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

**GENESIS-018. ABRAM THE HEBREW by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew.--."*

*Genesis 14:13*

This is a singular designation of Abram as The Hebrew. Probably we have in its use here a trace of the customary epithet which he bore among the inhabitants of Canaan, and perhaps the presence of the name in this narrative may indicate the influence of some older account, traditional or written, which owed its authorship to some of them. At all events, this is the first appearance of the name in Scripture. As we all know, it has become that of the nation, but a Jew did not call himself a Hebrew except in intercourse with foreigners. As in many other cases, the national name used by other nations was not that by which the people called themselves. Here, obviously, it is not a national name, for the very good reason that there was no nation then. It is a personal epithet, or, in plain English, a nickname, and it means, probably, as the ancient Greek translation of Genesis gives it, neither more nor less than The man from the other side, the man that had come across the water. Just as a mediaeval prince bore the sobriquet Outremere-the man from beyond the sea--so Abram, to the aboriginal, or, at least, long-settled, inhabitants of the country, was known simply as the foreigner, the man from the other side (of the Jordan, or more probably of the great river Euphrates), the man from across the water.

Now that name may suggest, with a permissible, and, I hope, not misleading play of fancy, just two things, which I seek now to press upon our hearts and consciences. The one is as to how men become Christians, and the other is as to how they look to other people when they are.

**I. Men become Christians by a great emigration.**

Get thee out from thy father's house, and from thy country, and from thy kindred, was the command to Abram. And he became the heir to God's promises and the father of the faithful, because he did not hesitate a moment to make the plunge and to leave behind him all his past, his associations, his loves, much of his possessions, and, in a very profound sense, his old self, and put a great impassable gulf between him and them all.

Now I am not going to say anything so narrow or foolish as that the Christian life must always begin with a conscious and sudden change; but this I am quite sure of, that in the vast majority of cases of thoroughly and out-and-out religious men, there must be a conscious change, whether it has been diffused through months or years, or concentrated in one burning moment. There has been a beginning; whether it has been like the dawn, or whether it has been like the kindling of a candle, the beginning of the flashing of the divine light into the heart; and the men that are most really under the influence of religious truth can, as a rule, looking back upon their past experience, see that it divides itself into two halves, separated from each other by a profound gulf--the time on the other side, and that on this side, of the great river. We must take heed lest by insisting on any one way of entrance into the kingdom we seem to narrow God's mercy, or sadden true hearts, or make the method of approach a test of the fact of entrance. God's city has more than twelve gates; they open to all the thirty-two points of the compass, yet there is, in the religious experience of the truest saints, always something analogous to this change. And what I desire to press upon you is, that unless you are only religious people after the popular superficial fashion of the day, there will be something like it in your lives.

There will be a change in a man's deepest self, so that he will be a new creature, with new tastes, new motives stirring to action, new desires pressing for satisfaction, new loves sweetly filling his heart, new insight into the meanings and true good of life and time guiding his conduct, new aversions withdrawing him from old delights which have become hateful now, new hopes pluming their growing wings, and new powers bearing him along a new road. There will be a change in his relations to God and to God's will. God in Christ will have become his centre, instead of self, which was so before. He lives in a new world, being himself a new man.

Our Lord uses this very illustration when He says, He that heareth My Word, and believeth Him that sent Me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life. That is a great migration, is it not, from the condition of a corpse to that of a living man? Paul, too, gives the same idea with a somewhat different turn of the illustration, when he gives thanks to the Father who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of,--not, as we might expect to complete the antithesis, the light, but--the kingdom of the Son of His love, which is the same thing as the light. The illustration is probably drawn from the practice of the ancient conquering monarchs, who, when they subjugated a country, were wont to lead away captive long files of its inhabitants as compulsory colonists, and set them down in another land. Thus the conquering Christ comes, and those whom He conquers by His love, He shifts by a great emigration out of the dominion of that darkness which is at once tyranny and anarchy, and leads them into the happy kingdom of the light.

Thus, then, all Christian men become such, because they turn their backs upon their old selves, and crucify their affections and lusts; and paste down the leaf, as it were, on which their blotted past is writ, and turn over a new and a fairer one. And my question to you, dear brethren, is, Are you men from the other side, who were not born where you live now, and who have passed out of the native Chaldea into the foreign--and yet to the new self home--land of union with God?

**II. This designation may be taken as teaching that a Christian should be known as a foreigner, a man from across the water.**

Everybody in Canaan that knew Abram at all knew him as not one of themselves. The Hebrew was the name he went by, because his unlikeness to the others was the most conspicuous thing about him, even to the shallowest eye. Abram found himself, when he had migrated into Canaan, in no barbarous country, but plunged at once into the midst of an organised and compact civilisation, that walled its cities, and had the comforts and conveniences and regularities of a settled order; and in the midst of it all, what did he do? He elected to live in a tent. He dwelt in tabernacles, as the Epistle to the Hebrews comments upon his history, because he looked for a city. The more his expectations were fixed upon a permanent abode, the more transitory did he make his abode here. If there had been no other city to fill his eyes, he would have gone and lived in some of those that were in the land. If there had been no other order to which he felt himself to belong, he would have had no objection to cast in his lot with the order and the people with whom he lived on friendly terms. But although he bought and sold with them, and fought for them and by their sides, and acquired from them land in which to bury his dead, he was not one of them, but said, No! I am not going into your city. I stay in my tent under this terebinth tree; for I am here as a stranger and a sojourner. No doubt there were differences of language, dress, and a hundred other little things which helped the impression made on the men of the land by this strange visitor who lived in amity but in separation, and they are all crystallised in the name which the popular voice gave him, The man from the other side.

That is the impression which Christian people ought to make in the world. They should be recognised, by even unobservant eyes who know nothing of the inner secret of their lives, as plainly belonging to another order. If we seek to keep fresh in our own minds the consciousness that we do so, it will make itself manifest in all our bearing and actions. So that exhortation to cultivate the continual sense that our true city--the mother city of our hearts and hopes--is in heaven is ever to be reiterated, and as constantly obeyed, as the necessary condition of a life worthy of our true affinities and of our glorious hopes.

Nor less needful is the other exhortation--live by the laws of your own land, not by those of the foreign country where you are for a time. If you do that thoroughly, you will not need to say, I am from another country. Your conduct will say it for you. An English ship is a bit of England, in whatever latitude it may be, and however far beyond the three-mile limit of the King's authority upon the seas it may float. And so, wherever there is a Christian man, there is a bit of God's kingdom, and over that little speck in the midst of the ocean of the world the flag with the Cross on it should fly, and the laws of the Christ should be the only laws that have currency. If it could be said of us as Haman said to his king about the Jews, that we were a people with laws di&lt;scripRef passage="Genesis 13:1-13"&gt; from those of all people, we should be doing more than, alas! most of us do, to honour Him whom we profess to serve. Follow Christ, and people will be quick enough to say of you The man from the other side, He does not belong to our city. There is no need for ostentation, nor for saying, Come and see my zeal for the Lord, nor for blowing trumpets before us at street corners or elsewhere. The less of all that the better. The more we try to do the common things done by the folk round us, but from another motive, the more powerful will be our witness for our Master.

For instance, when John Knox was in the French galleys, he was fastened to the same oar with some criminal, perhaps a murderer. The two men sat on the same bench, did the same work, tugged at the same heavy sweep, were fed with the same food, suffered the same sorrows. Do you think there was any doubt as to the infinite gulf between them? We may be working side by side, at the very same tasks, and under similar circumstances, with men that have no share in our faith, and no sympathy with our hopes and aspirations, and yet, though doing the same thing, it will not be the same thing. And if we keep Christ before us, and follow His steps who has left us an example, depend upon it people will very soon find out that we are men from across the water.

Notice, further, how this dissimilarity and obvious aloofness from the order of things in which we dwell is still perfectly compatible with all sorts of helpful associations. The context shows us that. There had come a flood of invasion, under kings with strange and barbarous names, from the far East. They had swept down upon the fertile valley of Siddim, and there had inflicted devastation. Amongst the captives had been Lot, Abram's relative, and all his goods had been taken. One fugitive, as it appears, had escaped, and the first thing he did was to go straight to the man from the other side, and tell him about it, as if sure of sympathy and help. No doubt the relationship between Abram and Lot was the main reason why the panting survivor made his way to the hills where Abram's tent was pitched, but there was also confidence in his willingness to help the Sodomites who had lost their goods. So it was not to the sons of Heth in Mamre that the fugitive turned in his extremity, but he told Abram the Hebrew.

I need not narrate over again the familiar story of how, for once in his peaceful life, the friend of God girds on his sword and develops military instincts in his prompt and well-planned pursuit, which show that if he did not try to conquer some part of the land which he knew to be his by the will of God, it was not for want of ability, but because he believed God, and could wait. We all know how he armed his slaves, and made a swift march to the northern extremity of the land, and then, by a nocturnal surprise, came down upon the marauders and scattered them like chaff, before his onset, and recovered Lot and all the spoil.

Let us learn that, if Christian men will live well apart from the world, they will be able to sympathise with and help the world; and that our religion should fit us for the prompt and heroic undertaking, as it certainly does for the successful accomplishment, of all deeds of brotherly kindness and sympathy, bringing help and solace to the weak and the wearied, liberty to the captives, and hope to the despairing.

I do not believe that Christian men have any business to draw swords now. Abram is in that respect the Old Testament type of a God-fearing hero, with the actual sword in his hands. The New Testament type of a Christian warrior without a sword is not one jot less, but more, heroic. The form of sympathy, help, and public spirit which the man from the other side displayed is worse than an anachronism now in the light of Christ's law. It is a contradiction. But the spirit which breathed through Abram's conduct should be ours. We are bound to seek the peace of the city where we dwell as strangers and pilgrims, avoiding no duty of sympathy and help, but by prompt, heroic, self-forgetting service to all the needy, sorrowful, and oppressed, building up such characters for ourselves that fugitives and desperate men shall instinctively turn to men from the other side for that help which, they know full well, the men of the country are too selfish or cowardly to give.

May I venture to suggest yet another and very different application of this name? To the aboriginal inhabitants of heaven, the angels that kept their first estate, redeemed men are possessors of a unique experience; and are the men from the other side. They who entered on their pilgrimage through the Red Sea of conversion, pass out of it through the Jordan of death. They who become Christ's, by the great change of yielding their hearts to Him, and who live here as pilgrims and sojourners, pass dryshod through the stream into His presence. And there they who have always dwelt in the sunny highlands of the true Canaan, gather round them, and call them, not unenvying, perhaps, their experience, The men that have crossed. The Hebrews of the Hebrews in the heavens are those who have known what it is to be pilgrims and sojourners, and to whom the promise has been fulfilled in the last hour of their journey, When thou passest through the river, I will be with thee. They teach the angels a new song who sing, Thou hast led us through fire and through water, and brought us into a wealthy place.