

CHAPTER 3

ABRAM THE HEBREW

(*Gen. 12*)

As the centuries rolled by, the Flood and its message became an increasingly dim memory. Everywhere men turned once more to the worship of the forces of nature, even though the dim memory of a supreme creator God, lingered on. It was obscured by the apparent reality of the great forces of nature, which by their underlying harmony, yet frequent discord, suggested a family of gods who, while closing their ranks against evil spirits from outside, yet vied among themselves in jealous quarrels for their greater influence and honour.

In spite of wide local differences, it is permissible to generalize about the nature-religion of Bible lands. There was a fairly common cultural pattern in the East Mediterranean lands and Mesopotamia, and scholars are accustomed to speak of a common cultic pattern. It was generally believed that the great gods had produced order out of chaos. They had then created man for their own ends, that man might serve them, feed them by their sacrifices, and honour them in ways many and various, which would help the gods to hold any forces of chaos in check that might once again raise their heads.

Speaking generally, the demands of the gods tended to be ritual rather than moral, except in so far as morality would uphold the stability of society. They themselves were above morality, sometimes even immoral. Since they were the

great forces which controlled natural phenomena, they were ultimately subject to nature as a whole. They had shared out the earth and sea and the underworld among themselves, and according to where a man found himself, he was under obligation to give special, but not exclusive, honour to the god of that area. Animistic concepts, which used to figure so largely up to fifty years ago in books on Genesis, had by the time of Abram, some 2000 B.C., been superseded, leaving only vestiges in popular religion.

Joshua testified to the fact that Terah, a descendant of Shem, shared in the idolatry around him, and that its memory had never completely died out among his descendants (Jos. 24:2). From the few indications given us in Scripture it seems clear that this idolatry was of the general West-Semitic type, without the grosser sexual elements that had so poisoned Canaanite religion.

No indication of any kind is given us how Abram came to faith in one true God, and we know almost as little about the intellectual content of that faith. We may dismiss without discussion the rabbinic idea that he knew the essentials of all that was to be revealed later, and that he perfectly kept the Mosaic law, though many centuries were to pass before it was given. Slightly less improbable are the traditional stories of how Abram came to faith.¹ In fact they throw more light on Jewish propagandist methods against idolatry in the time of Christ than they do on Abram.

We are first introduced to Abram in two accounts which seem to have an element of contradiction in them. In the former (11:31, 32) we find Terah leaving Ur of the Chaldees to go to Canaan but interrupting his journey in Haran, where he died. No reasons are given for his leaving Ur, or for his stopping in Haran. In the latter story the call of God comes to Abram in a place unspecified, though at first sight it would seem to be Haran, telling him to leave country, relatives and "his father's house" for a land not named, but

¹ See additional Note at end of chapter.

which later turns out to be Canaan.

Superficially it might seem that consciously or unconsciously Terah initiated the divine purpose and after his death (Acts 7:4) Abram was commanded to continue it. There are, however, difficulties in accepting this view. The natural interpretation of the figures given is that Abram left Haran before his father's death, though this must not be pressed. There are considerable variations between the chronological figures given in the early versions, and those in the Samaritan leave Abram in Haran until his father died. More important is that in this case he could hardly have been commanded to leave his "father's house". Most important of all is that in 15:7 God tells him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans", a statement taken up in Neh. 9:7, Acts 7:3.

The most likely explanation is that we have here perhaps the first example of that dualism in story-telling which is not uncommon in the Bible, though perhaps we should regard the two creation stories as the first example. We have the story first as men saw it. Terah set out from Ur of the Chaldeans with most of his family. Whether Nahor moved to Paddan-Aram earlier or later (Gen. 22:20-24; 24:10, 15; 28:1) is not told us, for it does not affect the story. Since this migration ended in Canaan, the outsider, unaware of the inner spiritual motivation, is given that as the original purpose of leaving Ur.

Then we are introduced to the spiritual reality behind the externals. However little it might appear to the onlooker, however many other motives may have played a part, the inner drive of all that was happening came from God's call to Abram. Terah's actions were merely marginal.

It has often been suggested that Abram's faith influenced his father sufficiently for him to throw in his lot with his son. Then by the time they reached Haran, old age, weariness or decreasing faith caused him to abandon the seemingly endless journey. This is, of course, plausible and even "edifying", but it is pure conjecture based on silence and a

feeling of what should have been.

It may be that archaeology by its interpretation of Abram the Hebrew (14:13) has suggested the answer. Conjecture it must remain, but at least it seems to be firmly anchored in what we know of the period. Whereas "Hebrew" used to be linked with Eber (10:24, 25), or interpreted as "the man from the other side", it is now linked by most with *habiru* and cognate terms found for over half a millennium in documents and inscriptions that have come down to us. The term occurs with varying shades of meaning over the centuries, wanderers, mercenaries, serfs, etc., but apparently always with the idea of less than full citizenship. Professor Albright argued persuasively that in the time of Abram it meant caravaneers, plying their trade with the aid of asses, which were only later replaced first by mules and then by camels. He has shown conclusively that much that is told us of Abram's moves in Canaan fits in with what is known of the caravan trade with Egypt round 2,000 B.C.¹

If this is so, it explains much. Abram regarded Paddan-Aram, the area around Haran, as his native land (24:4, 10 – Nahor was near Haran). This frees us from thinking of Terah and his sons, Semites, as citizens of Sumerian Ur. They were there in the interests of the caravan trade, but they were only tolerated aliens and need not have lived within the city walls. When Abram told his father that he was going, Terah probably felt too old to carry on by himself in an alien setting. When he reached Haran he was not merely at home once again, but also in one of the major centres of the caravan trade. No wonder he stayed there.

It should be noted that all that is told us of Abram and his descendants fits in with this pattern. Except for Esau, they are never found far from human settlements, but they do not live in them. If Abram had 318 trained men available, when the four kings from Mesopotamia broke into Canaan (14:4), they will have been his caravaneers, whom he had

¹ Cf. W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, pp. 5ff.

collected at Hebron until the troubles were past.

Down the centuries the words have resounded: "Leave your country, your kinsmen and your father's house for the country I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you;
I will curse those who make little of you and despise you;
In you all families on earth shall be blessed."

God sent forth his Son, when the time had fully come (Gal. 4:4), and part of that fulness of time was the bringing of the lands round Palestine under a common culture and rule, which enabled the news of the Messiah to spread quickly. In the days of Abram there was no common rule in "the Fertile Crescent" from the Egyptian frontier to the Persian Gulf, but Akkadian, the language of Babylonia, was widely known by the educated throughout the area, and there was a similar culture and religious system. So while Abram was being called to go from all that was dear and familiar to him, he was not being asked to face the completely unknown.

God's demands on Abram were great, but within the limits he could bear. It is an illustration of the truth of Paul's saying, "God keeps faith, and he will not allow you to be tested above your powers" (1 Cor. 10:13, NEB). It is no chance that when he went to Egypt (12:10-20), with its very different culture, his faith cracked. There is, incidentally, no indication that God commanded him to go to Egypt. Both he and Isaac had a similar experience at Gerar (20; 26:6-11), an early Philistine settlement, where again the culture was an alien one. The missionary who outruns the call of God either does not really contact those to whom he has gone, or runs a serious risk of "cultural shock", the former being, of course, the far commoner today.

So the command "Leave" did not imply moving into a

sort of cultural vacuum, where he could make an entirely new beginning, as the Pilgrim Fathers dreamt of doing when they left for New England. It meant cutting himself off from every form of human aid that might be provided by past links and the demands of family relationship. God was demanding complete trust in himself; Abram was not to be granted even the choice of when and whither. In return there was the promise that God would make him become a great nation – not merely numerous but also famous – that he would bless him and make his name great.

In an age in which religion has for so many become marginal its vocabulary has become vague, and by many it is considered pedantic to ask what its terms mean. That this is true of “to bless” may be seen in some of the strange utterances that pass for a benediction in these days. In addition few ask themselves how man can be said to bless God, who is the source of all true blessing.

There is little doubt that the Hebrew verb *barak*, to bless, is linked with *berek*, a knee. When the greater gave to the weaker and poorer, who was in need, the latter knelt before him in gratitude with empty hands outstretched. This is what God’s blessing means, his gracious giving to the one in need, whether this is material or spiritual. Man in return blesses the giver, above all God, by his humble acknowledgement of need and grateful acceptance of what is given. So God’s statement that he would bless Abram implied that all that he would give would be of grace, and that Abram’s greatness would be entirely of God’s creating.

In theory a person’s name was a true description or reflection of his position and nature; it hardly needs saying that it seldom worked out that way. Even so, to make a person’s name great implied that he would be famous for his character and actions. From the sequel it is clear that next to Jesus the Messiah and possibly Moses, Abraham ranks higher than any other in the religious world’s estimation, if we look at the three main monotheistic religions. But this greatness was not to be for his own self-aggrandizement but

that he might be a blessing to others. He was to receive richly from God, that in turn he might pass on the divine riches to others.

At least in its primary sense, "I will bless those that bless you" is no mere promise of blessing to the philo-semite, to the one who seeks to do good and show kindness to the Jew for one reason or another. Yet we should not forget Matt. 25:40. In this setting to bless Abraham and his descendants (not necessarily all Jews! – Rom. 4:16, Gal. 3:7) means to accept gratefully and humbly that which God offers through them. Let us not forget that there are many who call themselves Christians, who resent it, when they are reminded that according to the flesh Jesus was a Jew. Even more of them, either deliberately or by neglect, try to eliminate the revelation of the Old Testament from their religion.

"I will curse those who make little of you and despise you" is a rendering which tries to bring out the meaning of the Hebrew. The traditional rendering, retained by RSV, "him who curses you I will curse", ignores that the Hebrew uses two different words of considerably different meaning. "I will curse those who slight you" (JB) is better, but is too weak; "those that curse you I will execrate" (NEB) is in itself excellent, but it uses a term outside the vocabulary of the average man.

We must face the added difficulty that while to curse originally meant to call down divine vengeance on a person, now, more often than not, it is used of rude and insulting language. For the former sense we have four or five terms in Hebrew, the most important being *'arar*; for the latter *qillel*, literally to make light, is used. It is these two verbs we find here. There are a few cases where *qillel* and its noun *qelalah* approach the meaning of calling down a curse, but normally to revile is nearer the meaning. Not so much the bitter hatred of the antisemite is here envisaged but man's despising and dishonouring of Abraham's descendants.

It is worth mentioning that it is *qelalah* that is used in the

verse so much misused by antisemites and the like, viz. Zech. 8:13. NEB tries to avoid the misunderstanding by translating "symbol of a curse"; "a curse word" would have been better.

"In you all families on earth shall be blessed"; such is the rendering of all the early versions and most Jewish commentators – Rashi is a major exception – but modern translations favour "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves", i.e., they shall say, "May I be blessed as Abraham was". Obviously the difference in meaning is small, but not unimportant. The modern rendering is almost certainly correct in 22:18; 26:4, where a different and indubitably reflexive form of the verb is used. The form used in 12:3; 18:18; 28:14 could in theory be either passive or reflexive. Unfortunately it is found only in these three passages, so we cannot judge from its use elsewhere. Since arbitrary verbal changes are not common in solemn promises, we shall do well to respect the difference and retain the traditional rendering in these three passages. A possible explanation for the change in 22:18; 26:4 is that not the patriarch but only his descendants are mentioned, not all of whom would necessarily prove a blessing.

Just as we are not told how long it took Abram to reach Haran from Ur, so equally the length of the way from Haran to Canaan remains unrecorded. It is the onward march of faith that matters, not the length of the road it has to traverse or the time involved. God waited until Abram had reached Shechem, the natural heart of Canaan, before He made known to him that at last he had reached his goal.

We then have the cryptic remark, "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (12:6). For over a century the majority of Old Testament scholars have used this as a proof that the story must have received its present form at a time when the Canaanites were no more. Since the conquest of Canaan was one of the outstanding memories of the people, ranking with the Exodus and the giving of the Law at Sinai, the logic of this deduction seems to be remarkably

weak. Far more likely is that we are to infer the shock caused to Abram by God's declaration, "To your descendants I will give this land" (12:7). It belongs to the nature of faith that it looks away from the perils and difficulties that surround it to God on high, even as Peter, when he walked the waves of Gennesaret, had eyes only for his Lord (Matt. 14:28-31). Normally, however, there comes the moment when the perils and difficulties become a reality; as with Peter, they may deflect one's gaze from God. What Abram had expected from God's call, we are not told, but it must have come as a shock to him that the land to be inherited was densely populated, at least in parts. That this is the correct explanation of the remark about the Canaanites is suggested by 13:7, where the mention of the Canaanites and Perizzites is surely meant to explain why there was insufficient pasture land for both Abram and Lot.

There is a tendency in some circles to separate the promise of the land in 12:7 from the initial promise at the time of Abram's call. The purpose behind this separation is varied. There are those who genuinely feel that an essentially spiritual promise cannot be permanently linked with a physical one, that the promise of the land was merely something temporary to aid the achievement of the spiritual. Less laudable is the attitude of those who maintain that the promises to Abraham have not merely been enlarged to take in his descendants through faith, but that they, i.e., the Church, have taken them over, leaving nothing for the Jews. Ever since the disastrous outcome of the Crusades the churches have come to terms with reality and have claimed only the "holy places" as their portion of the land. There are yet others who are essentially swayed by their emotions. They may seek to deny the land to the Jew out of sympathy for the dispossessed Arabs, or out of anti-semitic dislike and hatred, which demand that the Jew should pass through the world without a home.

This process of separation has been aided by the tendency of many to regard "To your descendants I will give this

land” as an essentially separate promise. But the very sending of Abram to a specific land (12:1) was by inference the promise of a land. It could not be specified and promised until Abram, following God’s leading in faith, had reached it.

Those who find it hard to combine the spiritual and the essentially physical, and they are many, have not grasped the fact and mystery of “corporeality”. They share in the ancient error of many Greeks that matter is evil or at the best something lower. The eternal Word of God became flesh (Jn. 1:14) not merely for the salvation of man but also for the reconciliation of heavenly as well as of earthly things (Col. 1:19). More than that, he has retained his risen, earthly, material body for all eternity. It would seem to be God’s will that his purposes should be worked out through the material. Just as the garden in Eden should have been gradually extended until it embraced the world, so Canaan should have been the centre from which the knowledge of God should have spread world wide, until the earth was full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. This remains the Scriptural hope also in the New Testament. Whereas Ezekiel saw in vision a small city named “The Lord is there” (Ezek. 48:35), on the new earth in Rev. 21 it has become a great mountain which fills the earth.

We are told that Abram marked the divine appearance and promise at Shechem by the building of an altar. Though it is not stated, it is reasonable to suppose that it was some form of realisation of God’s care and presence that caused him to build his second altar between Bethel and Ai (12:8). This latter altar is mentioned again in 13:4, after Abram’s safe return from the perils of Egypt. When he moved his main centre to the vicinity of Hebron an altar is once again mentioned (13:18). Apart from the much later building of an altar at Mt Moriah, as a preparation for the sacrifice of Isaac, we are told no more of the outward ritual of Abram’s worship.

An altar presupposes sacrifices, but we are told nothing of

them. There are good grounds for believing that there was not much difference between the sacrifices brought by the Patriarchs and those later enjoined by the Mosaic law, for these were all basically older than the Sinaitic covenant. What mattered was that the latter were God's command with even the smallest details laid down, while the former were the expression of the Patriarchs' spiritual needs and desires, which God in grace accepted, but which were not types and shadows from which the people of God should learn. Beyond a few special occasions we have no information about Abram's prayers, and of his worship we know only that he "invoked Jehovah by name" (12:8). On one occasion at least he brought tithes (14:20), almost certainly of the booty gained from his defeat of the four kings. Whether he did so on other occasions is not suggested, though it is likely that he did.

There are many today who lay very great stress on right theology and right worship, and who would dare say that they are wrong? Abraham, however, and for that matter Isaac and Jacob as well, stresses the primacy of a right relationship with God through faith. So long as we remember that it is not in Scripture, it probably matters little what theology and worship we attribute to Abraham. They were so insignificant compared with his faith that Scripture does not record them.

There are good grounds, supported by archaeology, for believing that Abram was what is technically called an ethical monotheist.¹ Having been brought up in the midst of polytheism and idolatry and having been surrounded by them in his father's home, he probably never doubted that these things had some form of real existence. But then Yahweh (Jehovah) – or did he call him El Shaddai, God Almighty, cf. Exod. 6:3? It matters not – revealed himself

¹ Cf. especially A. Alt, "The God of the Fathers" in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, pp. 1–66, and W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, pp. 188f.

to him. We are not told how, because it belongs to the essence of the first steps of faith that they are something completely personal, that one man's experience cannot be the pattern for another's. But once the personal relationship had been established then Abram was prepared to follow and obey Jehovah alone, even though there might be many "gods" and many "lords" (1 Cor. 8:5).

This is why there is something so basic in Abram's story. Culture and nurture, environment and education, the differences between the extrovert and the introvert may deeply influence a man's understanding of God and the way in which he finds him or rather is found by him. To all, however, Abram says that it is a question of knowing God – not knowing about him – and of obeying Him.

Additional Note

The Rabbis and Abraham

The rabbis realized something of the greatness of Abraham and lovingly embroidered the biblical story, filling in what they felt were the gaps in the biblical narrative from their own imagination. This must have started early, for we have examples of it in the fragmentary *Genesis Apocryphon* from Qumran. Here we have space only for the tales how he came to faith in Jehovah.

His father Terah was not only an idolator, but he also sold idols. But even as a child Abram was dissatisfied. One night, as he looked at the stars, he felt, "These are the gods". But with the coming of dawn they faded from sight, so he transferred his veneration to the sun, but this in turn set, as did the moon which replaced it. So he decided that there must be one who was the creator of stars, sun and moon, who must be the true god.

One day, being left in charge of his father's shop, he took a hammer and broke pieces off the various images. Then he damaged the largest and placed the hammer in his mutilated arms. When his father came home and, horrified, asked

what had happened, Abram explained that the gods had started quarrelling, so the largest took a hammer to keep them in order, and that he had caused all the damage. When his father angrily told him, "But there is no life or power in them to do such things", his young son retorted, "Why then do you serve them? Can they hear your prayers, when you call on them?"

Like all the other legends, the stories are attractive, but behind them we can see the Jew preaching monotheism to his pagan neighbours and confounding them by such arguments.