ABEL, MELCHIZEDEK, ABRAHAM

By FREDERICK MORIARTY

A VISITOR to the old imperial city of Ravenna comes for one reason – to marvel at the priceless mosaics which decorate the interiors of its early christian churches. In making his tour of the city and its dazzling treasures, the visitor will certainly be directed to the sixth century church of San Vitale. This unusual octagonal structure, well marked as a primary attraction along the 'route of the churches' provides us with a splendid example of early christian symbolism in relation to the eucharist as a sacrifice. What the Fathers had written down in their treatises and commentaries, the genius of the Ravenna artists depicted in form and colour on the walls of the churches. On either side of the altar of San Vitale, two beautiful mosaics continue to teach their lessons about the eucharist to those who have eyes to see and who share the faith and perspective of those devout christians of long ago. For them, the persons and events of the Old Testament belonged to a history which was brought to fulfilment in Christ. The first mosaic shows Abel and Melchizedek bringing their offerings to the altar which stands between them. A short distance away, a mosaic of equal size depicts two scenes from the life of Abraham, the sacrifice of Isaac and Abraham's reception of the three mysterious strangers.[1].

It is only with some effort of sympathetic adjustment that the twentieth century reader of the bible can establish fruitful contact with the mentality of the early christians who so eagerly sought out correspondences between the Old and New Testaments. While it is only right to acknowledge from the start that much of the earlier christian interpretation of the Old Testament does not supply us with an understanding of the primary literal sense of the passages in which these persons and events are described, it would nevertheless be our own loss should we overlook the unity they discerned

[1] Gen 22; 18, 1–8.

and expressed by this understanding. Let us not patronize. The first christians 'were living in the dawn of a new world. And as the religious authorities and the nation as a whole rejected Jesus and his gospel, the disciples knew themselves a new Israel, the remnant spoken of by the Old Testament prophets, the only true Israel of God, moving forward to fulfill the function of God's servant-people in the new era. But, as the new Israel, they were conscious of themselves and their story as the one legitimate continuation of the age-long story of Israel. Abraham was their father in the faith. Moses was their ancestor. Their church was founded on the prophets. The Old Testament was their holy scripture'.[1]

Basically, the unity of the bible lies in the historical continuity of the community of Israel and in the specifically christian conviction that we enjoy a continuing, active relationship with the one God who has initiated the whole process of salvation history. The christian witness of the New Testament and the succeeding patristic age sees the radiant figure of Jesus Christ as the centre of that history and the very principle of its intelligibility. When we reflect on this vast conception which spans the centuries of promise and fulfilment, the picture of the incarnate Word as the ultimate realization of God's self-manifestation emerges. From the standpoint of christian faith, Christ is what Zimmerli has felicitously called 'the eschatological event of the faithfulness of God'. He is not only the Light who has come into the world and henceforth illuminates our darkness, but a light which casts its glow over all history, even from the beginning. The shadowy figures which appear in the course of salvation history, whether historically recoverable or not, re-appear in the light of Christ as elements of the divine plan and foreshadowings of the ineffable mystery of God become man.

To look for a moment at the canon of the mass, we observe that even after the elements of bread and wine have been consecrated, the people of God still raises its voice in a plea for acceptance. This must strike us as very strange. For here is the most sacred gift, the perfect offering of Christ himself, who makes the sacrificial oblation by the ministry of the priest. Yet because we can never be sufficiently worthy of the great and holy God, this humble prayer of petition for acceptance is well-founded. It is a plea that the offering, which the Church makes of herself here and now, may be most intimately

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[1] Smart, James D., *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1961), p 106.

associated with the offering Christ made on her behalf on the cross, and which is re-presented in the mass. To that plea is joined a confident recall of the Old Testament figures associated in christian tradition with sacrifice. Two, Abel and Abraham, received explicit assurance from God that their sacrifices had been accepted.

One cannot fail to notice that the three men commemorated in the canon did not even share the same religion. Abel, though adopted into hebrew tradition, was not a member of the chosen people, and Melchizedek was a canaanite whose religion constituted a besetting temptation for the israelites from the moment they entered the land of their inheritance. This leads us to raise a general question about the very meaning of sacrifice before the coming of him who would offer the sacrifice which perfectly reconciled us to the Father. The three figures with whom we are concerned serve as a reminder that most men, regardless of the various forms which their religion took, have expressed their worship of the divine in some form of sacrifice.

In the Old Testament we are confronted with a very elaborate system of sacrifices; but it is impossible to find anything like a unified or coherent theory of sacrifice. It was so much a part of their daily lives that the israelites seem never to have worked out anything like a theory of this central act of their cult. A sacrificial system, it is true, is open to abuse; and the prophets of Israel never let their people forget that a sacrifice offered without the proper interior dispositions was a travesty of the religious act and an abomination to Yahweh. The prophets were so eloquent in condemning hollow and meaningless sacrifice that, for many years, it was believed that they had no use for sacrifice itself. Such an interpretation of the prophetic criticism of sacrifice was helped along, of course, by the strong anti-cultic views of those who hold these opinions. More often than we like to admit, personal convictions have had a considerable part in forming scholarly opinion. Several generations of scholars confidently asserted that prophet and priest were irreconcilably opposed, that the prophets had no use whatever for the whole sacrificial system. This extreme and wholly unwarranted position has now been abandoned by most scholars, who recognize that the prophetic complaint was levelled, not at sacrifices in themselves, but at sacrifices badly performed. It is only on this assumption that we can make any sense out of either the historical books, where the cultic foundations of israelite life are set down, or the prophetic literature which built upon this same structure in which such em-

phasis was placed on sacrifice. As a noted jewish scholar has recently reminded us, sacrifice and prayer were not meant to be downgraded or neglected in favour of good deeds; the worship of God in the temple was not to be brushed aside and replaced by social justice no matter how nobly motivated.[1]

No other external religious act equals sacrifice in its importance; its intrinsic value can, in good part, be measured by the interior dispositions of the one sacrificing. It is, in other words, a dramatized prayer or an external act which gives visible embodiment to a person's realization of total dependance upon God. The gift once accepted by God, a union is effected between God and the worshipper. The notion of gift, however, does not tell the full story about sacrifice. Not only does the accepted sacrifice bring about communion; it may also have an expiatory effect for one who has sinned and sincerely seeks to re-establish his broken covenant-relationship with God. In the Old Testament, the israelite keenly felt that sense of separation from God which is the penalty of sin, and in the expiatory sacrifice he found a means to restore this vital relationship with the source of his being. There were two classes of expiatory sacrifices, the sin offering (*hatta'th*) and guilt offering (*'asham*), both being described in the priestly laws of sacrifice.[2] Although the custom of offering expiatory sacrifices goes back to very early times, it was especially under the blows of national disaster, accompanied by an augmented sense of guilt, that their need was more acutely felt. To prepare the worshipper spiritually for this solemn religious act, israelite law required confession of sins before the performance of sacrifice.[3]

When sacrifice is described as a gift, there is obviously no implication that God is indigent and has a real need for our offering. The israelite was very much aware of the absolute sovereignty of God:

> I know all the birds of the air,
> and whatever stirs on the plains is mine.
> If I were hungry I would not tell you,
> for mine is the world and all that is in it.[4]

It is man who is in need, and his very offering and immolation of

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[1] The best description of hebrew sacrifice at the present time may be found in Fr Roland de Vaux's great synthesis of Israel's life and institutions, supplemented by the new material discussed in his published lectures at the University of Cardiff in 1961. Cf *Ancient Israel* IV (1961). The Cardiff Lectures were published in 1964 under the title *Les sacrifices de l'Ancien Testament*. An english translation has been prepared at Cardiff.

[2] Lev 4, 1–6, 7. [3] Lev 5, 5. [4] Ps 50, 11–12.

something required to sustain his own life symbolizes his dependence; the gift offered is a gesture of supplication to him whose gifts answer our real needs. The destruction, partial or total, has a double purpose. It makes the gift irrevocable; there can be no going back on the gift once made. And the act of immolation itself is a symbolic means, in the very alienation of the object, of transferring the gift to the invisible order of the divine. For example, the rising smoke of sacrifice reassured the Israelite that his offering was ascending to God; all that remained was the divine acceptance.

Sacrifice brought about a union between God and the worshipper. There is no question of a crass physical relationship such as might be verified among other peoples who had a sacrificial system. In the israelite sacrificial meal which attended the religious act as an integral part, a bond of unity was established. God was present at the meal. To express this the hebrew said that they ate and drank 'before the Lord'.[1] The sharing of a common meal drew the participants together in a firm moral union. The common experience, which is still vividly felt in the modern Near East, became a solemn religious act when one of the participants in this sacred banquet was Yahweh. The importance of sacrifice to the hebrews has become more apparent in virtue of recent studies on the covenant. It is now a commonplace to compare the covenant form with treaties which were concluded for centuries in the ancient Near East between a mighty king and his vassals. But just as we have learned, in so many cases, to distinguish what was common to both Israel and her neighbours from what was peculiar to Israel, given her distinctive faith, so, in the matter of the suzerainty-treaties the dissimilarities are present. In most of the non-israelite treaties known to us, the binding factor is the exchanged word, solemnified by oath; at Sinai the covenant is also cemented by a sacrificial ritual, the shared blood and the common meal.[2] Here something has been added to the ordinary form of covenant-making through the sworn word, and this difference touches the essence of the ceremony and not some accessory detail. The solemnization of covenant by rite, in addition to verbal contract, is something new in the treaty tradition; and this fact alone shows how esteemed a place sacrifices of communion *(zebahim shelamim)* held in the cultic life of Israel. The Sinai covenant, as the fundamental charter of Israel's existence, was sealed under the sign of sacrifice.

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[1] Exod 18, 12; Deut 12, 7; 14, 23; 15, 20.

[2] Exod 24, 3–11.

By faith Abel offered a sacrifice

Three times in the New Testament Abel is commended for his innocence, justice, and faith.[1] It is this remembrance in the New Testament, and especially the reference by our Lord, which accounts for the honour accorded Abel in christian art and liturgy from very early times. The new stature acquired by the young and innocent victim impels us to look a little more closely at the appealing figure of Abel whose story the hebrew people apparently loved to recite. It must be acknowledged that Abel is not an historically attainable figure in the same sense as are the patriarchs or Moses. With Abel we are not in the area of observation or historical recall; we are concerned rather with a legendary figure, who plays a role in Israel's theological reconstruction of mankind's past. This is something quite different from and much more profound than scientific pre-history; the israelite responsible for this fragment of tradition was interested in the fundamental and enduring mystery of divine goodness and human wickedness. The primeval sin of the first parents was not an isolated gesture of rebellion without consequences for the rest of mankind. Evil was, as it were, released in the world; and the dramatically told incidents of Cain and Abel vividly ratified the divine judgment 'that the wickedness of man on the earth was great, and that man's every thought and all the inclination of his heart were only evil'.[2]

It appears that the story of Cain and Abel, or something very close to it, was already well known in the ancient Near East. Farmer (Cain) and shepherd (Abel) were often in conflict; and the struggle between them is commemorated in literature which is much older than our biblical account. In any case, the inspired writer took this ancient story of conflict and skilfully worked it into his story of God's offer of salvation to mankind. This is the perspective from which we must view these theologized traditions. The biblical narrative does not tell us precisely why God found Abel's sacrifice acceptable and Cain's not. In fact, the account is so terse that we learn very little about the circumstances of the sacrifices offered by the two brothers. One has some reason for saying that the part about the sacrifices, though not unimportant, was secondary in the author's over-all design. The lesson which the first listeners undoubtedly drew from the recitation of this part of the story is just

[1] Mt 23, 35; 1 Jn 3, 12; Heb 11, 4.

[2] Gen 6, 5.

as significant now as then. Acceptance of sacrifice is not merely a matter of our merits, but of God's sovereignly free choice. Unconvincing reasons which attempt to show that Abel was a better person than Cain only weaken the force of this great mystery of divine predilection. As Fr Daniélou remarks: 'Abel is not chosen because he is righteous. He is righteous because he is chosen. God's love is given to him without any previous merit on his part. It is the very mystery of grace in all its paradox'.[1] As the object of God's unowed love, Abel has been taken up into the christian tradition. In this respect he typifies the man of whom Yahweh would say to Moses: 'I who show favours to whom I will, I who grant mercy to whom I will'.[2] When we invoke Abel's name during the canon of the mass it would be most appropriate to reflect not only on the innocence of the victim, a type of the spotless Lamb who is offered, but also upon the mystery of the complete gratuitousness of our own salvation. The ancient hebrew tradition brings us to the threshold of the great mystery of God's grace.

According to the order of Melchizedek

Without going into the status conferred upon Melchizedek by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the further honours accorded him in later patristic literature, it will be sufficient for us to examine briefly the episode in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, which provides the foundation for all future speculation on this mysterious figure. Both jews and christians were fascinated by Melchizedek. On the jewish side we might note two recent discoveries of literature in which he appears. He is mentioned in the *Genesis Apocryphon* from Qumran and in the recently published Vatican Codex of the palestinian *Targum Neofiti I.* Both tests provide a very interesting comparative basis for the study of this chapter of Genesis. It is very likely that the jewish adoption of Melchizedek goes all the way back to the original narrative in which the true God, Yahweh, is identified with Melchizedek's El Elyon.

The chapter in which Melchizedek makes his brief appearance is one of the most difficult in the patriarchal history. International in flavour, impersonal in its style, unrelated to the usual traditions which have been identified in the rest of the book, the chapter can only be regarded as an intrusion in the otherwise smoothly flowing

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[1] Cf *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (London 1957), pp 35–6. [2] Exod 33, 19.

story of Abraham. As if this were not enough, verses 18–20, which contain the references to Melchizedek, impress the reader as independent from the rest of the chapter. It is Abraham who links the account of the battle of the four foreign kings against the five local rulers with the Melchizedek episode. Abraham takes sides in the battle and is greeted by the canaanite priest-king. In times past, the historical estimate of this chapter varied considerably; but it is possible to-day to point to an impressive consensus which affirms the basic historical reliability of the narrative. Most scholars now hold that we have very ancient material transmitted over a long period of time, but still faithfully reflecting an historical situation which fits quite well in the first half of the second millenium B.C., at the latest, and more probably in the eighteenth century B.C.

While Abraham, with his retainers, is returning from his victory over the foreign coalition headed by the elamite king, he is met by Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of El Elyon, who brings out bread and wine ('food and drink' in the *Genesis Apocryphon)*, blesses Abr̄aham and receives a tenth part of the booty. After these few compressed remarks the narrative continues, resuming the subject which was broken off at verse eighteen. What sort of action was performed by Melchizedek? Did he really offer a sacrifice? And if this is so, of what type? The answers to those and other questions are too numerous to describe, and there is little point in going over well-trodden ground. But it might be noted that St Cyprian, in the third century, is the first of the Fathers to interpret the action as a true sacrifice and a prefigurement of the eucharistic sacrifice. If we are to take our lead from contemporary Catholic interpretation of this passage, we would have to conclude, I believe, that the text provides no certain foundation for the opinion that a true sacrifice was involved in this action.

A more plausible view would seem to be that Melchizedek brought refreshment to the returning warrior and received, in turn, a portion from the grateful Abraham. In terms of eucharistic prefigurement, one could say that Melchizedek's gesture of charity foreshadows the action of Christ, who provides the gift of his body and blood as the sustaining food or our spiritual journey through life. The canon of the mass, in the roman liturgy, has taken up, it is true, a tradition which is found in some of the Fathers, and has interpreted the action of Melchizedek as a sacrifice. But we must remember that liturgical use of Old Testament passages is not the surest means of arriving at the literal meaning of the text. Allowance must be made for accom-

modation of the text and for applications which often go beyond the intent of the original author. Christian usage has indeed rescued Melchizedek from the obscurity which surrounds his only appearance in the biblical text; in the light of further revelation and christian reflection upon this event of the distant past, the ancient priest-king has been granted honorary citizenship in the New Jerusalem.

. . . you did not withhold your beloved son from me

The sacrifice of Abraham is recalled in the most moving and artistically constructed narrative of the patriarchal history.[1] It was an unconsummated sacrifice ordered by Yahweh as the supreme test of Abraham's total dependence on him. At its deepest level this tremendous ordeal was to teach every reader or listener that the process of salvation, set in motion by God himself, would be brought to its conclusion only by complete faith and trust in Yahweh, even when all seemed to be lost. Isaac was the gift of promise who would, by all human calculations, guarantee the divine fidelity to the promise made to Abraham. With the death of Isaac at the hand of his own father, all the hopes which burned in Abraham's heart would be snuffed out. Every detail in the magnificently constructed story underlines the pathos of the situation. The young victim bearing the wood of sacrifice upon his shoulders is aptly matched by the silence of the heartbroken father. As E. A. Speiser has noted in his commentary: 'The short and simple sentence "And the two of them walked on together" covers what is perhaps the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature'.[2] The opening verse of the chapter lets the reader in on the divine purpose, and this removes any painful element of revulsion which might arise as the story proceeds.

Countless attempts have been made to explain the reason why this tradition of sacrifice was preserved among the hebrew people. Ultimately, I believe, the story comes to grips with the very heart of sacrifice: the interior readiness of a man to give up everything, even what seems most necessary in God's own plan. It was indeed a great act of faith for Abraham to leave home and country, setting out for a distant and unknown land with only a promise to sustain his journey. But the testing of one's faith is a continuing process, a day-to-day venture in commitment; and this incident was meant to

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[1] Gen 22. [2] *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York, 1964), p 165.

teach every descendant of Abraham that it was not the external act alone which God wanted, but the interior oblation of sacrifice by one prepared to give up all because he knows that all is a gift of God.

Of the three sacrifices recalled in the canon of the mass the one which appeals the most, and foreshadows more perfectly the fulfilment of all sacrifices in Christ, is that of Abraham. The slaying of young Abel, upon whose sacrifice Yahweh looked with pleasure, has left its echoes in the New Testament, the writings of the Fathers and early christian art. As Cain, confused and shaken by his senseless and murderous act, learned that the blood he had spilled called out in complaint to God, the human heart goes out to the innocent shepherd whose act of worship had occasioned his own death. The christian has also been pleased, in literature and art, to recall the simple dignity of the priest-king Melchizedek at his moment of encounter with the victorious Abraham. But nothing compares with the dramatic power of that scene in the land of Moriah where the venerable patriarch is put to the ultimate test. If christians have shown a predilection for this sublime episode of faith, may it not be because, through the story which unfolds in this chapter of Genesis, they have been able to discover the figure of the Father ready to sacrifice his only-begotten Son for the salvation of the world?