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well as by license. It is not difficult to trace, through the Epistles of Paul and Peter, the progress of these evils, until they culminate in the monstrous forms of the Apocalypse. There does not appear, therefore, to be any justification of the hypothesis that the Pastoral Epistles reveal so special an antagonism to a specific form of Gnosticism as to justify the suspicion of their being forged in the second century, and then attributed by their unknown author to St. Paul. H. R. REYNOLDS.

THE TEMPTATION OF ABRAHAM.

GENESIS XX. 1–19.

IT is in virtue of his faith that Abraham is the father of us all. This faith culminated, according to the Sacred Writers, in the sacrifice of his son, and in this act reached a height never surpassed, if it were ever paralleled. No such height was ever reached at a bound. All mountains are hard to climb; and, most of all, the Mount of Sacrifice. If we would understand the supreme and crowning achievement of Abraham's faith, we must trace that faith, from its inception, through the successive trials by which it was at once tested and trained.

Born and nurtured among a race which worshipped all the host of heaven with cruel and impure rites, Abraham renounced his native idolatry for the service of the only true God. If we ask, "How came he to know God? By what process of thought did he reach the conviction that Jehovah was the true Lord of men, and that He alone should be served?" Holy Scripture yields no reply save this, "The Lord

appeared unto him; the Lord spake with him, and bade him leave the land of his nativity, and promised to shew him a better land." It gives us no further hint of the process by which Abraham rose from superstition to faith, no hint at all as to how he was prepared to *see* God when He appeared, to listen and obey when He spake. If we would learn the story of Abraham's "conversion," we must turn from Scripture to an ancient tradition which is preserved in the literature of each of the great races which sprang from him, the Arabs and the Hebrews. This antique tradition, which doubtless has some basis of truth, is thus given in the Koran:—"When night overshadowed him, Abraham saw a star, and said, '*This* is my Lord.' But when it 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 declined, he said, '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, for this is greater than stars 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 made both heaven and earth!'" Whatever credence we may give to this venerable tradition, or withhold from it, we can hardly doubt that it was in some such way as this that Abraham was convinced of the impotence of the gods of light and fire whom his fathers propitiated with human sacrifices, and was taught to turn to Him who made the sun to rule the day, the moon and stars to rule the night; for it is thus that, in all ages, God prepares men to know

Him, to receive Him when He comes, to listen when He speaks. Apart from an inward quickening of thought and spiritual desire, of what avail are outward revelations of the Divine Glory? God may come to men and dwell among them in the most perfect forms, but they will not know Him as God, neither be thankful, unless they have been previously educated by his Spirit. The Light may shine, but if it shine on darkened hearts, the darkness comprehendeth it not. Only as Abraham had been taught to think more deeply and more truly than his neighbours, to see that gods who changed and set could not be gods, because they did not meet man's need for an unchanging ever-present Lord, could he have been prepared to recognize the glory of the true God, to believe and trust in Him. Only as he had a little light within him, could he recognize and welcome the greater Light which shone upon him from without. In fine, as we might have known without a legend, the faith of Abraham had an origin, an inception, similar to that by which faith springs up in other men.

And the faith which sprang as our faith springs was trained as our faith is trained — by trial, by illusion, by disappointment, by being strained to its last pitch of endurance. By faith, he left his native land, not knowing whither he went, but looking for the country which God had promised him and his seed after him. No sooner had he pitched his tent on the edge of the land of promise, than he was driven from it by famine. Without a murmur, he went down into Egypt, confident that God would bring him back. God did bring him back; and,

then, Lot quarrelled with him, and settled down in the fairest districts of the land which was to have been his inheritance. This inheritance was also promised to his seed after him; but years passed, Abraham grew old, and the promised child was not born. When Isaac was born, when the child in whom all his hopes clustered had grown into a young man—fair, thoughtful, full of promise, Abraham is called, or thinks himself called, to sacrifice him; to sacrifice, with him, all the hopes which had made him a pilgrim and a sojourner in the earth. Isaac is spared, given back, in a figure, from the dead; but still the promise is not fulfilled; God does not give Abraham the land He had promised to give him. When he dies, the patriarch has no possession in it but a grave, no, not so much as to set his foot on.

And when we ask, What is the meaning of all this? the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches us to see in it simply the education and development of faith. Abraham does not receive the promised land, he has to wait long for the promised seed, in order that, compelled to brood on the promise by perpetual disappointment, he may learn to see in it a higher meaning than he saw at first; that the horizons of thought and hope may be enlarged; that he may look for a better country than Canaan, even a heavenly, and for a better seed than Isaac, even a Divine.

This, in general, was the discipline of Abraham's faith, as it is of ours. And, in general, we can see that it was well for him that his faith should be thus tried; that he should be led on, as we are led, by illusion, by promises which seemed to mock the

hopes they bred, until his thoughts took a loftier flight, until, corrected by experience, he set his heart on a higher good than he could reach at first and grasped a larger benediction.

But there is one feature, and that the crowning feature, of this discipline which always has perplexed good men, and probably always will, since this perplexity may itself be a wholesome discipline of *their* faith. When we read that God "tempted" Abraham to kill his son, whatever gloss we put on the passage, we cannot but pause over it and question it. We say: "Nothing could ever make it right for a father to kill his innocent son. It is impossible that God should have sanctioned such a crime. We cannot take the words in their literal sense, if at least we are to take them as the words of God." And, indeed, if we read these simple annals of an antique time in a too prosaic way, we are sure to misconceive their meaning. In reading the Scriptures of the Old Testament, we must always make due allowance both for ancient modes of thought and for Eastern modes of expression. In those early days the poetic Eastern races conceived of all things in a way very different to ours, and uttered their conceptions in forms which on our lips would be simply passionate and extravagant. Thus, for example, they called any great wind "a wind *of God*," any large river "a river *of God*," any beautiful face, such as that of Moses or David, "a face *of God*." We ourselves speak at times of "a *divine* beauty," or "a *godlike* form," when all we mean is to express our admiration of a perfect beauty or a perfect form. But the ancient Hebrews carried this

mode of speech much farther than we do: in their writings the word "god" is often only an *adjective*, and is simply used to denote superlative excellence. Just as they would speak of a strong wind as "a wind of God," or a large river as "a river of God;" so also they would speak of a great thought as a thought of God, or an intense emotion as a Divine emotion—not necessarily meaning to attribute it to the Divine Being, but meaning only to imply how very large and deep it was. And it *may* be, as some of the Commentators have concluded, that when we read, "*God* tempted Abraham," we are only to understand that the temptation was very strong, very profound.

We must also remember, under penalty of constant error, that the theology of the ancient Hebrews was of necessity very loose and indefinite as compared with ours; that it often spake with a confused and stammering tongue of things too high for it, to which it had not attained. Thus, to take only one example, we read in the book of Samuel,[1] "*The Lord* moved David to say, Go, number Israel;" while the Book of Chronicles,[2] recording precisely the same event, affirms "*Satan* provoked David to number Israel." The very temptation which, in one book, is ascribed to God, is, in the other book, ascribed to the devil. And it is very possible that if we had *two* inspired biographies of Abraham, both written by ancient Hebrew scribes, one of them would say, "*God* tempted Abraham," and the other, "*Satan* tempted Abraham;" while if we were so fortunate as to have *three* biographies instead of two,

[1] 2 Sam. xxiv. 1. [2] 1 Chron. xxi. 1.

in all probability the third would contain a sentence which would reconcile both statements — such a sentence as we have in the story of a still greater temptation: "Then was Jesus led up *of the Spirit* into the wilderness to be tempted *of the devil.*"

We must not therefore read the story of Abraham's temptation in too literal a way; we must make every fair allowance for the indefiniteness of the patriarchal theology, and for Oriental modes of speech. But read it with what allowance we may, we can hardly find in it less than this—that Abraham *was* moved to sacrifice his son; that he thought it nothing less than his duty to God to make the sacrifice; that God did, in some way, use the sacrifice for Abraham's good; and that the faith which prompted the sacrifice, however mistaken may have been the form which it assumed, is, in substance and spirit, held up to our admiration in the New Testament as well as in the Old. Less than this it would be hard for any candid reader to find in the story; and when such a reader asks, "How is even this much to be interpreted and vindicated?" he raises a question to which it is by no means easy to give a satisfactory reply.

Assuredly the answer commonly accepted will not satisfy him. That answer runs thus: "Abraham was in danger of loving Isaac more than God. He was unconsciously idolizing the darling of his old age. To shew him his sin, and to recover him from it, to make his faith perfect, and to demonstrate that it was perfect, God *tempted* him; God placed him in a dilemma in which he was compelled to choose between Isaac and Jehovah, to sacrifice his pro-

foundest human affection to his love for God, to shew that he valued the unseen and spiritual above all that was fairest and dearest in the world of sense and time." *This*, as it is one of the most reasonable interpretations of the story, so it has been very generally welcomed by candid and thoughtful students of the Word. Yet, when we consider it, *can* we be content with it? *does* it vindicate the course Abraham took? If he was in danger of loving Isaac more than God, must he, to save himself from that sin, be guilty of a still greater sin? Could it be right that, to save himself from guilt, he should kill his innocent son, and so incur a heavier guilt? Are we to condone murder on the plea that it redeems a man from idolatry, or that it strengthens his faith in spiritual realities?

When the question is put thus, we feel that if Abraham attempted to kill Isaac, lest he should love him overmuch, he simply tried to cast out devils by the prince of the devils. To avoid that conclusion many plead, "But *God* told Abraham to offer up his son; he did not do it of his own accord; it was a Divine, not a human, expedient!" To that plea we reply, "You are simply transferring the guilt from Abraham to God. Wrong things do not become right because God tells us to do them, or, rather, because we think He does. Right and wrong are not mere caprices that change and vary at his will. Whoever ordered it, we know that for a father to kill his blameless son must be wrong and not right; that for a sinful man to commit murder in order to save his soul, is simply to damn his soul well-nigh beyond all hope of redemption.

"Ah, but," replies the objector, "you know God did not *mean* the sacrifice to be made, although He bade Abraham offer it!" But do you not see where that would lead us? Does God *say* one thing and *mean* another? Is He altogether such an one as ourselves? Does *He* palter with words in a double sense, and haggle and equivocate with men for their good?

We must not vindicate Abraham at the expense of God. We dare not juggle with right and wrong in order to vindicate either God or man. We may be quite sure that God *meant* whatever He said to Abraham. We may be quite sure that it was *not* God who taught him to think murder, and the murder of an unoffending child, acceptable to Him. We may be quite sure that it was wrong to intend such a sacrifice, and that all the blame of the wrong is to be charged on Abraham. Nothing is more foolish of us than to assume that the good men we meet in the Inspired Word were without a fault. And, great man as he was, Abraham had faults, which may be seen without a lens. Twice in his life this great hero of a dark age, to save his own skin, exposed his wife to the most extreme and deadly risks. He who sinned against his wife might well sin against his son; he who thought to save himself at Sarah's risk might well think to save himself at Isaac's cost. And *it may be* that this very incident, which we have been accustomed to admire as an illustration of the heroic faith which could sacrifice even a son for God, was intended to teach both Abraham and us that there is no true heroism in *that*, that it is a sin which God abhors and resents.

If we would at all enter into the meaning of Abraham's temptation, we must remember that, like most of the Eastern races of antiquity, the Chaldeans offered the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. Abraham was a Chaldean, and was familiar with their horrible ritual. The Spirit of God, acting on his reason and conscience, had taught him to renounce the idols of his fathers, to turn from all these to Him that made heaven and earth. But Abraham had no Bible, and no body of divinity in his hand; and very possibly could not have read them if he had. What he knew of God and God's will he had to learn by experiment, by adventure, as the years passed and carried his actions to their due results. His whole life was a discipline, a series of lessons and corrections. He was the very type of one who stands on the old paths looking for the new. He is for ever learning, for ever reaching forth to things before him. Whatever his moral instincts, or the Divine Voice, or his experience of life, suggested to him, had to be put to the test before he could know that it was true. He was sure that God spoke with him, but he was not sure what God said—*i. e.*, what his words meant. He searched into these words, these whispers and suggestions of the Spirit, asking what and what manner of thing they signified. God had promised him a land, for example; but the land was not given him. What did the promise mean? God had promised him a son, but for a quarter of a century the promised child was not born. What did the promise mean? Should he buy a parcel of land and try if God meant him to *purchase* the promised country? Should

he make war on some of the neighbouring chiefs, and try if God meant him to *conquer* it? Should he adopt Sarah's suggestion, and try whether the son of Hagar the handmaiden would prove the promised seed? It was thus that Abraham had to grope after God and the meaning of his words; it was thus that he studied and learned the lessons of life; thus that he acquainted himself with the will of God, until, as the inspired writers tell us, his faith embraced the heavenly inheritance, and rejoiced in the day of Christ which it "saw afar off."

And "the temptation" to sacrifice his son was one of the lessons, one of the trials, by which his faith was exercised and developed. Probably, as the Commentators suppose, Abraham loved Isaac with an affection which rivalled, or bade fair to rival, his love for God. God may have quickened this thought, this fear, of an undue or idolatrous love in Abraham's heart, by any one of those slight domestic incidents which have quickened a similar fear in many a tender and devout spirit. The thought, the doubt, the fear once roused, may have grown keen to misery; for should Abraham suffer anything to weaken his faith in God, the whole labour of his heroic life would be undone, and he would miss his mark when about to strike the gold. It may be that this fear mounted and swelled till it coloured all moods and thoughts of the soul, till he was ready to adopt any expedient that would put it to a decisive proof. His fathers and neighbours had given their firstborn to cruel and impotent gods: could he do as much for the Lord of heaven and earth? On this question he may have brooded till he felt there was no other

path out of the difficulty, that he should never be sure of himself unless he could nerve himself to this dreadful effort. He may have felt that if ever there could be sufficient reason for such a sacrifice he had it,—that it must be God who was asking it of him, that his very salvation hung on his obedience.

He braces himself for the effort; he attempts—in will and heart, he *makes*—the sacrifice. And God both accepts it and rejects it. An angel bids him stay his hand and spare his son. Abraham is thus taught in the most impressive way that, under all circumstances, God abhors human sacrifices; that He will not accept them even when they are prompted by the sincerest loyalty, and offered under the profoundest sense of duty. But if God rejects that which is evil in the offering, shall He not accept that which is good? Is it not like Him, is it not what we should expect of Him that, while teaching Abraham to renounce for ever the human, and therefore inhuman, sacrifices of his age, He should graciously recognize that intense faith in unseen realities, and that utter devotion of love which had prompted a father to offer up his only son rather than fail in his loyalty to Heaven? Surely this is the very Grace in which *we* trust—the Grace which disentangles the good from the evil in the mingled yarn of our service, which rejects the evil in order that the good may gain a larger scope!

This, then, is one mode in which we may at once interpret the temptation of Abraham and vindicate the way God took with him. But there is a deeper

interpretation which, in some sort, vindicates Abraham also, and that without doing violence to the Sacred Record. Violence! It is those who refuse to mix a little knowledge and imagination with what they read who are for ever violating the Scriptures, by reading them as if the Oriental chiefs of antiquity were modern Englishmen, or not living men at all. The Jew of Venice demands: "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?" And, really, so far as these ancient Jews of the Bible go, we practically reply, "No, they were not as we are." We find it almost impossible to believe that, had we pricked Abraham, he would have bled; that had we tickled Isaac, he would have laughed; that had we poisoned Jacob, he would have died. They are abstractions to us rather than men of flesh and blood. We have to remember and exert ourselves before we can conceive of them as men of like nature and passions with ourselves. But if we take the trouble to think of Abraham as he was—*as a man*—we may conceive more truly, and with a deeper sympathy, what his temptation was. We speak of it simply as a temptation to sacrifice Isaac. Was it not far more truly a temptation to sacrifice *himself?* Men and fathers, here was a man and a father, an old man to whom life had not much to offer, with an only son, the darling of his age. Would

it have been harder for this old man to die than for him to kill his son? Would it not have been infinitely easier? All the happiness of his life hung on this thoughtful comely young man; all the hopes of his life centered in him, for he was the seed of the promise. To slay Isaac was to slay all his hopes, and to blot out all brightness from his days. Who can doubt that it would have been far easier for him to give up his own life than to take his son's life, to sacrifice himself rather than his son? Nay, to sacrifice his son *was* to sacrifice himself, and that most painfully, most utterly. It may have been a mistaken sense of duty which prompted the sacrifice; the temptation may have come from Satan rather than from God. Yet we may understand how large a part God had even in the temptation, when once we reflect that Abraham was a man, and that he was really sacrificing himself in sacrificing his son: for *self-sacrifice* is the highest law of the highest life. What is love but the death, the sacrifice, of the self? And God *is* love. God is self-sacrifice. To *Him*, to live in and for others, to give and sacrifice Himself for others, is an eternal and perfect joy. To *us*, it is still often a pain, or a joy blended with pain, for as yet we are not perfect; we are not able to sacrifice ourselves wholly and fully for others, to live only for them, and to deny ourselves utterly for them. We approve and admire those who strain toward, if they do not reach, this high mark of perfection, but we ourselves cannot live a life so divine, or cannot as yet find our supreme joy in it. But when we are perfect, when we see God as He is, and are like Him, we shall no longer live to and for ourselves. The law of his

being will become the law of our being; we shall learn that to live in and for others is the only life, to sacrifice ourselves for others the supreme joy.

This is the deepest lesson of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, as it is also of God's sacrifice of *his* Son. The Atonement of Christ is not so much a question as to whether the innocent should die for the guilty, or the One for the all, as a question whether God should reveal Himself to men in the full perfection of his Divine Nature, according to the very law of his Being, as the essential infinite Love, for ever imparting, for ever sacrificing Himself for the good of his creatures. That we may become perfect, and share his pure eternal joy, God incites us to rise into the life of love and self-sacrifice, by displaying his love in giving up his Son for us all. That Abraham might become perfect, God may well have incited him, in sacrificing his son, to sacrifice himself. The temptation to please God by killing a man may have been a temptation of the devil; but the wish to sacrifice self in the ardour of devoted love — this could only have come from God.

In fine, we reach our truest conception of the temptation of Abraham, or the truest yet possible to us, if we conclude that by this temptation, whatever its origin, God taught Abraham, and taught all men through him, that human sacrifices are always an abomination to Him; and that, as to disavow and renounce the self is the negative form of love, and love is the highest law of being and of well-being, so self-sacrifice is the one sacrifice acceptable to Him.