

## ABRAHAM, FATHER OF ALL BELIEVERS

“**H**OW ODD OF GOD TO CHOOSE THE JEWS!” This is an old Hebrew saying that was often on the lips of thinking Jews. Struck by the wonder and awe of God’s dealings with men, they never ceased marvelling that God should have chosen this man, this people, out of all the peoples of the earth, to be his own special nation. And wonder is truly the only admissible posture in the face of this great mystery. The mystery of election is, in fact, a constantly recurring theme throughout all of *Genesis*. There is the choice of Abraham first, then the choice of Isaac over Ismael, and of Jacob over Esau. Even before Abraham, the same pattern is evident. Of the sons of Adam, it is Seth upon whom God’s blessing rests; then it is Noe who is singled out, and of His line it is the Semites who are favored. Finally, of the Semites, Abraham alone becomes the recipient of God’s favors. The Jews could give no answer for this gratuitous election other than God’s own good pleasure. Nor can we offer a better one today.

### *Abraham’s Story*

The Lord said to Abram :

*“Leave your country, your kinsfolk  
and your father’s house, for  
the land I will show you;  
I will make a great nation of you.  
I will bless you, and make  
your name great, so that you  
shall be a blessing.  
I will bless them that bless you,  
and curse them that curse you.  
In you shall all the nations of the  
earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).*

Abraham is the model of faith. If ever there were a man who seemingly had all the odds against him it was this wanderer from

the East. Called from his own kin and country, he was given no reason save a vague promise that somehow a great nation would spring from him. Yet he believed, trusting against all human possibilities. He left his family which provided him with protection; he left his country, the fatherland which offered him security. Into the unknown he departed, with the faith and obedience that God demanded—a faith and obedience that was truly heroic. Even the promise of future offspring demanded a heroic faith, Abraham was childless and his wife Sara sterile. Yet he believed, “hoping against hope” as St. Paul so meaningfully puts it.

Great was the sacrifice of Abraham. Nevertheless, while he left behind him the protection and security of family and home, he found these things anew and intensified in the protection and security offered him by God. And it is obviously one of the intentions of the author of the story of Abraham to stress this protective aspect on God's part.

An instance of this is the narrative in chapter 12 of *Genesis*. Abraham, because of a famine, went down to Egypt where he “lived as a stranger.” Before entering the land, he told his wife Sara to pass herself off as his sister lest the Egyptians seeing her beauty should kill him to take Sara. Rather, said Abraham, “Say you are my sister so that I may be treated well on your account, and my life will be spared for your sake.” And everything did go as he foresaw it would. The Egyptians saw her beauty, Pharaoh took her into his house, Abraham was well treated on her account, receiving flocks, herds, he-asses, menservants, etc. But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his household with great plagues because of Sara. Pharaoh, suspecting the cause, reprimanded Abraham, gave him back his wife and sent him out of the country.

There are many elements in this story, besides the obvious intention of the story-teller to teach the seriousness of adultery. It is natural for him, for example, to endow the parents of the Hebrew nation with striking characteristics and virtues. He delights in citing the example of Abraham's resourcefulness and of Sara's beauty. And although the patriarch's treatment of his wife Sara may seem “somewhat shabby” to us, it was not so in fact. Given the contemporary standards in such a situation, Abraham, according to his lights, acted prudently—and shrewdness, if not a virtue to the Semitic mind, was at least akin to it.

But the essential point of the story is to give an example of God's protection of Abraham. “God who had promised Abraham the blessing of numerous descendants kept the oath he had sworn.

Sara was preserved to her husband, and Abraham though escorted firmly out of Egypt was delivered from danger. Thus the story is a token of Abraham's entire life under God's protection" (Bruce Vawter, C.M., *A Path Through Genesis*, p. 125).

The same intention may be seen in chapter 13. To avoid quarrels among their shepherds, Abraham and Lot decide to separate. Abraham very generously gives Lot first choice (Generosity is another characteristic of the patriarch). It is to Lot's own misfortune that he chose for pasturage the land near the wicked city of Sodom. But the Lord favored Abraham in his choice. The Lord said to Abraham, "Raise your eyes, and from where you are now look to the North and the South and the East and the West. All the land you see I will give to you and your posterity forever." Then God renews his promises a second time: "I will make your posterity as the dust of the earth. If anyone can count the grains of dust, your posterity can also be counted" (*Gen.* 13:14-18).

These incidents in chapters 12 and 13, and also Abraham's campaign against the Mesopotamian kings to rescue Lot, in chapter 14, all emphasize the protective role of God in the story of Abraham. Abraham's role is one of trust and confidence. It is this attitude of faith that the author concentrates on when speaking of the Father of the Jews. Not that Abraham's life was wholly uncomplicated and free from all discouragement, as his complaints in the beginning of chapter 15 indicate. "And Abraham said: 'O Lord God . . . I am childless. . . . To me you have given no descendents; the slave born in my house shall be my heir.'" God replied that it was not to be like that at all, his heir would be born of his own flesh. "Then the Lord led him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and if you can, count the stars.'" And he said to him, "So shall your posterity be" (*Gen.* 15:2-6). And Abraham believed, "and it was credited to him as justice."

Abraham believed, and here at this time of doubt and renewed faith, God renews his promises for the third time, and enters into a pact or covenant with the Patriarch. Abraham believed, yet he was to prove his faith in many ways—even as ours must needs be proved. The greatest proof of course, is the heroic act of faith recounted in chapter 22, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice the life of his son Isaac even though he was the son of the promise. It was on Isaac that all of Abraham's hope for offspring were pinned. This is the climax of the Abraham story. "After these events God put Abraham to the test. . . . God said, 'Take your only son Isaac whom you love and go into the district

of Moria, and there offer him as a holocaust on the hill which I shall point out to you.' ”

Perhaps no one will ever be called upon to offer a more convincing evidence of faith and obedience than Abraham in this story. It is a touching demonstration of faith, of Abraham's unswerving obedience and Isaac's unsuspecting trust. For when God's will was made known to Abraham it apparently sounded the death knell of all his hopes. "Isaac was the child of the promise through whom God's word was to be fulfilled that Abraham might become the father of many nations—yet he was being asked to destroy this life and the promise with it" (*A Path Through Genesis*, p. 169).

This request of God's probably did not appear too strange. Human sacrifice seems to have been common among the Chanaanites among whom Abraham lived. And it was certainly clear in his mind that God, the ruler of life, had the right to demand this of him. But it was only a test. As Abraham raised the knife on high, an angel of the Lord called to him and stayed his trembling hand: "Do not lay a hand on the boy. . . . I know now that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me." And Abraham offered in place of his son a ram caught in the bush.

Again, after this, the last and greatest test of faith, God renews his promises for the final time: "I swear by myself, says the Lord, since you have done this and have not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you, and will surely multiply your descendents as the stars of the heavens, as the sand on the seashore. . . . In your descendents shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (*Gen. 22:15-19*).

### ***St. Paul's Abraham***

It is small wonder that Abraham is singled out from all the other men of the Old Testament as the man of faith and the father of all who believe. God could indeed have worked out his promises to save mankind in manifold and diverse ways. But the way he chose was through the descendents of Abraham. True, if Abraham had failed the test, the promise could have been fulfilled otherwise. As it is, we are Abraham's spiritual sons according to the promise.

According to the promise—it is by faith in the promise that Abraham merits the title of father. "Abraham hoping against hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations,

according to what was said, "So shall thy offspring be" (*Rom.* 4: 18). It is by faith that he is the father of all believers. And conversely, in the mind of St. Paul, it is the men of faith who are the real sons of Abraham (*Gal.* 3:7).

There is a difference, of course, between the faith of Abraham and the faith of the Christian. Before the coming of Christ, he and all the patriarchs and prophets could only believe in what was to be. We believe in what has come to be. Yet the grace Abraham received and that of every Christian comes from the grace of Christ. As our object of faith is one, we are the true sons of Abraham—who first believed.

St. Paul extols Abraham as the very model of faith, especially in that magnificent passage in chapter 11 of the Epistle to the Hebrews. "By faith Abraham obeyed. . . . By faith he abode in the land. . . . By faith he offered Isaac. . . ." Here St. Paul's rhetoric alone has a tremendous impact. But there is another reason too why St. Paul so very often calls forth the example of Abraham. The reason must be sought for in a consideration of the nature of the promise given the patriarch, and the essence of the mission of St. Paul himself.

We, like the Jews of old, too often forget that the true and mysterious object of the promise was the salvation of the nations. "In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." We are united to Abraham also by faith in this promise. It is really an extraordinary thing that here at the very beginning of sacred history its end should also be set before Abraham. The end that is, that all spiritual beings were created to recognize and give glory to God. The end that will not come till the end of the world when all nations will be brought to the Truth.

Pere Danielou, in his penetrating little study entitled, *Advent*, says that this end, though set before Abraham in the very beginning, was to be unfolded over the long course of the centuries, through God's great works in the threefold history of Israel, Christ and the Church. And this threefold history itself was the object of the faith of Abraham. He was called to believe that he would be "the father of a mighty nation"—Israel. He was called to believe that through one of his descendents, God's blessings would be spread over all mankind, which meant that the Messiah would be a descendent of his—"Abraham rejoiced that he might see my day," Jesus was to say of him. He was called to believe that all the kindred of the earth should be saved, which meant the founding of the Church. But from the very beginning, the ob-

ject of God's promise and the object of Abraham's faith was the salvation of the nations—in fact the very object of missionary activity (pp. 28-29).

This explains why St. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, was so fond of citing the example of Abraham's faith in the promise. He had to show people, especially the Jews, that the promise made to Abraham was literally being fulfilled in his mission.

And today, the same is true of each one of us. We are all called to be apostolic members of the Church. And it is the Church that is today carrying out the promise made to Abraham by her missionary work. "And the Scriptures, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, announced to Abraham beforehand, 'In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (*Gal. 3:8-9*). The acts of a man do go on into eternity, like the ripples on the surface of a pond caused by the casual tossing of a stone. It all began with Abraham thousands and thousands of years ago. Yet even today Abraham lives on in his promise, the promise that the Church is now fulfilling in her mission to the entire world. We are the true sons of our father Abraham, "the father of all believers."

—Chrysostom M. McVey, O.P.