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

**JOSHUA-006. THE CAPTAIN OF THE LORD'S HOST by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And he said, Nay, but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come."*

*Joshua 5:14*

The army of Israel was just beginning a hard conflict under an untried leader. Behind them the Jordan barred their retreat, in front of them Jericho forbade their advance. Most of them had never seen a fortified city, and had no experience nor engines for a siege. So we may well suppose that many doubts and fears shook the courage of the host, as it drew around the doomed city. Their chief had his own heavy burden. He seems to have gone apart to meditate on what his next step was to be. Absorbed in thought, he lifts up his eyes mechanically, as brooding men will, not expecting to see anything, and is startled by the silent figure of a man with a sword drawn in his hand, close beside him. There is nothing supernatural in his appearance; and the immediate thought of the leader is, Is this one of the enemy that has stolen upon my solitude? So, promptly and boldly, he strides up to him with the quick challenge: Whose side are you on? Are you one of us, or from the enemy's camp? And then the silent lips open. Upon neither the one nor the other. I am not on your side, you are on mine, for as Captain of the Lord's host, am I come up. And then Joshua falls on his face, recognises his Commander-in-Chief, owns himself a subordinate, and asks for orders. What saith my Lord unto his servant?'

Now let us try to gather the meaning and the lessons of this striking incident.

**I. I see in it a transient revelation of an eternal truth.**

I believe, as the vast majority of careful students of the course of Old Testament revelation and its relation to the New Testament completion believe, that we have here not a record of the appearance of a created superhuman person, but that of a preliminary manifestation of the Eternal Word of God, who, in the fulness of time, became flesh and dwelt among us.

You will observe that there run throughout the whole of the Old Testament notices of the occasional manifestation of a mysterious person who is named the Angel, the Angel of the Lord. For instance, in the great scene in the wilderness, where the bush burned and was not consumed, he who appeared is named the Angel of the Lord; and his lips declare I am that I am. In like manner, soon after, the divine voice speaks to Moses of the Angel in whom is My name.

When Balaam had his path blocked amongst the vineyards, it was a replica of the figure of my text that stayed his way, a man with a drawn sword in his hand, who spoke in autocratic and divine fashion. When the parents of Samson were apprised of the coming birth of the hero, it was the Angel of the Lord that appeared to them, accepted their sacrifice, declared the divine will, and disappeared in a flame of fire from the altar. A psalm speaks of the Angel of the Lord as encamping round about them that fear him, and delivering them. Isaiah tells us of the Angel of his face, who was afflicted in all Israel's afflictions, and saved them. And the last prophetic utterance of the Old Testament is most distinct and remarkable in its strange identification and separation of Jehovah and the Angel, when it says, the Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple, even the Angel of the Covenant. Now, if we put all these passages--and they are but select instances--if we put all these passages together, I think we cannot help seeing that there runs, as I said, throughout the whole of the Old Testament a singular strain of revelation in regard to a Person who, in a remarkable manner, is distinguished from the created hosts of angel beings, and also is distinguished from, and yet in name, attributes, and worship all but identified with, the Lord Himself.

If we turn to the narrative before us, we find there similar phenomena marked out. For this mysterious man with the sword drawn in his hand, quotes the very words which were spoken at the bush, when he says, Loose thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And by fair implication, He would have us to identify the persons in these two great theophanies. He ascribes to Himself, in the further conversation in the next chapter, directly divine attributes, and is named by the sacred name; The Lord said unto Joshua, see, I have given into thy hand Jericho and its king.

If we turn to the New Testament, we find that there under another image the same strain of thought is presented. The Word of God, who from everlasting was with God, and was God, is represented as being the Agent of Creation, the Source of all human illumination, the Director of Providence, the Lord of the Universe. By him were all things, and in him all things consists. So, surely, these two halves make a whole; and the Angel of the Lord, separate and yet so strangely identified with Jehovah, who at the crises of the nation's history, and stages of the development of the process of Revelation, is manifested, and the Eternal Word of God, whom the New Testament reveals to us, are one and the same.

This truth was transiently manifested in our text. The vision passed, the ground that was hallowed by His foot is undistinguished now in the sweltering plain round the mound that once was Jericho. But the fact remains, the humanity, that was only in appearance, and for a few minutes, assumed then, has now been taken up into everlasting union with the divine nature, and a Man reigns on the Throne, and is Commander of all who battle for the truth and the right. The eternal order of the universe is before us here.

It only remains to say a word in reference to the sweep of the command which our vision assigns to the Angel of the Lord. Captain of the Lord's host means a great deal more than the true General of Israel's little army. It does mean that, or the words and the vision would cease to have relevance and bearing on the moment's circumstances and need. But it includes also, as the usage of Scripture would sufficiently show, if it were needful to adduce instances of it, all the ordered ranks of loftier intelligent beings, and all the powers and forces of the universe. These are conceived of as an embattled host, comparable to an army in the strictness of their discipline and their obedience to a single will. It is the modern thought that the universe is a Cosmos and not a Chaos, an ordered unit, with the addition of the truth beyond the reach and range of science, that its unity is the expression of a personal will. It is the same thought which the centurion had, to Christ's wonder, when he compared his own power as an officer in a legion, where his will was implicitly obeyed, to the power of Christ over diseases and sorrows and miseries and death, and recognised that all these were His servants, to whom, if His autocratic lips chose to say Go, they went, and if He said, Do this, they did it.

So the Lord of the universe and its ordered ranks is Jesus Christ. That is the truth which was flashed from the unknown, like a vanishing meteor in the midnight, before the face of Joshua, and which stands like the noonday sun, unsetting and irradiating for us who live under the Gospel.

**II. I see here the Leader of all the warfare against the world's evil.**

The Captain of the Lord's host. He Himself takes part in the fight. He is not like a general who, on some safe knoll behind the army, sends his soldiers to death, and keeps his own skin whole. But He has fought, and He is fighting. Do you remember that wonderful picture in two halves, at the end of one of the Gospels, the Lord went up into Heaven and sat at the right hand of God, ... they went forth everywhere preaching the Word? Strange contrast between the repose of the seated Christ and the toils of His peripatetic servants! Yes, strange contrast; but the next words harmonise the two halves of it; the Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. The Leader does not so rest as that He does not fight; and the servants do not need so to fight, as that they cannot rest. Thus the old legends of many a land and tongue have a glorious truth in them to the eye of faith, and at the head of all the armies that are charging against any form of the world's misery and sin, there moves the form of the Son of Man, whose aid we have to invoke, even from His crowned repose at the right hand of God. Gird thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, and in Thy majesty ride forth prosperously, and Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things.

If this, then, be for us, as truly as for Joshua and his host, a revelation of who is our true leader, surely all of us in our various degrees, and especially any of us who have any Quixotic crusade for the world's good on our consciences and on our hands, may take the lessons and the encouragements that are here. Own your Leader; that is one plain duty. And recognise this fact, that by no other power than by His, and with no other weapons than those which He puts into our hands, in His Cross and meekness, can a world's evils be overcome, and the victory be won for the right and the truth. I have no faith in crusades which are not under the Captain of our salvation. And I would that the earnest men, and there are many of them, the laborious and the self-sacrificing men in many departments of philanthropy and benevolence and social reformation--who labour unaware of who is their Leader, and not dependent upon His help, nor trusting in His strength--would take to heart this vision of my text, and see beside them the man with the drawn sword in his hand, the Christ with the sharp two-edged sword going out of his mouth, by whom, and by whom alone, the world's evil can be overcome and slain.

Own your General; submit to His authority; pick the weapons that He can bless; trust absolutely in His help. We may have, we shall have, in all enterprises for God and man that are worth doing, need of patience, just as the army of Israel had to parade for six weary days round Jericho blowing their useless trumpets, whilst the impregnable walls stood firm, and the defenders flouted and jeered their aimless procession. But the seventh day will come, and at the trumpet blast down will go the loftiest ramparts of the cities that are walled up to heaven with a rush and a crash, and through the dust and over the ruined rubbish Christ's soldiers will march and take possession. So trust in your Leader, and be sure of the victory, and have patience and keep on at your work.

Do not make Joshua's mistake. Art Thou for us?--Nay! Thou art for me. That is a very different thing. We have the right to be sure that God is on our side, when we have made sure that we are on God's. So take care of self-will and self-regard, and human passions, and all the other parasitical insects that creep round philanthropic religious work, lest they spoil your service. There is a great deal that calls itself after Jehu's fashion, My zeal for the Lord, which is nothing better than zeal for my own notions and their preponderance. Therefore we must strip ourselves of all that, and not fancy that the cause is ours, and then graciously admit Christ to help us, but recognise that it is His, and lowly submit ourselves to His direction, and what we do, do, and when we fight, fight, in His name and for His sake.

**III. Here is the Ally in all our warfare with ourselves.**

That is the worst fight. Far worse than all these Hittites and Hivites, and the other tribes with their barbarous names, far worse than all external foes, are the foes that each man carries about in his own heart. In that slow hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot struggle I do not believe that there is any conquering power available for a man that can for a moment be compared with the power that comes through submission to Christ's command and acceptance of Christ's help. He has fought every foot of the ground before us. We have to run the race--to take another metaphor--that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the great Leader, and in His own self the Perfecter of the faith which conquers. In Him, His example, the actual communication of His divine Spirit, and in the motives for brave and persistent conflict which flow from His Cross and Passion, we shall find that which alone will make us the victors in this internecine warfare. There can be no better directory given to any man than to tread in Christ's footsteps, and learn how to fight, from Him who in the wilderness repelled the triple assault with the single It is written; thus recognising the word and will of God as the only directory and defence.

Thus, brethren, if we humbly take service in His ranks, and ask Him to show us where our foes within are, and to give us the grace to grapple with them, and cast them out, anything is possible rather than ultimate defeat, and however long and sore the struggle may be, its length and its severity are precious parts of the discipline that makes us strong, and we shall at last be more than conquerors through Him that loveth us.

**IV. Lastly, I see here the Power which it is madness to resist.**

Think of this vision. Think of the deep truths, partially shadowed and symbolised by it. Think of Christ, what He is, and what resources He has at His back, of what are His claims for our service, and our loyal, militant obedience. Think of the certain victory of all who follow Him amongst the armies of Heaven, clad in fine linen, clean and white. Think of the crown and the throne for him that overcomes.

Remember the destructive powers that sleep in Him: the drawn sword in His hand, the two-edged sword out of His mouth the wrath of the Lamb. Think of the ultimate certain defeat of all antagonisms; of that last campaign when He goes forth with the name written on His vesture and on His thigh "King of kings and Lord of lords." Think of how He strikes through kings in the day of His wrath, and fills the place with the bodies of the dead; and how His enemies become His footstool.

Ponder His own solemn word, He that is not with Me, is against Me. There is no neutrality in this warfare. Either we are for Him or we are for His adversary. Under which King? speak or die! As sensible men, not indifferent to your highest and lasting well-being, ask yourselves, Can I, with my ten thousand, meet Him with His twenty thousand? Put yourselves under His orders, and He will be on your side. He will teach your hands to war, and your fingers to fight; will cover your heads in the day of battle, and bring you at last, palm-bearing and laurel-crowned, to that blissful state where there will still be service, and He still be the Captain of the Lord's host, but where swords will be beaten into ploughshares and the victors shall need to learn war no more.