

ON ABRAHAM

Saint Ambrose of Milan



Translated by
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CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST
ORTHODOX STUDIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Book I [Genesis 12:27–25:10]	I
Book II [Genesis 12:27–18:16]	46
Index	104

BOOK I

§I

1. I entitled this book *Abraham* because it occurred to me to consider in orderly fashion the deeds of this Patriarch also. Our treatise concerning him will be moral and simple from the outset. For if we may express the progression, form, and appearance of virtue in a deeper discussion, then it will increase virtue to contemplate also the public signs of his actions. And, indeed, if the fruits which nature produces for the sustenance of men possess not a single, but a double, or even richer grace, how much more fitting is it to value the gifts on which the spirits feast as not meagre, but abounding in usefulness and manifold in nourishment.

2. But this is no ordinary, no futile endeavour. Indeed, since our Lord God endowed Abraham with the rich gift of His blessing, so that his grace challenged all the rest and his instruction corrected them; and since Moses represented him to us as worthy of imitation, so that the sight of him, as it were, at his earthly tomb revived the hearts of men as they fell into vice, it must not be seen as superficial if we closely examine his footprints. For if the wise men of this world, viz. even Plato himself, the prince of philosophers, put before us for scrutiny "The Republic," which is not real but fictitious and counterfeit, in order to teach what a state should be, and therefore thought that a society which he had neither seen nor heard in any city should be described, so that those whose duty it is could be instructed how to rule; and if Xenophon, Plato's fellow pupil, wished to delineate the person of a wise man with fictitious attributes in his book, i.e. *The Childhood of Cyrus*, so that the education of a just and wise king would proceed from the inmost heart of philosophy, how much the more intently must we examine, not the contrived image of a wise man, but the virtue portrayed and instilled by Divine tutelage, and study the

ways of him whom Moses so described that he somehow looked back upon himself.

§2

3. A great man indeed, distinguished by the signs of many virtues, whom philosophy could not equal, for all its aspirations. So what Xenophon depicted is inferior to what Abraham did, and simple faith in the truth is greater than the meretricious guile of eloquence. Therefore, let us consider the nature of Abraham's piety. For the virtue which is the foundation of all the others takes precedence, and God fittingly required this first of him, saying, "*Go forth out of thy land and out of thy kindred, and out of the house of thy father*" [Genesis 12:1]. It had sufficed to say, "*Out of thy land*" [Genesis 12:1]. This also involves exile from kindred, exile from his father's house, but He added these separate commands in order to test his will, lest perchance He seem to have chosen a man without foresight, or some evasion of the Divine ordinances be effected. But just as the precepts must be collected together, lest one escape notice, so also the rewards must be set forth lest perchance he despair.

4. He is tested as brave, he is exhorted as faithful, he is summoned as righteous, and he fittingly *went as the Lord spake to him, and Lot departed with him* [Genesis 12:4]. This is what is proclaimed among the sayings of the Seven Sages as "ἔπου Θεῶν" viz. "follow God." Indeed, Abraham anticipated the sayings of the wise and, following the Lord, went forth from his land. But because another land had previously been his, viz. the country of the Chaldees from which his father Tharrha departed and came to Charran, and because Abraham, who had been told to "*go forth out of thy kindred*" [Genesis 12:1], took with him his nephew Lot, let us consider whether this be to depart from his land, from the habitation of this land, viz. our body, from which Paul went forth, he who said, "*For our conversation is in Heaven*" [Philippians 3:20], and from

bodily enticements and delights which he represented as linked to our soul, which must suffer together with the body so long as it remains fettered thereto. Thus, we must go forth from earthly conversation and worldly pleasures, and from the customs and pursuits of our former life, so that we change not only our place but also ourselves. If we desire to cleave to Christ, let us abandon corruptible things. For the corruptible things in us are the flesh, pleasure, speech, as subject to bodily passions. For we recognize the passions through speech. Hence, our soul is διμερής, viz. double, having both a rational and an irrational part; inasmuch as it is divided through the flesh, the charms of physical pleasure, and the other bodily passions, a man who is righteous must unyoke and separate the rational part of his soul from the irrational. For this is to go forth from Charran, to depart, as it were, from certain caves, burrows, and hiding places; for it is a sign of a guilty conscience to lie hidden. So let us follow Abraham and go forth from our hiding places. If we are the sons of Abraham, let us perform the works of Abraham, so that our works shine before God and before men [*cf.* St. Matthew 5:16]. The righteous speaks of his works to the King [*cf.* Psalm 44:2], the sinner hides himself, as Adam desired to hide himself [*cf.* Genesis 3:8], but could not escape notice. Thus, Abraham obeyed the command, and no delay is mentioned.

5. Having set out, he *traversed the land lengthwise as far as Sychem* [Genesis 12:6], which is called in Latin “The Neck” or “The Shoulder,” whereby we understand the completion of a prescribed task; indeed, we have it written later on: “*He subjected his shoulder to labour*” [Genesis 49:15]. Hence, through the image of the places, we perceive it as manifest that the venerable Abraham proved his piety, not only by his zeal, but also by his fruitful virtue, whereby he came even to the oak tree. On this spot, the Lord appeared to him and said, “*I will give this land to thy seed*” [Genesis 12:7]. See how, with a repeated promise, He informs and instructs the weak man, and he, mindful of his status, attributes all to God and claims nothing for himself. Therefore, Abraham

built an Altar there to the Lord Who appeared to him, and he departed thence to the mountain eastward of Bethel [Genesis 12:7–8], desiring to see the Sun of Righteousness still rising to him [*cf.* Malachias 3:20, 4:2]. And thus he placed a tabernacle to Him on the mountain, not in the valleys, because He is God of the hills but not God of the valleys [*cf.* III Kings 21:28].

6. *“And he called upon the Name of the Lord”* [Genesis 12:8]. Where Bethel is, there is the House and Altar of God; where an Altar is, there is prayer to God. Not unfittingly did Abraham hold such solemn ceremonies, because he hoped that God would be a help to him. The athlete of the Lord is trained and hardened by adversity. He went away into the wilderness: there was famine; he went down to Egypt [*cf.* Genesis 12:10]. He had ascertained that lust prevailed among the young of Egypt, together with extravagance, wanton covetousness, and unbridled passions. He perceived that his wife’s honour would be at risk among such men and her beauty would endanger him: he warned his wife to say that she was his sister [*cf.* Genesis 12:13]. It is thereby taught that beauty, which is often wont to cause her husband’s death, is little to be desired in a wife. For a woman’s virtue and dignity rather than her comeliness please a man. Whoso seeks the sweetness of matrimony does not doubt its superiority to wealth, sweetness which the obligations of marriage will not restrain, adorned, not with jewellery, but with character. Very often, if a wife knows herself to be the more noble, she insults her husband. This ensues from pride. Sarah was neither richer in property nor more distinguished in lineage. Therefore, she did not consider her husband inferior; she loved him as equal in grace, but not restrained by her wealth, by her parents, or by her kinsmen, she followed him whithersoever he went. She came to a strange land, she said she was his sister, content in her modesty, if such were needful, to endanger herself rather than her husband and, in order to protect him, pretended sisterhood lest men who plotted against her chastity kill him as a rival and the avenger of his wife. So as soon as the Egyptians saw her, marvelling that she was

so beautiful, they led her to Pharaoh and treated Abraham well [*cf.* Genesis 12:14], honouring him as the brother of her who pleased their King.

7. *“But the Lord scourged Pharaoh and his house with most grievous stripes for Sarah, Abraham’s wife”* [Genesis 12:17]. As a great witness and lesson on the preservation of purity, the passage exhorts that each keep himself chaste and not desire another’s spouse, nor in the hope of escaping notice, or with impunity for so doing, importune another man’s wife, nor be provoked by the negligence, or foolishness, or long absence of the husband. God is the protector of marriage, He from Whom nothing lies hidden, Whom none escapes, none mocks. He defends the honour of an absent husband, He keeps watch, nay, even without vigils He seizes the transgressor before he carries out his intention: He perceives the guilt in the spirits of each, in the minds of all. Although an adulterer may deceive a husband, he does not deceive God; although he evades the husband, although he eludes the judge of the assize, he does not evade the Judge of all the world. God punishes the more severely the wrong inflicted on the weak, the affront to an imprudent husband; for it is a greater wrong that the Creator rather than the guardian of the marriage bed is scorned and disregarded.

8. And Pharaoh himself, albeit the King of the Egyptians, whom the arrogance of royal power had corrupted, and the lewdness and extravagance of Egypt had seduced from zeal for chastity, summoned Abraham and rebuked him, saying: *“What is this thou hast done to me, that thou didst not tell me that she is thy wife? Wherefore didst thou say, ‘She is my sister?’ and I took her for a wife to myself and now behold thy wife is before thee”* [Genesis 12:18-19]. Although fierce and savage by nature, he nevertheless shows that also among the delusions of foreigners and barbarians there is a care for propriety, and that the sin of adultery is to be shunned. He who pleads ignorance condemns profligacy. Nor is it strange if a barbarian knows the law of nature; for there are some dumb beasts, which are bound by no laws, which would not only keep faith in

the bond with their peers, but also guard the chastity of a single union. Thus, the law of nature is greater than the prescription of laws. Therefore, it is not strange if that Egyptian king feared God, he who did not fear man, yet paid the penalty for adultery, he who was subject to no laws, yet as soon as he realized that Sarah was another man's wife, not only restored her to her husband, but also provided attendants to escort him lest any of his barbarian people offer violence to the husband's cattle or the wife's honour.

9. This passage is also most suitable to instil the zeal for piety, for whoso follows God is always secure. Therefore, we must put God before all, and neither love of country, nor obligations to parents and children, nor regard for a wife, should recall us from compliance with the Heavenly precepts, because God bestows all these things on us and is well able to preserve what He gives. Hence, the fine example of the piety of Abraham, that he went down into Egypt with his beautiful wife. It was indeed his duty as a good husband to guard his wife's honour, but he was more zealous to ripen his devotion, lest he should seem to have preferred the protection of his spouse to the commandments of God. Thus, since he despised all things for the sake of God, he received from God all things in abundance. But God first bestowed the reward of chastity, which He knew to be pleasing to a husband: then, because in his zeal to fulfil the Heavenly precept Abraham had led his wife also into danger, God safeguarded the purity of the marriage too.

§3

10. So piety fittingly claimed primacy for itself. And let us see the grace of the other virtues. The venerable Abraham was soothed by the presence of his nephew, to whom he showed paternal affection. Strife arose between the servants of the nephew and those of the uncle. The wise man perceived that the harmony of their masters was wont to be broken by the disputes of the servants, and cut off the hem of the dissension lest the ill will

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