

child of his old age has been regarded, and justly so, as a sublime act of obedience, but we certainly shall not fail to discern that it was not an act of obedience to God, our Father in Heaven. It was, instead, obedience to a requirement he felt *his* god demanded from him,—to a religious rite of his own time and people,—and in this delusion of Abraham's we may find evidence of the low ethical development of the Hebrew religion in its earlier stages. The custom of sacrificing their children to their gods is a part of the religion of all primitive nations, and among the various Semitic nations in ancient times the rite was extensively practiced. Among the Hebrews it was not uncommon for those in desperate straits thus to attempt to propitiate the favor of Moloch, even those who still held allegiance to Jehovah, and who claimed still to be loyal children of Israel.

In this they were not unsustained by the priesthood, for the influence of the priests was always in favor of outward sacrifices, as witness the minute details for such ceremonial worship set forth in the book of Leviticus, where we have the priestly representation of the Hebrew religion most elaborately described. It is true that in this book we have nowhere an authorization of the sacrifice of children, but, as we shall see in our further study, the compilation of the book of Leviticus was of comparatively late origin, and it represents the religious views of the conservative Hebrews and the priestly class that were contemporaries with the later prophets.

Though the custom of human sacrifice, especially of children, was disavowed, so tenacious was the priesthood of the usages of the past that sacrificial worship, even down to the close of the Old Testament era, was maintained as an all-important part of the ritual of the Hebrew religion. The blood of the victim, generally a ram, in the later ages, when consumed in the fire upon the altar of Jehovah accord-

ing to the doctrine of the priests, secured the forgiveness of a guilty trespasser of the law: "The soul of a living creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for you, for the blood makes an atonement by the soul that is in it." (Lev. xvii., 2.) Thus the priests taught down to the beginning of the Christian era, assuming to voice the will of God. The substitution of a ram for a child as the victim of the sacrifice was indeed an advance in ethical principles from the earlier usages of Israel; an advance for which the excuse was found in the legend of Abraham. It was, however, but a step forward in morality, for the Hebrew conscience could not be largely developed under the teaching that an offended Deity could be propitiated by material gifts or a vicarious sacrifice.

The prophets took their stand upon a far more exalted spiritual plane, and disclaimed divine authority for the entire sacrificial ritual. It is unfortunate for humanity that in Christian teaching the prophets have been most prominently presented as foretellers of future events, (especially as describing the coming of the Messiah), and that their most valuable service to mankind, as inspired preachers of religion and leaders in the evolution of an ever-higher and purer Theism, has been so largely overlooked. Listen, for instance, to the lofty spirituality of the prophet Micah, seven hundred years before the Christian era, in his declaration to a people who were observing a ritual of sacrifices in their ordinary methods of worship, and who, in times of great distress, offered even the lives of their children upon the altar of their God: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of vows, or tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my *first-born* for my transgressions,