

"STUDIES IN THE WRITTEN WORD"

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1. ABRAHAM

There are certain outstanding names which appear in the sacred record. These seem to run in series of three, such as, the First Three Kings of Israel. Before us now we contemplate the first of the familiar three of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It will be noted that what is related of these three appears almost wholly in Genesis: the first book of the Bible. Genesis means beginning or producing, and has relation to the word "generation".

So in Abraham we perceive there is represented what belongs to our human formation. It is familiar teaching that our physical form is what is outermost and temporary. We ourselves are spiritual beings moulded by the hand of God. We are formed from within outwards; and Abraham is the representative in the Divine Word of that which is innermost in our creation. This is what is supremely God's dwelling place in us, without which we could have no human existence. This is Love, which fundamentally is the life of man.

God calls this to come to His service. From the time of baptism at the font and onwards this is ever the Divine care. He has made us that we may love Him, and our hearts will find no rest till this is consciously attained.

The Lord works secretly so that human freedom shall never be interfered with. Yet He guards with utmost care what is His own in us. In the literal story of Genesis we see indications of this. We see it, for instance, in the separation of Lot from Abraham. Lot, representing more external love, separated from Abraham and went to reside in the plain; and even later found a home in Sodom, from whose destruction he was however rescued.

It is noteworthy, too, that it was not from the beginning that Abraham bore this name. At first he was Abram: later his name was changed, and if we take note of the change it consisted in the addition of the letter "H". We are taught this was taken from the Divine Name, Jehovah. "H" is the breath letter. Its only sound is a breathing in, which in careless speech is neglected.

Our development in the spiritual life is never by anything that is of ourselves, but wholly by the reception of something from the Spirit (or breath) of the Lord.

It is surely significant that heaven is designated, "Abraham's bosom". If we are converted and become as little children we shall realise in fullness the glory of human life. To love God is the first and most important Commandment. If at the last, we can in reality attain this, we shall surely find a place in Abraham's bosom: and Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am".

2. ISAAC

Love is the life of man. That which is derived from this and is the distinctive quality of the human, is what is expressed in the word "Rationality". Isaac, in the internal sense of the Word, signifies this "Rational".

Love comes first; but soon there follows desire for knowledge and then understanding. The constant cry, "Why?" and "What?" in developing childhood is the evidence of this.

Abraham longed for a son, and even despaired of his desire ever being granted. To meet this impatient passion he was permitted to have a son by his servant, Hagar. She gave birth to Ishmael; and Abraham pleaded that this son might be accepted as his heir.

All this is a parable. It tells us that there is a lower "Rational" and a higher. In our impatience to have this rational faculty, even before in the Divine economy the time is ripe, we are permitted to have a "natural Rational". Because of our satisfaction with this, it is our prayer that this may be the promised Divine gift.

The "natural Rational" - offspring of the Egyptian bond woman - is self centred. The true "Rational", which is yet to be given, is God centred. At first we cannot realise this distinction and we would fain be content with Ishmael.

Let us contrast these two "Rationals". The one is reason, which functions in every sane man. By means of this we conduct our affairs in the world: we use our judgment for our benefit and advantage. Such is the wisdom of the worldly wise and unregenerate man. But this is not enough. It is unacceptable in the Divine sight. It is merely a permission, or a step towards proper human understanding. Eventually it is the Divine plan that this first "Rational" shall be disinherited; and Isaac, the son of Sarah, shall become the accepted heir. In the spiritual sense this represents the change from thinking from and for self, to thinking from God. It is this that is truly rational, and is competent to lead to the life of heaven.

One may wonder why Abraham was called upon to sacrifice Isaac. If Isaac was the hope of his house, why should he be called upon to lose him? The answer of course, is the need that we shall acknowledge that nothing we have is wholly our own. Rejoicing in this new and wondrous gift of spiritual Rationality, there is the danger that we defile it by grasping it as our very own. It is by means of grievous temptation that we learn that what God has given us is still not our own: it is His with us. Recognise that, and our possession of the precious gift can be confirmed. Calling it ours we lose it: knowing it to be the Lord's with us, we are assured that it may be indeed ours forever.

3. JACOB

Life is threefold; and, as we have so often declared, human life is innermost love; and then arising from this, is rationality, through which only love can effectually act. Then third in the series is action: the expression of what goes before. Jacob in the Word represents this third essential.

It will be remembered that Jacob was a twin with Esau; and actually Esau was the elder and he was supplanted by his brother. Behind this story lies the spiritual verity that

action has two possible impulses: one is from the will and the other from the understanding. At first it would seem that what springs from the will is to be preferred (this in New Church thought we call natural charity; and we affirm that it cannot be relied on for the developing of the heavenly life). What springs from the understanding has the guidance of truth and so is necessarily to be preferred.

Action, under the direction of what the rationality has discerned of truth, can develop the regenerating life. It will be recalled that Jacob saw a vision of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven. This is manifestly a representation of the eternal Word. Angels attend on the ascent of this ladder: both from life's beginnings reaching upwards and also coming from above to welcome, "singing sweet fragments of the songs above". Most interiorly the Lord Himself is the Ladder, as He made clear in His talk to Nathanael (John 1:51).

After this experience Jacob becomes Israel, a change of name betokening a purer quality of spiritual life.

So far in dealing with the three foundation names we have been concerned with Genesis, which represents beginning. This seems to picture what is a kind of golden age in human life: childhood. Now the story tells of the coming of great change and much disturbance. In our personal life this is the advance into youth, puberty and the teenage.

It is foreseen of the Divine Providence that Canaan will not be able to meet all that this developing life demands and a sojourning into Egypt, with a sojourn there, will be inevitable.

Egypt represents external knowledges from science and sensual experience. Youth will urgently seek this; will hunger for it. In order to make adequate provision for this, Joseph is permitted to be taken down into Egypt. There is a restlessness in youth which no longer finds satisfaction in the sweet and gentle experiences of childhood. Youth wants to be its own; and this urgent longing has to be met. Israel will have to travel down into Egypt to get sustenance, which by a wonderful Providence through the prior work of Joseph in Egypt, is able to be given.

At first this sojourn in Egypt is satisfying and well; but gradually there arises a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph and a form of slavery develops, threatening to destroy all spiritual life.

As adult life gradually comes upon us we find ourselves face to face with a wholly unregenerate life, from which, if there be no conversion, all spirituality will be crushed and heaven becomes a lost dream.

4. MOSES

Our study now brings us to the Book of Exodus; and this has the meaning of departure, a going forth or exit. Genesis dealt with the beginning or foundation of human life. Exodus opens a new chapter, and it centres in the person of Moses.

By our first birth we are born unregenerate. Though by our creation we are formed for heaven, yet in every soul a change has to be wrought so that heaven may be attained. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

The Divine parable of the Exodus of the Children of Israel tells the story of this experience in the regeneration. Moses is the appointed leader in this great change. The first experience of life is captivity in Egypt; and Egypt in the Word represents the dominating influence of self and the world.

With all of us there comes first of all, the needs of self and the interest and allurements of the world around us; and this increasingly becomes a slavery until the imperative call for change reaches us.

Moses represents the Word of the Lord, which alone is able to stir us and move us to seek betterment. Without Revelation from God out of heaven, darkness would prevail and no thought of a different way of life could be presented. So Moses is born and reared in safety. Yet when he calls for a mighty Exodus, he is opposed, not only by the Egyptian king, but by his own people. It seemed to them only a vague tale of a distant and better land where there would be freedom and contentment.

Yet Moses exhorts, and bravely and unflinchingly leads on: through the perils of the Red Sea and on to Mount Sinai, where the Law would be made abundantly clear for all to follow. On into the desert they go. Parched with thirst, water flows from the rock. Looking back and lamenting "the flesh-pots" of Egypt, manna is rained upon them and they eat angel's food.

In the journeying there are varied experiences. Sometimes there are battles to be fought: the way is not just easy and effortless. Yet again there are periods of rest and abundant blessing: wells of water and palm trees. Then after a while comes the call to go on again. Moses is the faithful leader, who in spite of weakness and perversity maintains the vision of that better land which is to be won.

Yet the Word as it is with us partakes of our weakness. It keeps the clear message, but at times the voice is dim and the prospect almost beyond endurance. So we read of Moses breaking the Tables of stone when he came down from the mountain and saw the utter perversity of the people; we read of him striking the rock in anger, whereas he was commanded to speak only and water would come. So it is that even Moses cannot cross Jordan and enter the Promised Land: another leader must be found. But Moses is permitted to ascend Pisgah and view the wondrous land beyond the river. This surely agrees with human experience. We are permitted to ascend into the hill of the Lord, and from that summit we see what heaven is like. It is indeed a better land, green and luscious.

There is beauty and peace set out before us; and under a new leader this may be ours. But now with the vision in our hearts we must descend the mount and prepare for the further journey. Moses dies; but we lose life only in order to find it. "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage."

5. JOSHUA

This article must stress the difference between Truth instructing and leading, and Truth militant. Moses represents the Word leading in the journey of life. Now in Joshua we have the soldier who is to lead to victory in battle. The contrast portrays a definite step forward in the regenerating life. We cannot at first fight for the truth: what we can and must do is to heed the truth and let it lead us. The progressive regenerating life inevitably involves more severe testing and deeper temptations.

It is worthy of note that in coming out of Egypt the first obstacle was the Red Sea, which had to be crossed. Now to enter the Promised Land it is necessary to cross the Jordan. The primary step in the regeneration is to step out of hell; the completely unregenerate state. In order to enter the Land of Promise a wholly new experience is necessary: this is a conscious realisation of advancing into the Kingdom. The one experience may be termed out, and the other in.

It is not to be an easy admission. There is still warfare, indeed increased warfare. As regeneration advances we find that temptations become more vigorous and are of a more internal character.

The child knows the temptations belonging to its stage of life and cannot believe that adults can ever be tempted: Having set our heart definitely on following the course of the regenerating life, we find there are numberless evils which oppose us, and of whose presence we were previously unaware.

Herein lies the spiritual significance of the many nations already in possession of the land, and who, in every step, will oppose our casting them out. These evil nations correspond to our hereditary evils, which must be combated and removed. These are in possession and will not lightly yield to the opposing invader.

At once on crossing the river we are faced with Jericho. This can and will be overcome if there is obedience to Divine instruction. In fact in this case there is no actual fighting. Trust in the Lord and obey, and surely the walls of the city fall down.

Immediately following, there is a terrible and heartrending defeat. The men of Ai drove them back; and it was discovered that the cause of this was that certain spoil had been stolen from the defeated Jericho. Was all praise for the conquest of Jericho due to the Lord alone, or partly to ourselves? The sin of Achan with the stolen goods in his tent, depicts the folly of one who would press on with the regeneration, claiming some of the credit is due to me!

The great Captain leads on. Victory must be won and every battle bravely fought. The easier days of wandering in the wilderness give place to war and the threat of war on every side. The Kingdom can only be won by conflict.

"Onward, Christian soldiers."

6. JUDGES: GIDEON AND JEPHTHAH

The conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua is now complete. But most certainly rest and peace are not fully attained. Joshua was the great soldier, leading on to conquest. The Judges are appointed rulers to give direction to the invaders, so that they may settle in the land and enjoy its delights.

The land of Promise had been won; but how much yet remained to be done before real possession is taken of the heritage. Let us, by way of illustration, contrast the life of the soldier, obeying commands and following his leader and the citizen called on to order his own life, no longer under control of a commander. The citizen has to work out a way of life for himself; meet his own difficulties and disappointments; on his own initiative face his own responsibilities.

In a word, it is easier to be a soldier under authority, than to be a citizen subject to no discipline or control, but free to make his own way and develop his own career. Remember how after the great wars of our time the soldiers, disbanded and now citizens, found it hard to accustom themselves to the changed conditions and greater freedom; and consequently there was much discontent.

Under the Judges the people were to enter into possession and become citizens of the country. More is demanded of the citizen to settle in the country than of the soldier under orders to conquer. How often we find it easier to long and strive for some ideal, than properly to use and enjoy it when the gift is ours: We win the life of regeneration (by conversion): but can we maintain it?

This seems to be the pervading lesson of the Book of Judges. I have selected two names for this article, and will reserve two others for later treatment. There are four outstanding Judges. As rulers of the people they personify the Word with us. The weaknesses of the Judges depict how we make the Word of less effect because of our fondness for and confidence in, our own proprium.

Gideon was a noble Judge. Like Moses before him and Saul after him, he was humble, and felt himself quite unfit to bring deliverance to his people. Yet he was persuaded, in the strength of his many thousands, to try; but the Lord wished him to conquer, not by this massive strength, but by the puny 300 under Divine direction. Man is not permitted to make sure conquest in any strength of his own. Such a conquest could not endure.

Jephthah represents such an endeavour in our own strength to overcome. He bargains with the Lord, and makes a terrible and most unnecessary vow. Our Lord teaches: "Swear not at all, because thou cannot", do anything in your own strength. The foolish vow led to the tragic loss of that which was most precious in his own house. Such a sacrifice need never have been; a shattering loss, which under a proper trust in Providence was wholly uncalled for. Greater humility and trust would save us from suffering. The Lord's Providence seeks gently to lead us, and desires that we should suffer no terrible sense of deprivation.

A final scene in the Judgeship of Jephthah: the ford over the waters of Jordan. None were to pass but those who could say, "Shibboleth". So many could only say, "Sibboleth". They failed to sound their "H": which is the sure evidence of attributing all to the Lord. Can

you sound your "H"? Or are you too spiritually lazy or self satisfied? "H" belongs to the Lord's Name: Jehovah: intended to be ours from Him.

7. JUDGES: SAMSON AND SAMUEL

There were fifteen Judges of Israel before the passing on to the regime of the Kings. We have ventured to suggest that this period represents a stage in the developing spiritual life when, the land having been conquered, the experience of settling in to the heritage is taking place; and this, we have seen, is never so easy or straightforward as it may seem. We ventured to put it this way: anticipation and hope are more easily attained than realisation and use.

Lifting this thought on to the spiritual plane we struggle to enter the new life of conversion, but having begun the new life we find it hard to sustain. There are still foes all around us, and they are not lightly going to yield to the dominion of a reformed life. In general the foes belonging to this period are the hereditary tendencies to evil, which were in possession of the Promised Land before we came. The most persistent foe we find were the Philistines, who constantly dwelt alongside Israel. In the internal sense they signify the false belief in "faith alone" as being of supreme importance. We believe, yes; but do we see the countless ways in which belief needs to be applied?

The story of Samson and Delilah portrays this temptation. Samson delighted in his great strength and the tempter sought to weaken or nullify this. His strength lay in the locks of his hair, which had never been shorn. The hair signifies the Word in ultimates, reaching to all the experiences of life.

We recall the children calling Elisha a "baldhead", which spiritually denies the power of the Word in action. We recall the Divine statement, "The hairs of your head are all numbered", meaning that all efforts on our part to apply the Word to life are known and their value preserved.

Samuel, meaning "asked of God", depicts the coming of a spiritual leader who is to uplift the life from a very low ebb. The Philistines had crushed and humiliated Israel. In their desperation Israel had taken the Ark on to the battlefield. This vain impulse was useless to bring victory. Might we not illustrate with the notion that to carry the Bible in one's pocket will ensure victory in temptation? It is what the Bible teaches which will help if applied in time of crisis, but both Bible and Ark belong to the place and time of worship.

Samuel sought faithfully to lead and to govern the people so that the Spirit of the Lord might dwell among them. Rule under the Judges was a theocracy that is a direct guidance from the Divine. In the throes of struggling spiritual effort man becomes impatient of this guidance and wants to do more to direct his own destinies. This was the restless demand for a king, which Samuel, the noblest of the Judges, was to perceive and to lament. He warned that this longing for self to take control was really a retrograde step. But, as with all dealings of Providence, if man persists in a desire, he is permitted to have it; and still the Lord will never forsake and will remain close at hand to help. So the era of the Kings must come.

8. SAUL

Samuel warned the people that choosing a king was a retrograde step. It arose from the desire to be like the other nations around them. It was therefore an ambition for an added self importance and a longing for some visible glory. Looked at spiritually, we can see here depicted a certain dissatisfaction in direct Divine government and a wish to have a manifest hand in the work of our regeneration. Self is still at the back and is restless for some evidence of control. Who governs our life? Yes, it is the Lord; but we want to feel we have some more definite part in the work. All glory belongs to the Lord, but surely some credit belongs to us who strive to be faithful: Give us a king!

There is more external glory in Kingship than in Judgeship. There is something to show, which can excite the admiration or jealousy of those around us. I am trying to be good, but let me be able to show the world that I am good: Such is the reasoning, is it not?

The Lord always leads us in a manner in which we can follow. If we cannot maintain the higher ideal, He permits a lower which we can loyally embrace. If we cry out for more of self and He sees that, by this we can be better helped, He gives us the King we desire. He never breaks, but He bends. He must have our cooperation to progress in our regeneration. The Divine cry, "Let us make man", is an appeal to us humans in all our weakness to work with the Lord.

So a king is granted. His first appearance is in every way attractive, and his behaviour when chosen is commendable. So the first reaction is complete satisfaction. Is there not a parallel with us when, in a state of early enthusiasm, we feel we are going to make a wholly new start in life? Yes, we have given ourselves to the Lord: the prospect looks easy and enticing. Surely now we are going to be really the Lord's!

But in that new state of reform there lies hidden so much that is frail and even rebellious. We had placed so much confidence in our king. But because self lurks in hiding in this new state, a rejection of this king will have to come, and a new king be given to us. This will involve tremendous rivalry and bitterness.

The new king is gentle and seeks nothing for itself: it makes no attack in spite of provocation. He hides in safety, knowing that with patience he will be recognised and accepted. Saul represents the rule of the "natural", in which there is so much of self that it must be rejected and a wholly new start made. David represents the "spiritual", and this can be accepted and real progress made. There is less of self in this: it is rule from the truth, which is recognised as wholly apart from self: a submission to that which is above ourselves.

We remember that our Saviour was declared to be "of the house and lineage of David".

9. DAVID

The kingship of Saul was not enough. Man wants to rule himself together with the Lord: he is not satisfied to be under direct Divine guidance. The desire for a king is (as

Samuel told the people) a longing for a consciousness of self in the process of the regeneration. It is strangely true how self - or our proprium - constantly demands a fresh recognition.

If man yearns for something of self in every stage of the regeneration, this desire is granted. Human freedom has to be considered, for consequently only is man won to give himself to be the Lord's. There is no compulsion in the government of the Lord's Providence.

Saul was seeking his father's asses: David was minding the sheep. The former relate to things intellectual, which is our first concept of kingship. The sheep relate to things of charity - as is abundantly shown in all our Lord's teaching. We recall that it was to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks that the news of the birth of the Saviour was first given.

There are three main degrees of human life. These we designate the natural, the spiritual and the celestial. It is these three degrees that are pictured in the lives of the first three kings of Israel. The natural plane is the most external. It is concerned with the life of order, but the motive lacks conscious reliance on the Lord. We learn of the Lord, we speak of Him and even worship Him, yet our confidence is still so much in ourselves and we forget! Such is the rule of the "natural".

This makes a fair beginning and the prospect seems full of promise. Yet there is weakness in the kingship of Saul, which is not at first seen; experience brings this to light. Saul on occasion fell into horrid states of depression, and then it was David's playing on the harp that revived him. (The harp, a stringed instrument, belongs to the "spiritual", by contrast with wind instruments, which produce sound from within - the "celestial".)

It was David, the unarmed stripling, who slew Goliath. Saul and his armies were afraid. In charity there is humility, and in humility there is strength. It is the "spiritual", even untried and inexperienced that can slay the giant "Faith Alone", which is the besetting foe of the Lord's people.

David's great desire was to build a temple for the Lord. A temple would surely be of greater significance than the Tabernacle! The Lord has no need of a temple: we read concerning the New Jerusalem "I saw no temple therein". But again if man desires a temple and this will help him more realistically to worship, then a temple is permitted. For this same reason glorious temples are permitted at this day. But David was not allowed to build it. He could bring up the Ark into the land of Israel and make preparation for his son Solomon to build the temple. Solomon was to be a man of peace: David was a warrior. So the "spiritual" in us must fight against temptations. The "spiritual" is the rule of Truth. The "celestial" is the reign of love; and only in love can the Lord find a dwelling to rest with His people.

The Word made flesh was the Divine Truth with us; and He came to fight against man's foes and to secure his Redemption. And He therefore is called "the Son of David".

10. SOLOMON

King Solomon represents rule from love: and love is the greatest of all human powers. If we progress in a life under the rule of truth, represented by David, we are to pass into a reign of love. That is, our state changes from discipline under the requirements of truth to action from delight in and affection for what has to be obeyed.

We read that Solomon had a wonderful dream in which he was asked by God what he would like to receive; and Solomon prayed for "an understanding heart". It is this divine gift that dominates his reign. An understanding heart means wisdom; and this involves so much more than intelligence, which is to see the truth. Wisdom is to love the truth and direct one's life thereby.

To Solomon it was to be granted that he should build the Temple of the Lord. This was forbidden to David, his father. To erect a House for the Lord to dwell in can only be the function of wisdom directed by love. We note there was precise direction given as to this building: - "the house, when it was in building, was built of stone made ready before it was brought thither; so that there was neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron heard in the house while it was in building". A wonderful and solemn quiet! The shaping had to be done at the quarry, and then the stones were to be placed in position. It would be so easy, so tempting, to do just a little variation and adaptation to make a stone fit where and how we wanted it. This is not to be permitted. Under the rule of love there will be no compromise or partial loyalty to the truth.

Yet even "Solomon in all his glory" cannot complete the work of salvation. This can only be when "a greater than Solomon is here". Self even at the best is unworthy. We are taught "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven - even the Son of Man Who is in heaven". We cannot save ourselves, and we need to be brought into states of extreme humiliation to realise this. Of course alone we are - and we remain - nothing but evil. Only the Spirit of the Lord entering in and taking possession can make the change. This can only be with our total consent; and this is more difficult than we have any conception of in earlier experiences of the regeneration.

John the Baptist needs to arise as the great prophet to point to Him, Who alone is able to take away the sin of the world, He must needs increase, while all that is of self and its glory must decrease. Without Him we "can do nothing". When shall we be able really to learn what this means? We have to lose our life in order to find it in the compassionate love of our Father. In Him we will need to live and move and have our being.

We need to "lie in dust life's glory dead" - even all the glory of the rule of Solomon, and yield ourselves without reservation to "the love that will not let us go".

"My will is not my own,
Till Thou hast made it Thine;
If it would reach a monarch's throne
It must its crown resign."