

Holy Thursday

Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, C

Reading 1

[Ex 12:1-8, 11-14](#)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,
“This month shall stand at the head of your calendar;
you shall reckon it the first month of the year.
Tell the whole community of Israel:
On the tenth of this month every one of your families
must procure for itself a lamb, one apiece for each household.
If a family is too small for a whole lamb,
it shall join the nearest household in procuring one
and shall share in the lamb
in proportion to the number of persons who partake of it.
The lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish.
You may take it from either the sheep or the goats.
You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month,
and then, with the whole assembly of Israel present,
it shall be slaughtered during the evening twilight.
They shall take some of its blood
and apply it to the two doorposts and the lintel
of every house in which they partake of the lamb.
That same night they shall eat its roasted flesh
with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

“This is how you are to eat it:
with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand,
you shall eat like those who are in flight.
It is the Passover of the LORD.
For on this same night I will go through Egypt,
striking down every firstborn of the land, both man and beast,
and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt—I, the LORD!
But the blood will mark the houses where you are.
Seeing the blood, I will pass over you;
thus, when I strike the land of Egypt,
no destructive blow will come upon you.

“This day shall be a memorial feast for you,
which all your generations shall celebrate
with pilgrimage to the LORD, as a perpetual institution.”

Jerome Biblical Commentary

26 (L) The Pasch and Azymes (12:1-20). The Hebr term for the passover is pesa , the etymology of which is disputed. In popular biblical etymology, it is connected with the Hebr vb. ps , “to limp,” “to hobble,” or “to jump.” Concretely, then, it would refer to the fact that in the tenth plague Yahweh “jumped over” the houses where this rite had been properly observed. Others see in this word a cognate of the Akkadian vb. pašâhu, “to appease”; still others look to the Egyptian language for a solution, where we find a variety of suggestions. Some see in it a Semitic transcription of an Egyptian word meaning “a blow.” In this analysis, the tenth plague would be “the blow” in which Yahweh struck down the first-born of the Egyptians. Finally, another group wishes to connect it with the Egyptian pa sha, “a souvenir”; thus, the event of the tenth plague would be “the souvenir” marking the definitive deliverance of Yahweh’s people. It is unlikely, however, that the Hebrews would give an Egyptian name to a custom of Semitic origin. Furthermore, these efforts seek to find in the tenth plague an explanation of the Passover, but this plague was a later feature of the feast.

Whatever its etymology, it seems that this feast is very, ancient, long antedating the Exodus itself. In early times, it was a nomadic or seminomadic spring rite in which the priest and altar were unimportant but the use of blood was most important. It insured the fecundity of the flock, and, through the blood smeared on tentpoles, it warded off hostile or evil powers.

Ma ôṭ,, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, or Azymes, was an ancient feast that reflected an agricultural background. It was borrowed from the Canaanites and marked the beginning of the barley harvest. During this feast, the people ate unleavened bread for seven days, and, of course, they made an offering—a contribution of the first fruits of the harvest.

These two feasts, then, very primitive in character and reflecting nomadic or seminomadic and agricultural backgrounds, have been “historicized,” i.e., charged with the great event of the deliverance of God’s people from Egypt and thus given a fresh, salvific significance (see De Vaux, *AI* 484-93).

27 12:1-14. This section is generally attributed to P; vv. 15-20, although reflecting the same tradition, represent a later addition, because the Exodus is here considered to be already accomplished (v. 17). Detailed instructions are given regarding the time of the feast, the age and condition of the sacrificial animal, the size of the group to share the sacrificial meal, the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood on the doorposts and lintel, the

Hebr Hebrew

Al R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (London and N.Y., 1961)

accompanying unleavened bread and herbs, and the distinctly religious and memorial character of the feast. These stipulations reflect the later practice of Israel.

Haydock's Catholic Commentary

Ver. 1. *Said*, some time before. Moses mentions all the plagues together. (Menochius)

Ver. 2. *Year*, sacred or ecclesiastical, which is most commonly used in Scripture. The civil year commenced with Tisri, in September, and regulated the jubilee, contracts, &c. (Lapide) --- January was the first month to determine the age of trees, and August to decide when cattle became liable to be tithed. (Chap. xxii. 29; Leviticus xix. 23.) (Calmet) --- Before the captivity, the months were not styled Nisan, &c., but *abib*, (chap xiii. 5,) the first...*Bul* the 11th, (1 Kings vi.), &c. *Sa*.

Ver. 3. *Children*; a word which has been dropped in the printed Hebrew and in the Chaldee, which has been assimilated to it, though found still in some manuscripts and in the Samaritan, Septuagint, Syriac and Arabic versions. (Kennicott) --- *Day*. This regarded only the present occasion. (Jonathan) --- The Jews no longer eat the paschal lamb, as they are banished from Chanaan. (Calmet) --- *Man*, who has a family sufficient to eat a *lamb*; Hebrew *se*, which means also a *kid*, (as either was lawful, ver. 13,) and perhaps also a calf, Deuteronomy xvi. 2.

Ver. 4. *Less*. Moses does not specify the number. But in never comprised fewer than ten, nor more than twenty, in which number Menoch does not think women or children are comprised. The Jews satisfied the inquiry of Cestius, concerning the multitude which might be assembled at the paschal solemnity, by allowing ten for every victim; and finding that 250,600 victims had been sacrificed in the space of two hours, they concluded 2,700,000 people were collected at Jerusalem. (Josephus, Jewish Wars vii. 16.)

Ver. 5. *Lamb*. Hebrew *se*, which denotes the young of either sheep or goats. (Kimchi.) He who had not a lamb, was to sacrifice a kid. (Theodoret.) --- *A kid*. The *Phase* might be performed, either with a lamb or with a kid; and all the same rites and ceremonies were to be used with the one as with the other. (Challoner) --- Many have asserted, that both were to be sacrificed. But custom decides against them. All was to be perfect, *Momim*, as even the pagans required; (Grotius) and God (Leviticus xxii. 22,) orders the victims in general must have no fault. The Egyptians rejected them, if they were even spotted, or twins. --- *A male*, as all holocausts were to be. Pagans gave the preference to females. (Calmet) --- *One year*, not older, though it would do if above eight days old. (Menochius) --- The paschal lamb prefigured Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us by his death, being holy, set apart, and condescending to feed us with his sacred person, in the blessed Eucharist. Here we eat the lamb without breaking a bone, though we take the whole victim. (John xix. 36; 1 Corinthians v. 7.) (Calmet) --- To fulfil this figure, Christ substituted his own body, and, making his apostles priests, ordered them to continue

this sacrifice for ever. He came to Jerusalem on the 10th day of Nisan, on Sunday. He gave himself to his disciples on the evening of the 14th, and died at noon on the 15th. The unleavened bread, and the cup, (Luke xxii. 17,) clearly denoted the blessed Sacrament, which was ordered to be eaten in the house or church of God. (St. Cyprian, Unit.) See St. Gregory, hom. 22, in Evang.; Tertullian, contra Marc. iv, "The bread he made his own body." If, therefore, the truth must surpass the figure, surely the blessed Sacrament must be more than bread and wine; otherwise it would yield in excellence and signification to the paschal lamb. (Worthington)

Ver. 6. *Sacrifice*, not simply *kill*, as the Protestants would have it. (Worthington) --- *Evening*. Hebrew, "between the two evenings," or "suns," according to the Chaldee, alluding to the sun when it declines and when it sets, including about the space of two hours. This time belonged to the evening of the 14th [of Nisan], at which time the lamb was to be sacrificed, though it was to be eaten in the night, which pertained to the 15th. (Menochius) --- The Jews began the day at sun-set, and some began the first evening soon after mid-day. (Matthew xiv. 15, and seq.[following]) (Calmet)

Ver. 7. *Houses*. Those who joined their neighbours to eat the paschal lamb, were therefore to continue with them that night, if they would escape destruction, ver. 23. (Menochius)

Ver. 8. *Unleavened*, in testimony of innocence, 1 Corinthians v. 7. The priests of Jupiter did the like. (Servius) --- Lettuce, or some "bitter herbs," Hebrew and Septuagint. The Jews allow of five sorts.

Ver. 9. *Raw*. Some nations delighted in *raw flesh*, in the feasts of Bacchus, who hence received the title of *Omadios*. (Porphyr. de Abstin. 3.) The Hebrew term *na* occurs nowhere else, and may perhaps signify half-roasted or boiled, *semicoctum*. It cannot be inferred from this prohibition, that the Hebrews commonly lived on such food. --- *In water*, as the other victims usually were. (1 Kings ii. 13; 2 Paralipomenon xxxv. 13.) --- *You shall eat*, is not in the original, nor in the Septuagint. We may supply it, however, or "you shall roast all, head," &c., but in eating, you shall avoid breaking any bone, as the Septuagint and Syriac express it, (ver. 10,) and as we read, ver. 46, and Numbers ix. 12. These were to be burnt, that they might not be profaned. (Calmet)

Ver. 11. *Haste*, as all the aforesaid prescriptions intimate. (Menochius) --- Many of them regarded only this occasion, and were not required afterwards. --- *Phase*, which the Chaldee writes Pascha, signifies the *passing over* (Calmet) of the destroying angel, when he spared those houses only which were marked with blood, to insinuate the necessity of faith in Christ's death. Some have derived the word from the Greek *Pascho*, "to suffer," on account of the similarity of sound. (Haydock)

Ver. 12. *First-born*, often denotes the most beloved; or, when spoken of those under oppression, the most miserable. (Isaias xiv. 30; Psalm lxxxvii. 27.) Moses observes, (ver. 30,) that every house had *one dead*, which would not probably be true of the first-born, taken in a literal sense; but where there was no child, there the most dear and

honourable person was cut off, Habacuc iii. 13, 14. --- *Gods*, idols, whose statues some assert were overthrown (St. Jerome, ep. ad Fabiol.; Eusebius, præp. ix. ult.[last]); or sacred animals, which were adored by the Egyptians; (Origen) or the word may imply that the princes and judges of the land would be mostly destroyed. (Calmet) --- Forbes observes, that by the destruction of the first-born, all the proper sacrifices, and priests of Egypt, were destroyed.

Ver. 14. *This day.* The Jews assert, that as their fathers were delivered out of Egypt on the 15th of Nisan, so Israel will be redeemed on that day by the Messiah; which has been literally verified in Jesus Christ. --- *Everlasting.* This is what will be done with respect to our Christian passover, (Calmet) of which the Jewish was a figure, designed to subsist as long as their republic. (Menochius)

Daily Bible Study Series (non-Catholic)

¹Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make ³your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

At some point in the early or mid-second millennium B.C. a nomadic Semite called Abraham left Harran in Upper Mesopotamia and went to Palestine. On the face of it a quite unremarkable event—yet both Jews and Christians believe that it marked a moment fraught with destiny for the whole human race, indeed for the whole created universe. For God was behind it. Both Jews and Christians believe that by his call to this one individual God was setting in motion a series of acts of grace and judgment which would fashion a special people for him, who would lead a lost mankind back to their true home. It is our claim as Christians that we belong to that special people, and with our Jewish brethren we look back today to Abraham as father of the faithful. If he had not answered that call, Israel would not have reached her Promised Land, the Church we love would not exist, there would be no Scriptures for us to study and write commentaries on, and our lives would be emptied of everything that makes them worth while.

Our first reaction to this event ought therefore to be one of wonder, wonder that God should choose so seemingly undramatic a way of opening the story of the world's redemption, and wonder that this single man in those far-off days should have grasped, however dimly, what it was about.

(i)

The first eleven chapters of Genesis set the scene for the call, and a dark and sombre scene it is. (For a detailed study of these chapters see Volume 1.)

God had created a good world and filled it with his creatures so that he might lavish on them the love and affection he had to spare and that would otherwise have gone to waste. But that good world was in disarray. His highest creation, his supreme masterpiece—we human beings—had gone horribly wrong. Made to govern his universe in justice, we had mercilessly exploited it and turned his fair earth into a desert. Made to live in harmony with our fellows, we were now scattered to the four winds and hopelessly fragmented. Made to serve our Creator and worship him, we had forgotten our creatureliness and laid usurping hands on a divinity to which we had no right. God could of course, being God, have compelled us to keep our place and do our duty. But that was not his way. So as the chapters draw to their close, we catch a glimpse of him—if we may so phrase it—puzzling over what to do next, as resolutely but with a heavy heart he staved off the final disaster which would undo all his creative work and leave him alone in eternal and rueful silence. In short, because of human sin the world was in a state of mortal danger.

(ii)

Such was the fearful problem with which according to Genesis 1–11 God was faced. Having forsworn compulsion he had, if all was not to be forever lost, to begin again, to try a new initiative and once more attempt to get through to proud and sinful men. So as chapter 12 approaches (see 11:26ff.) he encompassed with his grace and favour a small group of wandering Semites, a family who by their way of life would not, he hoped, be overly impressed by what the world called greatness. He detached Terah, his son Abraham, his grandson Lot (Abraham's nephew), and his daughter-in-law Sarah (Abraham's wife), from their contact with Ur of the Chaldeans (or as the AV has it, Chaldees—the name is later than Abraham's time) in Babylonia and led them back to their ancestral homeland around Harran in Northern Mesopotamia. And there he left them for a while continuing their age-long nomadic existence as they moved slowly from pasture to pasture with their servants and their flocks and herds. There, too, as the years passed, they all grew older and, as we are ominously reminded (11:30), Sarah remained childless.

But then suddenly, after Terah's death, God decided that the hour had arrived, and issued his call to Abraham, speaking for the second time a Word "out of the blue" that would, if it were heard, bring light into the darkness of chaos and eventually form peace out of present discord (see commentary on 1:3–5, *And God said*).

(iii)

Let us ponder a little this marvellous occasion. Before we even look at what God said in his call or what it involved for the human beings to whom it was addressed, there are a number of lessons to be learned from its setting and circumstances.

Firstly, it was centred on a group of people who, if we except slaves, were among the weakest in the society of that time, people who were already fully aware of the precariousness of the human condition, knowing nothing of that feeling of security

engendered by settled city life. They had the freedom to move about that slaves did not have, but not a great deal more. Significantly, also, Abraham and his wife were getting on in years and had no issue. But this was exactly the situation God wanted them to be in, cast adrift and with no apparent future. In his providence they were, in so far as any human beings could be, in the right frame of mind to hear and answer the call that really mattered.

Secondly, God's initiative was so engineered that it implicitly but powerfully condemned the security of civilized life—and its pomp and achievements and philosophy as well. It cannot have been by chance that, as the chosen people emerge from the mists of pre-history, we find them in Babylonia, the cradle of one of the most advanced cultures that ancient world had yet known. Nor can it have been by chance that before God could do anything with them, he had to get them out from there to the wide and open spaces of the ruder, nomadic north.

Thirdly, there is the tremendous risk God was taking. His providence had prepared the way. He had chosen—and chosen carefully—the time, the place, and the people. He had done all that he could do without using a force on mankind that would have made a mockery of his love. But now he had to depend on these people responding, to “put his money”, as it were, on representatives of the very creatures who had already let him down so badly. “Love conquers all”, we say. But does it? It is not certainty that tells us that, but faith. In that one moment—did we call it undramatic?—everything God had planned hung in the balance.

Which brings us *fourthly* to Abraham himself. According to Hebrew tradition the Patriarchs had “lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods” (Josh. 24:2). This reminds us that up to his very call Abraham was a pagan. The gods he worshipped would not be the great deities of Babylonia, for whom as a free nomadic spirit he probably had very little stomach. What then did he think of his own nomadic gods, the gods of his own clan and tribe? We cannot say, and it is idle to speculate. All that we can say is that he answered the call of the one true God when it was issued. We have spoken about God's hand guiding Abraham to this hour. But though, looking back on his life later, he himself would undoubtedly have acknowledged this, he knew nothing of it at the time. He simply recognized that his life had been changed, and obeyed. The call of this God was self-authenticating. In the last analysis it needed no other explanation beyond itself.

SEPARATION

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont'd*)

God said to Abraham, “Go!” or, as the AV, more in tune with the drama of the moment, has it, “Get thee out!” There could have been no more radical summons. He commanded this man, already a wanderer on the face of the earth, to leave behind him for good the only area he had ever settled in for any length of time. The few certainties he knew had to be abandoned for something still more uncertain.

(i)

Abraham is not asked to renounce his “country” in the sense of giving up his citizenship. He was already stateless. “Country” here means simply the place where he lived. The emphasis is more on leaving his “kindred” and his “father’s house”, the first of these terms signifying the larger tribal group to which he belonged and the second his immediate blood relatives. He was to take only his wife and his fatherless nephew with him.

Did those among whom he lived think it was only the old nomadic urge reasserting itself and, as he left, wish him well and say, “See you in a month or two”? Or did they sense that this was a more permanent parting and try to dissuade him, pointing out to him that he was getting too old for that sort of thing? Did, for that matter, his wife and his nephew understand what was happening, and acquiesce happily? Or did they too try to dissuade him, reminding him of his duty to his kith and kin? As so often in the Bible, we are not told. We are given only the bare essential facts, God’s summons to break with the past and begin a new life under his control, and Abraham’s positive response. The rest we have to infer.

(ii)

It seems reasonable, however, to assume from their behaviour later that neither Sarah nor Lot would have been too keen on the move. And certainly if Abraham had made any attempt to explain to his other kinsmen why he was going, we can well imagine their ridicule and opposition.

If that were the case, there is a very perturbing parallel in the Gospels, which underscores the radical nature of the crisis facing Abraham. It concerns what happened the first time Jesus returned to Nazareth.

Jesus was reared at Nazareth in Galilee, where he was probably apprenticed to Joseph and after his death became the village carpenter. Until he was about thirty his days would be passed making ploughs for the local farmers and furniture for the villagers’ homes. But he was more than a carpenter, and when the clarion call of John the Baptist sounded, he downed his tools and left his bench and went out to announce that God’s Kingdom had arrived. The crowds in the beginning flocked to listen, and to marvel at his miracles.

But when in due course he came back to his home village and preached from the pulpit of the local synagogue, it was not admiration that he elicited, but a galling repulse. The folks among whom he had been brought up, with whom maybe he had played when they were youngsters together, whose ploughs he had mended, whose homes he had furnished, were scandalised at his arrogance, even attempting violence to his person and coming near to lynching him. Little wonder that Jesus was driven to say (in words that are strangely reminiscent of our verses in Genesis), “A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house” (Mark

6:4)! And little wonder that he could do no mighty work there “because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58)! It was a shattering experience but only, alas, the prelude of much more to come.

(iii)

Faith has always had the disconcerting habit of causing separations, of cutting across family and community ties. The things of home are regarded as sacrosanct by the majority of mankind, but to the few who are the true children of faith there is something higher and holier, the call of God, and there is no certainty that the two will not clash. Abraham was commanded to separate himself from his “country” and his “kindred” and his “father’s house”. Bunyan’s pilgrim had to leave his wife and family to seek his own salvation. In the early Church converts had to suffer insult and sometimes betrayal from relatives and friends who remained pagans. In the service of God a man’s foes may well be those of his own household (Matt. 10:36).

In the quiet and uneventful life that is the lot of most of us, there is not much chance of a conflict. But what if the cards were down? How would we choose? We will never probably be called upon to choose, as some great souls in the past have been and as not a few of our fellow Christians in totalitarian lands are being called upon to do even today. But what if we were?

We are all of us wrapped up in the things and folk around us, and not many can make the leap of faith required to see them as good and lovely but as by no means the most vital part of life, to see them as something which *may*—if it is God’s will—have to be given up.

Our Lord has some perplexing, even repellent words to say on this matter. They constitute one of the “hard sayings” of the Gospel, and it is not difficult to believe that they arose out of the distressing experience at Nazareth which we have been looking at. They also bear very uncomfortably on how we ought to understand God’s call to us and to apply Abraham’s experience to our own littler lives:

If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

(Luke 14:26)

PROMISE

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont’d*)

Only after the call to separate himself from all that he had previously held dear does God give Abraham a promise of something to replace it. It is a three-fold promise:

- (a) of a land which God would show him;
- (b) of descendants who would grow into a great nation;
- (c) of a special blessing which would in the immediate future afford him protection against anyone opposing him, but which would eventually bring all the nations of the earth within its scope.

(i)

It is natural for us to place the emphasis on the third of these promises, since it is the one that particularly involves us. I would guess that for Abraham himself, however, it was the least relevant of the three, or rather that the second part of it was. That part told him that his God was much more than a tribal god, that he was indeed the God of the whole earth, and that he desired every nation on it to worship him. But Abraham was an unlettered nomad, and it would be foolish of us to think of him having more than the sketchiest awareness of what this would ultimately mean. He would, at the beginning at any rate, be much more interested in the protection which the first part of the third promise held out to him, since that was more immediately and practically applicable to his situation.

But that necessary note of caution having been sounded, namely that we ought not to expect Abraham to have understood the promises as we now understand them, it is beyond dispute that these promises are what gave purpose and meaning to Abraham's life. Everything he does following his call and everything that happens to him are either directly related to them in the narratives or may be brought into connection with them by the exercise of a little imagination. Will he be able to settle in Canaan? Will he have a son? How will his contacts with the peoples already in the land turn out? If we keep these questions in our minds as we read through chapters 12–25, we will see how the working out of the promises supplies both the main element of tension in the plot of the stories and the primary key to their interpretation.

(ii)

Most obviously there is the specific renewal of one or more of the promises at moments of perplexity or crisis in his life:

- of the promise of land in [12:7](#) when he first arrives in Canaan
- of the promise of land and descendants in [13:14–17](#) after Lot has chosen the best territory and he is left with the least attractive
- of the promise of descendants in [15:4–5](#) after he has complained that he was still childless

—of the same promise in [17:19–21](#) after he has laughed at the thought of his aged wife bearing a son

—of the promise of descendants and blessing in [22:16–18](#) after his faith has been tested by the command to sacrifice Isaac.

Moreover, in at least one place the story itself makes a connection between the promise of blessing and what is about to happen, when in [18:17–19](#) God in a soliloquy speaks of it just before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

These specific references should encourage us to look for links elsewhere, for instance:

—between the promise of descendants and Abraham’s attempt on two occasions ([12:10–20](#) in Egypt and chapter [20](#) in Gerar) to pass his wife off as his sister

—between the promise of blessing and (a) Abraham’s warlike victory over the four great kings in chapter [14](#); and (b) his more peaceable agreement with the king of Gerar in chapter [21](#)

—between the promise of land and (a) the several occasions on which Abraham builds an altar and calls upon God’s name ([12:8](#); [13:4](#), [18](#); [21:33](#)); and (b) the occasion on which he purchases from some Hittites an actual piece of Canaanite territory in order to bury his wife (chapter [23](#)).

(iii)

There can be no doubt that these promises mattered vitally to Abraham and that it was his ardent desire to see some signs that they were coming true that sustained him in his wanderings and gave him both strength and hope in hours of despair and darkness. And he was granted his signs—and they were apparently enough to convince him that his God was no liar and that his waiting and suffering had not been in vain.

Yet when all is said and done, what tiny signs they were! Escape from danger here, a rare victory over the great ones of the earth there, a son at last—at long last—in his old age, a small plot of land to receive the dead body of his wife! Most men would have demanded much more evidence that things were moving in the right direction before they could have died contentedly and in peace. There is a long way to go from a single son to a great nation or from a field to a country. The plain fact is that Abraham remained a homeless wanderer to the end, with nowhere of his own to lay his head, and in the end there were not many more people around him than at the beginning. In the last analysis only faith told him that he would not have been better off staying with his kindred at Harran. And such faith cannot have come easily to him.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews finely catches that sense of “How long, O Lord?” which must have nagged at Abraham all his days when he says of him in his famous eleventh chapter

By faith...he went out, not knowing where he was to go (verse 8)

or

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land (verse 9)

or

...from [this] one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven (verse 12)

or when he says of the Patriarchs as a whole, including Abraham

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (verse 13).

PILGRIMAGE I

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont'd*)

(i)

There was, then, a huge gap between promise and fulfilment in Abraham's life, which was only bridged by his remarkable faith. There ought not to be so huge a gap in our lives for, as the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us at the close of chapter 11, “All these [i.e. Abraham and the other Patriarchs and all the heroes and martyrs of Old Testament times] did not receive what was promised” (verse 39). *We* did. Because (verse 40) “God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” or, as Dr. Barclay translates it, “God had some better plan for us, that they, without us, should not find all his purposes fulfilled”. It was a way of saying that the promises first given to Abraham and so very fitfully fulfilled in his own lifetime were finally and magnificently fulfilled in the Church which grew out of ancient Israel and of which we are members. The Church of Jesus Christ is the real Canaan of Abraham's dreams, the real nation which he fathered, the real defence of the faithful in time of trial, the real channel of blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

(ii)

But there is a lot more to be said than that. We must not in the slightest underestimate the stupendous claims of the New Testament that by the Incarnation God's rule over men took a visible shape among them in Jesus of Nazareth, a shape it had not

previously taken, or that by his Cross and Resurrection God won so decisive a victory over his ancient enemies of sin and evil that never again would they be able to plunge his Creation into chaos and disaster. As Christians these must be our claims too. In the truest of senses the strife which the first eleven chapters of Genesis had so eloquently described *is* over and the battle to which they had so unerringly pointed *is* won. In that sense the journey on which God had embarked when he called on Abraham to cross the great river and enter the unknown *was* at an end.

Yet we must at the same time be realists. As we survey the world around us, it does not look that way. Nor will it look any more that way simply because we keep exultantly repeating that it is. It is faith, not the present state of the world, that speaks to us of God's and Christ's triumph and of the fulfilment in our day and in our midst of the promises so long ago spoken to Abraham.

(iii)

The New Testament is in no doubt about this either. In continuous counterpoint with the proclamation that the Kingdom's day has dawned is the growing realization that it is still only its early morning and that its noontide not to mention its evening are a long way off. Even as it celebrates joyously Christ's first coming it looks forward expectantly—and sometimes desperately—to his second coming. In that sense—and it is just as true a sense—faithful Christians are still with Abraham in Harran and still with Israel in the wilderness, Pharaoh's Egypt is still strong, the Jordan has still to be crossed, and Canaan still to be possessed. In that sense faith is still for us, as in the words of Hebrews chapter 11 it was for the Patriarchs and heroes of God's first people, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (verse 1). In that sense there *is* still a gap between promise and fulfilment and Abraham's descendants are still “strangers and exiles on the earth”.

PILGRIMAGE II

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont'd*)

(iv)

“Strangers and exiles on the earth”. The Jews, Abraham's descendants after the flesh, know this in their heart of hearts. They have in our lifetime entered their Promised Land for a third time, and on the surface they seem quite powerful enough to keep it for as long into the future as one cares to look. And they hardly need God's help! But is this to be a permanent fulfilment of God's promise to the patriarch? Their history will not, if they consider it, fill them with confidence.

The first occasion on which they gained the land, it was by military force under Joshua and they kept it for more than half a millennium. But Nebuchadnezzar removed them into exile in Babylon, and from his time onwards there have always been more Jews outside Palestine than in it. There was a return after the Exile, but it was not to the

glories of the old kingdom, but to a life of domination by Persians and after them by Greeks and Romans. And when not long after the age of the New Testament they rebelled against Rome and tried to win their freedom, Jerusalem and her Temple were razed to the ground, and the Jews were homeless once more. Will the third return in the present century be any different, or will the suspicion and enmity of other nations one day drive them out again? Will the world, after a suitable interval, forget the Nazi gas-chambers and resume its old ways of hounding this people from pillar to post?

Let us pray that nothing like that ever happens again. But even if it does not, no thinking Jew can ever be sure that he has finally come home. Even in possession of his ancestral country he is still in his heart the wandering Jew, still awaiting the Messiah of his Scriptures, still searching for the land that flows with milk and honey.

(v)

A proud Christendom has also to learn this lesson of uncertainty and fragility. The success of God's cause must not be equated with the success of his Church nor must his imperial claims be arrogated by his followers—as far too often in the past they have been. Take the following extracts from some well-known hymns about the Church:

John Newton's

On the Rock of Ages founded,

What can shake thy sure repose?

With salvation's walls surrounded,

Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

or Samuel Johnson's

In vain the surge's angry shock,

In vain the drifting sands:

Unharm'd upon the eternal Rock

The eternal City stands.

or Frances Ridley Havergal's

Fierce may be the conflict,

Strong may be the foe,

But the King's own army

None can overthrow.

or Sabine Baring-Gould's

Crowns and thrones may perish,

Kingdoms rise and wane,

But the Church of Jesus,

Constant will remain.

or even, though it uses the figure of pilgrimage, the same writer's

Through the night of doubt and sorrow,

Onward goes the pilgrim band,

Singing songs of expectation,

Marching to the promised land.

Clear before us, through the darkness,

Gleams and burns the guiding light;

Brother clasps the hand of brother,

Stepping fearless through the night.

In the expansive days when Europe and America dominated the world scene and their missionaries were gathering the heathen by the million into the Church's fold, these hymns struck a responsive chord. Empire and science and Christianity were together ushering in the millennium. I would not like to suggest that we give up singing such hymns, but are they not too triumphalist by half? For if the truth were told, the Church of Jesus is not in our day constant; it is in retreat. As often as not its foes are smiling at it, not the other way round. It is not unharmed, but badly buffeted by all sorts of tempests. The King's own army is in fact in grave danger of being overthrown.

(vi)

The chief lesson we Christians have to learn from this part of Genesis describing Abraham's call is, I would suggest, that the Church is a vulnerable, not a solid institution. To be really faithful to her Lord, who himself won his greatest victory on a

Cross, she should be silencing her erstwhile superior and triumphalist tones and recognizing herself as she in fact is, a serving, suffering Church, a scorned Church, may be a persecuted Church, certainly a pilgrim Church, travelling in the midst of a hostile world with only God knows how long a journey to traverse before the eternal City is reached, still very much in the “night of doubt and sorrow” but not, if she is wise, “stepping fearless” through it. Faith like Abraham’s can lead to great endeavour and it can bring much assurance and comfort, but it is not faith but arrogance that uses words like “fearless” and “unharméd”.

PILGRIMAGE III

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont’d*)

(vii)

And what is true of the believing community is true of the individual believer too. It is well worth our while thinking some more on this idea of pilgrimage; for the Bible is full of it, and it is full of it because it so aptly describes not only the Church’s situation in the world but the perennial human condition.

There are first of all a veritable host of comparisons of life to a *road* or *journey*. These images are perhaps not directly drawn from the theme of pilgrimage, but rather from the more general circumstances of daily living in a country and in an era without cars or trains, when not even animals but walking on foot was the usual manner of getting from one place to another. But they are not unconnected. I list some from the Old Testament:

Noah walked with God

(Gen. 6:9)

You shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you.

(Deut. 5:32–33)

And now I am about to go the way of all the earth

(Josh. 23:14)

Blessed is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked

nor stands in the way of sinners.

(Ps. 1:1)

He leads me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me.

(Ps. 23:3, 4)

Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways

....

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

....

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

(Ps. 139:3, 7, 23–24)

(of folly)

...her house sinks down to death,
and her paths to the shades;
none who go to her come back
nor do they regain the paths of life.

(Prov. 2:18–19)

(of wisdom)

Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.

(Prov. 3:17)

Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

(Isa. 40:30–31)

Stand by the roads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.

(Jer. 6:16)

I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself,
that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

(Jer. 10:23)

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?

(Jer. 12:1)

Can two walk together unless they be agreed?

(Amos 3:3)

(viii)

Such language is also richly employed in the New Testament, in the epistles, but particularly in the teaching of Jesus. The following are examples:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

(Matt. 7:13–14)

Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes.

(John 12:35)

“You know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”

(John 14:4–6)

Whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death.

(James 5:20)

He who hates his brother is in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

(1 John 2:11)

PILGRIMAGE IV

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont'd*)

(ix)

More closely linked with the verses from Genesis which we are studying, however, are the many forceful and colourful descriptions of the journeyings of Israel's ancestors and of Israel's own forty years' wandering in the wilderness. Here are just a few from the rest of Genesis and later:

And they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came

(Gen. 12:5, AV)

And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb

(Gen. 12:9)

Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east

(Gen. 29:1)

So Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba

(Gen. 46:1)

God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. ... And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

(Exod. 13:18, 21)

Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land which I swore to give to your fathers...[but] your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall go in there. ... But as for you, turn, and journey into the wilderness.

(Deut. 1:35, 39–40)

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart.

(Deut. 8:2)

A wandering Aramean [AV: a Syrian ready to perish] was my father; and he went down into Egypt...and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

(Deut. 26:5, 8–9)

Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,

the waters of the great deep;

that didst make the depths of the sea a way

for the redeemed to pass over?

(Isa. 51:10)

(x)

A third idea related to our theme, which is met with especially in the Psalms, is that of the pilgrimage to Zion, the holy city. Examples are:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart.

(Ps. 24:3–4)

My soul thirsts for God,

for the living God.

When shall I come and behold

the face of God?

(Ps. 42:2)

Oh send out thy light and thy truth;

let them lead me,

let them bring me to thy holy hill,

and to thy dwelling!

(Ps. 43:3)

Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee

in whose heart are the highways to Zion

.....

They go on from strength to strength;

the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

(Ps. 84:5, 7)

I was glad when they said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

Our feet have been standing

within your gates, O Jerusalem!

(Ps. 122:1–2)

How shall we sing the Lord’s song

in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem

above my highest joy!

(Ps. 137:4–6)

(xi)

In some passages we even find this idea of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem finely interwoven with that of the wilderness wandering, as in the two excerpts below from Isaiah, in which the prophet is looking forward to the return to Zion after the Exile in Babylon:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;

like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,

and rejoice with joy and singing

...

And a highway shall be there,

and it shall be called the Holy Way

...

The ransomed of the Lord shall return,

and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(Isa. 35:1, 8, 10)

You shall go out in joy,

and be led forth in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you

shall break forth into singing,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

(Isa. 55:12)

PILGRIMAGE V

Genesis 12:1–3 (*cont'd*)

(xii)

The imagery of pilgrimage in the preciser sense is not so prominent in the New Testament. There is in the prologue to John's Gospel a very imaginative reminiscence of the wilderness wandering in the phrase translated "dwelt among us" (1:14), but which literally means "pitched his tent, tabernacled among us", i.e. as God had once dwelt with his people on the journey to the Promised Land. And we have already noted the reverberating phrases used in Hebrews chapter 11 of Abraham going out, not knowing where he was to go but seeking a city which had foundations, and of the Patriarchs as a whole catching sight of the fulfilment of God's promise from afar and acknowledging therefore that they were but strangers and exiles on the earth.

But if the New Testament—which is after all not a large book—does not make an extensive use of the figure of pilgrimage, Christian literature and hymnology down the

ages are replete with it. We meet it in many guises, in theological classics like Augustine's *City of God* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and in hymns like "O God of Bethel! by whose hand" (a paraphrase of Gen. 28:20–22) or (already cited) "Through the night of doubt and sorrow", like Bunyan's own "Who would true valour see" or Blake's "And did those feet in ancient time". An especially favourite use is to illumine faith in the face of death, as in hymns like Bernard of Cluny's "Jerusalem the golden", or Isaac Watts' "There is a land of pure delight", or Charles Wesley's "Let saints on earth in concert sing". Happily not all of these by any means show the triumphalism we were criticizing earlier.

(xiii)

Put all these passages and compositions and poems together—those about life as a path or a road, those about Israel's journey to the Promised Land, those about the pilgrimage to Zion—and we have a very potent and marvellous *pot-pourri* of images and symbols with which to strengthen and inspire both the believing community and the believing individual in matters of faith and conduct.

They bring it forcibly to our attention that the Christian life is an ongoing process, with both a beginning or a setting out which calls for courage and commitment and a goal or a journey's end to which we look forward eagerly but which we have not yet reached. They warn us that there are all the time choices to be made, wrong turnings to be avoided, a right path to be kept. They remind us too that we are not alone but have a protector and guide on the way, who has brought us to where we are now and who will help us to circumvent the dangers that still lie before us.

The whole Bible in fact is governed more by this symbol of journeying and pilgrimage than by any other. It begins with *Paradise Lost*, from which man has been driven out, and ends with a new heaven and a new earth, a *Paradise Regained* which we shall enter at the end of the age. It speaks of a Canaan our predecessors won, but which is not to be compared with the Canaan still to be attained. It tells of a Jordan that was once crossed but also of many other Jordans looming ahead. It dwells joyously on the fact that Our Lord once "tabernacled" among us so that we could see his glory, yet its last words are still of faith, not sight—"Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). The movement of the Gospel story is, in short, inexorably forward.

(xiv)

And the story had its start in the three verses that open chapter 12 of Genesis! These three verses not only encapsulate the lost condition of humanity and supply the first indication of God's answer to it. They also enshrine the hope that constantly tugs at man's breast that one day his wanderings shall cease and he shall reach his Father's abode in peace. But—and this, as I suggested before, is their chief message to us—that day is not yet. Tiredness and elation, shame and purpose, striving and expectation, responsibility and dependence—these are the contrary thoughts and emotions the verses should engender in us, but not—and I repeat not—notions of victory and

triumph, or even of rest and contentment. These things we believe shall be ours too, but that is for the future, and the future is God's. They can only be enjoyed in this life by faith, and that still means for us, as it did for Abraham, fleetingly and in foretaste.

OBEDIENCE

Genesis 12:4–9

⁴So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. ⁶When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time ⁷the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built ⁸there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. Thence he removed to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar ⁹to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

In this terse little passage we are given simply a list of happenings. It is left to us to sense its drama—and there is a good deal of drama about it—by using our imaginations.

(i)

First there is Abraham's *obedience*, communicated in a single short sentence: he went as he had been told.

He left Harran with his wife and nephew, their possessions and their slaves ("the persons—AV, souls—that they had gotten"). The mention of slaves tells us that it was not a tiny family that went out from Harran but a sizeable caravan, and prepares us for the three hundred and eighteen men who in chapter 14 Abraham was able to put into the field for a military raid. We have not, therefore, to think in the chapters ahead of Abraham as a poverty-stricken refugee on the model of Cain in chapter 4. Certainly he was not one of the great men of the earth, but he was a chief of a clan, though as yet a small one. He had no landed property and lived in nomadic encampments, but with his flocks and herds and the people required to tend and protect them he would have been considered quite prosperous in his time and probably enjoyed for that time a reasonably comfortable standard of living (compare 13:2). When he left Harran he was not abandoning a life of ease for one of physical deprivation and asceticism. Neither of these extremes was relevant in his case.

But all this kind of background information is unimportant to the story-teller. With their frugality of language these verses home in on what was essential, the urgency of

God's call and the immediate response it evoked. We get the same feelings of urgency and immediacy when we read the equally terse stories of how Jesus got himself a band of disciples (and how little of the background we are given there too!):

And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men". And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

(Mark 1:16–18)

And as he passed on, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax office, and he said to him, "Follow me". And he rose and followed him.

(Mark 2:14)

Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father". But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead" (or more crisply still with the AV, "let the dead bury their dead!").

(Matt. 8:21–22)

The lesson for the reader is clear. There can be no gainsaying the call of God or God's Son. No excuses are allowed. It must be obeyed in the moment it is issued, for to do otherwise is to misunderstand what it is about. In such a vital matter this God does not give a second chance, and the Son of this God will not pass the same way again.

(ii)

Next, Abraham and his family set out to go to the land of Canaan—as we know and as they afterwards knew, but of course they did not know it at the time; but the story-teller cannot even spare a moment to point that out. Then—as the AV, again with a nicer sense of the drama of the occasion, translates—"into the land of Canaan they came".

Not a word is said of the long journey that intervened. Probably the travellers kept near to the great international caravan route from Mesopotamia to Egypt, which is called in Isa. 9:1 "the way of [or rather, to] the sea". Harran was a staging-post on this route, which crossed the Euphrates at Carchemish and turned southwestwards through Aleppo and Hamath to Damascus and thence across Galilee and the plain of Sharon to reach the coast at Joppa (see Map 1). Abraham may have left it at Damascus and continued south along the "King's Highway", entering Palestine from the east across the Jordan (as Jacob was later to do on his return from Mesopotamia), or he may have remained on it till Hazor or Megiddo, then turned south into the hill-country of Ephraim. We do not know. All we know is that the first place mentioned after Harran is Shechem. There, following a laconic reference to the indigenous inhabitants, the Canaanites,

Abraham is given in a vision the news—and once more a single short sentence is enough—that this was the land of promise.

So in a mere phrase or two is Abraham transported from the old to the new, and the first forefather of the chosen people stands for the first time on the sacred soil of Palestine. The hazards of the way—the bandits that attacked the caravans, the fierce desert sections, the awesome defiles of the eastern Lebanon range—are not reported at all. The powerful Canaanites, who built the great fortresses of Hazor and Megiddo uncovered by the archaeologists and who in centuries to come were to fight bitterly with the Hebrews for possession of this very land, are brought in almost in the passing. All Abraham is told is: “You have arrived, and your descendants shall one day settle permanently in this territory”.

(iii)

But how he must have needed that message with its renewal of the promise and its reminder that God was still with him! For his immediate reaction is to build an altar to the Lord to commemorate the occasion.

Again only a few words are used. It is not said that Abraham prayed to God for guidance. Rather it is said—or more accurately, hinted at—that in his servant's loneliness and his apprehension at his new surroundings and the ominously strong people who were now his neighbours God drew near to him to offer him hope. Only then does Abraham express his gratitude in an act of worship.

The original audience would note that this act of worship, the first recorded of a Hebrew in the Holy Land, took place at Shechem, a centre where later the twelve tribes used regularly to meet to renew their allegiance to the Lord (see, for example, Joshua chapter 24). But perhaps more important for us is that *worship* is not mentioned until verse 7 of this crucial chapter. The order of events is God's call—man's obedience—man's perplexities—God's comfort—and only then man's address to God. It is an order which is maintained throughout Scripture. God seeks us out, we do not seek for him. He does things for us and asks us to do things for him, and that is the way we find out what he is like. And that experience and that knowledge, not what we think up by our own arguing and philosophizing, then become the proper subject-matter of our prayers and praises.

Presumably after his exhausting travels Abraham remained for a while at Shechem, but he was not allowed to stay too long. Soon he was on the move again, and reached Bethel (also renowned as a centre of worship in later Israel) where he built another altar. And there he is in verse 9 still journeying on, “still going towards the Negeb”. It was to be generations yet to be born, not he himself, who would settle down in this land and enjoy the full fruit of the promise first given to him.

Perhaps it were best if we too, as we “journey on” in life’s pilgrimage, concentrate on the two things emphasized in this frugal passage—obedience and worship—and do not pretend that we are near our goal.

EXPEDIENCY

Genesis 12:10–20

¹⁰Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt ¹¹to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are ¹²a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; then they will kill me, but they will let you ¹³live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of ¹⁴you, and that my life may be spared on your account.” When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to ¹⁶Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels.

¹⁷But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues ¹⁸because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me ¹⁹that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be ²⁰gone.” And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

The next little tale of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt is scarcely less taut in its composition than the one preceding it. To know what the story-teller is getting at we have to do a lot of reading between the lines.

(i)

Many commentators interpret it positively as showing how Abraham gets the better of none other than Egypt’s Pharaoh and acquires considerable wealth at his expense. He thus makes his “name great” in accordance with the third of God’s promises (12:2), and God’s “blessing” on him is given a quick confirmation at the first whiff of serious danger in his life. Famine has forced him out of the land of promise soon after reaching it, and the attractiveness of his wife to the Egyptians faces him with a real problem if he and she are to survive to start a family. That he uses rather dubious means to safeguard their future may be regrettable but is in the circumstances understandable.

(ii)

But I find a negative interpretation more in keeping with the laconic tones of the narrative. The very first words of the story may indeed contain an implicit rebuke to Abraham for quitting Canaan so hastily, even though it be to escape a famine. That is

perhaps to read in too much, but what does not seem to be in doubt is that behind Abraham's suggestion to his wife when they arrive in Egypt to pretend that she was his sister was simple cowardice, a desire to save his own skin. He may also have had the promise of progeny in mind, but what he says is "When the Egyptians see you...they will kill me, but they will let you live".

His subterfuge appears to work, and Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's house. In reality this is a euphemism for into his harem, not at all a pleasant fate. But the story says nothing about Abraham being appalled at what might happen to her there. Didn't he care? Or was he carried away by the generous gifts of sheep and cattle and servants which Pharaoh bestowed on him and on which the story does dwell? Was he congratulating himself that not only had he secured his safety but made a profit out of the deal as well?

We cannot answer these questions with any certainty, but it is significant that from this point in the story onwards it is Pharaoh who takes the initiative. Abraham has no choice but to go along with what he does. Plagues come upon Pharaoh's house, which he must have put down to the arrival of the new woman and, suspecting the truth, he asks Abraham why he did not tell him that Sarah was his wife. In a similar quandary later on in Gerar Abraham advances the excuse to Gerar's king that Sarah was in fact his half-sister, with the same father but not the same mother (20:12). But on this occasion he makes no reply. The Pharaoh peremptorily commands him, "Take her, and be gone!" And as though still not sure that Abraham could be trusted, he orders his men to "set him on his way". He does not even ask for his gifts back, but in disdain lets Abraham take "all that he had" with him. It does look as if the patriarch is being unceremoniously bundled out of the country with his tail firmly between his legs.

(iii)

In my view that is exactly the impression the narrator wishes to give. I cannot see how this story can be taken as other than critical of Abraham. It is like many another Hebrew story terse and frugal in the extreme. But the irony that shines through it cannot but be felt if it is read over slowly and the right emphases put on the right phrases.

It is not, as a positive interpretation would suggest, a story of God's intervention to save his threatened people from a cruel overlord and turn the tables on him. That, we know, is what happened when his people were next in Egypt in Moses' time. Certainly God intervenes, and he does save Abraham and Sarah. But if the tables are turned on anyone, it is on Abraham for his scheming, and on this occasion Pharaoh does not "allow" the holy people to go and then change his mind and pursue them, but he "commands" them to go and appoints an escort of soldiers to see that they do. He is not this time God's enemy, but God's ally to punish his wayward servant.

Considering what Egypt was later to mean to the Hebrews as a symbol of oppression and slavery, the irony of Pharaoh's role in this story must have hurt. I think it was meant to. For the lesson that is being taught Abraham—and all God's people after

him—is that it was not up to him—or to them—to plan victories for God’s cause. Their task was to trust God, not to do God’s job for him. Abraham was succumbing to fear and, worse, resorting to expediency—he was, if you like, trying to guarantee his own salvation—when he should have been leaving the outcome to God.

The Bible does not idealize its heroes and can at times turn a very jaundiced eye on their weaknesses. That it does so in Abraham’s case even before the first chapter devoted to him is ended speaks volumes for its realistic opinion of man’s ability to save himself.

I finish with a quote from a study of Genesis written nearly a century ago which finely sums up the frightening message of this story of Abraham’s pathetic failure so soon after his magnificent start on a life of faith. The author knows his Scottish history well, as both his allusion to my home city and his closing citation (from an essay by Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the Disruption) show:

It is recorded in history that Edinburgh Castle was supposed to be inaccessible on the precipitous side, and there the defences were feeble and the outlook careless, while on the weaker sides the fortifications were strong and the watch was strictly kept. But it was at the strongest, not the weakest point that the entrance was effected and the citadel captured. It is also on the strongest side that the citadel of man’s soul is often captured. The weakness of God’s servants is most conspicuous where their strength lies. Abraham, the most faithful of men, sinned by unfaithfulness; Moses, the meekest of men, by anger; Solomon, the wisest, by folly; Elijah, the most valiant, by fear; John, one of the gentlest, by vindictiveness; Peter, one of the boldest, by cowardice. Unguarded strength is double weakness. “We are not to walk in all the footsteps of the saints, but only in the footsteps of their faith.”

(from Dr. Strahan’s *Hebrew Ideals*)

A Note on Genesis Chapters 12ff. As “History”

I must confess to feeling uneasy about the historical trustworthiness of this story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt. For one thing, it has Abraham passing off his wife as his sister because she was an attractive woman, which is hardly consistent with the fact stressed elsewhere (e.g. 18:11) that both he and she were old. We need not believe *literally* that Abraham was seventy-five and Sarah sixty-five (see 17:17) when they left Harran and a hundred and seventy-five and a hundred and twenty-seven respectively when they died (see 25:7 and 23:1). Such exaggerated numbers like the even more exaggerated ones used of Adam, Noah and the rest earlier in Genesis seem to have been conventional in Hebrew tradition when referring to the distant days at the edge of human memory and beyond (see the commentary on chapter 5 in Volume 1). If they had a significance, it was to contrast the great figures of the past with the puny men and women of the present day. But convention apart, it is difficult to avoid the impression throughout Gen. 12ff. that neither Abraham nor his wife were, to put it mildly, in the first bloom of youth.

But even more suspicious is the mention of the Lord afflicting Pharaoh and his house with *plagues*. Add to this that it was a *famine* that led Abraham to go down to Egypt and that in spite of his relative obscurity as a minor nomadic chieftain he is pictured in direct confrontation with the *Pharaoh* himself, and the parallels with what happened later to Israel in the time of Joseph and Moses become too striking for comfort. This does not mean that we have to dismiss the story as a fabrication, but it does seem as though a visit made by Abraham to Egypt (quite likely to escape famine in Canaan—there is no reason why that should not have happened twice) has been rather outrageously “written up” to catch the interest of later Hebrew audiences with a nose for intriguing comparisons.

We get quite a lot of this kind of “writing up” in Gen. 12ff. (there is another and rather less edifying example coming soon in chapter 14), and it is only honest to acknowledge the fact right at the start of our study of these chapters. Biblical scholars tend to connect it with the “documents” which they find behind our present Genesis and which they identify by the well known labels “J” and “P” and (appearing in chapters 12ff. but not in 1–11) “E”. But though in Volume 1 I spent some time pointing out where “J” and “P” are present in chapters 1–11, it does not seem to me necessary to be so academically precise in the case of the Patriarchal narratives. Because of the unique problems Gen. 1–11 raise at all sorts of levels, a very detailed treatment of these chapters had to be given, even at the risk of bringing in refinements of analysis which would normally only interest the specialist. With chapters 12ff., however, it is usually enough that the reader be guided to recognize where later “hands” have been at work without being burdened with the question of which document such and such a passage should be assigned to. Such a broad distinction between early and late is one that we can all appreciate, for we know from our own experience how stories “grow” in the telling. By making it in Gen. 12ff. we not only put ourselves into closer touch with the “real live” Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph but are freed in our own interpretation of the stories from falling prey to the exaggeration (as in this chapter) or the prejudice (as in chapter 14) which as the centuries passed they have drawn to themselves.