

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER TWO

Abraham, The Friend of GOD

IN THE *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, Oliver Wendell Holmes remarks, in a rather condescending manner, "The Hebrew patriarchs had small libraries, if any, and yet I think if we could ask Abraham to dine with us men of letters next Saturday, we should feel honored by his company."

There are two errors in this reference to Abraham - the Father of all believers.

The first is pardonable because in the days of Holmes the libraries of Abraham's day at Ur of the Chaldees had not been discovered.

The second is that no real Semite would accept an invitation to dine at a club!

Oriental hospitality always finds its center in the home of the host. There were no hotels in all Arabia until oil was discovered. There is no question, however, that had Abraham received and accepted an invitation to dine at the Harvard Club (two imponderables) the other dinner guests would soon have learned that "those great-grandfathers of the Church saw more in the cloud than we do in the fire." No one is worthy to appraise the greatness of Abraham unless he too is in some humble sense a friend of GOD.

For Abraham is called by James and Isaiah and Jehoshaphat the Friend of GOD (James 2:23; Isaiah 41:8 and II Chronicles 20:7), and his common title among all Arabs and the whole Moslem world is Ibrahim Khalil Allah, (Abraham, the Bosom-friend of Allah).

His grave at Hebron is the common shrine for the three great theistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Our Saviour JESUS CHRIST and His apostles bore testimony to Abraham's faith, character and preeminence in Jewish history (John 8:31; Acts 7:2; Galatians 3:6; Hebrews 11:8; James 2:21-24).

One might almost say that next to Moses his moral stature towers above all the Old Testament characters.

The story of Abraham's life begins at chapter twelve in Genesis and continues until the middle of the twenty-fifth chapter where we read of his death at the age of one hundred threescore and fifteen years.

"Then Abraham gave up the ghost and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years; and was gathered unto his people" (Genesis 25:8).

Like Enoch he walked with GOD and went to dwell with Him after life's long and strenuous pilgrimage.

Robert Burns tells, in "*The Cotter's Saturday Night*," how at family worship in Scotland, "they chant their artless notes in simple guise, They tune their hearts by far the noblest aim; The priest-like father reads the Sacred page How Abram was the friend of GOD on High."

Abraham has travelled from Ur of the Chaldees across the seven seas, the continents and islands until his name is a household word and his story is read in nearly a thousand languages. So we see the fulfillment even here **"In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed."**

Orientalists always emphasize the importance of names. To them a name stands for reality. With a change of office or calling there is often a change of name; even as Jacob became Israel after his wrestling with the Angel.

Among the Arabs today, many personal names are compounds of the name of Allah. Like our Dorothy and Theodore they have Abdullah, *the slave of God*; Dhaif Allah, *the guest of God*; Khair Allah, *the goodness of God*, etc.

It is also the case in the Bible: Elijah, *the Lord is my GOD*; Eliezer, *GOD is my strength*; Nathaneal, *the gift of GOD*; Daniel, *the judgment of GOD*; Ezekiel, *my strength is GOD*; Emmanuel, *GOD with us*.

Then also we have special names given. Daniel is called **"greatly beloved"**; David the man after GOD's heart; Ezekiel, son-of-man. But Abraham surpasses all; he is **"the father of all believers,"** the head of the covenant promises to Israel, and **"the Friend of God."**

There is a beautiful story told in Moslem tradition as to the occasion when Abraham first received this name.

Commenting on the verse in the Koran (4:124), "For God took Abraham as his friend."

Baidawi says: "Abraham in a time of dearth sent to a friend of his in Egypt for a supply of corn: but the friend denied him, saying, in his excuse, that though there was a famine in their country also, yet, had it been for Abraham's own family, he would have sent what he desired, but he knew he wanted it only to entertain his guests, and give away to the poor, according to his usual hospitality. The servants whom Abraham had sent on this message, being ashamed to return empty, to conceal the matter from their neighbors, filled their sacks with fine white sand, which in the East pretty much resembles meal. Abraham being informed by his servants on their return of their ill success, the concern he was under threw him into a sleep, and in the meantime Sarah, knowing nothing of what had happened, opening one of the sacks, found good flour in it, and immediately set to making bread. Abraham awaking, and smelling the new bread, asked her whence she had the flour. 'Why,' says she, 'from your friend in Egypt.' 'Nay,' replied the patriarch, 'it must have come from no other than my friend, GOD Almighty.' "

No wonder that Doughty, the great Arabian traveller, took the name Khalil Allah on his dangerous journeys; and the desert Arabs learned to love him as well as know him by that name. The name Abraham occurs more than three hundred times in twenty-seven books of the Old and New Testament. It is writ large in the Psalms and Isaiah but especially by Paul in his Epistles, and in Luke's Gospel.

To all of these writers, as to the Jewish people down the centuries, Abraham was not a myth or a mere tribal name (as Liberal critics assert) but a historic character. Our Saviour spoke of him as a person and not as a tribe (Matthew 8:11; 22: 32; Luke 13:28; 16:24; John 8:56). He said that Abraham rejoiced to see His day; that He was before Abraham and greater than Abraham; and that the heaven of rest was rightly called Abraham's bosom; he, moreover, agreed with the national consciousness that the Jews had Abraham for their patriarchal father.

In tracing briefly the life and character of this patriarch - two questions engage our attention: Why was Abraham especially called the friend of GOD? And how "by walking in the footprints of Abraham" we too can become friends of GOD?

In literature and in life true friendship is the ruling passion.

By the warp of time and the woof of circumstance, GOD Himself knits two hearts together and whether this be in great fiction or on the pages of history, the result is an unbroken, loyal, sacrificial friendship.

When Zeno was asked what a friend was, he replied, "Another I." And in the ancient *Fables of Bidpai* we read that "A friend is as it were another self to whom we impart our most secret thoughts, who partakes of our joy and comforts us in our affliction."

In some such sense GOD was the friend of Abraham and Abraham was the friend of GOD.

The first stanza of our familiar hymn sums up the spiritual life of Abraham and the words of JESUS, "He rejoiced to see my day and was glad."

"What a friend we have in JESUS
All our sins and griefs to bear;
What a privilege to carry
Everything to GOD in prayer."

All through the narrative told in thirteen short chapters of Genesis, Abraham seems to be on very familiar terms with the Almighty.

Look at the record and ask yourself whether any other man in the Old Testament talked with GOD, walked with GOD, believed in GOD, fought for GOD, and prayed to GOD so boldly as did Abraham. Here is the astonishing record of his life in summary.

The history of the life of the great patriarch falls into four periods, each marked by a special divine revelation.

- The first period (ch. 12-14) begins with his call and emigration to Canaan;
- The second (ch. 15,16) deals with the promise of an heir and the formation of a covenant;
- The third (ch. 17-21) tells of the establishment of that great covenant through the change of Abram's name to Abraham and the introduction of the rite of circumcision;
- The fourth period (ch. 22-25) relates to the trial of Abraham's faith in the offering up of Isaac.

In each of these periods of his long life, Abraham stands out as the man of dauntless faith and the friend of GOD. All through the story of his life we see a faith that falters only to rise again; a humility before GOD and man that adds to his moral stature; a self-sacrifice after the field of battle or in the dark hour of temptation; a benevolence and gentleness toward others illuminating the greatness of his soul.

The story does not gloss over nor condone the faults in Abraham's character. It tells how he once used deceit to protect his beautiful wife, Sarah, from the alien Egyptians; and how he tried to forestall GOD's promise by human contrivance in the case of Ishmael.

But Wordsworth, in his commentary, remarks. with deep insight:

"The frank portrayal of the weaknesses of the patriarchs only strengthens our faith in the veracity of the Pentateuch."

Moreover, we must not forget the age in which they lived and their environment when we try to sit in judgment on the sins of the Patriarchs.

Nothing reveals inner character more truly than prayer. And the prayers of Abraham are the strongest proof of his faith, hope, and charity - and the greatest of these in the recorded prayers is his charity.

When GOD appeared to him at Bethel, we read that as soon as he pitched his roving tent, he built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord.

His unselfish conduct toward Lot was an unspoken prayer which brought the answer from heaven, "**Lift up now thine eyes and look from the place where thou art, northward, southward, eastward and westward; all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it . . . and to thy seed forever.**"

So Lot and his wife settled in Sodom, but of Abraham we read that he dwelt by the oaks of Mamre and again built an altar to the Lord.

In rescuing Lot from the raid of the four Arabian sheikhs, Abraham showed his courage but also his reliance upon GOD.

To the King of Sodom he said, "**I have lifted up my hand to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a shoe-latchet of all the spoil.**"

What unselfishness!

Then how childlike he pleads with GOD for a child of his own, after GOD had said, "**I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward**"

"**O Lord, what wilt thou give me seeing I go childless . . . Behold to me thou hast given no seed.**"

Then in reply GOD bade him "**tell the stars if thou be able to tell them . . . so shall thy seed be!**"

"**And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.**"

After that we see Abraham in his Gethsemane when "**the horror of a great darkness fell upon him**" (ch. 15) and he learned that his seed would, for the space of four hundred years, be strangers and slaves "**in a land that is not theirs.**"

Again we have his pathetic prayer for the son of Hagar, Ishmael (who was also Abraham's son): "**Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee!**" (ch. 21). This earliest missionary collect is still used in the Liturgy of the Moravian Brethren as they pray for the Moslem world.

And who can abbreviate by a single word the surpassing revelation of Abraham's power of intercession in his plea to GOD for mercy on Sodom. There is nothing like it in the whole Bible. The Friend of GOD pleading with the Judge of all the earth to do right!

Read the inspired text in chapter eighteen of Genesis from the words: "**Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city . . .**" And follow his pleading and intercession down the arithmetical scale; 50,45,40, 30, 20, 10; and upward in his dauntless faith and six "**peradventures**" of persistence until the Almighty says, "**I will not destroy it for the tens sake.**" Did ever a man take hold of GOD like that unless he was sure he was the friend of GOD?

Add to all this Abraham's prayer for Abimelech and their covenant together; the silent prayer as he ascended Moriah, "**My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt-offering**"; also his prayer when he bound Isaac on the wood.

The *'Aqada* or Binding prayer is found in the New Year's Day ritual of Judaism:

"Remember in our favour, O Lord our GOD, the oath which Thou hast sworn to our father Abraham on Mount Moriah; consider the binding of his son Isaac upon the altar when he suppressed his love in order to do Thy will with a whole heart! Thus may Thy love suppress Thy wrath against us, and through Thy great goodness may the heart of Thine anger be turned away from Thy people, Thy city and Thy heritage . . . Remember to-day in mercy in favour of his seed, the binding of Isaac."

There are many interesting apocryphal stories relating to Abraham in the Jewish Talmud. Some of them have also come to us in Moslem tradition and in the later Persian poets.

In the Koran (VI:74-82) we have the story of Abraham rebuking his father Terah for worshipping the sun, the moon and the stars because they were not steadfast but set in the West.

And in Surah XXI:P-75 is the curious story of Abraham confounding the idolaters by breaking all their idols one day in a temple and placing an axe near the largest image to indicate that he it was who had wielded the axe against his companions. When they grew angry and threatened to burn Abraham in the fire, Allah intervened and commanded the fire to grow cold for Abraham. This story is a favorite one among Moslems.

Many of these Jewish and Moslem legends are of little worth but we find one that is very beautiful and found a place in Western literature.

In the *Bustan*, or "Flower Garden" of the Persian poet, Saadi, there is this beautiful tale (we quote from the prose version of Jeremy Taylor): [1]

"One day when Abraham sat at his tent-door, according to his custom, waiting to entertain strangers, he espied an old man stooping and leaning on his staff, weary with age and travel, coming toward him, who was an hundred years of age; he received him kindly, washed his feet, provided supper, caused him to sit down; but observing that the old man ate and prayed not, nor begged for a blessing on his meat, asked him why he did not worship the GOD of heaven. The old man told him that he worshipped the fire only, and acknowledged no other GOD: at which answer Abraham grew so zealously angry, that he thrust the old man out of his tent, and exposed him to all the evils of the night and an unguarded condition. When the old man was gone, GOD called to him and asked him where the stranger was; he replied, 'I thrust him away because he did not worship thee'; GOD answered him, 'I have suffered him these hundred years, although he dishonored me, and couldst thou not endure him one night, when he gave thee no trouble?' Upon this, saith the story, Abraham fetcht him back again, and gave him hospitable entertainment and wise instruction. Go thou and do likewise, and thy charity will be rewarded by the GOD of Abraham."

The fruit of friendship, according to Lord Bacon, is like the pomegranate which has multitude of kernels.

There are many elements in true friendship. Its beauty is like the sevenfold colors of pure light seen through a prism.

Almost every incident in the life-story of Abraham illustrates his friendship with GOD. But four factors of the master-passion are dominant in Abraham: loyalty, affection, mutual confidence and sacrifice.

When he heard GOD's call in Ur of the Chaldees he obeyed. **"By faith Abraham when he was called to go out unto a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country . . . For he looked for a city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"** (Hebrews 11:8-10).

His unswerving obedience to GOD's call made him the father of the faithful as well as the heir of all the promises.

His faith was a perfect illustration of the acrostic I once saw on a Salvation Army blackboard:

What is faith? Read the first letters and see.

**Forsaking All
I
Take Him**

Abraham's loyalty was not greater than his love. The unparalleled story of the father and his only son Isaac ascending Mount Moriah; the altar, the wood, the knife and the fire; the hand outstretched to slay his son. And then GOD's voice **"Lay not thine hand upon the lad . . . for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me"** (Genesis 21:12).

1 *The Liberty of Prophecy*, p. 606. Benjamin Franklin and others have given their version of the story in slightly different form. It doubtless has Jewish origin.

O GOD of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who keepest covenant to all generations, make us true sons of Abraham, Thy friend, and may we be known by our walk and conversation as friends of GOD. Amen.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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