

Abraham

The present stages a crisis of faith. This year was one of intercession for faith. The Legion lives out of faith and for the Faith, and a distinguished figure has just declared it to be pre-eminent for the virtue and for its team-mate, obedience. So it is appropriate to take a searching look at one in whom those things leaped to heights, who can be described as the progenitor of faith. I refer to Abraham. There is another special point in my doing so; his name is on the lips of every legionary daily when in the Catena, he pronounces the line: 'As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.'

Therefore we must know Abraham. Let us ask Mary who spoke those words and who thus called him father, to aid us in our approach to him. Strange to say, I think there is no other scriptural record of her mentioning a name.

In the natural order Abraham was the founder of several races of men, of which the principal are the Jews and the Arabs. In the spiritual order he was the founder of the Chosen People of whom we are a continuation. Our religion, that is as a revelation and a ritual, takes its rise from him.

Abraham was a Chaldean. Let us glance at that country which produced such greatness. In it had been the Tower of Babel. God had wished men to set about their destiny of peopling the world, but they tarried on the building of the tower and probably would have ended by settling down around it. So he confused their languages which forced them to go.

Later that country became Babylon and about 600 BC the Jewish people would be transported into captivity there, as if to make pilgrimage in the native land of their ancestor. Abraham was born about 2000 BC. He was the son of Thare, sometimes written as Terah, who lived in Ur (now Mugheir, Iraq) the capital of the Chaldees. Afterwards, and perhaps even then, the Chaldeans were a learned people, advanced in astronomy, and practicing religion and magic. Thare is spoken of as a 'priest of the moon' and a manufacturer of idols.

Abraham married his half-sister Sara, ten years younger than himself, by whom he did not have a child until she was 90.

Suddenly, Thare decided to migrate. Taking with him his grandson Lot, Abraham and Sara, he set out for the neighbouring land of Canaan. He did not enter it, but settled at Haran where he eventually died.

Then at Haran begins the tremendous drama of the fatherly relations of God with Abraham, of angelic visitations, and even visions of God himself.

Chapter XII of the Book of Genesis opens the story as follows: 'The Lord said to Abraham: Go forth out of thy country and from thy kindred and out of thy father's house, and come into the land which I shall show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless and magnify thy name and thou shalt be blest. I will bless

them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee, and in thee shall the kindred of the Earth be blessed.'

We are not informed as to how God signified himself to Abraham, but it would seem to have been without intermediary. Abraham, then aged 75 did as he was told. With him went Sara, his nephew Lot and all those whom they had gathered around them in Haran. They entered into Canaan. His first recorded halting place was at the Oaks of More in the 'Noble Vale' – at present Sichem. There as if in approval of Abraham's prompt obedience, the Lord appeared to him and confirmed his promise that he would give all that land to his seed. Thereupon, Abraham built an altar unto the Lord, by which we must understand that he offered an animal sacrifice. It would seem as if the inhabitants did not welcome the stranger, because Abraham passed on to mountain territory between Bethel and Hai where defence would be easy. There also he built an altar and invoked the name of God.

Famine descended on the country and the little company fled from it into Egypt, which was then a civilized and imposing power. The historian Josephus describes Abraham at this epoch as full of wisdom and as teaching astronomy and mathematics to the Egyptians. This could be true. The son of Thare would probably have imbibed much of the science of the Chaldeans.

It is not known how long Abraham sojourned in Egypt. It was during that time that he resorted to the subterfuge of declaring that Sara was his sister and not his wife. He feared lest her extreme beauty would attract the Egyptians so that they would kill him to possess her. Pharaoh took her for his wife. For this God scourged him and Pharaoh bitterly reproached Abraham. He ordered him out of Egypt, but to propitiate God he enriched Abraham considerably.

Subsequently Abraham repeated the deception in regard to Abimelech, King of the Philistines.

Too much scorn is thrown on Abraham for those prevarications – as if he were a Christian with our standards. Women were chattels in those days; men took them and put them away lightly, just as they killed for a mere trifle. Nature was deeply wounded by Original Sin. Conscience shed but a dim light. The laws of behaviour were not yet inscribed on stone or in hearts. Abraham's standards of virtue only rose above those of his time. His incomparable quality lay in his faith, and it was on faith that God was building. It was the mystic bridge by which he would enter into loving relations with man. No amount of natural lustre could substitute for it.

The family moved north to their previous habitation at Bethel. There Abraham again built an altar and invoked the Lord.

Then occurred the dispute between the herdsmen of Abraham and of Lot. To avoid dissension Abraham offered Lot first choice of the wide open spaces which lay before their eyes. Lot chose to live in the cities of the plain, namely Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham took up his abode in Canaan. There was a providential significance in this separation between uncle and nephew, because Abraham had most certainly regarded Lot as his heir. Now Abraham was left without anyone to whom his great possessions could descend.

It was at this juncture that God again spoke to him and repeated his solemn Covenant. I must give it to you verbatim as it is so terrific: 'Lift up thy eyes and look from the place wherein thou now art to the north and to the south, to the east and to the west. All the land which thou seest I will give to thee and to thy seed forever. I will make

thy seed as the dust of the Earth. If any man be able to number the dust of the Earth, he shall be able to number thy seed also.' After this Abraham proceeded to the Vale of Mambre which is in Hebron. There he built an altar to the Lord and established his dwelling under the shade of the historic oak-grove.

Then there was the invasion by the four kings. Abraham was caught up in this and brought victory to his side. Returning with his laurels, he was received by the mysterious Melchizedek, the High Priest and King of Salem, who offered up bread and wine in his honour and called down on him the blessing of the Most High God who created Heaven and Earth. Hence Melchizedek is acclaimed as a figure of the Catholic priesthood and his offering as symbolic of the Eucharist.

Again God comes to Abraham in a vision and declares: 'I am thy protector and thy reward shall be exceeding great.' In reply Abraham cries out sorrowfully that a reward is of little use to him because he has no child to receive it. This is the first time Abraham answers God. Then God speaks his great promise of a son through whom through Abraham shall people the Earth: 'Look up to Heaven and number the stars if thou canst. So shall thy seed be.'

The scripture says that 'Abraham believed God and it was reputed to him unto justice'. Abraham's acceptance of God's promise, which was completely contrary to all natural expectation, was a mighty act of faith. Indeed, proceeding from a world that was supernaturally almost dead, it was transcendent. Raissa Maritain's comment is that this is one of the high places of scripture, higher than Sinai.

Then God ordered him to offer a strange sacrifice of five different animals, possessing no doubt a profound

symbolism. When it was completed, God wonderfully opened up to him the future, promising to his seed the land in which he stood. But before that would be accomplished, the seed would be in bondage in another land and would remain thus afflicted for the period of four hundred years. But he, God would then release them and they would issue forth possessed of great substance. Finally they would enter into the Promised Land.

That was God's solemn Covenant with Abraham. It was accompanied by portents in the sky which some authors think to have meant a visible appearance of God to him in fire.

After that Abraham lived for ten years in Canaan, but there was no child. Both of them were convinced that he must take another wife in order to have a son. So Sara gave him Agar, her housemaid, an Egyptian, who conceived a child to Abraham. Very judiciously, she mocked her mistress over this, and Sara retaliated. Agar ran away into the wilderness. The angel of the Lord came to her there and ordered her to return home and humble herself to Sara. Then he delivered to her a remarkable prophecy: 'I will multiply thy seed exceedingly and it shall not be numbered for multitude. Thou shalt bring forth a son and thou shall call his name Ismael. He shall be a wild man. His hand will be against all men and all men's hands will be against him.'

Agar brought forth a son to Abraham who was 86 years old. Of course Abraham saw in the coming of Ismael the beginning of the realisation of the Covenant which God had spoken to him, all the more so as God had specifically promised that Ismael would have offspring beyond all numbering. But therein Abraham was wrong; it was not through Ismael that the promise was to be fulfilled.

After the birth of Ismael, thirteen years elapsed in Mambre without incident of note. Then in Abraham's 99th year the Lord appeared to him once more and affirmed his previous promises, declaring them to be perpetual. A new addition was made that Abraham would be the father of many nations. The law of circumcision was established to identify the people of Abraham according to the flesh. Then God went on to his further immense promise that Sara was blessed by him and would bring forth a son to Abraham, and this son would be the heir to the promise.

At this Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, saying in his heart that it was unthinkable that a son would be born to him at 100 and Sara 90 years of age. But commentators say that this laughter was not that of unbelief but showed the familiarity of the dialogue; it was an appeal for enlightenment.

Then Abraham went on to plead for Ismael whom he loved with a great love and whom he did not wish to see displaced from the inheritance. Then God explained: He would bless Ismael so that he would increase and multiply and become a great nation. But the Covenant was not with Ismael but with Isaac, that is the child whom Sara would bring forth at precisely one year thence.

After that astounding revelation, Abraham circumcised all the males of his household, including the slaves and the strangers who were living there.

To mark the new order and to denote an addition of dignity, God changed the names of Abraham and Sara. Previously they had been Abram and Sarai; the new forms were to be Abraham and Sara as I have been designating them.

There followed an event of a prestigious character. The Lord came to Abraham in the Vale of Mambre. It

was in this way: Three men appeared before him. He understood that they were not of this world, and he bowed down to the ground before them, addressing one of them as Lord. He begged them to abide with him so that he would give them some refreshment. After they had eaten, he whom Abraham had addressed as Lord declared that he would return bringing life with him and that Sara would have a son that time twelve month. Sara laughed in her heart at this, whereupon the Lord reading her thought insisted, saying: 'Is there anything hard to God?'

Then the three rose up to go and Abraham walked a little way with them. When they were about to part, the Lord said to Abraham that he would destroy the cities of the plain because of their complete depravity. While Abraham was pleading on behalf of the two cities, in which his nephew was still dwelling, the two angels who were with God departed for the cities.

The coming of the angels to Sodom and their interview with Lot and their treatment by the debased inhabitants of the place is told in Chapter 18 of the Book of Genesis. It is an appalling chapter, which shows how merited was the shower of fire and brimstone which wiped out those two cities of utter iniquity. Coming over the following morning, Abraham could only see in the place of Sodom and Gomorrah the ashes rising up from the earth like the smoke of a furnace.

He moved to Gerar and it was there the Lord visited Sara as he had promised. She conceived and bore a son in her old age at the precise time that God had foretold. The child was named Isaac and was circumcised according to the command of God. Abraham was now 100 years old and his wife was 90.

The time of Isaac's weaning, which would be about two or three years of age, was the occasion of another mysterious disposition of Providence. When Sara saw Ismael playing with Isaac, she asked of Abraham that he would cast out the girl and her son. She insisted that the son of the bondswoman could not be the heir along with Isaac. Abraham took this command badly because he loved Ismael and his mother exceedingly. But the Lord explained to him that he should do as Sara had required, because in Isaac, and not in Ismael, was the covenant to be fulfilled. But also out of Ismael would arise a great nation.

Then follows the pitiful recital of the expulsion of Agar and her boy, then thirteen years of age. Abraham gave her bread and a bottle of water and sent her away into the wilderness of Beersheba. The water was soon spent and death menaced both of them. Unable to bear the spectacle of the death of her child, Agar put him under a tree and withdrew to a distance and she raised her voice in anguish and wept bitterly. Then God declared to Agar that she was to return to the boy and take him by the hand. This she did and she saw a well and gave the boy a drink.

They lived on in the wilderness. His mother got a wife for Ismael out of their own land of Egypt. To them were born twelve sons and one daughter, and out of these sprung the Arab people. Ismael died at the age of 137.

In that agonising episode of the sending forth of Agar and Ismael whom Abraham loved so dearly, we see another working out of his sublime faith which caused him to fulfil implicitly every word of instruction which the Lord delivered to him, no matter how preposterous it seemed to human reasoning. Each new test of his faith showed it rising to loftier levels. Now he sent those two loved ones into the desert with only the bread and water

which they could carry and which would last but a few hours. Yet his faith trembled not, and God was enabled to do as he said, namely to raise up out of Ismael one of the great peoples of the whole world.

Another feature is that Egypt should form such a recurring theme in the story of Abraham and of the Chosen People. Abraham visited that country, and after him, the Patriarch Joseph. The Chosen People assembled in Egypt and spent there four hundred years of bondage according to the prophecy. Then they went forth to claim their inheritance. Later the Holy Family went to visit the roots of their race. It is a tragedy that two people whose origins were so closely entwined should now be torn by hatred and warfare.

Let us return to Abraham and witness the next act of the divine drama. It exhibits the faith and obedience of Abraham reaching a peak beyond which it would be impossible to ascend. Even in the Christian dispensation it would be difficult to find a faith of such utter purity and heroism and self-sacrifice. Unquestionably it far exceeds the possibility of mere human nature.

The account begins: 'God said to him; Abraham, Abraham, and he answered: Here I am. God said to him: Take thy only begotten son Isaac whom thou lovest and go into the land of vision and thou shalt offer him for a holocaust upon one of the mountains which I will show thee.'

Stricken by such a thunderbolt at the height of his hopes, how does Abraham stay alive? Yet he does not recoil from what he has to do. Without a murmur as it would seem, and without a moment's delay, he sets out by night on this mission. It is evident that he concealed his intentions from Sara and from everyone else. For three

days and more he journeys, a prey to tortures which could not be exceeded; while Isaac, the cause of them, bounds along in the irrepressible gaiety of youth.

In this dark night of his soul, he has achieved a new dimension. By proving that his faith and obedience had no limit, he has established himself as father of all believers. He has provided the foundation for God's Covenant with his people forever.

You will observe that Abraham is not left free to choose the place. He must go to a particular mountain which will be pointed out to him. Therefore it is not a place familiar to him. It is moreover at a great distance, necessitating many days of travel. So it must be part of the great design which is now being gradually revealed. There are two traditions on the subject. One favours the mountain of More where Abraham had his first vision of God and first offered sacrifice. The other is Mount Moriah in Jerusalem; where from the year 1005 BC the Temple will house the daily sacrifice of the Old Law which will be completed by the sacrifice of Christ nearby.

Between those options, logic and likewise super eminent fitness declares for the second: (a) a prophesy looks forward; (b) a type stands for something superior not inferior; (c) as Abraham is here the figure of the Eternal Father who will sacrifice his only son for mankind, it would be an anti-climax to look back to an original shadowing.

So we must assign Jerusalem as 'the place afar' shown to Abraham.

At last they arrive at the indicated spot. Abraham built the altar and set the wood upon it, and he bound Isaac and laid him on the pile of wood, and he took the sword to sacrifice his son.

But as his sword was uplifted, an angel stopped him and said: 'Touch not the boy; because it is now evident that thou fearest God and that thou hast not hesitated to sacrifice thy son for God's sake.' Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw a ram sticking in the briars caught by its horns. He took it and offered it for a holocaust instead of his son. He called the place: 'The Lord Seeth.'

Would it be going too far to couple the above prodigy with the stupendous words spoken in the Gospel of St John (8:56-58): 'Jesus said: Abraham your father rejoiced that he was to see my day. He saw it and was glad. The Jews therefore said to him: You are not yet fifty years old. How can you have seen Abraham? Jesus said to them: Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.' Did Abraham's vision at that moment of his sacrifice pierce the future and see in Isaac the image of Jesus?

Also contained in type in that offering of Abraham was the future offering of her son by Mary. But from Abraham was required only the readiness and he had to endure it for only three days. From Mary was to be extracted the fullness of the sacrifice. She meditated on it for twenty years; and then saw with her eyes its awful consummation.

The sequel to that offering of Isaac was that the Lord called to Abraham from Heaven saying: 'Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake, I will bless thee and wilt multiply thy seed as the stars of Heaven and as the sand that is by the seashore. Thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies, and in thy seed shall all the nations of the Earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice.'

Abraham and Isaac returned to Beersheba and dwelt there.

Sara died at the age of 127 years in Arbee and was buried in a great double cave looking towards Mambre which was given to Abraham by the children of Heth. And Abraham mourned her profoundly.

Abraham's last thought was to provide a worthy wife for Isaac. He did not will that Isaac should marry among the heathenish Cananites, so he sent his servant to Mesopotamia to the city of Nachor, to his own brother. His servant sought the hand of Rebecca, an exceedingly comely maid. This marriage was effected. Isaac brought Rebecca into the tent of Sara his mother and took her to wife. And he loved her so much that it moderated the bitter sorrow which had been occasioned by his mother's death.

Abraham gave all his possessions to Isaac. Then at the age of 175 he died and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ismael, his sons, buried him in the double cave with Sara. Thus passed away the father of many nations and the remote founder of the Christian people. It has been claimed that the double cave of burial lies concealed under the mosque of Hebron.