

ARTICLE VI.

NOTE ON GENESIS XI. 26.

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“AND Terah lived seventy years, and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran.” It is plain, upon the face of this statement, that it is in some way or other a condensed expression of the facts. No one supposes that the three sons of Terah were born at one birth, and the subsequent narrative gives ground for supposing a considerable difference of age between them. The genealogy of the sons of Noah has already shown that priority in age is not necessarily indicated by priority in the order of names: Shem being named first not because he was the oldest, but because he was the ancestor of the chosen line. The general understanding of the text has been that Abram was the youngest of the three sons of Terah, the eldest of whom was begotten by Terah at the age of seventy.

Terah (vs. 32) lived to the age of two hundred and five. After his death mention is made of the departure of Abram from Haran at the age of seventy-five. It is expressly asserted by Stephen (Acts vii. 4) that Abram's departure actually took place after the death of Terah. By Alford and others it is vigorously maintained that this is a chronological blunder on the part of Stephen; but from his familiarity with Jewish history, and from the circumstances under which he spoke, it might have been assumed that his statement was at least in accordance with the current Jewish opinion of the day. There need be no uncertainty, however, upon this point; for Philo (*De Migr. Abrah.* § 32, P. 325 A, ed. Col. 1613) is quite as positive in the statement as Stephen. Have we any data at this day to show that Philo and Stephen were both mistaken about this fact in the history of their

ancestors? It is quite common now to say that we have; and we propose to examine the evidence.

In Gen. xvii. 15, 16, when Abraham was ninety-nine, God promised him a son by his wife Sarah, who was only ten years his junior. This thing seemed incredible to Abraham (vs. 17), on account of the age both of himself and of Sarah, and he pleaded earnestly for Ishmael. Sarah also (xviii. 12, 13) was convinced of the impossibility of the fulfilment of the promise, and is told that even this is not too hard for the Lord. In the New Testament, also, in Rom. iv. 18-21; Heb. xi. 11, 12, strong emphasis is placed upon the fact that the birth of Isaac was out of the course of nature; and Abraham's faith is eulogized, because "he considered not his own body now dead (when he was about an hundred years old), neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb." And this faith thus shown is made, in both these epistles, the basis of important exhortation and doctrinal argument. But how could the birth of a child when he was a hundred have seemed so impossible to Abraham, and so contrary to nature, if he had himself been born when his father was one hundred and thirty? At first view, this consideration seems to settle the question, and to convict Stephen of a chronological error, and his Jewish contemporaries of knowing less of the detail of the history of their fathers than we are able to ascertain at the present day. Only in such case it is very remarkable that Paul should have based his argument on the contrary supposition without noticing the error, and especially that this should have been done in the Epistle *πρὸς Ἑβραίους*. If the facts which have been mentioned were all that bear on the case, there might seem some reason for the lecture that Alford reads to those who follow the chronology of Stephen, and thus, "from motives however good, begin to handle the word of God deceitfully" (Alf. in Acts vii. 4).

There is really a serious difficulty in putting the parts of the narrative together; but it arises from the story in Genesis itself, and is not changed by the views taken of it by Stephen and Paul. Let us look at the facts as they appear there.

The age of Abraham at the promise of Isaac is distinctly said to be ninety-nine (xvii. 1, 24), and at his birth one hundred (xxi. 5); and there can be no question of his opinion as to the probability of his having a son at that age, or of his wife's bearing one (xvii. 17). Sarah was at least equally incredulous; and it is distinctly said of her that she had already passed "the change of life" (xviii. 11, 12). Nevertheless, as nothing is "too hard for the Lord," the promise was duly fulfilled, and Isaac was born.

Thirty-seven years rolled away, and Sarah died, at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven, Abraham being now one hundred and thirty-seven (xxiii. 1). After her death Abraham sent his servant to Mesopotamia to take a wife for Isaac from among his kindred. He successfully accomplished his mission, and brought back Rebecca. "And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted *after his mother's death*" (xxiv. 67). Immediately after this we read: "Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bare him" six sons (xxv. 1, 2). If the story be taken in the order in which it stands, Abraham must have been at least one hundred and forty-seven when the last of these was born, for Isaac was forty when he married (xxv. 20); and yet there is nothing said of this being out of the course of nature, nor do the circumstances render it at all likely that the birth of these sons was miraculous. Two or three different explanations have been given of this. The one most common among modern expositors is, that the supernatural renewal of Abraham's natural vigor before the birth of Isaac continued in its effects for more than forty years, and accounts for his abundant posterity through Keturah. This is, of course, pure hypothesis, and all that can be said of it is that it is contrary to the analogy of the working of the supernatural that a miracle should extend so greatly beyond the purpose for which it was wrought. Another supposition is that of a portion of the Jewish commentators, which has been incorporated in

the Targums of Jonathan and of Jerusalem, that Keturah is identical with Hagar—it being supposed that she was recalled by Abraham after the death of Sarah. In verse 6, however, the *concubines* of Abraham are mentioned in the plural, and in 1 Chron. i. 28–33 the sons of Keturah are distinguished not only from Isaac, but also from Ishmael. Setting aside this hypothesis, there remains another,—that Abraham had taken Keturah during the lifetime of Sarah, but the mention of the fact was deferred to avoid interrupting the story of Sarah and her son. This supposition is perfectly consistent with the language of the original of xxv. 1, and such going back from the close of one completed story to take up the thread of another which occurred in its midst is common enough in the historical books of Scripture. But admitting it, does it remove the difficulty? Abraham was still childless just before he took Hagar (xv. 2). His taking Keturah must be subsequent to this. He was eighty-six (xvi. 16) when “Hagar bare Ishmael.” Now, as he had six sons by Keturah, the last could hardly have been born before he was ninety-three, and the interval between ninety-three and ninety-nine is not sufficient to explain the language of the Old Testament in regard to the supposed impossibility of his begetting children, nor that of the New, in regard to the deadness of his body, and his hoping for the promise of posterity “against hope.” The difficulty, therefore, still remains in the narrative of Genesis itself, without reference to the language of Stephen.

Let us look at the matter from another point of view. The term of human life, and consequently the term of possible paternity, lessened from the time of Noah down, gradually on the whole, but by somewhat irregular steps. Noah’s children were born when he was five hundred. Shem was one hundred when he begat Arphaxad, but lived after this, begetting sons and daughters, five hundred years (Gen. xi. 10, 11). We have no means of knowing definitely at what age his last child was born; but the narrative leaves us to infer that he was several hundred years old. After this the

patriarchs began to have children at a much earlier period, varying from Salah's "thirty years" (vs. 14) and Nahor's "nine and twenty years" (vs. 24) to Terah's seventy and Abram's eighty-six years. Isaac was sixty at paternity (xxv. 26), and Jacob about forty-eight (xxvi. 34, with xxvii.; xxviii.; xxix. 20). But it is recorded of most of the earlier ones that they continued to live for long periods, and to beget sons and daughters; so that Terah's having a son at one hundred and thirty, or Abraham one at one hundred, seems quite in accordance with the general course of the story. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, must have been nearly eighty when Benjamin was born. The conditions of human life, therefore, at this period, are represented as such that there would have been nothing remarkable in the age of paternity, either in Terah or in Abraham. Terah, according to the genealogy, was the ninth, Abraham the tenth, and Jacob the twelfth generation from Noah. As already noticed, Noah had children at five hundred, Jacob at near eighty, giving an average diminution in the age of paternity of about thirty-five years. This would make it possible for Abraham to have had children at one hundred and fifty and Terah at one hundred and eighty-five. Or, if we make the more probable supposition that the age diminished more rapidly at first and more slowly afterwards, and were to take half this amount for the later diminution, still it would allow Abraham to have become a father (relatively to Jacob) at above one hundred, and Terah at very nearly the age supposed. We are brought, therefore, to the same conclusion as before — that the difficulty is inherent in the narrative, and is not affected by the statements of Stephen and Philo.

There is still one other point of view to be taken as regards Sarah. The improbability of her bearing a child in her old age is made especially prominent both in (Genesis xvii. 17; xviii. 12), and in the New Testament (Rom. iv. 19; Heb. xi. 11). Was this because child-bearing at her time of life was an unheard of thing among her contemporaries? Or was it on account of some peculiarity individual to herself?

There is quite plain evidence upon this point. She was ninety when Isaac was born; yet it was within the previous year, apparently after the actual conception of Isaac, that the strange incident happened in connection with Abimelech king of Gerar. The course of events is as follows: In chapter xviii. the three superhuman beings appear to Abraham in the plains of Mamre and promise him the birth of Isaac, "according to the time of life." Whatever may be critically determined to be the exact sense of this phrase, it must mean within a year. In the latter part of the chapter is the account of Abraham's pleading for Sodom, and in the following chapter the narrative of the destruction of the cities of the plain. At the very opening of chapter xx. Abraham went to sojourn in Gerar, and "said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah." Then Abimelech is divinely warned of his error, and remonstrates with Abraham for his deceit; Abraham tries to excuse himself (vs. 11) by reason of the danger of his life on Sarah's account. Immediately afterwards (xxi. 1, 2) follows the account of the birth of Isaac. It is clear, therefore, that Sarah must still have retained her striking beauty, and that there was nothing apparent to a stranger, either in her person or in her age, which in those times should have prevented her being a desirable acquisition to Abimelech's harem. Yet at this time she must have been actually pregnant with Isaac. Certainly the difficulties here are compressed into quite too narrow a compass to be affected either by the statement of Stephen or the assertion of Philo.

The only solution seems to lie in the fact that the incapacity for children was personal to Abraham and Sarah, not belonging ordinarily to men and women generally of that period at their age. In regard to Sarah it is expressly said — and the mention of it seems to imply that it was something singular — that "it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women" (xviii. 11). If a similar constitutional change be supposed in Abraham, we shall then have a reason which accounts for the incredulity of both in regard to the

birth of Isaac. It is a reason, however, known only to themselves; to their contemporaries there would be nothing strange in their having a child.

This view is further strengthened by the fact that after the conception of Isaac Sarah lived thirty-eight years, and Abraham seventy-six. They had therefore advanced somewhat less than two thirds of the way through the whole term of their lives, and, according to the ordinary proportion of life in our own day, should still have been able to have children, unless prevented by special personal hinderance.

The objection to this view is obvious in the stress which is laid upon the fact of their *old age*, both in Genesis and in the New Testament; but this is removed if it be understood of old age as manifested to themselves by changes prematurely taking place within themselves; in other words, of old age *quoad hoc*. The point of the argument in the Epistles to the Romans and the Hebrews is, that Abraham and Sarah were in a condition in which they could not have a child in the ordinary course of nature; the same thing is emphatically said in Genesis. Yet it is plain from the considerations which have been adduced, that this would not ordinarily have been the case with their contemporaries at their age. The difficulty was therefore personal.

There is, then, no reason to question the accuracy of Stephen's statement, or to change the order of the narrative in Genesis by which Abraham is made to have left Haran after the death of Terah.