

TRUE OR FALSE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM.

(JOHN VIII. 37-42.)

WE proceed to the second half of our Lord's polemic against those Jews who after a fashion had believed on Him. They had claimed first to be Abraham's sons, and, second, to be God's freemen. Jesus had already demonstrated (as we saw in our last paper¹) that they were in point of fact spiritual slaves to sin; and it followed from this that they could be no true sons of Abraham, as Isaac was. But although this second conclusion was virtually involved in what He had already said about the free-born son and the slave-born, yet it cost Him a good deal of pains and time to argue it out, because the Jews obstinately stood upon their pure descent from the Father of the faithful. They claimed to be, in virtue of their Abrahamic lineage, heirs of all the promises of Abraham's covenant. This claim of theirs rested upon a misconception. That great patriarch sustained a twofold position in the history of revelation. He was at once the progenitor of the national Israel sprung from his blood, and also the spiritual prototype and ancestor of every faithful (or believing) soul. Of the various promises given to him in Jehovah's covenant, some were national, and descended to the tribes which sprang from his race. Such was the promise of perpetual existence as a separate people, or the promise that of their blood should Messiah be born, or the promise of permanent possession of the Promised Land on condition of fidelity to God. Of promises like these the value was earthly and temporary. But underneath these there lay others vastly more to be coveted, the value of which was spiritual and everlasting: such as the promise of the Divine favour, or of

¹ See *THE EXPOSITOR* for April, 1891.

forgiveness of sins through sacrifice. Promises of this latter class had for their condition the personal faith of each individual; and consequently they were for those who inherited the spiritual character of Abraham—his faith and godliness. To the nation as such were held out secular advantages which any Jew might call his birth-right. To godly souls in the nation who walked also in the steps of the patriarch's piety were held out heavenly blessings, such as only they had a right to claim.

The temptation lay very near, and it was a constant one, to confound these two sorts of covenant blessings. In this confusion is to be sought the central and rooted blunder of worldly-minded Hebrews all through their history. The blunder was frequently rebuked by their great prophets down to John the Baptist, their latest one. But it perpetually re-appeared. Proud of his unbroken ancestry, and aware that, on the strength of that, he did possess certain advantages guaranteed by Heaven, an ungodly Jew might very easily lay to his soul the "flattering unction" that his descent from Abraham brought him within all the benefits of God's ancient covenant. On his mere genealogy he founded a plea which seemed to forbid the idea of his ever being cut off from mercy, to fall away into the perdition of the uncircumcised and uncovenanted heathen.

It is clear that the only way to meet this confusion was to distinguish between the things confounded. This is what our Lord does even by a distinction in terms. The phrase, "seed of Abraham," had been employed by these Jews to cover both ideas—natural descent and spiritual affinity. Our Lord cuts the two sheer asunder. The natural descent He allows them, the spiritual affinity He denies to them. And for more clear distinction, so that no one might build false hopes upon the ambiguity of a phrase any longer, He assigns to each idea its own term. "Seed of Abraham" He knows them to be—that implies

blood descent; "Abraham's children" He denies that they are—that carries the idea of moral affinity. It is a distinction in the use of language which His scholar St. Paul, when conducting the same argument many years after, found serviceable.

Our Lord's position then is, that, although descended from the stock of Abraham, these men were not spiritually his sons, and therefore not entitled to claim the spiritual benefits of his covenant. The proof of this position is to be found in their moral and religious unlikeness to Abraham. Children inherit their parents' image, their parents' nature. Just as physical derivation perpetuates the physical features of a race, so that blood descendants are to be recognised by their outward resemblance to their progenitors; so, in the sense in which alone any one can be called the spiritual child of another, there is implied a community of spiritual character, showing itself of course in a correspondence of moral and religious behaviour. "If ye were Abraham's children," says our Lord, "ye would do the works of Abraham."

Now the spiritual character of Abraham is not far to seek. The history of that saint is strongly marked by two outstanding unmistakable features. Every Jew was familiar with them, for they grew to be like household words. The first is his faith in God; the second, his friendship with God. Beyond all other men whose spiritual biography has been preserved, it may be said that this man possessed an open ear for every word which reached him from the invisible. Whether it came by a vision or a dream or a visible messenger, no revelation from the unseen staggered his faith, to none did he show himself disobedient. Once he knew it to be a veritable word from God, he made room for it in his heart, rested on it the whole trust of his soul, and at every sacrifice prepared himself to carry it out. It was so with his original exodus out

of his Chaldæan home ; it was so when, a second time, he migrated from Haran ; it was so when bidden to cast out his firstborn son ; it was so when directed to sacrifice the heir of promise. No one can miss this faith in God's word, attested by practical obedience ; for it is the grand feature which rendered Abraham the original pattern and parent of all men of faith, all trusters of the Divine word in face of difficulties.

Out of this childlike yet heroic loyalty to the word of God sprang the second feature I named. It grew up alongside. Because he believed God, God admitted him to be His friend. Knowing God better than any other man of his time, he was attached to the Most High by a singular closeness and strength of affection, so that he was permitted to walk with the Eternal as friend with friend in a fellowship of spirit such as scarce any other has enjoyed. Because the man believed that God would not withhold any blessing which He had promised, therefore would the man withhold from God nothing He might ask. The two, covenanted and sworn friends, as man never had been before with God since Adam ceased to walk in paradise, had thorough confidence each in the other. Are not these the marks of character which confessedly make glorious in the eyes of mankind that sainted father whose form rises in colossal spiritual proportions against the gray dawn of revelation ?

When we turn from Abraham to these so-called " children " of his, what a notable contrast do they offer to both these marks of his character ! Analyse their attitude to the great religious fact of their age, the presence among them of Jesus the Son of God, and what do you find ? First, a reluctance to admit the truth which is pressed upon them in God's name—reluctance fast mounting to flat resistance ; next, a dislike for the person of this Messenger and Son of God who walks the land beside them—dislike

that threatens soon to mount to murder! Call these men children of Abraham? Of Abraham, the candid-hearted, the truth-loving, quick of spiritual ear to catch, alone in his generation, each accent from heaven and prompt to follow it round the world; yet here are men in whose prejudiced minds the new truth spoken by the Son of God can find no place—not lodgment, not entrance even! Of Abraham, the companion and friend of God, whose noble soul dwelt in a sweet and trustful fellowship with the Invisible, and communed apart with Heaven as the joy of his existence; yet here are persons who will not even recognise the Son of God when He is come down to keep them company, but would kill Him if they could!

The demonstration of their unlikeness in spirit to Father Abraham lay so easily to His hand, in their actual attitude to Himself, that Jesus found no long discussion necessary to complete it. It all lies compressed as in a nutshell in these few words which He first spoke to them (ver. 37): “I know that ye are Abraham’s seed; yet ye seek to kill Me, because My word hath no place in you!” It all lay there, I say. But because they had no ear to hear that, and could only respond to it by a stupid and parrot-like repetition of their original boast (“our father is Abraham”), therefore our Lord found it needful (like some patient teacher who condescends to a dull scholar) to go over His words again, supplying each omitted step in the argument, and restating it all at full length, as when one breaks down bread for infants. This is the reason why we read it over again in the following form (vers. 39–41)—a form which surely nobody can misunderstand: “If you were ‘children of Abraham’ (as you say), you would do the works of Abraham. But now what you are doing is this, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has been telling you the truth which I heard from God. This is not what

Abraham did. You are indeed doing the works of your spiritual father"—but he is not Abraham.

Not even these men misunderstood that plain speaking. They began at least to perceive that He was referring to a spiritual, not a mere physical, kinship with the covenant Head. They felt now that He meant to deny to them any real covenant relationship with God, such as Abraham enjoyed. But to say that they were not legitimately the heirs of Abraham's religious privileges was the same as to say that they had no safe or gracious standing before Jehovah as children of His covenant. To the people of Jehovah's covenant a loftier title belonged than even children of Abraham. Jehovah Himself had been pleased to take, in the sacred books, the title of a Father unto Israel. Not often indeed, yet here and there, in texts scattered thinly through the Old Testament, do we find Jehovah speaking of Israel as His son whom He brought out of Egypt. Of course such language could only be read in a spiritual sense, of religious privilege and standing in His favour. In this sense, God might with no presumption be claimed as a Father by the faithful members of His covenant people. There was indeed one sin which every Hebrew recognised to be a breach of the blessed tie which bound Israel to its God. Idolatry is everywhere in Scripture stigmatized as infidelity to God; and Israelites born in an age when the people had forsaken Jehovah for false gods, might be said to be tainted with spiritual illegitimacy—no longer sons unto Jehovah. Could it be in this sense that Jesus denied their Divine sonship? No; for these times of national apostasy were over. Babylon had effectually cured the nation of its weakness for idols. Ever since the brave martyrs of the age of Antiochus died for their devotion to the true God, the Jews had some right to say, with pride: "We are not the offspring of an unfaithful spouse; as children of Israel, we were not born in religious

illegitimacy; we have all of us one spiritual Father, and that is God."

The claim thus made, though in form a new one, is substantially a repetition of the old. Only they understood better than at first that our Lord was thinking of religious relationship, and not of physical descent. To the claim as now put He applies the same remorseless test as before. Spiritual children must bear the likeness of their father. If they were sons of God in any real and inward sense, they would recognise Jesus for the Son of God, and love Him for His Father's sake. Like draws to like; brother to brother. If you love Him who begat, you will love Him also that is begotten of Him, as St. John says. It would indeed have been a happy experience for God's only begotten Son, when He proceeded and came forth from the bosom of the Father, had He found among the nominal family that called Jehovah Father any large company of genuine children of God prepared to recognise in Him the Divine likeness, to receive, revere, and love Him for His Father's sake, on whose errand He was come. Alas! "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." They said, "This is the Heir; come, let us kill Him." A second time Joseph's brethren disowned the family tie, and slew their brother.

I should therefore have expected our Lord to say to them, "If God were your Father, ye would love Me, for I am the Son of God," or words to that effect. He does not. He avoids in this place what is so current on His lips, the calling God His Father, or Himself God's Son. For this reason, possibly, that such a claim might at that moment, when He was exasperating them by denying their position in the Divine family, have proved so irritating as to precipitate an explosion, and abruptly close the conversation before the time. What He does say, at all events, is: "If God were (as you say) your Father, you would love Me: *for*

I came forth and am come from God." The dignity of a Divine messenger at least He may claim; of a prophet, that is to say—if you choose to call Him no more than a prophet: of one who is not come of His own motion, but has been sent by God with a message from Him. That at least He may claim, for in that is no blasphemy; and this pretension to a prophetic commission (like his predecessor, John the Baptist's) was the well-known matter in dispute, upon which until this point the Sanhedrin had scarcely announced any public decision. Yet even while expressing Himself with caution, I notice how naturally our Lord selects words which may (and, to the instructed ear, do) go far beyond the claims of an ordinary prophet. To "proceed forth and come from God," is an expression which has always appeared to the faith of the Church to cover some deeper mystery than a simple Divine commission to speak for Jehovah. Does it not betray the hidden consciousness in this speaker of a personal, as well as official, origin from the Most High; of His having drawn His pre-existent being by Divine generation from the everlasting One, whom *they* call their Father, but of whom *He* was alone the equal and well-beloved Son? From the bosom of that eternal Father no man could be said, in the strict or literal sense of the word, to have *come forth*, save He who is of God, and is God—the Divine Word, who was in the beginning with God.

In any case it remains indisputable that one whose connexion with God was so close as His must have met with a very different reception, had the chiefs of Israel been Israelites indeed. Had those whose public office it was to sit in judgment on claims like His been themselves men of a tender, reverent, and holy heart, men in whom dwelt the Spirit of God, who loved His word, and were quick to recognise His will, how different would have been Messiah's reception! In name, these false plotters against His life

were sons of God. In character they bore the likeness of one who is a liar and murderer from the beginning. It was impossible that Jesus could recognise nominal pretensions which were supported by no personal worth. And just as impossible will it be for Him, when, from being arraigned to give account of Himself, He shall sit to arraign mankind before His bar, to take men then at their own reckoning, or allow their outward standing in His Church to count, in the absence of a new heart and a holy life. Christians are (as these Jews were) inside the pale of the covenant and the household of God. They are baptized into His name, and called in His grace the children of God. Of what avail is it to vaunt these empty titles, if behind our nominal position there be no inward character corresponding?

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