

## ABRAHAM.

“The Lord said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto the land that I will show thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram went, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.”—GENESIS xii. 1-4.

PROFESSOR MAX MÜLLER, in a well-known Essay on Semitic Monotheism published many years ago, has a remarkable passage on the great place which belongs to Abraham in the history, not of the Jews alone, but of the human race. He says that faith in the one living God, wherever it exists—that is, as a real religious force, not merely as a philosophical speculation—“may be traced back to one man,—to him in whom ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” “We see in him,” he continues, “the life-spring of that faith which was to unite all the nations of the earth. We want to know more of that man than we do; but even with the little we know of him he stands before us as a figure second only to one in the whole history of the world” (*Chips from a German Work-shop*, vol. i. pp. 373-4).

That is a remarkable estimate; I am not sure that it is an exaggeration. The Lord Jesus Christ stands apart and alone—in a supremacy which removes Him from all comparison with even the greatest of mankind. But there is no other that can be placed by the side of Abraham, if we estimate his greatness by the immense and beneficial effect of his life and character on the condition of mankind.

How is it that some races have worshipped one God, while others—not inferior to them in all that constitutes the splendour of secular civilisation; their superiors, indeed, in many of the most brilliant forms of genius—have

worshipped many gods? How is it that the nations of Europe and America, the Jews, and a large part of the populations of Africa and Western Asia, and part of India, are monotheistic, while the rest of India and China are heathen?

M. Comte maintained that when science discovered that the whole of the physical universe illustrates the power of the same laws, that the same great physical forces are active in every country, on the land and the sea, in the world, and—as far as we can discover—in all other worlds, it was impossible for Polytheism to survive. There was no longer any place for the separate Divine powers which, according to the older faith, had divided the sovereignty of the universe between them. The unity of the physical universe carried with it the unity of God. It is obvious to reply that in ancient times the Jews, who were the least speculative and scientific of all nations, were the worshippers of one God, and that the Egyptians and the Greeks, who had the most brilliant scientific genius, worshipped many gods. It is true that those modern nations which have been greatest in physical science have also been monotheistic; but Western Europe, and the Saracens who for a time settled in Spain, were first believers in one God—and *then* achieved their scientific discoveries. It would be far more reasonable and historical to say that monotheism led the way to a scientific belief in the unity of the universe, than to say that a scientific belief in the unity of the universe led the way to monotheism. No. Monotheism comes from Abraham. There lies his greatness. Trace the belief in one God, wherever you find it, to its original spring, and you come to him. In him it has its historic roots.

There are three great monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedanism. Outside these three religions men worship many gods. Judaism is the direct outgrowth of Abraham's faith. Christianity came from

Judaism; and Mohammedanism is compounded partly of Judaism, partly of Christianity.

I remember a pathetic and impressive illustration of the kinship of these three great religions. The stern and desolate granite rocks of Sinai surrounded by the waste and desolation of the desert are the eternal memorial of Judaism; but on the very summit of the mountain, within a few yards of each other, there are a small Christian chapel and a small Mohammedan mosque. The whole history of Monotheism is represented there. At Sinai Judaism does not need as its monument any work of human hands: the bare rocks, which look as if the power of God had passed over them, destroying nearly every trace of life,—these are enough to stand for the grandeur and endurance of the ancient faith. The chapel and the mosque are the homage which Christianity and Mohammedanism offer to the faith of Abraham and his descendants.

But of late years we have heard a great deal of the mysterious differences between different races of mankind; and the characteristic powers of different races are declared to be to a large extent the explanation of their history. Are we quite right in speaking of Monotheism as though under God it came to us through one man—through Abraham? Did it not come through the Semitic race? Was not this their distinctive service to mankind? A great French scholar—a man of wide learning, of great ingenuity, and with a literary genius which I suppose has not been equalled in Europe since the death of Voltaire—M. Renan, was of this opinion. In one of his most famous works he contended that Monotheism was an instinct of the Semitic races—an instinct not shared by the rest of mankind who belong to the Aryan race. That was a brilliant fancy: but, like so many other of his theories, it was a fancy only; it was directly contradicted by the most certain and notorious facts.

It was mainly to criticise and to destroy this theory, which was set out with great eloquence and beauty in M. Renan's *General History and Systematic Comparison of the Semitic Languages*, that Mr. Max Müller wrote the article which I have already quoted. He shows that the Semitic nations of Syria, Phœnicia, Mesopotamia, and Yemen, were polytheistic like the rest of mankind; that the Arabians before Mohammed were polytheistic; that the Semitic tribes which surrounded the Jews were polytheistic: they worshipped Dagon and Ashtaroth and Baal, and other gods besides. And even the Jews themselves were incessantly drifting into idolatry. Mr. Max Müller asks,—“Could the monotheistic instinct of the Semitic race, if it was an instinct, have been so frequently obscured, or the polytheistic instinct of the Aryan race so completely annihilated, as to allow the Jews to worship in all the high places round Jerusalem, and the Greeks and Romans to become believers in Christ?”

No; the Old Testament account is the true one. God in some wonderful way revealed Himself to Abraham. This, as Mr. Max Müller contended, is the only reasonable account of the matter.

It is apparent from several indications in the early Jewish books that Abraham belonged to a race, not of Monotheists, but of men who worshipped false gods. When Jacob left his uncle Laban in Padan Aram, Laban complained that he had taken away his *gods* (Gen. xxxi. 30). And when Jacob had returned to Palestine and was coming near to Bethel, Jacob said to his household and to all that were with him, “Put away *the strange gods* that are among you . . . and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make there an altar unto God” (Gen. xxxv. 2, 3). And when the Jewish nations entered the Promised Land to take possession of it, Joshua is represented as saying, “Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River, even

Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor : and they served *other gods*. . . . If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve ; whether the gods which your fathers served that were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell : but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord " (Josh. xxiv. 2, 15).

How the revelation of God came to Abraham we do not know, but there is a charming legend known perhaps to most of us, but which I will venture to repeat for the sake of those who have never heard it.

The scene, according to Dean Stanley, is laid sometimes in Ur, sometimes in the celebrated hill above Damascus. He gives the story in the form in which it is preserved in the Koran. "When night overshadowed him, Abraham saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord.' But when the star set, he said, 'I like not those that set.' And when he saw the moon rising, he said, 'This is my Lord.' But when the moon set, he answered, 'Verily if my Lord direct me not in the right way, I shall be as one of those who err.' And when he saw the sun rising, he said, 'This is my Lord. This is greater than the star or moon.' But when the sun went down, he said, 'O my people, I am clear of these things. I turn my face to Him who hath made the heaven and the earth.'"

The legend becomes more impressive when we remember that on the great plains of Central Asia, from the earliest times, the heavenly hosts received worship. But however the knowledge of the one true living God came to him, it was not a doubtful inference of his own from what he saw in the natural order of the world, or from the sovereignty of conscience. It was a revelation—not an hypothesis constructed by his own logical skill. He did not merely come to know that God is—that God must be. He came to know *God*, which is something infinitely different and infinitely

greater. God spoke to Abraham: that is the simplest way of putting it, and it is the truest. As *we* make ourselves known to other men by speaking to them, so, in some wonderful way of speaking, God made Himself known to Abraham; and Abraham knew that it was God Himself who was speaking.

Now we have reached the historic—earthly—beginning of the immense monotheistic religions which have had so great an effect on the religious life of mankind and on the fortunes of great nations. Abraham had faith in the God who spoke to him—believed that He was the Highest, Greatest, Best—submitted without reserve to His authority, and consequently relied upon Him for protection and blessing. Judaism, Christianity, Mohammedanism—the three great monotheistic faiths—all do honour to Abraham as the father of the faithful. And wherever, I repeat, there is faith in one living God—wherever that faith is a real religious force, not merely a philosophical speculation—it came from Abraham.

What then was Abraham's faith? Are we to suppose that at once, and as soon as the revelation of God came to him, he lost all belief in the existence of the gods that his fathers had worshipped? I very much doubt whether that supposition can be sustained by the Jewish Scriptures. Nor does it seem to me that to effect so sudden and complete a transition from Polytheism to Monotheism would be in harmony with what appears to be God's method of training man to the knowledge and love of Himself. There are many indications in Jewish history that for a long time some kind of belief in the existence and in the power of the gods of the nations remained side by side with a genuine love and fear of Jehovah. Jehovah was to the Jew a great King above all gods; but the other gods were regarded as something more than the creations of ignorance and superstition. God was supreme; but the shadowy forms of

inferior divinities had not wholly passed away from the heaven of Jewish thought. In the time of the prophets a farther step was made: God was not only supreme—He was alone; the gods of the nations were idols—unreal things—vanities; and those who had any reverence for them, any trust in them, are mocked at; but it was only by slow degrees that the Jews seem to have reached what I may call this absolute theoretical Monotheism.

But practically they were monotheistic from the beginning. For there was always one great religious difference between the Jews and other races. I mean, of course, between the Jews who were true to the faith of Judaism and other races. Other races not only believed that there were many gods, but worshipped them. They thought that one god was the special protection of one country, or city, or household, and another god of another. They thought that one god was supreme on the sea, and another on the land; and, therefore, they looked to different gods for help in different places and different circumstances. But to the Jew, even during those early ages, in which (shall I say?) his imagination was unable to dislodge the forms of the divinities of the heathen—to the Jew, God was the Most High—the Almighty Creator of the heavens as well as the earth, of the land as well as the sea, of the darkness as well as the light; and he worshipped no other god. To worship another god was to the true Jew, from the very first, the great, the most awful sin. That other gods might exist, was possible; they might have large powers: but they were as nothing to the Supreme; they must never receive any worship. To offer at their altars, to enter their temples, to show them any sign of reverence, was for the Jew the most appalling wickedness; other nations were also guilty, in his judgment, of a tremendous crime in worshipping them. But a god who is not worshipped—whom it is a crime to worship—is no god at all. Whatever beliefs the Jews may

have had for many generations about the existence of Baal and Ashtaroth and the rest of the gods whom their neighbours were worshipping, the true Jew was always a monotheist; there was no power in the heavens above or on the earth beneath which could claim to share his worship: it was his distinction and glory to know and to serve the only true God. And so, for anything I can tell, Abraham himself may, for a time, or even throughout his life, have been so far under the control of the common beliefs of his contemporaries as to suppose that the gods of his fathers had real existence and real power. But he had heard the voice of a God of a wholly different kind—of a God who alone had a right to be worshipped—the Almighty God, the Just God, the Eternal God; a God whose majesty filled him with wonder, whose righteousness filled him with awe, and in whose love for himself he had immeasurable confidence. Morally, religiously, he was a Monotheist. For him there was practically but one God; and whatever inferior powers might have drawn to themselves the worship of mankind, the God whom he worshipped was the supreme God, and He alone had a right to sovereignty over the life and conduct of mankind. The Jews were ultimately led to theoretical truth by the path of obedience: those who were faithful to the light which had come to their race worshipped one God and only one—regarded it as a crime to worship any other, and at last they came to see that there was really no other god to worship.

Do you think that this theory of the possible imperfection of Abraham's knowledge lessens the greatness of his faith? To me it rather seems to make his faith more energetic, more daring, more sublime. If there still remained in him the belief that the gods of the surrounding nations had real existence, with large powers to help those who served them and to injure those who refused them service, there was all the more courage, audacity, faith in



his high resolve to be loyal to the supreme God—the true God—to make no terms with the divinities which had usurped an authority to which they had no right—not to purchase their favour or avert their anger by offering any sacrifice or doing them any honour. And further, it is clear that if the shadows of common beliefs still fell upon him, and the gods of the nations still seemed to have a real though limited control over human affairs, his refusal to serve them implies a transcendent conception of the majesty of the Eternal and a profound sense of the exclusive moral right of the Eternal to his obedience and trust.

But Abraham's faith included very much more than a conviction of the supreme greatness and majesty of God, and His exclusive right to worship and obedience. Abraham's faith was a real religion, and religion includes other elements of immense importance.

Religion—true religion—what is it? What does it include? It includes a deep, immovable belief in the august greatness and glory of the living and true God, in His perfection—His moral perfection—as well as in His wisdom, His power and His eternal existence.

Yes; but that is not enough. What else?

It also includes a profound reverence and awe of God. The belief in His august greatness must be something more than belief. It must pass into emotion. The great and awful aspects of the physical universe fill us with wonder and awe. God, who is supremely great in the moral universe, should also fill us with wonder and awe; and all that is fair and beautiful in His infinite life should inspire us with delight, as all that is fair and beautiful in earth and sky inspires us with delight.

But is this all? Ah, no. As yet we have only the beginnings of what can be really called religion. There are some—there are many, I fear, who go no farther. God is a vision of glory to them, nothing more. When the vision

comes, they welcome it, as they welcome the chances of seeing a gorgeous sunset, or the immense and awful solitudes of the snow mountains. They are conscious that the vision of sublimity, greatness, beauty of a lofty kind, whether physical or moral, has an elevating power over thought and feeling, and increases at once the vigour and refinement of their own emotional and intellectual nature. True. But as yet we have nothing that can be called religion. We are in the region of æsthetics, and religion is something greater than this.

Shall we add the expression of our emotions in adoration, in song? Yes, but the real worth of the expression must depend on what is expressed; and if the emotion is æsthetic only, not religious, the expression of it is æsthetic only, not religious.

What more shall we add? In Abraham's case there was obedience to the Divine will—obedience of a very practical kind. He left the country where he had lived from his childhood, broke with the people of his own race, and went into another land and lived among strange people. He did not merely look to God to help him to fulfil his own ideas of right. He found in God a real Authority, an Authority not to be questioned,—to be submitted to and unreservedly obeyed. I shall have something to say in another paper about the offering of Isaac, but I refer to it now as the actual proof of Abraham's belief in the sovereignty of God; when he believed that God required him to sacrifice his son, he proceeded to do it. This, too, is an element of his religion,—the practical recognition in common life of God's absolute authority over us.

But is this all? Is there in religion nothing *beyond* the belief in God's greatness and perfection, reverence for Him, worship, the acknowledgment—the practical acknowledgment—of God's sovereignty by obedience? I think there is.

To Abraham God gave the great promise that in him and

his seed all nations should be blessed. Abraham believed it, and we can well imagine that this mysterious, this immense blessing, filled his thought, and that his life was lived very largely in the future which was to witness the fulfilment of the promise. And in all real religion there will be the hope and the expectation of receiving something from God. I mean that we must confidently rely on Him to do something, and to do something great for us.

It is my impression that it is at this point that the religion of many of us is wanting.

We *believe* in the majesty and glory of God, and sometimes we are profoundly moved by our thoughts of His greatness—by what seems more than our own thoughts, by the actual apprehension and vision of His greatness. Yes, and similar emotion is produced by the mountains and the sea. But the mountains and the sea do not consciously and of purpose serve us; they are but wonderful visions. Between them and us there are no free mutual relations of affection and sympathy. They are remote, they belong to another order of being. And it is possible for us to be similarly and even more deeply impressed by the greatness and glory of God, and for God to be still remote, for no friendly relations to exist between Him and us.

But as soon as we discover that there are things which He will do for us—good things, great things, and we look to Him to do them; our whole relationship to God is changed; we have really a religion. Then we each stand related to Him as person to person. He is not merely a vision of wonder, glorious, fair, but remote. He is not merely an august authority, great, mighty, but remote, binding us by His laws, Himself remaining unbound. He too is bound to *us* as we are bound to Him. There are ties on both sides. We have, I repeat, a real religion; a religion that will be the support of righteousness and a perfect solace and joy.

R. W. DALE.