

ATTUNEMENT

There was once a man; he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation. When he became older he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had divided what had been united in the child's pious simplicity. The older he became the more often his thoughts turned to that tale, his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger, and yet less and less could he understand it. Finally it put everything else out of his mind; his soul had but one wish, actually to see Abraham, and one longing, to have been witness to those events. It was not the beautiful regions of the East, nor the earthly splendour of the Promised Land, he longed to see, not the God-fearing couple whose old age God had blessed, not the venerable figure of the patriarch stricken in years, not the youthful vigour God gave to Isaac – it would have been the same if it had taken place on a barren heath. What he yearned for was to accompany them on the three-day journey, when Abraham rode with grief before him and Isaac by his side. He wanted to be there at that moment when Abraham raised his eyes and saw in the distance the mountain in Moriah, the moment he left the asses behind and went on up the mountain alone with Isaac. For what occupied him was not the finely wrought fabric of imagination, but the shudder of thought.

This man was no thinker, he felt no need to go further than faith. To be remembered as its father seemed to him to be surely the greatest glory of all, and to have it a lot to be envied even if no one else knew.

This man was no learned exegete, he knew no Hebrew; had he known Hebrew then perhaps it might have been easy for him to understand the story of Abraham.

I

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him . . . Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.⁹

It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, had the asses saddled and left his tent, taking Isaac with him, but Sarah watched them from the window as they went down the valley¹⁰ until she could see them no more. They rode in silence for three days; on the morning of the fourth Abraham still said not a word, but raised his eyes and saw afar the mountain in Moriah. He left the lads behind and went on alone up the mountain with Isaac beside him. But Abraham said to himself: 'I won't conceal from Isaac where this way is leading him.' He stood still, laid his hand on Isaac's head to give him his blessing, and Isaac bent down to receive it. And Abraham's expression was fatherly, his gaze gentle, his speech encouraging. But Isaac could not understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he clung to Abraham's knees, pleaded at his feet, begged for his young life, for his fair promise; he called to mind the joy in Abraham's house, reminded him of the sorrow and loneliness. Then Abraham lifted the boy up and walked with him, taking him by the hand, and his words were full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. Abraham climbed the mountain in Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then he turned away from Isaac for a moment, but when Isaac saw his face a second time it was changed, his gaze was wild, his mien one of horror. He caught Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground and said: 'Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God's command? No, it is my own desire.' Then Isaac trembled and in his anguish cried: 'God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then be Thou my father!' But below his breath Abraham said to himself: 'Lord in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better

that he believe I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee.'

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When the child is to be weaned the mother blackens her breast, for it would be a shame were the breast to look pleasing when the child is not to have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed but the mother is the same, her look loving and tender as ever. Lucky the one that needed no more terrible means to wean the child!

II

It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, embraced Sarah, the bride of his old age, and Sarah kissed Isaac, who had taken her disgrace from her, was her pride and hope for all generations. So they rode on in silence and Abraham's eyes were fixed on the ground, until the fourth day when he looked up and saw afar the mountain in Moriah, but he turned his gaze once again to the ground. Silently he arranged the firewood, bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife. Then he saw the ram that God had appointed. He sacrificed that and returned home ... From that day on, Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac thrived as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.

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When the child has grown and is to be weaned the mother virginally covers her breast, so the child no more has a mother. Lucky the child that lost its mother in no other way!

III

It was early morning. Abraham rose in good time, kissed Sarah the young mother, and Sarah kissed Isaac, her delight, her joy

for ever. And Abraham rode thoughtfully on. He thought of Hagar and of the son whom he had driven out into the desert. He climbed the mountain in Moriah, he drew the knife.

It was a tranquil evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode to the mountain in Moriah; he threw himself on his face, he begged God to forgive his sin at having been willing to sacrifice Isaac, at the father's having forgotten his duty to his son. He rode more frequently on his lonely way, but found no peace. He could not comprehend that it was a sin to have been willing to sacrifice to God the best he owned; that for which he would many a time have gladly laid down his own life; and if it was a sin, if he had not so loved Isaac, then he could not understand that it could be forgiven; for what sin was more terrible?

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When the child is to be weaned the mother too is not without sorrow, that she and the child grow more and more apart; that the child which first lay beneath her heart, yet later rested at her breast, should no longer be so close. Thus together they suffer this brief sorrow. Lucky the one who kept the child so close and had no need to sorrow more!

IV

It was early morning. Everything had been made ready for the journey in Abraham's house. Abraham took leave of Sarah, and the faithful servant Eleazar followed him out on the way until he had to turn back. They rode together in accord, Abraham and Isaac, until they came to the mountain in Moriah. Yet Abraham made everything ready for the sacrifice, calmly and quietly, but as he turned away Isaac saw that Abraham's left hand was clenched in anguish, that a shudder went through his body – but Abraham drew the knife.

Then they turned home again and Sarah ran to meet them, but Isaac had lost his faith. Never a word in the whole world

is spoken of this,¹¹ and Isaac told no one what he had seen, and Abraham never suspected that anyone had seen it.

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When the child is to be weaned the mother has more solid food at hand, so that the child will not perish. Lucky the one who has more solid food at hand!

In these and similar ways this man of whom we speak thought about those events. Every time he came home from a journey to the mountain in Moriah he collapsed in weariness, clasped his hands, and said: 'Yet no one was as great as Abraham; who is able to understand him?'

SPEECH IN PRAISE OF ABRAHAM

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest,¹² if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches – how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so, and as God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speech-maker. The latter has none of the skills of the former, he can only admire, love, take pleasure in the hero. Yet he, too, no less than the hero, is happy; for the hero is so to speak that better nature of his in which he is enamoured, though happy that it is not himself, that his love can indeed be admiration. He is the spirit of remembrance, can only bring to mind what has been done, do nothing but admire what has been done. He takes nothing of himself, but is jealous of his charge. He follows his heart's desire, but having found what he sought he wanders round in front of everyone's door with his song and his speech, so that all can admire the hero as he does, be proud of the hero as he is. That is his achievement, his humble task, this his faithful service in the hero's house. If he remains thus true to his love, if he struggles night and day against the wiles of oblivion, which would cheat him of his hero, then he has fulfilled his task, he is united with the hero who in his turn has loved him just as faithfully, for the poet is so to speak the *hero's* better nature, ineffectual certainly as a memory is, but

also transfigured as a memory is. Therefore no one who was great will be forgotten: and however long it takes, even if a cloud of misunderstanding¹³ should take the hero away, his lover still comes, and the more time goes by the more faithfully he sticks by him.

No! No one shall be forgotten who was great in this world; but everyone was great in his own way, and everyone in proportion to the greatness of what *he loved*. For he who loved himself became great in himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all. They shall all be remembered, but everyone became great in proportion to his *expectancy*. One became great through expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. They shall all be remembered, but everyone was great in proportion to the magnitude of what he *strove with*. For he who strove with the world became great by conquering the world, and he who strove with himself became greater by conquering himself; but he who strove with God became greater than all. Thus there was strife in the world, man against man, one against thousands, but he who strove with God was greater than all. Thus there was strife upon earth: there was he who conquered everything by his own strength, and he who conquered God by his powerlessness. There was one who relied upon himself and gained everything, and one who, secure in his own strength, sacrificed everything; but greater than all was the one who believed God. There was one who was great in his strength, and one who was great in his wisdom, and one who was great in hope, and one who was great in love; but greater than all was Abraham, great with that power whose strength is powerlessness, great in that wisdom whose secret is folly,¹⁴ great in that hope whose outward form is insanity, great in that love which is hatred of self.

It was by his faith that Abraham could leave the land of his fathers to become a stranger in the land of promise.¹⁵ He left one thing behind, took another with him. He left behind his worldly understanding and took with him his faith. Otherwise he would surely not have gone; certainly it would have been

senseless to do so. It was by his faith that he could be a stranger in the promised land; there was nothing to remind him of what was dear, but the novelty of everything tempted his soul to sad longing. And yet he was God's chosen, in whom the Lord was well pleased! Yes, indeed! If only he had been disowned, cast out from God's grace, he would have understood it better. As it was it looked more like a mockery of himself and his faith. There was once another who lived in exile from the beloved land of his fathers.¹⁶ He is not forgotten, nor his songs of lament in which in sorrow he sought and found what he had lost. From Abraham we have no song of lament. It is human to complain, human to weep with one who weeps, but it is greater to have faith and more blessed to behold the believer.

It was faith that made Abraham accept the promise that all nations of the earth should be blessed in his seed.¹⁷ Time went by, the possibility was still there, and Abraham had faith; time went by, it became unlikely, and Abraham had faith. There was once another who held out an expectation. Time went by, the evening drew near, he was not so pitiful as to forget his expectation; therefore he too should not be forgotten. Then he sorrowed, and the sorrow did not deceive him as life had done; it did all it could for him and in the sweetness of sorrow he possessed his disappointed expectation. It is human to sorrow with the sorrower, but greater to have faith and more blessed to behold the believer. From Abraham we have no song of sorrow. As time went by he did not mournfully count the days, he did not cast suspicious glances at Sarah, fearing she was growing old; he did not stay the march of the sun¹⁸ so that Sarah should not grow old and with her his expectation; he did not soothingly sing to Sarah his mournful lay. Abraham became old and Sarah was mocked in the land, and still he was God's chosen and heir to the promise that in his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed. Would it not be better, then, were he not God's chosen? What is it to be God's chosen? Is it to be denied in youth one's youthful desire in order to have it fulfilled in great travail in old age? But Abraham believed and held firm to the promise. Had Abraham wavered he would have renounced it. He would have said to God: 'So perhaps after all

it is not your will that it should happen; then I will give up my desire, it was my only desire, my blessed joy. My soul is upright, I bear no secret grudge because you refused it.' He would not have been forgotten, he would have saved many by his example, yet he would not have become the father of faith; for it is great to give up one's desire, but greater to stick to it after having given it up; it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up. But then came the fullness of time. Had Abraham not had faith, then Sarah would surely have died of sorrow, and Abraham, dull with grief, instead of understanding the fulfilment, would have smiled at it as at a youthful dream. But Abraham believed, and therefore he was young; for he who always hopes for the best becomes old, deceived by life, and he who is always prepared for the worst becomes old prematurely; but he who has faith, retains eternal youth. All praise then to that tale! For Sarah, though stricken in years, was young enough to covet the pleasure of motherhood; and Abraham, though grey of head, was young enough to want to be a father. Outwardly the wonder of faith is in Abraham and Sarah's being young enough for it to happen according to their expectations; in a deeper sense the wonder of faith lies in Abraham and Sarah's being young enough to wish, and in faith's having preserved their wish and through it their youthfulness. He accepted the fulfilment of the promise, he accepted it in faith, and it happened according to expectation and according to faith; for Moses struck the rock with his rod¹⁹ but he did not believe.

So there was rejoicing in Abraham's house when Sarah was bride on their golden-wedding day.

But it was not to remain so; Abraham was to be tried once more. He had fought with that subtle power that invents everything, with that watchful opponent that never takes a nap, with that old man who outlives everything – time itself. He had fought with it and kept his faith. Now all the horrors of the struggle were to be concentrated in one moment. 'And God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him . . . Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of

Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.'

So all was lost, more terrible than if it had never been! So the Lord was only making sport of Abraham! Through a miracle he had made the preposterous come true, now he would see it again brought to nothing. Foolery indeed! But Abraham did not laugh at it, as Sarah had laughed when the promise had first been proclaimed.²⁰ All was lost! Seventy years' faithful expectation, the brief joy at faith's fulfilment.²¹ Who is it then that snatches the staff from the old man, who is it that demands that the old man himself should break it? Who is it that makes a man's grey hairs forlorn, who is it that demands that he himself should make them so? Is there no compassion for this venerable greybeard, none for the innocent child? And yet Abraham was God's chosen, and it was the Lord who put him to this test. All was now surely lost! The glorious memory of the human race, the promise in Abraham's seed,²² it was only a whim, a fleeting thought of the Lord's, which Abraham himself must now eradicate. That glorious treasure, as old as the faith in Abraham's heart, many many years older than Isaac, the fruit of Abraham's life, hallowed with prayers, ripened in struggle – the blessing on Abraham's lips, this fruit was now to be plucked out of season and have no meaning; for what meaning could there be in it if Isaac was to be sacrificed! That sad yet still blessed hour when Abraham should take leave of everything he held dear, when he should raise his venerable head one time more, when his countenance should be radiant as the Lord's, when he should concentrate his whole soul in a blessing with the power to give Isaac joy all his days – that moment was not to come! For, yes, Abraham would indeed take leave of Isaac, but it was he that was to remain; death would divide them, but Isaac was to be its victim. The old man was not to lay his hand upon Isaac in blessing, but weary of life was to lay it upon him in violence. And it was God who tried him. Yes. Woe, woe to the messenger who came before Abraham with such tidings! Who would have dared be the emissary of such sorrow? Yet it was God who tried Abraham.

But Abraham had faith, and had faith for *this* life. Yes, had

his faith only been for a future life it would indeed have been easier to cast everything aside in order to hasten out of this world to which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of that kind, if there is such, for a faith like that is not really faith but only its remotest possibility, a faith that has some inkling of its object at the very edge of the field of vision but remains separated from it by a yawning abyss in which despair plays its pranks. But it was for this life that Abraham believed, he believed he would become old in his land, honoured among his people, blessed in his kin, eternally remembered in Isaac, the dearest in his life, whom he embraced with a love for which it was but a poor expression to say that he faithfully fulfilled the father's duty to love the son, as indeed the summons put it: 'the son whom thou lovest.' Jacob had twelve sons and he loved one; Abraham had just one, the son he loved.

But Abraham had faith and did not doubt. He believed the absurd. If Abraham had doubted – then he would have done something else, something great and glorious; for how could Abraham have done other than what is great and glorious? He would have marched out to the mountain in Moriah, chopped the firewood, set light to the fire, drawn the knife – he would have cried out to God: 'Do not scorn this sacrifice, it is not the best I possess, that I well know; for what is an old man compared with the child of promise, but it is the best I can give. Let Isaac never come to know, that he may comfort himself in his young years.' He would have thrust the knife into his own breast. He would have been admired in the world and his name never forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, another to be a guiding star that saves the anguished.

But Abraham had faith. He did not beg for himself in hope of moving the Lord; it was only that time when the just punishment had been proclaimed upon Sodom and Gomorrah that Abraham came forward with his prayers.²³

We read in those Holy Scriptures: 'And God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: Abraham, where are you? but Abraham answered: here I am.'²⁴ You, to whom my speech is addressed, was that the case with you? When you saw, far off, the heavy fate approaching, did you not say to the

mountains, 'hide me', to the hills, 'fall on me'?²⁵ Or if you were stronger, did your feet nevertheless not drag along the way? Did they not hanker, as it were, to get back into the old tracks? When you were called, did you answer, or did you not? Perhaps softly and in a whisper? Not so Abraham, gladly, boldly, trustingly he answered out loud 'here I am'. We read further: 'And Abraham rose up early in the morning.'²⁶ He hurried as though to some celebration, and he was at the appointed place, the mountain in Moriah, early in the morning. He said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eleazar. After all, who could have understood him? Hadn't the test by its very nature exacted an oath of silence from him? 'And [he] clave the wood, he bound Isaac, he kindled the fire, he drew the knife.' My hearer! Many a father has felt the loss of his child as the loss of the dearest thing he has in the world, to be bereft of every hope for the future; yet no son was the child of promise in the sense that Isaac was for Abraham. Many a father has lost his child, but then it was God, the unchangeable and inscrutable will of the Almighty, it was his hand that took it. Not so with Abraham. For him a harder trial was reserved; along with the knife the fate of Isaac was put into Abraham's own hand. And he stood there, the old man with his only hope! But he did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to left or right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it – and he drew the knife.

Who gave strength to Abraham's arm, who kept his right arm raised so that it did not fall helplessly down! Anyone who saw this would be paralysed. Who gave strength to Abraham's soul, so that his eye did not become too clouded to see either Isaac or the ram! Anyone who saw this would become blind. And yet rare enough though they may be, those who are both paralysed and blind, still more rare is he who can tell the story and give it its due. We know it, all of us – it was only a trial.

Had Abraham doubted as he stood on the mountain in Moriah, had he looked about in indecision, if before drawing

the knife he had accidentally caught sight of the ram and God had allowed him to offer it in place of Isaac – then he would have gone home, everything would have been as before, he would have had Sarah, he would have kept Isaac, and yet how changed! For his withdrawal would have been a flight, his deliverance an accident, his reward dishonour, his future perhaps damnation. Then he would have borne witness, not to his faith or to God's mercy, but to how dreadful was the journey to the mountain in Moriah. Abraham would not be forgotten, nor the mountain. Yet it would not be mentioned like Ararat, where the Ark came to land,²⁸ but as a horror, for it was here that Abraham doubted.

Venerable Father Abraham! When you journeyed home from the mountain in Moriah you needed no speech of praise to console you for what was lost; for in fact you gained everything and kept Isaac. Was it not so? The Lord never again took him from you, you sat happily at table with him in your tent, as you do in the hereafter in all eternity. Venerable Father Abraham! Thousands of years have slipped by since those days, but you need no late-coming lover to snatch your memory from the power of oblivion; for every mother-tongue commemorates you – and still you reward your lover more gloriously than any one. You make him blessed hereafter in your bosom, you captivate his eye and his heart in the here and now with the marvel of your deed. Venerable Father Abraham! Second father to the human race! You who first saw and bore witness to that tremendous passion that scorns the fearful struggle with the raging elements and the forces of creation in order to struggle with God instead, you who first knew that supreme passion, the sacred, pure, and humble expression of the divine madness which the pagans admired²⁹ – forgive him who would speak in your praise if he did not do it correctly. He spoke humbly, seeing it is his heart's desire; he spoke briefly, as is fitting; but he will never forget that you needed a hundred years to get the son of your old age, against every expectation, that you had to draw the knife before keeping Isaac; he will never forget that in one hundred and thirty years you got no further than faith.

PROBLEMATA

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PREAMBLE FROM THE HEART

An old proverb pertaining to the outward and visible world says: 'Only one who works gets bread.'³⁰ Oddly enough, the saying doesn't apply in the world to which it most properly belongs, for the outward world is subject to the law of imperfection; there it happens time and again that one who gets bread is one who does not work, that one who sleeps gets it in greater abundance than one who labours. In the outward world everything belongs to whoever has it, the outward world is subject to the law of indifference and the genie of the ring obeys the one who wears it, whether he be a Nouredin or an Aladdin,³¹ and whoever holds the world's treasures does so however he came by them. It is otherwise in the world of spirit. Here there prevails an eternal divine order, here it does not rain on the just and the unjust alike, here the sun does not shine on both good and evil, here only one who works gets bread, and only one who knows anguish finds rest, only one who descends to the underworld saves the loved one, only one who draws the knife gets Isaac. He who will not work does not get bread, but will be deluded, as the gods deluded Orpheus³² with an airy figure in place of the beloved, deluded him because he was tender-hearted, not courageous, deluded him because he was a lyre-player, not a man.

Here it is no help to have Abraham as one's father,³³ or seventeen centuries of noble ancestry; of anyone who will not work here one can say what is written about Israel's virgins,³⁴ he gives birth to wind – while the one who works will give birth to his own father.

Conventional wisdom aims presumptuously to introduce into the world of spirit that same law of indifference under which