**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**ACTS-062. THE CHARTER OF GENTILE LIBERTY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"12. Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. 13. And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: 14. Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name. 15. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, 16. After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: 17. That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom My name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. 18. Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world. 19. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: 20. But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. 21. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach Him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. 22. Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: 23. And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: 24. Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: 25. It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26. Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. 28. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; 29. That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well."*

*Acts 15:12-29*

Much was at stake in the decision of this gathering of the Church. If the Jewish party triumphed, Christianity sank to the level of a Jewish sect. The question brought up for decision was difficult, and there was much to be said for the view that the Mosaic law was binding on Gentile converts. It must have been an uprooting of deepest beliefs for a Jewish Christian to contemplate the abrogation of that law, venerable by its divine origin, by its hoary antiquity, by its national associations. We must not be hard upon men who clung to it; but we should learn from their final complete drifting away from Christianity how perilous is the position which insists on the necessity to true discipleship of any outward observance.

Our passage begins in the middle of the conference. Peter has, with characteristic vehemence, dwelt upon the divine attestation of the genuine equality of the uncircumcised converts with the Jewish, given by their possession of the same divine Spirit, and has flung fiery questions at the Judaisers, which silenced them. Then, after the impressive hush following his eager words, Barnabas and Paul tell their story once more, and clinch the nail driven by Peter by asserting that God had already by signs and wonders given His sanction to the admission of Gentiles without circumcision. Characteristically, in Jerusalem Barnabas is restored to his place above Paul, and is named first as speaking first, and regarded by the Jerusalem Church as the superior of the missionary pair.

The next speaker is James, not an Apostle, but the bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, of whom tradition tells that he was a zealous adherent to the Mosaic law in his own person, and that his knees were as hard as a camel's through continual prayer. It is singular that this meeting should be so often called the Apostolic council, when, as a fact, only one Apostle said a word, and he not as an Apostle, but as the chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles. The elders, of whose existence we now hear for the first time in this wholly incidental manner, were associated with the Apostles (ver. 6), and the multitude (ver. 12) is most naturally taken to be the whole Church (ver. 22). James represents the eldership, and as bishop in Jerusalem and an eager observer of legal prescriptions, fittingly speaks. His words practically determined the question. Like a wise man, he begins with facts. His use of the intensely Jewish form of the name Simeon is an interesting reminiscence of old days. So he had been accustomed to call Peter when they were all young together, and so he calls him still, though everybody else named him by his new name. What God had done by him seems to James to settle the whole question; for it was nothing else than to put the Gentile converts without circumcision on an equality with the Jewish part of the Church.

Note the significant juxtaposition of the words Gentiles and people--the former the name for heathen, the latter the sacred designation of the chosen nation. The great paradox which, through Peter's preaching at Caesarea, had become a fact was that the people of God were made up of Gentiles as well as Jews--that His name was equally imparted to both. If God had made Gentiles His people, had He not thereby shown that the special observances of Israel were put aside, and that, in particular, circumcision was no longer the condition of entrance? The end of national distinction and the opening of a new way of incorporation among the people of God were clearly contained in the facts. How much Christian narrowness would be blown to atoms if its advocates would do as James did, and let God's facts teach them the width of God's purposes and the comprehensiveness of Christ's Church! We do wisely when we square our theories with facts; but many of us go to work in the opposite way, and snip down facts to the dimension of our theories.

James's next step is marked equally by calm wisdom and open-mindedness. He looks to God's word, as interpreted by God's deeds, to throw light in turn on the deeds and to confirm the interpretation of these. Two things are to be noted in considering his quotation from Amos--its bearing on the question in hand, and its divergence from the existing Hebrew text. As to the former, there seems at first sight nothing relevant to James's purpose in the quotation, which simply declares that the Gentiles will seek the Lord when the fallen tabernacle of David is rebuilt. That period of time has at least begun, thinks James, in the work of Jesus, in whom the decayed dominion of David is again in higher form established. The return of the Gentiles does not merely synchronise with, but is the intended issue of, Christ's reign. Lifted from the earth, He will draw all men unto Him, and they shall seek the Lord, and on them His name will be called.

Now the force of this quotation lies, as it seems, first in the fact that Peter's experience at Caesarea is to be taken as an indication of how God means the prophecy to be fulfilled, namely, without circumcision; and secondly, in the argumentum a silentio, since the prophet says nothing about ritual or the like, but declares that moral and spiritual qualifications--on the one hand a true desire after God, and on the other receiving the proclamation of His name and calling themselves by it--are all that are needed to make Gentiles God's people. Just because there is nothing in the prophecy about observing Jewish ceremonies, and something about longing and faith, James thinks that these are the essentials, and that the others may be dropped by the Church, as God had dropped them in the case of Cornelius, and as Amos had dropped them in his vision of the future kingdom. God knew what He meant to do when He spoke through the prophet, and what He has done has explained the words, as James says in verse 18.

The variation from the Hebrew text requires a word of comment. The quotation is substantially from the Septuagint, with a slight alteration. Probably James quoted the version familiar to many of his hearers. It seems to have been made from a somewhat different Hebrew text in verse 17, but the difference is very much slighter than an English reader would suppose. Our text has Edom where the Septuagint has men; but the Hebrew words without vowels are identical but for the addition of one letter in the former. Our text has inherit where the Septuagint has seek after; but there again the difference in the two Hebrew words would be one letter only, so that there may well have been a various reading as preserved in the Septuagint and Acts. James adds to the Septuagint seek the evidently correct completion the Lord.

Now it is obvious that, even if we suppose his rendering of the whole verse to be a paraphrase of the same Hebrew text as we have, it is a correct representation of the meaning; for the inheriting of Edom is no mere external victory, and Edom is always in the Old Testament the type of the godless man. The conquest of the Gentiles by the restorer of David's tabernacle is really the seeking after the Lord, and the calling of His name upon the Gentiles.

The conclusion drawn by James is full of practical wisdom, and would have saved the Church from many a sad page in its history, if its spirit had been prevalent in later councils. Note how the very designation given to the Gentile converts in verse 19 carries argumentative force. They turn to God from among the Gentiles--if they have done that, surely their new separation and new attachment are enough, and make insistence on circumcision infinitely ridiculous. They have the thing signified; what does it matter about the sign, which is good for us Jews, but needless for them? If Church rulers had always been as open-eyed as this bishop in Jerusalem, and had been content if people were joined to God and parted from the world, what torrents of blood, what frowning walls of division, what scandals and partings of brethren would have been spared!

The observances suggested are a portion of the precepts enjoined by Judaism on proselytes. The two former were necessary to the Christian life; the two latter were not, but were concessions to the Jewish feelings of the stricter party. The conclusion may be called a compromise, but it was one dictated by the desire for unity, and had nothing unworthy in it. There should be giving and taking on both sides. If the Jewish Christians made the, to them, immense concession of waiving the necessity of circumcision, the Gentile section might surely make the small one of abstinence from things strangled and from blood. Similarities in diet would daily assimilate the lives of the two parties, and would be a more visible and continuous token of their oneness than the single act of circumcision.

But what does the reason in verse 21 mean? Why should the reading of Moses every Sabbath be a reason for these concessions? Various answers are given: but the most natural is that the constant promulgation of the law made respect for the feelings (even if mistaken) of Jewish Christians advisable, and the course suggested the most likely to win Jews who were not yet Christians. Both classes would be flung farther apart if there were not some yielding. The general principle involved is that one cannot be too tender with old and deeply rooted convictions even if they be prejudices, and that Christian charity, which is truest wisdom, will consent to limitations of Christian liberty, if thereby any little one who believes in Him shall be saved from being offended, or any unbeliever from being repelled.

The letter embodying James's wise suggestion needs little further notice. We may observe that there was no imposing and authoritative decision of the Ecclesia, but that the whole thing was threshed out in free talk, and then the unanimous judgment of the community, Apostles, elders and the whole Church, was embodied in the epistle. Observe the accurate rendering of verse 25 (R.**V.**), having come to one accord, which gives a lively picture of the process. Note too that James's proposal of a letter was mended by the addition of a deputation, consisting of an unknown Judas called Barsabas (perhaps a relative of Joseph called Barsabas, the unsuccessful nominee for Apostleship in chap. i.), and the well-known Silas or Silvanus, of whom we hear so much in Paul's letters. That journey was the turning-point in his life, and he henceforward, attracted by the mass and magnetism of Paul's great personality, revolved round him, and forsook Jerusalem.

Probably James drew up the document, which has the same somewhat unusual greeting as his Epistle. The sharp reference to the Judaising teachers would be difficult for their sympathisers to swallow, but charity is not broken by plain repudiation of error and its teachers. Subverting your souls is a heavy charge. The word is only here found in the New Testament, and means to unsettle, the image in it being that of packing up baggage for removal. The disavowal of these men is more complete if we follow the Revised Version in reading (ver. 24) no commandment instead of no such commandment.

These unauthorised teachers went; but, in strong contrast with them, Judas and Silas are chosen out and sent. Another thrust at the Judaising teachers is in the affectionate eulogy of Paul and Barnabas as beloved, whatever disparaging things had been said about them, and as having hazarded their lives, while these others had taken very good care of themselves, and had only gone to disturb converts whom Paul and Barnabas had won at the peril of their lives.

The calm matter-of-course assertion that the decision which commended itself to us is the decision of the Holy Ghost was warranted by Christ's promises, and came from the consciousness that they had observed the conditions which He had laid down. They had brought their minds to bear upon the question, with the light of facts and of Scripture, and had come to a unanimous conclusion. If they believed their Lord's parting words, they could not doubt that His Spirit had guided them. If we lived more fully in that Spirit, we should know more of the same peaceful assurance, which is far removed from the delusion of our own infallibility, and is the simple expression of trust in the veracious promises of our Lord.

The closing words of the letter are beautifully brotherly, sinking authority, and putting in the foreground the advantage to the Gentile converts of compliance with the injunctions. Ye shall do well, rightly and conformably with the requirements of brotherly love to weaker brethren. And thus doing well, they will fare well, and be strong. That is not the way in which lords over God's heritage are accustomed to end their decrees. Brotherly affection, rather than authority imposing its will, breathes here. Would that all succeeding Councils had imitated this as well as it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us!