FAITH IN ISRAEL

by FREDERICK L. MORIARTY

THE usual approach to an understanding of faith in the Old Testament is through an analysis of the Hebrew word commonly used to express this relationship between two persons. The word is '*aman*', a verb form translated 'to be solid, firm, reliable'. The noun '*emeth* is derived from this verb and we generally translate it as 'faith', 'fidelity', and sometimes, 'truth'. Even supposing that we knew exactly the basic and radical meaning of the word – a supposition which is by no means certain – recent studies concerned with our understanding of biblical terms have demonstrated the peril of assuming that a given biblical word, in all contexts, inevitably denotes one and the same thing. Instead of isolating an alleged fundamental meaning for a word such as 'believe' and then applying it univocally to all occurrences in the biblical text the modern scholar wants to examine each use of the word in its own context. For it is only in this context that the full and accurate sense of the word, with all its nuances, can be determined. In other words, it is the statement rather than the word itself which counts. This method does not make the task of the biblical scholar any easier; but it offers him the assurance that his word-study is proceeding along sound psychological lines which are also consistent with our everyday use of language.

For the above reasons we shall not attempt to disengage some basic meaning for the word 'faith', applicable to all cases, but rather examine certain situations in which that virtue is called into play, hoping thereby to arrive at a more just appreciation of what faith means in the Old Testament. Since, moreover, faith is admittedly a highly personal relationship, our best chance of success lies in examining that faith which is shown by certain biblical characters towards the God in whom they believed. Abraham and Moses have been remembered in the sacred traditions of the Hebrew people because they were, each in his own way, men of faith, totally committed to the God who spoke to them and summoned them to co-operation in his plan. We speak of the divine plan because, beyond all persons and events, the Old Testament is really the story of how God has mysteriously but efficaciously devised a way of universal blessing and salvation for a world which has separated itself from him.

Our biblical traditions concerning Abraham are rich and varied, but his life nevertheless discloses a marvellous unity. From beginning to end Abraham, the wanderer, is destined to walk in the obscure light of faith, whose power is tested by trials which would be unendurable for the man without faith. To grasp the Abraham story in all its dimensions we must see how the sacred writer has arranged the material of his narrative in such a way that Abraham's faith is judged to be the only adequate answer to the estrangement between God and man, an estrangement due entirely to man's sin. The vivid picture of man's increasing deterioration, portrayed in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, is the background against which one must set the call and response of the patriarch. The story of man's rebellion begins in the Garden, and is then followed by a whole series of episodes which describe the further defacement of the image in which man was created. The tower of Babel incident brings the whole wretched story of sin to a stunning climax which leaves men scattered and confused on the face of the earth.[1] The narrative, as von Rad remarks, breaks off 'in a shrill dissonance'. Man is not only alienated from God but has even ceased to communicate with his fellowman. It is at this point, where sin has reduced man's very existence to a shambles, that God seizes the initiative, breaking into our history in order to mend the friendship which sin has torn apart.

'*So Abram went, as Yahweh had told him*'.

But God does not re-open the possibility of sharing in his divine life by some transcendent act beyond space or time. He acts through a man in a particular place and moment of time; the man's response in faith sets in motion salvation history.

> Then Yahweh said to Abram: Leave your native land, your kinsfolk and your father's house for a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him that curses you I will curse. Through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.[2]

Every detail of the divine command highlights the poignancy of the scene and the burden which Abraham's faith is asked to sustain. Country, kindred and father's house were the precious constants of a

[1] Gen 11, 19. [2] Gen 12, 1–4.

semite's life; in these he found his roots and from them life derived its meaning. Abraham was now asked to put all of these behind him in order that he might set out for a land where he would be a stranger, the 'wandering Aramaean', as he is described later in Israel's profession of faith.[1] In the same chapter we should note the number of times it is said that Abraham 'set forth', 'journeyed', 'moved on'. The narrator never lets us forget that Abraham did not possess the land.

The peremptory summons to an uncertain future is counterbalanced by the great promise which opens up horizons far beyond the vision of Abraham. If Abraham obeys, a process is to be set in motion. At the very beginning of sacred history Yahweh reveals something about the goal towards which it is moving. The perspective widens from the particular, Abraham's blessing, to the families of mankind who will honour Abraham as their father – because he believed. The witness of the New Testament assures us that this promise reaches across the span of almost two thousand years, attaining its fulfillment in a blessing which Abraham could hardly have foreseen, though his faith opened the way to that climax of divine goodness. In the sharp, staccato *wayyelek* (and he went) the Hebrew language epitomizes the obedience of Abraham. No description can improve upon it. Without question or protest, and with no illumination except the light of faith, the venerable patriarch entered upon the way designated by God.

Great art has the power to elevate a particular event into something of typical or universal significance. And there is no doubt that when the Israelites listened to the recitation of Abraham's call they saw in it a type of their own situation before God. Israel, like Abraham, was called to follow a destiny which lay entirely in God's hand; the nation, like its father, was meant to live by faith, in utter abandonment to the will of Yahweh who was using this people for his own mysterious plan of salvation.

The years of wandering were passing and still Abraham had no son by Sarah, who was barren. Could the promise of descendants as numerous as the dust particles of the earth[2] be a cruel joke upon the man who was rich in all material things but had no heir? For a second time Abraham was put to the test; he was asked to believe that God would provide what nature had denied, and would do so with that prodigality which is characteristic of the divine giving.

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[1] Deut 26, 5. [2] Gen 13, 16; 17, 4.

The vision is described in a few verses which set in sharp contrast the agony of a man and the liberality of God.

> After these events the word of Yahweh came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great. But Abram said, O Adonai Yahweh, what can you give me, seeing that I am childless and the heir of my house is Dammesek Eliezer? Abram said further, Since you have given me no offspring one of my household will be my heir. But the word of Yahweh came to him, saying, That one will not be your heir, but one born of your own flesh shall be your heir. Then he brought him outside and said, Look up at the heavens and count the stars if you are able. Then he added, So shall your offspring be. And he believed in Yahweh, who credited the act to him as justice.[1]

The promise of a son is remembered in two other places of the Israelite tradition,[2] but in each episode the response is something less than the simple belief and complete acceptance of the scene described above. Is the 'laugh' of Abraham and Sarah an expression of an irreverent incredulity, or is it simply the nervous, spontaneous reaction of a human couple to a promise which cancels out a sorrow to which their age and condition had resigned them? Most likely we shall never know the answer; but, in any case, both are given the divine assurance that nothing is too wonderful for Yahweh, the Lord of nature.[3] Fascinated by the figure of Abraham, Kierkegaard makes this remark about the event: 'But Abraham believed, therefore he was young; for he who always hopes for the best becomes old, and he who is always prepared for the worst grows old early, but he who believes preserves an eternal youth'.[4]

But the radical test of faith and obedience still lay ahead for Abraham. Nothing in the Old Testament equals the tragic pathos of the moment when Abraham is told by Yahweh to sacrifice the son of promise, 'your only son, Isaac, whom you love'. The shattering force of the whole episode comes home to us when we reflect that God appears to be destroying the last and only hope of posterity which he had already promised to Abraham. Against all the laws of nature Yahweh had given a son to Abraham, and had thus made

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[1] Gen 15, 1–6. [2] Gen 17, 15–21; 18, 9–15. [3] Gen 18, 14.
[4] *Fear and Trembling* (Doubleday Anchor Book, 1954), p. 33.

actual the promise that salvation would come through Abraham's family. Isaac was the palpable guarantee of Yahweh's fidelity to his own promise. And now it seemed as though God was contradicting himself in destroying the very possibility that Abraham should have descendants. The description of the command leaves no doubt that Yahweh knows perfectly well the consequences of this test, a fact which only makes the incident more incomprehensible. Prudence could suggest a hundred arguments to support Abraham's refusal to comply with the divine command. But against all these reasons, and infinitely outweighing them, was the absolute obedience of Abraham which is not even expressed in words, but in the simple description of an action. 'Then early next morning Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and Isaac his son. Having cut the wood for the burnt offering he set out for the place of which God had told him'.[1] As Abraham took the knife of sacrifice to slay his son bound upon the altar, the narrator tells us nothing of his interior anguish. But it is possible to surmise that, at that instant, Abraham understood the utter gratuity of this gift of a son. God was only claiming what belonged entirely to him. Is it not likely that the phrase 'God will provide', taken at its deepest level, is the key to this mysterious and agonizing act of faith?

These few examples tell us more about the faith of Abraham than any word-analysis might. Faith was the all-embracing principle of this man's life; it was the structural component which gave meaning to all his actions. First and foremost Abraham's faith was a total acceptance of God's word, the hearing which is not separated from obedience. In Abraham's case it was a free and generous adherence to a divine promise which was not to be fulfilled in his own lifetime. This is something more than vague trust in another, a kind of pallid fideism or a loyalty divorced from intellectual conviction. The whole man, intellect, will and affective life, was committed to another Person and to his promise that in this man God was working out his plan for the salvation of men. It can be no accident that Paul, in giving us one of his classic definitions of justifying faith, has done so by appealing to Abraham's faith.

> Hoping against hope Abraham believed so that he became the father of many nations, as he had been told, So shall your offspring be. And with no weakening of his faith did he con-

[1] Gen 22, 3.

> sider his own body, as good as dead (for he was almost a hundred years old), along with the deadness of Sarah's womb. He never doubted God's promise but grew strong in his faith, giving glory to God in the firm conviction that he could do what he promised. For this reason his faith was credited to him as justice.[1]

Moses, My Servant.

When we come to consider the faith of Moses, our records confront us with a perplexing situation. The sources are, of course, the books of the Pentateuch, with the exception of Genesis; the traditions in these four books are almost wholly centred in the story of Moses and his mediating role in the formation of the Israelite people. Yet nowhere do we find the explicit statement 'Moses believed'. With Abraham, as we have met him in the traditions of Genesis, the case is entirely different. His acts of faith are described in full detail; faith is the signature, the trademark of the man whose complete and unreserved reliance upon Yahweh throughout his life earns him the title 'the friend of God'. Abraham appears to glory in his total dependence upon God even when the divine will asks what seems to be humanly impossible, if not absurd.

Great demands are also made upon Moses, and more than once his commitment is put to the test. But his response to the divine commands is not explicitly framed in the vocabulary of faith. Of Moses it is not said that 'he believed', but that 'he did as Yahweh commanded'. Unhesitating, radical obedience to the divine will is the virtue by which the Israelites remember their great leader and founder of the nation. Is Moses for that reason any less a man of faith? Not if we understand faith in its biblical meaning of radical self-renunciation which issues in total obedience to the will of God. Judged by that standard Moses qualifies pre-eminently as the man of faith. He has no need to be marked down explicitly as one who believed; his vocation could not have been fulfilled on any other terms than faith in its most comprehensive meaning.

Before all else Moses is the instrument divinely chosen to liberate God's people. Here it is well to notice a characteristic of the relation between God and Moses which runs throughout Israel's remembrance of these events. Though his name is mentioned constantly and the dialogue with God is uninterrupted, Moses appears less as

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[1] Rom 4, 18–25.

an independent and fully drawn historical character than as the minister of Yahweh, wholly subordinate to him and controlled by only one motive, the service of Yahweh. This quality of self-effacement strikes the reader in the brilliantly dramatized call of Moses at Horeb, the mountain of God.[1] With shoes removed out of reverence for the place, Moses hid his face for fear of looking upon God. The commission which would change the whole direction of Moses' life follows: 'Come, I will send you to Pharaoh so that you may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt'.[2] Fear and diffidence are not inconsistent with faith; they only make more meritorious that task undertaken with renouncement of self and complete reliance upon God.

The long narrative of Israel's liberation from the degrading servitude in Egypt continues the same theme of God's initiative and Moses' obedience as the faithful servant. After crossing the Sea of Reeds, the people journeyed through the desert, moving inexorably towards their rendezvous with God on Sinai. The deliverer of his people would now act as the mediator of a covenant between Yahweh and Israel, binding the whole community to that life of faith which was already exemplified in the leadership of Moses. From the beginning Moses had identified himself with the sufferings and hardships of his people. Now his task was to identify this stubborn and rebellious band with his own life inasmuch as that life stood for unconditional obedience to God's will. On Sinai a way of life was revealed as the charter of Israel's existence, and it was promulgated with the authority of a suzerain over his vassals. The Law was the expression of Yahweh's claim over his people, and its observance would be both the test of Israel's fidelity and the acknowledgment of God's suzerainty. Understanding this people and their proneness to rebellion, Moses nevertheless assumed the burden of the mediator with that purity of purpose which marks the man of faith.

> See, I have taught you laws and norms, as Yahweh my God commanded me, for you to observe in the land you are about to invade and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be your wisdom and discernment before other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, Surely this is a great nation of wise and discerning people. For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is Yahweh our God

[1] Exod 3, 1–4, 17. [2] Exod 3, 10.

> whenever we call upon him? And what great nation has laws and norms so just as all this law that I set before you this day?[1]

We have already noted that, although it is not said in so many words that Moses believed, yet his whole life of service was an act of faith, a manifestation of belief by deeds. That Moses himself understood faith in terms of obedience to God's will becomes clear from a passage in which he reproaches the people for their failure to believe God and obey. It was during the sojourn at Kadesh-barnea where God commanded the Israelites to go up and possess the land. Moses says: 'And when Yahweh sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, Go up and possess the land I am giving to you, you rebelled against the commandment of Yahweh your God, and did not believe him or obey his voice'.[2] Since faith without obedience is a hollow pretence, Moses could sum up their long record of rebellion as a sustained act of infidelity. This lack of faith was the burden of suffering laid upon one who, as the mediator, was destined to stand so many times in almost unendurable loneliness between God and the people.

Some of these scenes, in which the faith of Moses was put to the severest test, are vividly remembered in the Old Testament traditions. The period of sojourn in the wilderness was somewhat idealized in later books, but the image of a people offering unswerving fidelity to their God in the first fervour of their new relation with him can be sustained only by forgetting the record which the Israelite historians have left us. The true picture seems to be that of a restless and fickle multitude, ready to break out at any moment in complaint against God or his servant Moses. One of the earliest stories of this murmuring is preserved in the eleventh chapter of Numbers. So bitterly did the Israelites complain against God that he ravaged the outskirts of the camp with fire and would undoubtedly have destroyed more had not Moses interceded and turned aside the anger of Yahweh. Fittingly enough, the place was called Taberah, which means 'the burning'. Shortly after this sign of Yahweh's anger, Moses heard the people weeping at the entrance of their tents. It was the wailing of a multitude which had, under the pressures of life in the desert, lost faith in God. It is at this point that Moses, weighed down by the burden of an ungrateful and despairing people, expostulated with Yahweh, confessing with surprising

[1] Deut 4, 5–8. [2] Deut 9, 23. Cf also 1, 32.

frankness his anguish as a leader, and praying that God would take his life rather than make him continue to bear this burden.[1] It appears that his own faith had reached the breaking-point, and he threw himself upon the mercy of One who had chosen him for this frustrating task. Yahweh then instructed Moses to appoint seventy elders who, endowed with a portion of his spirit, would share Moses' responsibilities without diminishing his unique authority.

The greatest test of the leader's endurance came, of course, at Sinai, where the people fell into idolatry even while Moses was on the mountain. 'Out of sight, out of mind' would be a good description of the people's reaction to the absence of Moses. Whereupon they called upon Aaron to 'make us a god who will go before us, for the man Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him'.[2] So Aaron melted down their golden rings and turned them into the molten image of a young bull before which they offered their burnt offerings, banqueted and danced in wild merriment. Yahweh again threatened to destroy them, but his anger was held back by the intercession of Moses, appealing to the promise made to the Fathers.[3] The genius of Michelangelo has reproduced, in his Moses, all the anger, humiliation, faith and zeal of the man who beheld the apostacy of a people at the very moment when God was calling them into a covenant with himself.

It is one of the paradoxes of Old Testament history that Moses, the faithful servant of Yahweh, was denied entrance into the promised land because of a momentary failure of faith. The tradition is not altogether clear at this point, but the reason for refusing to let Moses accompany the people across the Jordan is unmistakeable. 'Because you did not believe me by showing forth my holiness in the sight of the Israelites, therefore you shall not lead this community into the land I have given them'.[4] In what did this failure of faith consist? The commentators are not agreed and so we are forced to settle for a more or less plausible answer. Certainly the narrative, as it stands, does not clearly indicate the fault which would be proportionate to the punishment. The incident, however, should probably be seen within the framework of all the wonders which Yahweh had already wrought for his people. At almost every step of the way from Egypt to the threshold of the land of Canaan, God

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[1] Num 11, 10–15. [2] Exod 32, 1. [3] Exod 32, 13–14.

[4] Num 20, 12. A different reason for refusing to let Moses enter Canaan is given in Deut 1, 37 though it does not seem that Moses shared the unbelief of the people on this occasion.

had shown his divine control over nature by one miracle after the other. At this moment the people suffered from thirst, and Yahweh was again prepared to intervene in some wondrous and unexpected fashion. So he commanded Moses and Aaron to strike the rock; once again the divine power would be manifested. But the two brothers used the occasion to denounce the rebelliousness of the people; the action of striking the rock was done in anger rather than in the joy and gratitude which should have accompanied this latest sign of God's providence. The whole character of the event, as it was intended by God, was changed. Moses and Aaron had given free play to their anger; they had failed to glorify the Name before the people. For this fleeting lack of faith at the waters of Meribah, Moses was allowed only to look upon but not to enter the land which Yahweh had promised to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.[1] One would gravely err, however, to exaggerate the temporary lapse of faith. Patience has its limits.

It may have taken Israel a good many years to catch up with the true stature of Moses; but Israel's final evaluation of the man recognizes what the nation owed to her founder.[2] That faith is not singled out explicitly among his virtues does not matter. The love of Moses for his people, his own self-effacement and total dedication to the divine will as the servant of Yahweh, are the only proof necessary that faith, in its full biblical meaning, was what gave dynamism to his whole life. The faith of Moses issued in obedience, mighty power, great and wonderful deeds.

Examples of faith from the Old Testament could be multiplied; the concept was undoubtedly deepened by a man like Isaiah, of whom it is said that, in linking faith to Israel's very existence, the ultimate depth of meaning was given to the word. We have dwelt on only two of Israel's heroes of faith, whose roll-call is read off in the eleventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews. Abraham and Moses stand out in the list; all, however, proudly march under the banner of faith, through which they won God's approval. The last two verses of the chapter throw one of those surprising flashes of illumination on the whole course of this journey of faith we call salvation history.

'These also, one and all, though commemorated for their faith, did not receive the promised blessings because, having us in mind, God had a better plan, that only in our company would they reach perfection'.[3]

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[1] Deut 34, 4. [2] Deut 34, 10–12. [3] Heb 11, 39–40.