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

**JEREMIAH-027. THE KINSMAN REDEEMER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Their Redeemer is strong; the Lord of Hosts is His name: He shall thoroughly plead their cause."*

*Jeremiah 50:34*

Among the remarkable provisions of the Mosaic law there were some very peculiar ones affecting the next-of-kin. The nearest living blood relation to a man had certain obligations and offices to discharge, under certain contingencies, in respect of which he received a special name; which is sometimes translated in the Old Testament Redeemer, and sometimes Avenger of blood. What the etymological signification of the word may be is, perhaps, somewhat doubtful. It is taken by some authorities to come from a word meaning to set free. But a consideration of the offices which the law prescribed for the Goel is of more value for understanding the peculiar force of the metaphor in such a text as this, than any examination of the original meaning of the word. Jehovah is represented as having taken upon Himself the functions of the next-of-kin, and is the Kinsman-Redeemer of His people. The same thought recurs frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the second half of the prophecies of Isaiah, and it were much to be desired that the Revised Version had adopted some means of showing an English reader the instances, since the expression suggests a very interesting and pathetic view of God's relation to His people.

**I. Let me state briefly the qualifications and offices of the kinsman-redeemer, the Goel.**

The qualifications may be all summed up in one--that he must be the nearest blood relation of the person whose Goel he was. He might be brother, or less nearly related, but this was essential, that of all living men, he was the most closely connected. That qualification has to be kept well in mind when thinking of the transference of the office to God in His relation to Israel, and through Israel to us.

Such being his qualification, what were his duties? Mainly three. The first was connected with property, and is thus stated in the words of the law, If thy brother be waxen poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold (Lev. 25:25, R. V.). The Mosaic law was very jealous of large estates. The prophet pronounced a curse upon those who joined land to land, and field to field... that they may be alone in the midst of the earth. One great purpose steadily kept in view in all the Mosaic land-laws was the prevention of the alienation of the land from its original holders, and of its accumulation in a few hands. The idea underlying the law was that of the tribal or family ownership--or rather occupancy, for God was the owner and Israel but a tenant--and not individual possession. That thought carries us back to a social state long since passed away, but of which traces are still left even among ourselves. It was carried out thoroughly in the law of Moses, however imperfectly in actual practice. The singular institution of the year of Jubilee operated, among other effects, to check the acquisition of large estates. It provided that land which had been alienated was to revert to its original occupants, and so, in substance, prohibited purchase and permitted only the lease of land for a maximum term of fifty years. We do not know how far its enactments were a dead letter, but their spirit and intention were obviously to secure the land of the tribe to the tribe for ever, to keep the territory of each distinct, to discourage the creation of a landowning class, with its consequent landless class, to prevent the extremes of poverty and wealth, and to perpetuate a diffused, and nearly uniform, modest wellbeing amongst a pastoral and agricultural community, and to keep all in mind that the land was not to be sold for ever, for it is Mine, saith the Lord.

The obligation on the next-of-kin to buy back alienated property was quite as much imposed on him for the sake of the family as of the individual.

The second of his duties was to buy back a member of his family fallen into slavery. If a stranger or sojourner with thee be waxen rich, and thy brother be waxen poor beside him, and sell himself unto the stranger... after that he is sold, he may be redeemed; one of his brethren may redeem him. The price was to vary according to the time which had to elapse before the year of Jubilee, when all slaves were necessarily set free. So Hebrew slavery was entirely unlike the thing called by the same name in other countries, and by virtue of this power of purchase at any time, which was vested in the nearest relative, taken along with the compulsory manumission of all slaves every fiftieth year, came to be substantially a voluntary engagement for a fixed time, which might be ended even before that time had expired, if compensation for the unexpired term was made to the master.

It is to be observed that this provision applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself. No other person could sell a man into slavery. And it applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself to a foreigner. No Jew was allowed to hold a Jew as a slave. If thy brother be waxen poor with thee, and sell himself unto thee, thou shalt not make him to serve as a bondservant: as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee. (Lev. 25:39, R. V.).

The last of the offices of the kinsman-redeemer was that of avenging the blood of a murdered relative. If a man were stricken to death, it became a solemn obligation to exact life for life, and the blood-feud incumbent on all the family was especially binding on the next-of-kin. The obligation shocks a modern mind, accustomed to relegate all punishment to the action of law which no criminal thinks of resisting. But customs and laws are unfairly estimated when the state of things which they regulated is forgotten or confused with that of today. The law of blood-feud among the Hebrews was all in the direction of restricting the wild justice of revenge, and of entrusting it to certain chosen persons out of the kindred of the murdered man. The savage vendetta was too deeply engrained in the national habits to be done away with altogether. All that was for the time possible was to check and systematise it, and this was done by the institution in question, which did not so much put the sword into the hand of the next-of-kin as strike it out of the hand of all the rest of the clan.

These, then, were the main parts of the duty of the Goel, the kinsman-redeemer--buying back the alienated land, purchasing the freedom of the man who had voluntarily sold himself as a slave, and avenging the slaying of a kinsman.

**II. Notice the grand mysterious transference of this office to Jehovah.**

This singular institution was gradually discerned to be charged with lofty meaning and to be capable of being turned into a dim shadowing of something greater than itself. You will find that God begins to be spoken of in the later portions of Scripture as the Kinsman-Redeemer. I reckon eighteen instances, of which thirteen are in the second half of Isaiah. The reference is, no doubt, mainly to the great deliverance from captivity in Egypt and Babylon, but the thought sweeps a much wider circle and goes much deeper down than these historical facts. There was in it some dim feeling that though God was separated from them by all the distance between finitude and infinitude, yet they were nearer to Him than to any one else; that the nearest living relation whom these poor persecuted Jews had was the Lord of Hosts, beneath whose wings they might come to trust. Therefore does the prophet kindle into rapture and triumphant confidence as he thinks that the Lord of Hosts, mighty, unspeakable, high above our thoughts, our words, or our praise, is Israel's Kinsman, and, therefore, their Redeemer. How profound a consciousness that man was made in the image of God, and that, in spite of all the gulf between finite and infinite, and the yet deeper gulf between sinful man and righteous God, He was closer to a poor struggling soul than even the dearest were, must have been at all events dawning on the prophet who dared to think of the Holy One in the Heavens as Israel's Kinsman. No doubt, he was dwelling mostly on historical outward deliverances wrought for the nation, and his idea of Israel's kinship to God applied to the people, not to individuals, and meant chiefly that the nation had been chosen for God's. But still the thought must have been felt to be great and wonderful, and some faint apprehension of the yet deeper sense in which it is true that God is the next-of-kin to every soul and ready to be its Redeemer, would no doubt begin to be felt.

The deepening of the idea from a reference to external and national deliverances, and the large, dim hopes which clustered round it, may be illustrated by one or two significant instances. Take, for example, that mysterious and very beautiful utterance in the Book of Job, where the man, in the very depth of his despair, and just because there is not a human being that has any drop of pity for him, turns from earth, and striking confidence out of his very despair, like fire from flint, sees there his Kinsman-Redeemer. I know that my Redeemer liveth. Men may mock him, friends may turn against him, the wife of his bosom may tempt him, comforters may pour vitriol instead of oil into his wounds, yet he, sitting on his dunghill there, poverty-stricken and desolate, knows that God is of kin to him, and will do the kinsman's part by him. The very metaphor implies that the divine intervention which he expects is to take place after his death. It was a dead man whose blood the Goel avenged. Thus the view which sees in the subsequent words a hope, however dim and undefined, of an experience of a divine manifestation on his behalf beyond the grave is the only one which gives its full force to the central idea of the passage, as well as to the obscure individual expressions. Most strikingly, then, he goes on to say, carrying out the allusion, and that he shall stand at the last upon the dust. Little did it boot the murdered man, lying there stark, with the knife in his bosom, that the murderer should be slain by the swift justice of his kinsman-avenger, but Job felt that, in some mysterious way, God would appear for him, after he had been laid in the dust, and that he would somehow share in the gladness of His manifestation--for he believes that without his flesh he will see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. Large and mysterious hopes are gathering round the metaphor, which flash some light into the darkness of the grave, and give to the troubled soul the assurance that when life with all its troubles is past, and flesh has seen corruption, the inmost personal being of every man who commits his cause to God will behold Him coming forth his Kinsman-Redeemer.

Another illustration of the hopes which gathered round this image is found in the great psalm which prophesies of the true King of Peace, in language too wide for any poetical licence to warrant if intended only to describe a Jewish king (Ps. lxxii. 14). The universal dominion of this great King is described in terms which, though they may be partly referred to the Jewish monarchy at its greatest expansion, sweep far beyond its bounds in exulting anticipation that all kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve Him. The reason for this world-wide dominion is not military power, as was the case with the warrior kings of old, who bound nations together for a little while in an artificial unity with iron chains, but His dominion is universal, for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, ... He shall redeem their souls from oppression and violence, and precious shall their blood be in His sight. Two of the functions of the Kinsman-Redeemer are here united. He buys back slaves from their tyrannous masters, and He avenges their shed blood. And because His Kingdom is a kingdom of gentle pity and loving help, because He is of the same blood with His subjects, and brings liberty to the captives, therefore it is universal and everlasting. For the strongest thing in all the world is love, and He who can staunch men's wounds, and will hear their cries and help them, will rule them with authority which conquerors cannot wield.

This universal King, the kinsman and the sovereign of all the needy, is not God. A human figure is rising before the prophet-psalmist's eye, whose meekness as well as His majesty, and whose kingdom as well as His redeeming power, seem to pass beyond human limits. Divine offices seem to be devolved on a man's shoulders. Dim hopes are springing which point onwards. So that great psalm leads us a step further.

**III. See the perfect fulfilment of this divine office by the man Christ Jesus.**

Job's anticipation and the psalmist's rapturous vision are fulfilled in the Incarnate Word, in whom God comes near to us all and makes Himself kindred to our flesh, that He may discharge all those blessed offices, of redeeming from slavery, of recovering our alienated inheritance, and of guarding our lives, which demand at once divine power and human nearness. Christ is our Kinsman. True, the divine nature and the human are nearly allied, so that even apart from the Incarnation, men may feel that none is so truly and closely akin to them as their Father in Heaven is. But how much more blessed than even that kinship is the consanguinity of Christ, who is doubly of kin to each soul of man, both because in His true manhood He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and because in His divinity He is nearer to us than the closest human kindred can ever be. By both He comes so near to us that we may clasp Him by our faith, and rest upon Him, and have Him for our nearest friend, our brother. He is nearer to each of us than our dearest is. He loves us with the love of kindred, and can fill our hearts and wills, and help our weakness in better, more inward ways than all sympathy and love of human hearts can do. Between the atoms of the densest of material bodies there is an interspace of air, as is shown by the fact that everything is compressible if you can find the force sufficient to compress it. That is to say, in the material universe no particle touches another. And so in the spiritual region, there is an awful film of separation between each of us and all others, however closely we may be united. We each live on our own little island in the deep, with echoing straits between us thrown. We have a solemn consciousness of personality, of responsibility unshared by any, of a separate destiny parting us from our dearest. Arms may be twined, but they must be unlinked some day, and each in turn must face the awful solitude of death, as each has really faced that scarcely less awful solitude of life, alone. But he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit, and our kinsman, Christ, will come so near to us, that we shall be in Him and He in us, one spirit and one life. He is your nearest relation, nearer than husband, wife, parent, brother, sister, or friend. He is nearer to you than your very selves. He is your better self. That is His qualification for His office.

Because He is man's kinsman, He buys back His enslaved brethren. The bondage from which one of His brethren might redeem the Israelite was a voluntary bondage into which he had sold himself. And such is our slavery. None can rob us of our freedom but ourselves. The world and the flesh and the devil cannot put their chains on us unless our own wills hold out our hands for the manacles.

And, alas! it is often an unsuspected slavery. How sayest thou, ye shall be made free. We were never in bondage to any man, boasted the angry disputants with Christ. And if they had lifted up their eyes they might have seen from the Temple courts in which they stood, the citadel full of Roman soldiers, and perhaps the golden eagles gleaming in the sunshine on the loftiest battlements. Yet with that strange power of ignoring disagreeable facts they dared to assert their freedom. Never in bondage to any man!--what about Egypt, and Assyria, and Babylon? Had there never been an Antiochus? Was Rome a reality? Did it lay no yoke on them? Was it all a dream?

Some of us are just as foolish, and try as desperately to annihilate facts by ignoring them, and to make ourselves free by passionately denying that we are slaves. But he that committeth sin is the slave of sin. That sounds a paradox. I am master of my own actions, you may say, and never freer than when I break the bonds of right and duty and choose to do what is contrary to them, for no reason on earth but because I choose. That is liberty, emancipation from the burdensome restraints which your narrow preaching about law and conscience would impose. Yes, you are masters of your actions, and your sinful actions very soon become masters of you. Do we not know that that is true? You fall into, or walk into a habit, and then it gets the mastery of you, and you cannot get rid of it. Whosoever sets his foot upon that slippery inclined plane of wrongdoing, after he has gone a little way, gravitation is too much for him and away he goes down the hill. Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin. Did you ever try to kill a bad habit, a vice? Did you find it easy work? Was it not your master? You thought that a chain no stronger than a spider's web was round your wrist till you tried to break it; and then you found it a chain of adamant. Many men who boast themselves free are tied and bound with the cords of their sins.

Dreaming of freedom, you have sold yourself, and that for nought. Is that not true, tragically true?

What have you made out of sin? Is the game worth the candle? Will it continue to be so? Ye shall be redeemed without money, for Jesus Christ laid down His life for you and me, that by His death we might receive forgiveness and deliverance from the power of sin. And so your Kinsman, nearer to you than all else, has bought you back. Do not refuse the offered emancipation, but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. Be not like the spiritless slaves, for whose servile choice the law provided, who had rather remain bond than go out free. Surely when Christ calls you to liberty, you will not turn from Him to the tyrannous masters whom you have served, and, like the Hebrew slave, let them fasten you to their door-posts with their awl through your ear. Do you hug your chains and prefer your bondage?

Your Kinsman-Redeemer brings back your squandered inheritance, which is God. God is the only possession that makes a man rich. He alone is worth calling my portion. It is only when we have God in our hearts, God in our heads, God in our souls, God in our life--it is only when we love Him, and think about Him, and obey Him, and bring our characters into harmony with Him, and so possess Him--it is only then that we become truly rich. No other possession corresponds to our capacities so as to fill up all our needs and satisfy all our being. No other possession passes into our very substance and becomes inseparable from ourselves. So the mystical fervour of the psalmist's devotion spoke a simple prose truth when he exclaimed, The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup.

We have squandered our inheritance. We have sinned away fellowship with God. We have flung away our true wealth, wasted our substance in riotous living. And here is our Elder Brother, our nearest relative, who has always been with the Father; but who, instead of grudging the prodigals their fatted calf and their hearty welcome when they come back, has Himself, by the sacrifice of Himself, won for them the inheritance, its earnest in the possession of God's spirit here and its completion in the broad fields of the inheritance of the saints in light, the entire fruition and possession of the divine in the life to come. If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

Your Kinsman-Redeemer will keep your lives under His care, and be ready to plead your cause. He that touches you, touches the apple of Mine eye. He reproved kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed. Not in vain does the cry go up to Him, Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints,--and if no apparent retribution has followed, and if often His servant's blood seems to have been shed in vain, still we know that it has often been the seed of the Church, and that He who puts our tears into His bottle will not count our blood less precious in His sight. So we may rest confident that our Kinsman-Redeemer will charge Himself with pleading our cause and intervening in our behalf, that He will compass us about with His protection, and that we are knit so close to Him that our woes and foes are His, and that we cannot die as long as He lives.

So, dear brethren, be sure of this, that if only you will take Christ for your Saviour and brother, your Helper and Friend, if only you will rest yourself upon that complete sacrifice which He has made for the sins of the world, He will give you liberty, and restore your lost inheritance, and your blood shall be precious in His sight, and He will keep His hand around you and preserve you; and finally will bring you into His home and yours. In Him we have redemption through His blood, and He comes to every one of you now, even through my poor lips, with His ancient word of merciful invitation: Behold! I have blotted out as a cloud thy sins and as a thick cloud thy transgressions. Turn unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.