

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC.

“ And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham : and he said, Here am I.”—GENESIS xxii. 1.

I PROPOSE to discuss in this paper what is commonly called the sacrifice of Isaac ; but, as a matter of fact, there was no sacrifice of Isaac : the sacrifice was forbidden by God, peremptorily forbidden, at the very moment when it was about to be made.

Imagine the horror that we should have felt if at the beginning of Jewish history the father of the faithful had actually offered a human sacrifice to God, that sacrifice being his son ; and had offered him by the Divine command. But no such dreadful tragedy ever occurred. That awful stain of blood does not appear on the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. To some of us, perhaps, the moral difficulties of the story as it stands are sufficiently grave ; but if Isaac had been actually put to death by his father and offered to God as a sacrifice, and if we had been told that this was done in obedience to a Divine command, I suppose that we should all have felt that the story was incredible.

In intention, however, Abraham did really offer this sacrifice ; and though he was prevented by the interference of God from actually offering it, the story declares that what he meant to do was imposed upon him by the authority of God.

And so, to put the objection roughly, Abraham, in obedience to the will of God, is represented as intending to commit a horrible crime. No doubt he was prevented by God Himself from committing it ; but he was in the very act of committing it ; he had stretched forth his hand and had taken the knife, as the picturesque narrative tells us, when the angel of the Lord called to him out of heaven and arrested him.

This, I say, is the difficulty. Abraham, in obedience to the will of God, is represented as intending to commit a horrible crime.

The common answer—and it is good as far as it goes, only it does not go far enough—is very simple. We are reminded that although *we* have no right to determine how long another man shall live, and when he shall die, God has. He may permit one man to live for eighty or a hundred years, though he has been guilty of great crimes: He may cut off a saint in the morning of his days. God's authority over us is supreme. Had he taken the life of Isaac by lightning, or earthquake, or fever, His righteousness could not have been impeached. He is God, and to God belongs the absolute authority to determine the measure of our years. We may be sure that He does not exercise His authority arbitrarily and without great reason; but His authority is final, and it is above our criticism. And if instead of taking the life of Isaac by lightning, or earthquake, or fever, He had determined to take it by the hand of Abraham, how could we charge either God or Abraham with a crime?

This reply satisfied Bishop Butler. In the third chapter of the second part of his *Analogy* he says: "Men have no right to either life or property, but what arises solely from the grant of God: when this grant is revoked, they cease to have any right at all in either: and when this revocation is made known, as surely it is possible it may be, it must cease to be unjust to deprive them of either."¹ . . . That is, some acts which would be criminal apart from God's command cease to be criminal when He commands them. To use a familiar example: if without any authority a servant of mine opens my purse and takes out a five-pound note and uses it for himself, that is a crime; but if I tell him to do it, then, though he does precisely the same

¹ Butler: *Analogy*, Book ii. c. 3, § 27, p. 239, Clarendon Press Edition.

outward acts,—looks for the purse, finds it, opens it, takes the note, spends it for himself,—he commits no wrong. God had authority over Isaac's life: had Abraham resolved to take it without God's authority, he would have intended to commit a crime; there was no crime when God told him to take it.

Butler admits that if God were to command a succession of acts which without His command would be immoral, they might gradually lead to the formation of an immoral habit; but he contends that a few detached commands would have no such tendency. This means—to go back to my illustration—that if I told my servant once or twice to use the contents of my purse, or part of them, for himself, it would do him no harm; but that if I told him to do it day after day for a month or six weeks, he might form the habit of appropriating my money to his own use, and might continue to do it even when I gave him no authority, and so would become a thief.

But there is one phrase in the passage which I quoted from Butler that occasions a difficulty. He says that *when God revokes His grant of property or life to any man, it must be possible to make the revocation known*. The late Professor Mozley, of Oxford, has made some very striking observations on that part of Butler's reply. I shall have occasion this morning to quote Professor Mozley's words rather frequently, but it would be difficult for me to say how much I owe to his keen and profound discussion of this story. I cannot, I think, appeal to his authority to support all that I have to say about it, but perhaps most of the principal things I have to say were either said or suggested by him. He was one of the most robust thinkers that we have had in England during this century.

Butler takes for granted that there could be no difficulty in making it clear to Abraham that it was God's will that he was to sacrifice Isaac. But Professor Mozley says, and

says justly, that nothing could prove to you or me that it was the will of God that we should sacrifice a child of our own.

No miracle could prove it. We have been taught both by the Old Testament and the New to test the miracle by the precept or the doctrine it is intended to support : if the precept shocks our conscience, if the doctrine contradicts what we already know to be the truth, we are to stand by conscience and truth and to reject the miracle. Professor Mozley says, in substance, that the rights of human life are now so strongly felt, they are so intimate a part of the moral progress of the race, that no miracle could practically act as sufficient evidence to warrant the infraction of them.¹

But it was not so in Abraham's time. There is nothing in the story to suggest that he was at all uncertain as to whether the command came from God, or that his uncertainty had been overcome by any stupendous miracle.

The explanation lies in one immense difference between ancient and modern times, and this difference reaches the very heart of the difficulty which the story creates. A great movement in the moral and religious life of the world has issued in investing the individual man with inalienable rights. That movement has derived its chief inspiration and strength from the revelation of God in Christ, but has been powerfully aided by other forces of a less noble kind. At last, indeed, and in our own days, there have come signs of reaction against it. We have discovered that the doctrine of individualism may be carried too far, and the claims of society, as contrasted with the claims of the individual man—what we call Socialism as contrasted with individualism—are now clamorous for recognition.

In Abraham's time, and in the early history of all nations, individualism was unknown, and a form of Socialism pre-

¹ J. B. Mozley : *Ruling Ideas in Early Ages*, pp. 33, fol.

vailed. "Primitive Society," as Sir Henry Maine has said, "has for its units not individuals, but groups of men united by the reality or the fiction of blood relationship."¹ "Ancient law," he says again, "knows next to nothing of individuals. It is concerned not with individuals, but with families, not with single human beings, but groups."² Again, and largely as the result of this, in those early days, "the eldest male parent—the eldest ascendant—is absolutely supreme in his household. His dominion extends to life and death, and is as unqualified over his children and their houses as over his slaves; indeed"—according to Sir Henry Maine—"the relations of sonship and serfdom appear to differ in little beyond the higher capacity which the child in blood possesses of becoming one day the head of a family himself. The flocks and herds of the children are the flocks and herds of the parent"; and further, the parent held all this property not as we hold it, as a matter of personal right, but "in a representative rather than in a proprietary character."³ It was what might be called *tribal* Socialism. It not only denied the right to private ownership in land and other material wealth, but private ownership of a man's own limbs and life. Our modern idea of a man as having a separate right to his own property and to his own life did not exist. As an act of justice in those days, a man's whole family was sometimes put to death with him as the punishment of his crime. A man's children were a man's property—not less dear for that; but the relationship was something so different from the relationship that exists among us that we can hardly understand it.

In modern times, as Prof. Mozley puts it, a man's life belongs to himself; to put him to death as a sacrifice is to give up that which is not ours to give. It was not so in primitive society; a man's life belonged to his tribe, and could be disposed of by the head of his tribe. To Abraham

¹ *Ancient Law*, p. 183.

² *Ib.*, p. 258.

³ *Ib.*, pp. 123, 124.

Isaac is "a treasure of his own which he has to give up, a treasure which is dearer to him than any other earthly thing, and which it is the greatest trial of his life to part with, but which is still his own, *belonging* to him, and appropriate to him to surrender."¹

To Abraham therefore the command to sacrifice his son would have a moral character altogether different from that which a similar command would have to us. This has to be remembered throughout the story.

Secondly, we can imagine that as Abraham passed from one end of the promised land to another he would sometimes actually witness the human sacrifices which the heathen people who then held the country offered occasionally to their gods, and he might still more frequently hear of them. The question would occur to him whether *he* was capable of a similar devotion to the Eternal. Was *his* reverence for the supreme God as deep—would it prove, in time of trial, as effective as their reverence for their inferior divinities? He broods over the question. Isaac is dearer to him than all the world besides. And further, it is through Isaac that all his visions of future greatness and glory for his descendants were to be fulfilled. Nor was this all: through Isaac he and his descendants were to be channels of Divine blessing to all nations. Could he sacrifice Isaac, at the command of the Eternal, as the heathen were sacrificing their own sons? Perhaps he doubts. How could he sacrifice the son that he loves with so immense a love? How could he destroy, with his own hands, his great hope, the hope of the human race, the hope which had come to him through the wonderful goodness of God? Everything else that he had he would sacrifice at the command of God;—but this! was it not too much? It would be, no doubt, the final, the supreme proof of his faith in God and his obedience to Him; but was it possible?

¹ J. B. Mozley: *Ruling Ideas*, p. 49.

Then came the Divine voice. If to sacrifice Isaac seemed to Abraham the final, the supreme proof of his fidelity to God, he must do it. Abraham's own conscience declared that this would be the highest proof of his faith and obedience. It may be—it was, in this instance—an unenlightened conscience. But what he feels would be the highest proof of his faithfulness to God, this the voice of God requires from him. Abraham obeys: but at the moment that he is about to put Isaac to death, God interferes: it is not by the shedding of human blood on the altar that God can be honoured. Abraham has shown that he does not shrink from even the extreme test of his faith in God; whatever God asks for he will surrender—his own son, and all the infinite hopes that were to be fulfilled through him. There lies the glory of the deed. Let me put it briefly: there are two elements in Abraham's act; first, he himself believed that to sacrifice Isaac would be the most decisive proof of his devotion to God; and then the voice of God required him to give this proof.

A great act like this, to quote Prof. Mozley again, is dramatic, while character is only didactic. A great act is like "a great poem, a great law, a great battle, any great event; it is a movement, it is a type which fructifies and reproduces itself."¹ "Do you say," he continues, "that such an act could not be done now? That is all the more reason why it should have been done; why it should have been done when it could be done. . . . It seems to belong suitably to the Divine Governor of the world to extract out of every state of mankind the highest and most noble acts to which the special conceptions of the age can give rise, and direct those earlier ideas and modes of thinking toward such great moral achievements as are able to be founded upon them."

¹ Mozley: *Ruling Ideas in Early Ages*, pp. 59, 60, 61, and 55.

That last sentence of Prof. Mozley's is the clear statement of a principle which has to be remembered in all our moral judgments of the past. To us, for example, the monastic conception of the perfect life seems inadequate and false; but, given that conception, we can see what nobleness, what zeal, what sanctity are illustrated in the lives of many of the ancient monks. The vehicle through which they expressed the innermost life was miserably imperfect; but beneath and within the imperfection of the expression we can see how beautiful and divine the life was. To us the crusades appear to have had their origin in superstition. The Christian men of crusading times were eager to rescue the Sepulchre of our Lord from the hands of the infidel. For this nobles sold their estates, and kings spent the wealth of their kingdoms; for this they left for years their homes and wives and children, and died by thousands and tens of thousands—died in prison, died of famine, died of disease, died on the battle-field. If instead of endeavouring to rescue from the infidel the Sepulchre where the body of Christ had rested, they had endeavoured with the same passion, the same heroism, and with the same reckless devotion of life and treasure, to make known to the infidels the grace and glory of the Christ who had died and risen again and was now the Lord and Saviour of men, how much nobler would have been the results! But we have never yet shown the same earnestness and enthusiasm in trying to rescue men from sin that they may become living temples of the Living Christ, that the crusaders showed in trying to rescue the rocky tomb where the dead Christ was buried. Their ideas of how Christ was to be honoured were, as we think, grossly superstitious. Yes, but how intense, how pathetic was the passion of many of them for honouring Him! We can but do what seems to us our best and highest for

God. Abraham meant to do it, and this has given him enduring glory.

God "*proved*" Abraham—tested his faith. It was to test whether Abraham really held fast the conviction which broke out in his intercessions for Sodom and Gomorrah,—“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Was Abraham really sure that God was Supreme, and that the highest duty and blessedness of man lay in obeying Him? Was Abraham certain—absolutely certain—that God would be true to His promise that by Abraham’s descendants through Isaac all nations would be blessed? Was he certain that God would be true to it, even though Isaac was offered as a sacrifice on the altar? Abraham came out of the testing process gloriously.

And God "*proves*" us. His first great proof of us is in a manner the precise opposite of that to which He subjected Abraham. God proved Abraham by testing whether he had sufficient faith in God to sacrifice his son at God’s command. God proves us by testing whether we have sufficient faith in God to believe that He loves us well enough to sacrifice His Son for us. How many of us admire—really admire—the beauty and grace of our Lord’s character and the depth of His teaching. Ah! but admiration is neither the first feeling nor the last that we ought to feel for Christ. It is too cold, too remote. The spectators on the shore who see a fisherman leap into a rough sea to save a drowning man, imperilling his own life to rescue the life of another—they may admire; but the drowning man himself who is saved feels something different from admiration, and far deeper: he owes his life to the man who has rescued him. And we, when once we see that the Eternal Son of God has died for us, feel something far deeper than admiration: we see how awful must have been our peril, and we confess that we owe our eternal life to Him. The Gospel of Christ proves us, tests

our belief in the love of God. The Gospel of Christ proves us ; it proves whether we believe that our sin is so awful a thing that even the infinite mercy of God may not be able to forgive it without sacrifice ; and it proves whether we believe that, notwithstanding our sin, the mercy of God is so great that the sacrifice has been offered.

But the ways in which God tests whether we really acknowledge Him as Supreme are many and varied. The great tests, no doubt, come seldom. They are the memorable moments of life, the turning points, the crises, in which we are judged—judged not finally, but with a judgment that often extends over many years, and has a large effect for good or evil on our whole subsequent history. The test is sometimes in secret, and how we have borne it is known only to God and ourselves ; we have stood it, and are greatly the stronger for it, but we win no human honour ; we have horribly failed, and shall suffer for it for years, but we incur no open disgrace. Sometimes the test is imposed in a form that reveals us to others as well as to ourselves—ruins us or makes us.

But these great crises, I repeat, come rarely : the way in which we meet them is largely determined by the way in which we stand tests of a more ordinary kind ; and these are constantly recurring. For us is God supreme ? The test has been imposed on us to-day. It will be imposed to-morrow, and every day in the week, and when you lie awake at night. It will be imposed in your business. God will be proving you from hour to hour to test whether your chief desire is to please Him. When men say and do things that would naturally provoke you to harsh and bitter words, He will be testing you. When you have the chance of getting undue advantage for yourself out of another man's ignorance, helplessness, poverty, He will be testing you. When impure thoughts are suggested to you by something that you see or hear in the

street or read in a book, He will be testing you. When you have done wrong, or made a mistake, and can easily hide it by a lie, He will be testing you. When you have the chance of being idle, without any one knowing it in the house where you are hired for working, He will be testing you. Always, everywhere, though at some times and in some places more than others, God is proving us—is testing whether He is really our God. And if we find that He is not,—that we are continually thinking thoughts, saying words, doing deeds that would be checked and prevented if He were really our God, it is clear that we have reason to be troubled, not merely by the particular offences which may show it—*they* may seem to be very trifling matters, things to be passed over by the Eternal and forgotten, but we have reason to be troubled by what they show; and if they show that God is not really God to us, this is fatal. Everything is wrong—wrong now; and if not remedied before it be too late, everything will be wrong for ever.

The analyst has a quart of water taken from the water-supply of a great city; he tests it, discovers clear indications of sewage poison. How minute is the quantity of poison in that quart of water! Surely no one need be alarmed about it. Not alarmed? It may mean death to thousands of men and women. As soon as it is discovered the city should be ready to spend hundreds of thousands—millions if necessary—to avert the danger.

And these *tests* of whether God is really our God, may seem equally insignificant. The thoughts, the feelings, the words, the actions, the habits, are in themselves, as we think, wholly unimportant. Yes, in *themselves* perhaps: but they show the quality of our life; the poison is there: and it is only as the very springs of life are purified that we can be saved from eternal death.

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