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*THE PLACE OF ABRAHAM IN RELIGIOUS
HISTORY.*

“I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement; to the end that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him.”—GENESIS xviii. 19.

I HAVE already endeavoured to illustrate the great place of Abraham in the religious history of the human race, and have also discussed the great proof of his faith in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac at the command of the Eternal.¹

Monotheism—faith in one living God—wherever it exists, may be traced back historically to him. There has been a mere philosophical belief in the unity of the Supreme outside the historic movement which began with Abraham, but a real, effective, religious faith in one God is found only in Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism. Judaism was the faith of Abraham’s descendants; Christianity is the flower and ultimate aim of Judaism; Mohammedanism is a composite religion, composed in part of Jewish and in part of Christian elements. All three have their roots in the father of the faithful.

But in his own home, and in the country where he fed his flocks and herds, Abraham did not stand alone as a worshipper of the one Supreme God. His faith was shared by Melchizedek, who is described as “priest of God most High,” and whose priesthood Abraham himself acknowledged by receiving his blessing and giving him a tithe of the spoil which he had taken from the four kings. A few centuries later a Monotheistic faith was still found in the same country: Balaam was not only a worshipper of the Supreme, he was an inspired prophet.

How was it that neither Melchizedek nor Balaam came

¹ EXPOSITOR, June and July, 1896.

to hold the place in the religious history of mankind that belongs to Abraham? Melchizedek passes across the dim and remote past—a solitary, mysterious figure; is seen but for a moment, and then completely vanishes: he leaves behind him, as far as we know, not a single heir of his faith. Balaam emerges as suddenly, but remains in sight for a little longer: an intense light is thrown upon the strange conflict in him of good and evil—the co-existence of the highest spiritual gifts with the lowest and most ignoble cravings for mere material good. The covetous prophet is a dark riddle and an awful warning to all ages: but he, too, vanishes; and he, too, like Melchizedek, leaves behind not a single heir of his faith.

What is the explanation of the difference between these men and Abraham? How are we to account for the enduring power of his faith and the transitoriness of theirs?

At first sight they seem to have the advantage of him, and to be far more likely than he to have the glory of originating a great religious movement in the history of the race. Melchizedek was priest of the most high God, and tradition represents him as being also a king. Balaam had the gift of prophecy, and spoke with singular beauty and force. Abraham had no such shining gift; he did not possess that poetic genius and natural eloquence which, blended with the vision of the thoughts of God, distinguished the great prophets, and of which Balaam had his share; nor did what appears to have been the priestly sanctity of Melchizedek belong to him. He was the chief of a wandering tribe—of such a tribe as a traveller may still see at any time in the Sinaitic desert. He was occupied with his flocks, his herds, and his household. He had his times of leisure, as men still have who live the wandering life of the Bedouin; but he had many cares, and his time was largely spent in the most ordinary secular business. He was not a missionary, as some one has said, and

does not seem to have had the kind of power that would have made him a missionary. He looked after his affairs; he grew rich; and then he died.

How unlike he is both to the founders of great religions and to the great reformers of religions which have sunk into decay! how unlike Sakya-Muni, for example, the founder of Buddhism, as represented in the well-known legend! How unlike St. Francis, St. Bernard, Luther, Wesley, Whitfield!

In the external conditions of his life he was a most ordinary man. He lived the common life of his countrymen of that age. Nor was he exempt from the infirmities of ordinary men. When the fulfilment of the divine promise seemed delayed, he endeavoured to get it fulfilled in his own way, and had a child by Hagar, Sarah's maid. That failure of faith brought on himself trouble and shame, and the Ishmaelites, the descendants of the child of his unbelief, were a trouble to the descendants of Isaac for centuries. Twice he told a falsehood to protect himself and Sarah when he was the guest of neighbouring kings. It is a very human figure—this of Abraham: he stands on the common earth; he is no ascetic, no priest, no prophet; and to the common mind he is no saint.

How did it come to pass that he achieved such unique greatness?

The text seems to give the explanation. He was elect of God—partly, no doubt, because of the wonderful depth and power of his own faith; a faith which indeed had its vicissitudes of weakness and strength, but which, though now and then it yielded, bore through a long life a constant and severe strain, became stronger as he grew older, and met sublimely the supreme test of all when he was required to sacrifice his son. But the power of his own faith is not the only explanation. There was that in him which made it certain that he would "command his children and

his household after him ” “ that they might keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgement.”

Faith in the Living God was not to be propagated by mere preaching—by inducing an individual here and there to forsake his old gods and to worship the Supreme. It was to be lodged in an organized society ; to be maintained and defended by the institutions and the customs and the public opinion of that society ; it was to become a tradition, moulding the thought and life of successive generations of men. In his own household—that is, in all the men and women that belonged to his tribe and over whom he ruled, a company of perhaps a thousand persons, and more, for we are told that he had three hundred and eighteen men trained to arms who had been born in his tents,—in all this great company his own faith in the supreme God worked with such energy that they gave up worshipping inferior divinities. They were Monotheists as he was. This, indeed, was only in harmony with the prevailing customs of those ancient times. Each family, each tribe, each nation held together as a matter of course in its religious faith and customs. But a chief of inferior vigour to Abraham might have been unable to restrain his people from yielding to the strong attractions of the neighbouring forms of idolatry. It was Abraham’s distinction—and this was, no doubt, largely the ground of his election—that he exercised such complete ascendancy over his household that they all consented to stand apart—as he stood apart—from the common idolatries of their country and their age.

Before Isaac, who was to succeed him, was born, the power of Abraham’s faith had, I suppose, penetrated and moulded the whole tribe, so that Isaac from his childhood breathed the atmosphere and was surrounded by the customs of a Monotheistic people. It was not his father alone that worshipped the Eternal, but the men that pitched the

tents, and looked after the camels and the cattle and the sheep, and who were trained to defend the lives and the property of the tribe from their plundering neighbours; and the women, too, were Monotheistic, who ground the corn, and prepared the meat, and cared for all the simple needs of a Bedouin household. As the tribe grew, the worship of the living and supreme God grew with it; until at last the tribe became a nation, and in that nation, notwithstanding its perpetual tendency to idolatry, the faith of Abraham was too firmly rooted to be ever wholly destroyed.

And so the history of Abraham in more ways than one is a striking illustration of the extent to which men depend upon each other for even the greatest gifts of God. The blessings which God sends us do not all come direct from heaven, but through innumerable human channels. They do not all descend upon us like rain—straight from the sky; but the rain feeds the springs, and it is from the springs that we draw our water; the rain falls on the hill sides and drains down into the rivers and lakes, and from the rivers and lakes we fill the reservoirs in which are treasured the supplies that save great cities from perishing of thirst. And so great religious gifts come to us—some of them no doubt direct from God, but many through the ministry of men.

To Abraham's faith we trace the faith of all the races of mankind that worship one living and true God. But it is not through Abraham alone that the revelation of the Supreme comes to us. Abraham's faith had to be lodged first in Abraham's family, or it would have passed away without producing any lasting effect on the history of the race. When the family grew into a nation, the faith had to be expressed and defended by the institutions and by the laws, by the customs, by the traditions, by the social and economic order of the State. And when the great trust passed from Judaism to Christianity, still it was not left to

the precarious protection of individual men ; if it had been, it would soon have disappeared : it was committed to churches—to organized bodies of Christian men, who were to be disciplined and instructed by public teachers, who were to maintain public worship, and who were to give form and power to their faith by a special type of character—the growth and creation in part of the Christian Society, as well as of the Spirit of God and of the truths and laws, the memories and hopes which belong to the Christian gospel.

Many of us, I fear, have a most inadequate conception of the necessity of the communion of saints and the institution of worship to the growth of religious knowledge, of personal righteousness, power of service, and joy in God. We think that we can live a Christian life isolated and alone, making no confession of our faith, and keeping apart from all close association with Christian people. This error is a grave one, and may prove fatal. Imagine the kind of character that is formed in a corresponding isolation from general society. Imagine a child—growing up, not in a family, but in solitude ; sufficiently cared for to keep it alive, but with its intellect and affections undeveloped by free intercourse with its kind ; having no brothers or sisters or playfellows, no father or mother,—none to draw out its confidence and its love. Or imagine a man living, not in society, but in a desert—with books if you like, but with no living friends near or remote—none with whom he ever speaks or who ever speak to him, none to whom he ever writes or who ever write to him, working alone, resting alone, and sharing no man's sorrow or gladness. He misses more than half the strength and nearly all the joy of life, and grace and beauty of character are quite impossible to him.

But a man who lives in religious solitude, suffers similar loss but of a graver kind. The chances are that if his

faith in God does not perish it will be feeble; he will learn very little of religious truth from religious books, for the faculty which apprehends religious truth will be feeble; he will have no exulting joy in the consciousness of his own redemption; he will have little or no power to render religious service to others. The story of Abraham reminds us that the great blessings which we receive from the love of God do not come to us direct from heaven, but through human channels: in Abraham and his seed all nations were to be blessed: the Jewish nation was to be the organ through which the grace of God was to reach all mankind.

What we call the solidarity of mankind—the living organic interdependence of men upon each other—as opposed to what is called individualism, is impressively illustrated in the position of Abraham and his relations to the religious history of the world. And yet the principle of individualism was also impressively illustrated in Abraham's history.

In the early ages of human history the suppression of the individual was almost complete. The family—which included not only a man's own children but their children, and also his slaves,—the family, not the individual, was the unit of ancient societies. To the individual the law was almost indifferent; it defended the rights and assumed the loyalty, not of the individual but of the family. Property in Abraham's time was the property of the tribe and was held by the chief as the representative of the tribe. And as a man had no private property in material wealth but only shared the use of it with his tribe, so even his life belonged to his tribe rather than to himself. And in times much later than those of Abraham, and under forms of civilization much more advanced, the individual had no rights against the State, while the authority and power of the State over the individual citizen were unlimited and supreme.

Under these conditions it was not easy for a man to realize what we call his individual and personal responsibility. The individual was but a limb of the body—a branch of the tree: he might seem even less than this, and be nothing more than a ripple on the stream of the life of his tribe, a passing wave on the ocean of the life of his nation.

How have we come to that vivid sense of possessing a personal and individual life which is present wherever the Christian gospel is received, and apart from which Christian righteousness is impossible?

The late Dean of St. Paul's, in an interesting series of sermons, attempts to answer that question, and in answering it he has something to say about Abraham. It seemed to Dean Church that what we call the Christian character—the specific form of moral and religious excellence which is illustrated with more or less completeness in all Christian men, and which every Christian man, so far as he is loyal to Christ, is striving to attain—is not a type of goodness which in all its elements was unknown before the Incarnation. He regards it—to quote his own words—as “the result and outgrowth of all that series of events of which the Bible is in part, but the most important part, the record.” “The Bible,” he says, “exhibits it in various stages, in various forms—not always perfect, yet always going on to what is higher and purer, and shows (it) to us at last, after the passage of so many ages and generations, so many efforts and failures and slow steps of progress, in its finished and flawless perfection in the Person of the Divine Son of man.”

This means that the Christian character in its completeness was not suddenly and without preparation exhibited in Christ, but that we can trace what might be called its development through a succession of inferior types of righteousness and sanctity, as the biologist can trace the

development of the higher from the lower types of vegetable and animal life. The Christian theologian believes that this development from the very first was the manifestation of the presence and power of Christ in human thought and endeavour and achievement; but that in harmony with the general laws of the divine action the ascent from perfection to perfection was gradual. One great element and power of the Christian character appeared in Abraham; another appeared under the discipline of the law; another in the time of Isaiah and the great prophets.

The principle is in substance profoundly true, and gives great interest to the whole of the history of the religious life of the Jewish race. I am not clear, however, that I can agree with Dean Church in what he describes as the special contribution of that stage of God's discipline which we witness in the patriarchs, and especially in Abraham, to the formation of the religious character which was to be at last "the mind of Christ." For to Dean Church, this contribution consists in the idea of the singleness and individuality of the soul in its relation to the God who called it into being,—the singleness, the solitariness of the human soul, compared with all other things in the world about it; its independence and its greatness.

It is true that this great idea,—the idea of individualism in religion,—received an impressive prominence in the life and history of Abraham; but I should hesitate to assign to it the first place. It seems to me to be secondary in Abraham's history to the great idea of faith in the living and true God, and of unreserved obedience to Him; and, further, as I have attempted to show, Abraham's position and his relation to the human race illustrate, in the most striking and impressive manner, the opposite principle of the solidarity of mankind—of our dependence on each other, even in the highest provinces and activities of life.

And yet what Dean Church says has a very large measure

of truth in it. While the element of faith in the one living and supreme God was the great contribution of Abraham to the development of the Christian character, the necessary result of his faith was a profound sense of his separate and immediate relation to God, and of his direct responsibility to God; and this involved a vivid sense of his own individual personality.

To him, separately and apart from all the rest of mankind, the revelation of God had come; to him, separately and apart from all the rest of mankind, the great promise of God had been given; on him, separately and apart from all the rest of mankind, had been imposed the duty—to him had come the glory—of asserting the awful supremacy of the Eternal. He had to break away from the race to which he belonged, to leave the country where he had lived from his childhood, to go out not knowing whither he went. He must fulfil his trust; he must stand by what he now knew concerning God, against the world.

And how lonely his knowledge of the great future of his descendants must have made him! We cannot doubt that he thought constantly of the wonderful mystery that in him—in them—all nations were to be blessed; he lived under the power of this amazing discovery; and it must have separated him by an immeasurable distance from all the rest of mankind. He was the heir of a solitary and most mysterious greatness.

And whenever a man begins to discover that the Eternal God is near to him—that day by day, in his thoughts, in his words, in his temper, in his wishes, in his actions, he is giving account of himself to God, and that from God Himself, not merely from the action of unconscious and necessary laws, he will receive at last the things done in the body; when a man learns that there is a law of God which he has to obey, and that he may have the grace of God in order to obey it, he is at once detached from the

crowd, stands apart and alone, charged with the awful responsibility of determining his own character and destiny.

His sin, it is his own; the guilt of it is his. However fiercely he was tempted, it was he and not another who was assailed; he and not another who fell under the assault. If he is to be forgiven, he himself must venture, without any human comradeship or support, into the presence of God, must appeal to God's mercy, and obtain God's pardon. The great life he has to live—the life which is to be the fulfilment of God's own thought and purpose—is a life not governed by common motives or formed by common traditions; it is a life apart, inspired by the power of God's infinite love for him, and directed by God's supreme authority—a life with its secret but infinite hopes, its secret but infinite delights; and it must be his own life. He has to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is working in him both to will and work of His own good pleasure.

There is no vigorous and effective religious life until a man is thus separated from the whole race, from the whole universe, and finds himself alone with God; and yet not alone, for that would be awful for a sinner: he is in Christ—and so the awe and the dread pass into a great joy.

Yes, it is a great and critical hour in the history of a man when he is drawn aside from the crowd and stands alone in the presence of the Eternal, and when the awful question comes to him whether he will confront all that is implicated in his own independent personality and take up the burdens which it imposes upon him. He is involved, no doubt, in the common imperfection and sin of his race; he has inherited tendencies to many forms of moral evil, and he has been environed by conditions unfriendly to moral perfection; and yet he—he himself—is responsible for conduct and character. He is free, however limited the range of freedom. The tendencies to evil which he has

inherited—has he struggled against them? The environment hostile to perfection—has he endeavoured to resist its malignant influence? Does he submit to the condemnation of conscience—the condemnation of God, which attaches guilt to him individually, for basely yielding to these evil tendencies and powers instead of collecting all his forces to do battle with them? Is he prepared now to make it the supreme work of life to attempt, with whatever ill success, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with his God? Will he stand alone against all the forces of evil that are dragging him to shame and ruin, stand alone in his attempt to achieve a perfect righteousness?

There is a salvation common to the race. He lives in a redeemed world. The Son of the Eternal has died for him, that he may have the pardon of sin and the very life of God. Will he—he himself—grasp the infinite gifts of God's mercy? will he make them his own, not relying on any church or ministry, on any gracious influences that may come upon him from without, but acting on the discovery that it is for him—for him separately and alone—to trust in the divine grace and to work out his own salvation? If he responds to this appeal, with him it is well—well with him in this life, and it will be well through the endless ages that are his inheritance in Christ. He has come to himself, as the prodigal did; and a man must come to himself if he is to come to God.

Whatever contributes to expel this sense of personality, whatever merges the individual in the race, is hostile at once to a noble morality and to a deep religious faith. The dying words of M. Renan are an impressive illustration of the extent to which, in our times, the moral suppression of the individual is possible. "Be calm," he said to his wife, "be resigned. We undergo the laws of that nature of which we are a manifestation. We perish, we disappear; but heaven and earth remain, and the march of time goes

on for ever." Foam bubbles on the tossing sea of life, appearing and vanishing, though the sea continues to toss for thousands of generations. Leaves on the great tree of life, which through year after year strikes its roots deep into the earth and flings its mighty branches higher into the heavens,—leaves which are the manifestations of the nature of the tree,—appear in the spring and fall in the autumn according to the eternal laws. Foam-bubbles, leaves,—nothing more! If that is true, farewell, not only to the glory of all religious hope, but to all moral heroism. Suppress the personality of man, his ethical freedom, his life, which is blended no doubt with the life of the race, but is a life secret, separate and apart from the race, his own—in a most awful sense his own; suppress his direct and personal relations to the Eternal, bind him inseparably, for good or evil, to the race to which he belongs; let his character be nothing more than the manifestation of a life common to mankind, instead of having stamped upon it the impress of his own freedom; let his destiny, for glory or shame, for eternal life or eternal death, be the destiny of his race, independent altogether of his own personal choice and his own personal conduct, and the roots of all lofty righteousness and of all generous love, whether for God or man, are destroyed; man is unscathed, uncrowned, descends from his rank as created to be a child of God, and passes into a lower order, takes his place among the mere mechanic forces of the universe; his kinship to the Eternal is lost and all the glory of his nature quenched.

The vivid sense of personality—this is essential to ethics and to religion: Abraham's example proves that it is not inconsistent with a vivid sense of our dependence on each other and of the solidarity of the race.

R. W. DALE.