

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PATRIARCHS IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGION.

My conviction is that we have the right even now to say that the patriarchs belong to historic reality. I will not explain that sentence here, as I think I have done so sufficiently in my *History of the Kingdom of God*.¹ I will say only this much : The historical ground on which the patriarchs are among the principal figures is not a complete and uniform crystal, but it is a mountain-ridge in which we shall find many old deposits which form a permanent foundation of the earliest part of Israel's historical memories. Therefore I think I may with a clear conscience raise the question as to the significance of the patriarchs in the history of religion. It is impossible, however, to appreciate the historical importance of a personality unless we can fix his position from a backward as well as from a forward point of view.

1. Let us, therefore, first try to settle whether and how the patriarchs stand out from their age and surroundings in the religious-historical aspect.

The old Hebrew historical writings inform us in all their strata, that it was from a religious motive that Abraham separated himself from his ancestors and kindred.

We have the fact clearly stated in these words : " Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time (i.e. of the most important river in Hither Asia, the Euphrates), even Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nachor, and they served other gods. And I (the divine Being, Jahve) took your father Abraham from the other side of the

¹ *Geschichte des Reiches Gottes* (1908), p. 18 f., p. 46 f.

flood and led him throughout all the land, etc." Therefore, it was from a religious motive that the first patriarch separated even from his nearest relatives. This we are told in Joshua xxiv. 2, etc., a portion of the so-called Elohistie stratum of the Pentateuch which from various indications of language and contents,¹ seems to me and to a number of other scholars to be the oldest. With this original testimony there corresponds the well-known passage from the Jehovistic source of the Pentateuch, according to which the call to Abraham ran as follows: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I (the everlasting divine Being) will show thee" (Gen. xii. 1-3).

The clear evidence of the entire ancient Hebrew literature is in fullest harmony with those oldest express utterances on the position of Abraham in religious history. With what silent eloquence does the testimony of historic facts link itself on in the same connexion! For if there is any one thing that is firmly established in the history of Israel, it is the fact that the religious separation from other peoples, which is the chief factor in Israel's peculiar importance in the history of human civilisation, dates from the *pre-Mosaic* age. For Moses (again according to the testimony of the earliest and indeed of all sources) approached his fellow-countrymen with the clearly-expressed declaration that he was the messenger of the God of their FATHERS (Exod. iii. 13; vi. 2, etc.). Consequently the national memory of Israel was aware of a connexion between the Mosaic and the patriarchal religious stages, and even such a decided representative of modern criticism as the Strassburg scholar, Charles Piepenbring, has with full justice defended the importance of this historical recollection of Israel in these emphatic words: "All these traditions (i.e., on the con-

¹ Compare my *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, pp. 203-205.

nexion of the Mosaic religious stage with that of the patriarchs) cannot be mere air-woven inventions.”¹

According to the direct and indirect evidence of the historical sources, Abraham's importance for the history of religion consists, therefore, primarily in this fact, that within the Semitic branch of the human race to which he belonged he struck out a new and different religious direction. Is it possible to define with greater completeness what this direction was ?

Let us try to do so first on *negative* lines. What a noteworthy fact it is that in all the original records about Abraham there is no mention of any objective image of God ! In an age and environment in which the embodying to the senses of the divine idea by plastic imitations of various kinds of super-earthly or earthly phenomena formed a fundamental characteristic of religious life, a man is brought before us in the original sources who did *not* represent the Godhead to himself in a concrete object. But were not the patriarchs fetish-worshippers ? That fact is maintained in several modern accounts of the history of Israel and the writers think they find proof of the assertion in the statement that when Jacob awoke from his dream about the heavenly ladder he poured oil upon the stone on which his head had lain (Gen. xxviii. 17, etc.). But did Jacob, according to this narrative, “ regard the stone as a fetish,” as a dwelling of God from which he believed that his dream had come ? Certainly not. The contrary fact is made clear even in that cry of Jacob, “ How dreadful is this place ! ” He did not cry : “ How dreadful is this stone ! ” and in the whole account we do not find that sentence which even some of the most recent authors ² have quoted from it, that the stone

¹ Ch. Piepenbring, *Histoire du peuple d'Israel* (1898), p. 47. “ Toutes ces traditions ne peuvent pas être tirées de l'air.”

² Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, p. 155; and S. I. Curtiss, *Primitive Semitic Religions, etc.* (1903), p. 93.

was for Jacob a house of God. On the contrary, the passage reads : " And this stone shall become, or be, a house of God." If Jacob had regarded the stone as a dwelling-place of God, as a fetish, the passage (Gen. xxviii. 22) which actually has a place in the original record, would be absurd.

But [it may be answered] Jacob did " pour oil upon the stone." Well, that may have been, in the first place, an act of consecration. This symbolic act was often performed on objects and on persons, and it would correspond to the intention of Jacob to make that stone the foundation stone of a house of God. But this pouring out of oil may also have been a sacrifice. That stone, viewed in this sense, may have served the purpose of one of those primitive rock-altars which are occasionally mentioned (see Judges xiii. 19, etc.), and in the parallel narrative (Gen. xxxv. 14) the pouring of oil is actually understood in this sense.

But what of this fact ? We are actually to assume from xxviii. 17 f. that Jacob was a fetish-worshipper, and yet in chap. xxxv. 1-5 we read that when he returned from Mesopotamia he caused the images and amulets which some of his family had brought home from the country to be delivered up to him and buried. Both passages (xxviii. 17, and xxxv. 1-5) belong, moreover, to the same stratum of the Pentateuch.

How could the same narrator have represented the third patriarch as a fetish-worshipper and at the same time have informed us that he caused the images to be buried ? We see then that the religion of the patriarchs, according to the sources, had already risen above the use of images of God.

In characterising, from the *negative* side, the position of the patriarchs in the history of religion, we must make this further remark, that they had been led to hold human sacrifices in abhorrence. Abraham, at the time of his immigration into Canaan, may well have been almost compelled at first to regard child-sacrifice as an act of the deepest devotion

to God. For among the discoveries which have been made during the most recent excavations in Palestine the gruesome discovery of children's skeletons has been one of the most extensive. This observation was made by Professor Ernst Sellin during his excavations at Ta'annek in the plain of Jezreel,¹ but much more distinctly by the English searcher, Macalister, during the excavation at Gezer (south-east of Jâfa).² But in this situation, where he was so tempted, the knowledge was made possible for the patriarch that his God did not desire to be worshipped by the actual sacrifice of children, but that for *this* God it was sufficient that man should carry within his soul the highest sacrificial capacity of disposition. Rightly, therefore, has this rejection of human sacrifice been described by several scholars of our own day as a cardinal principle, from the negative side, in the religion of Abraham.³

Looked at from the *negative* standpoint, the position of the patriarchs in religious history is characterised, we see, by its elevation above the practice of making images of the divine—how much more above fetish worship—and by its rejection of child sacrifices.

Let us next ask what was, from the *positive* side, the nature of the patriarchal religion. The entire historic consciousness of Israel answers this question as follows :—

The religion of Abraham in its fundamental character was a new positive connexion with God, entered into by the first patriarch, which was to result finally in blessing to the whole human race. So we read in the cardinal words of the Jehovistic passage : " Go out of thy country," etc., " and

¹ E. Sellin, *Denkschriften der Wiener Akademie, philosophisch-historische Klasse*, Band iv., Heft iv. (1904), p. 96 f.

² H. Vincent, *Canaan d'après l'exploration récente* (1907), p. 188 f., 191, etc.

³ Ad. Kamphausen, *das Menschenopfer* (1896), p. 26 ff.; O Procksch, *das nordhebräische Sagenbuch* (1906), p. 342.

in thy seed shall all families of the earth be blessed " (Gen. xii. 1-3). The same meaning is derived from the Elohist passages in which Abraham is called a prophet (Gen. xx. 7) and in which, as already mentioned, he was called upon to leave his ancestors as worshippers of *other gods*, and to emigrate to Canaan (Josh. xxiv. 2 f.)

If we seek to collect secondary characteristics in addition to this fundamental positive characteristic of the patriarchal religion, we find the following : in the conception of God the quality of power stands in the foreground. The sources of the Pentateuch agree on this point. For as the divine sphere opened itself for Abraham with the expression, " I am the Almighty God," etc. (Gen. xvii. 1) so we find that in a very striking way Isaac's conception of the divine Being is in two passages (and nowhere else in the Old Testament) referred to as an " object of fear " (*páchad Jischâq*, Gen. xxxi. 42, 53).

Further, we learn from all the sources that the first patriarch was conscious of a principle of morality which was religiously directed. For according to the Elohist source Abraham cherished this thought in his mind with regard to an unknown town that the life of a stranger might be held of small account because the fear of God was not in the place. (Gen. xx. 11, " And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place, and they will slay me for my wife's sake.") We see how the same relationship between religion and morality is expressed here as in the words of the esoteric-priestly stratum of the Pentateuch, " I am the Almighty God ; walk before me, and be thou perfect " (Gen. xvii. 1).

According to the oldest sources there was this further characteristic in the religious consciousness of the patriarchs that the connexion with God which was established in Abraham was to result in the far future in blessing to the

whole human race (Gen. xii. 3, etc. The words occur five times in Genesis). Finally, we note that in the actions of the man who has entered into a covenant with God, faith and hope, on this patriarchal stage, are conspicuously more prominent than obedience. "Abraham believed God, and He counted it to him for righteousness." The patriarch Jacob cried to the being with whom he had to wrestle in the lonely night at Jabbok, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." From the heart of the aged Jacob, too, there was breathed that sigh of prayer: "I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord." But we see most distinctly from the two points last mentioned that the individual views, principles and efforts which meet us in the whole field of patriarchal religion, are merely outstreamings from its central sphere of light; I mean the new and peculiar connexion between God and the first patriarch which was to result finally in blessing to the whole of humanity. This religion of redemption, and with it the founding of the Kingdom of God, is the sun in the religious consciousness of the patriarchs, while the other characteristics—negative and positive—which have been gathered from the original narratives, resemble the reflexions, partly of shadow and partly of light, cast by the satellites of this newly-rising sun.

What *rank*, we may next ask, does the stage of patriarchal religion occupy in the spiritual history of mankind? If we restrict ourselves to the consideration of that principle which may be compared to the sun in the existence of patriarchal religion, no one can deny that the patriarchs hold a very important position in religious history. Who will dispute this fact, if he has once realised how idol-worship and child-sacrifice fled away as dark shadows before the light of the new and unique consciousness of God, and how that light caused the blazing forth both of the principle of a higher, religiously directed, morality, and also the prospect of a

brotherly union of the human race as a religious community ? But the final estimate of this importance depends on the answer given to the question as to the *original source-point* of the position of the patriarchs in religious history. If it is permissible to summarise in a single sentence the two answers to this question which have prevailed in recent times in most scientific publications, the matter stands as follows : some derive the peculiar religious position of the patriarchs from the so-called "Bedouin ideal," and others from the contact of Abraham with the Babylonian and Canaanite religions. Let us examine these two attempts at derivation, which are now prevalent.

Some, as we have said, think they can unveil the secret of Abraham's peculiar religious position by directing our attention to the Bedouin-like circumstances of his life. This is the root-idea of the so-called Wellhausen school, as it is represented to-day, for example, by the English scholar Ottley in his book *The Religion of Israel* (1905). He draws out this widely accepted explanation as follows :—

Abraham was "the pastoral chief whose life of wandering in the desert has imbued him with a sense of the irresistible power which lies behind the rugged and stern phenomena of nature around which his lot is cast. In a spirit of awe, of receptivity, of submission to the leadings of his God, he passes from land to land, dwelling in tents, rearing his altar for sacrifice beneath the open sky, shunning the tumult of cities, and sojourning in the broad and silent spaces of the wilderness. This tendency to withdraw from the centres of civilisation and to prefer a life of primitive simplicity is illustrated by the narrative of the call of Abraham"¹ But if it were allowable for us to content ourselves with causes and motives of such a general influence, many originators of a special religion must have arisen among the Semitic shepherds.

¹ Ottley, *The Religion of Israel* (1905), p. 23.

In order that we may judge fairly in this matter, let us try to realise for one moment the picture which Ottley and other adherents of the same school have drawn with regard to the origin of the separate religious position of Abraham. A desert landscape, like others which then existed and still exist, forms the background. A Semitic shepherd, like thousands of others of his class, stands in the foreground ; and yet we are to suppose that just this one particular Semitic shepherd appeared as the beginner of a new period of religious history.

Surely we must admit that the causes do not correspond to the effect produced by them ! Moreover, the statements about a holding aloof from towns and centres of civilisation do not apply to Abraham. Did not Abraham establish himself at Sichem and Hebron and near the Philistine capital Gerar, etc. ? Was not this the utmost that he could do in the way of approaching towns ? Was it possible for him to make his dwelling within these towns ? Then again, he accepted the gifts of Pharaoh, and we remember those rich bridal presents which he gave to the messenger he sent out to arrange the marriage with Rebecca. We note also that twice in the life of the patriarchs there is a mention of agriculture,¹ the sign of a settled position.

Generally speaking, it may be said that we completely misunderstand the religion of the Old Testament if we suppose that it demanded a renunciation of property or of the enjoyment of the blessings of nature and the gifts of civilisation. No prophet of the Old Testament religion represented the so-called " Bedouin ideal." It is by an entire mistake that this ideal has been attributed so often in recent literature to the father of the patriarchal religion and the religion of Israel as a whole.²

¹ Genesis xxvi. 12, and xxxvii. 7.

² This point has been elucidated in my "History of the Kingdom of God," pp. 71, 137 and 215, with the entire material relating to this matter which can be found in the sources.

We next ask, What foundation is there for the *second* main theory that has recently been suggested for the derivation of the Abrahamic religion? Was it drawn from Babylonia or from Canaan? In examining this theory we shall not attempt to cover the whole ground, but shall keep in view only the latest publications. In its newest form, this derivation of the Abrahamic religion from a Babylonian origin may be set out as follows: Writers have fallen back on the idea that in Babylonia there were at least "Monotheistic tendencies."¹ But in whom did these monotheistic tendencies show themselves? A ruler like Hammurabi, who was certainly one of the most enlightened intellects of his nation, names four gods in the first three lines of the inscription of his Code.² Berossos, a Chaldean priest of *circa* 270 B.C., makes no mention in his Babylonian history of monotheism as forming part of the progressive development of his people. In the Babylonian-Assyrian texts we find only that phenomenon of religious history which we call Henotheism, and which has been observed also in India and Egypt. For the Babylonian or Assyrian worshipper it happened that in one or other situation some figure from his people's Pantheon of divinities advanced into the foreground of interest. For example, a long prayer was offered to the goddess Ishtar, a personification of Venus, but at the close the praying man returns to the standpoint of polytheism. For he says: "May the gods of the universe do thee homage!"³

But in recent writings an even stronger emphasis has been laid on the theory that monotheism has been discovered

¹ A. Jeremias in his work, *Monotheistische Strömungen innerhalb der babylonischen Religion* (1904).

² The first lines of the Code of Hammurabi read: "When the lofty *Anu*, king of the Anunnaki, and *Bel*, lord of heaven and earth, he who determines the destiny of the land, committed the rule of mankind to *Marduk*, the chief son of *Ea*, etc."

³ H. Zimmern, *Babylonische Hymnen und Gebete in Auswahl* (1905), p. 16.

among the ancient *Canaanites*.¹ Every one will naturally recall in this connexion the name of Melchisedek, king of Salem, and priest of the most high God [in a better rendering, "of the highly throned God"]. But among the excavations at Ta'annek a cuneiform letter has been discovered in which mention is made of "bêl ilânu," the "lord of gods." This, however, is only a sharpening off of Polytheism to form a monarchic summit such as we find, for instance, in the Greek elevation of Zeus, which did not—we may remark in passing—lead on to monotheism.

We see then that even if monotheism were the most characteristic feature of the Abrahamic religion, it could not have been derived from the religion of Babylonia or Canaan. But the monotheistic faith was not the essential feature of the religion of the patriarchs. The chief factor of the Abrahamic religion lies rather in a new positive connexion between God and man, and this could not have been borrowed from the Babylonian or Canaanite beliefs.

What then was the original source-point of this consciousness of a new positive connexion with God, which forms the essential factor of the Abrahamic religion? The famous Sanscrit scholar, Max Müller, says that Abraham followed the same inner voice that speaks to us all.² But if we derive the special religious consciousness of the prophetic minds of Israel from the general character and experience of humanity, we land ourselves in a complete inner contradiction. The essential fact in the history of civilisation, of which it is impossible for us to rid ourselves, is that Abraham's religious position is the foundation stone of the special position which Israel holds in the history of intellectual development. Through it this nation became the religious people of the ancient world, as the Göttingen theologian Hermann

¹ See B. Baentsch, *Aktorientalischer und israelitischer Monotheismus* (1906), p. 57.

² Max Müller, *Essays on Religion*, vol. i., p. 353.

Schultz has recently remarked with perfect accuracy. This specific peculiarity of the religious history of Israel cannot be explained by referring to the customary factors of the intellectual history of mankind, as Wellhausen himself has twice expressly admitted.¹

We are therefore forced to the conclusion that the ultimate source-point of the prophetic religion of Israel which began with Abraham is to be sought in a special experience of the prophets of that people. And is this impossible? Has it been settled that Hamlet was wrong when he said :

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” ?

In our own century we are less disposed than ever to deny the truth of his words. Our age has discovered in radium an element whose nature and influence have thrown doubt on natural laws which were previously accepted. For radium is warmer than its environment, a characteristic which had hitherto been known to exist only in living beings ; and radium sends out rays without losing anything, as far as the observer can see, of its effective capacity. In no previous age has that saying of Hamlet seemed less impossible than in ours. The significance of the patriarchs in religious history is, therefore, a very high one, on account of the extraordinary origin of the patriarchal religion, which history and logic demand, and which, in the present state of human knowledge, cannot be disproved.

2. There is, further, a mutual correspondence between the height on which a phenomenon originates and the elevation of its influence on later times. To the same height from which the head waters descend, the fertilizing influence of their rippling streams ascends. We recognise this partly as we examine the objective course of history, and partly

¹ Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 4th edition, 1901, p. 36. “We can form no final conclusion as to why Israelitish history, which had an approximately similar origin to that of Moab, should have led to an entirely different result.”

as we watch the human subjects even under the patriarchal religion. Let us pause a moment to consider the thought in these two directions.

(a) If we regard the influence of the Abrahamic religion in the light of the objective course of history this fact becomes clear: The Abrahamic religion, which cannot be wholly explained as having had its origin in finite causes, had also an infinite bearing upon the future.

The beginning in the patriarchal age was followed by the continuation in the Mosaic epoch, the great uprising of the national and religious spirit in the time of Samuel, the partly reforming, partly progressive activity of the prophets from Elijah onwards, etc., and finally by the perfecting of this religion through Christ. This later history of the Abrahamic religion would have been amazing even if it stood in the same relation to the earlier as the stem, the buds and the ripening of the fruit, bear to the seed germ. For what a mighty, impulsive force there must then have been in this seed which manifested itself in such powerful and majestic forms during its later development.

But the real facts are different. One circumstance which has not yet been fully noted and appreciated is that none of the spiritual leaders of Israel derives his message from any predecessor. They all appeal directly to the same divine origin of their mission. The true prophets of Israel do not form a chain whose links are bound together. They are like rays which issue from the same central sun. This is most of all true, I might say, if I dared to make distinctions in degree, in the case of Jesus Christ. For the Messianic image which He represented in word, act and suffering does not correspond in any mechanical way with the outward content of separate prophecies, but is rather an organic development of these, their spiritual realisation, as I think I have proved sufficiently in my *History of the Kingdom of God*.¹

¹ *Geschichte des Reiches Gottes bis auf Jesus Christus* (1908), § 45.

The unfolding of the patriarchal religion cannot, therefore, be represented as the development of the root impulse of that religion. That development is shown by the original records to have been something different. It is a *continuous* proof of the connexion of the patriarchal religion with a higher world, which carried on that earliest point, fixed by the call of Abraham, to the starry line of a history of redemption, and which reached its final halting-place in Jesus Christ.

(b) Let us ask in conclusion what place the patriarchal religion holds for posterity when we view it in the mirror of the human subjects.

The patriarchal religion was regarded by later generations with admiration and gratitude. The name of Abraham, to begin with, acquired a great celebrity, as was promised in that old prediction of Genesis xii. 2. He has maintained through history that title of honour, "the friend of God."¹ Mohammedans vie with Jews and Christians in praising him. They also call him *Chalîlu-allâhi*, i.e. the beloved of God.² For the people of Israel Abraham was the rock out of whom the nation was hewn like some plastic image; to him, as the fundamental origin, it owed its national and religious existence (Isaiah li. 1 f.). In the diverse ranks of the Old Testament heroes of faith, Abraham, according to the early Christian records, leads the way as standard-bearer, for he "in hope believed against hope" (Rom. iv. 18). With what admiration and gratitude later generations of Christians have looked back to the patriarchs! They could not sufficiently admire the joyful courage with which Abraham obeyed a divine call to become in a far distant region the originator of a new family of the human race. They could not repeat

¹ 2 Chronicles xx. 7; Judith viii. 22; James ii. 23.

² Qorân, Sûre iv. 124. Therefore, Hebron even to-day is called *el-shalîl*, the town of the beloved.

too often his expression of disinterested modesty, "If thou wilt go to the left, then I will go to the right," etc., words by which Abraham set up at the same time his monument as a lover of peace. They could not grow weary of gazing at that touching scene in which he interceded even for Sodom and Gomorrah. How often have the words of Jacob, "Lord, I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which thou hast showed unto thy servant,"¹ found a deep echo in human hearts! Who can count the occasions on which the words of Joseph, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God,"² have strengthened a soul in its struggle with temptation?

It is indeed a sublime image of the religious significance of the patriarchs which gleams forth upon us if we consider it as reflected in the mirror of posterity.

This must, therefore, be the comprehensive judgment we are compelled to form as to the position of the patriarchs in religious history: Even the modern development of source-criticism and the widening gaze which the new discoveries have made increasingly possible for students in the field of comparative research, have not led to any misapprehension as to the broad stream of common material which lies in the various original documents of the patriarchal age. Critics have been obliged to admit the novelty, the amazing elevation, the mysteriousness (defying all ordinary attempts at explanation) of the origin of the patriarchal religion. We may therefore hope that our age also will regard it as an act of historical justice to pay to these old heroes of self-surrender, faith and hope,—these pillars of the truly ideal view of life—the tribute of reverent appreciation.

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¹ Genesis xxxii. 10.

² Genesis xxxix. 9.