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

**NUMBERS-006. AFRAID OF GIANTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17.* *And Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said unto them, Get you up this way southward, and go up into the mountain; 18. And see the land, what it is; and the people that dwelleth therein, whether they be strong or weak, few or many; 19. And what the land is that they dwell in, whether it be good or bad; and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strong holds; 20. And what the land is, whether it be fat or lean, whether there be wood therein, or not. And be ye of good courage, and bring of the fruit of the land. Now the time was the time of the firstripe grapes. 21. So they went up, and searched the land from the wilderness of Zin unto Rehob, as men come to Hamath. 22. And they ascended by the south, and came unto Hebron; where Ahiman, Sheshai, and Talmai, the children of Anak, were. (Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) 23. And they came unto the brook of Eshcol, and cut down from thence a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bare it between two upon staff; and they brought of the pomegranates, and of the figs. 24. The place was called the brook Eshcol, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence. 25. And they returned from searching of the land after forty days. 26. And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, unto the wilderness of Paran, to Kadesh; and brought back word unto them, and unto all the congregation, and shewed them the fruit of the land. 27. And they told him, and said, We came unto the land whither thou sentest us, and surely it floweth with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it. 28. Nevertheless the people be strong that dwell in the land, and the cities are walled, and very great: and, moreover, we saw the children of Anak there. 29. The Amalekites dwell in the land of the south; and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the coast of Jordan. 30. And Caleb stilled the people before Moses, and said, Let us go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it. 31. But the men that went up with him said, We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. 32. And they brought up an evil report of the land which they had searched unto the children of Israel, saying, The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. 33. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.--."*

*Numbers 13:17-33*

We stand here on the edge of the Promised Land. The discussion of the true site of Kadesh need not concern us now. Wherever it was, the wanderers had the end of their desert journey within sight; one bold push forward, and their feet would tread on their inheritance. But, as is so often the case, courage oozed out at the decisive moment, and cowardice, disguised as prudence, called for further information,--that cuckoo-cry of the faint-hearted. There are three steps in this narrative: the despatch of the explorers, their expedition, and the two reports brought back.

**I.** We have the despatch and instructions of the explorers. A comparison with Deuteronomy i. shows that the project of sending the spies originated in the people's terror at the near prospect of the fighting which they had known to be impending ever since they left Egypt. Faith finds that nearness diminishes dangers, but sense sees them grow as they approach. The people answered Moses brave words summoning them to the struggle with this feeble petition for an investigation. They did not honestly say that they were alarmed, but defined the scope of the exploring party's mission as simply to bring us word again of the way by which we must go up, and the cities into which we shall come. Had they not the pillar blazing there above them to tell them that? The request was not fathomed in its true faithlessness by Moses, who thought it reasonable and yielded. So far Deuteronomy goes; but this narrative puts another colour on the mission, representing it as the consequence of God's command. The most eager discoverer of discrepancies in the component parts of the Pentateuch need not press this one into his service, for both sides may be true: the one representing the human feebleness which originated the wish; the other, the divine compliance with the desire, in order to disclose the unbelief which unfitted the people for the impending struggle, and to educate them by letting them have their foolish way, and taste its bitter results. Putting the two accounts together, we get, not a contradiction, but a complete view, which teaches a large truth as to God's dealings; namely, that He often lovingly lets us have our own way to show us by the issues that His is better, and that daring, which is obedience, is the true prudence.

The instructions given to the explorers turn on two points: the eligibility of the country for settlement, and the military strength of its inhabitants. They alternate in a very graphic way from the one of these to the other, beginning, in verse 18, with the land, and immediately going on to the numbers and power of the inhabitants; then harking back again, in verse 19, to the fertility of the land, and passing again to the capacity of the cities to resist attack; and finishing up, in verse 20, with the land once more, both arable and forest. The same double thought colours the parting exhortation to be bold, and to bring of the produce of the land. Now the people knew already both points which the spies were despatched to find out. Over and over again, in Egypt, in the march, and at Sinai, they had been told that the land was flowing with milk and honey, and had been assured of its conquest. What more did they want? Nothing, if they had believed God. Nothing, if they had been all saints,--which they were not. Their fears were very natural. A great deal might be said in favour of their wish to have accurate information. But it is a bad sign when faith, or rather unbelief, sends out sense to be its scout, and when we think to verify God's words by men's confirmation. Not to believe Him unless a jury of twelve of ourselves says the same thing, is surely much the same as not believing Him at all; for it is not He, but they, whom we believe after all.

There is no need to be too hard on the people. They were a mob of slaves, whose manhood had been eaten out by four centuries of sluggish comfort, and latterly crushed by oppression. So far as we know, Abraham's midnight surprise of the Eastern kings was the solitary bit of fighting in the national history thus far; and it is not wonderful that, with such a past, they should have shrunk from the prospect of bloodshed, and caught at any excuse for delay at least, even if not for escape. We have all of us one human heart, and these cowards were no monsters, but average men, who did very much what average men, professing to be Christians, do every day, and for doing get praised for prudence by other average professing Christians. How many of us, when brought right up to some task involving difficulty or danger, but unmistakably laid on us by God, shelter our distrustful fears under the fair pretext of knowing a little more about it first, and shake wise heads over rashness which takes God at His word, and thinks that it knows enough when it knows what He wills?

**II.** We have the exploration (verses 21-25). The account of it is arranged on a plan common in the Old Testament narratives, the observation of which would, in many places, remove difficulties which have led to extraordinary hypotheses. Verse 21 gives a general summary of what is then taken up, and told in more detail. It indicates the completeness of the exploration by giving its extreme southern and northern points, the desert of Zin being probably the present depression called the Arabah, and Rehob as men come to Hamath being probably near the northern Dan, on the way to Hamath, which lay in the valley between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. The account then begins over again, and tells how the spies went up into the South. The Revised Version has done wisely in printing this word with a capital, and thereby showing that it is not merely the name of a cardinal point, but of a district. It literally means the dry, and is applied to the arid stretch of land between the more cultivated southern parts of Canaan and the northern portion of the desert which runs down to Sinai. It is a great chalky plateau, and might almost be called a steppe or prairie. Passing through this, the explorers next would come to Hebron, the first town of importance, beside which Abraham had lived, and where the graves of their ancestors were. But they were in no mood for remembering such old stories. Living Anaks were much more real to them than dead patriarchs. So the only thing mentioned, besides the antiquity of the city, is the presence in it of these giants. They were probably the relics of the aboriginal inhabitants, and some strain of their blood survived till late days. They seem to have expelled the Hittites, who held Mamre, or Hebron, in Abraham's time. Their name is said to mean long-necked, and the three names in our lesson are probably tribal, and not personal, names. The whole march northward and back again comes in between verses 22 and 23; for Eshcol was close to Hebron, and the spies would not encumber themselves with the bunch of grapes on their northward march. The details of the exploration are given more fully in the spies report, which shows that they had gone up north from Hebron, through the hills, and possibly came back by the valley of the Jordan. At any rate, they made good speed, and must have done some bold and hard marching, to cover the ground out and back in six weeks. So they returned with their pomegranates and figs, and a great bunch of the grapes for which the valley identified with Eshcol is still famous, swinging on a pole,--the easiest way of carrying it without injury.

**III.** We have next the two reports. The explorers are received in a full assembly of the people, and begin their story with an object-lesson, producing the great grape cluster and the other spoils. But while honesty compelled the acknowledgment of the fertility of the land, cowardice slurred that over as lightly as might be, and went on to dilate on the terrors of the giants and the strength of the cities, and the crowded population that held every corner of the country. Truly, the eye sees what it brings with it. They really had gone to look for dangers, and of course they found them. Whatever Moses might lay down in his instructions, they had been sent by the people to bring back reasons for not attempting the conquest, and so they curtly and coldly admit the fertility of the soil, and fling down the fruit for inspection as undeniably grown there, but they tell their real mind with a great nevertheless. Their report is, no doubt, quite accurate. The cities were, no doubt, some of them walled, and to eyes accustomed to the desert, very great; and there were, no doubt, Anaks at Hebron, at any rate, and the spies had got the names of the various races and their territories correctly. As to these, we need only notice that the Hittites were an outlying branch of the great nation, which recent research has discovered, as we might say, the importance and extent of which we scarcely yet know; that the Jebusites held Jerusalem till David's time; that the Amorites, or Highlanders, occupied the central block of mountainous country in conjunction with the two preceding tribes; and that the Canaanites, or Lowlanders, held the lowlands east and west of that hilly nucleus, namely, the deep gorge of the Jordan, and the strip of maritime plain. A very accurate report may be very one-sided. The spies were not the last people who, being sent out to bring home facts, managed to convey very decided opinions without expressing any. A grudging and short admission to begin with, the force of which is immediately broken by sombre and minute painting of difficulty and danger, is more powerful as a deterrent than any dissuasive. It sounds such an unbiassed appeal to common-sense, as if the reporter said, There are the facts; we leave you to draw the conclusions. An unvarnished account of the real state of the case, in which there is not a single misstatement nor exaggeration, may be utterly false by reason of wrong perspective and omission, and, however true, is sure to act as a shower-bath to courage, if it is unaccompanied with a word of cheer. To begin a perilous enterprise without fairly facing its risks and difficulties is folly. To look at them only is no less folly, and is the sure precursor of defeat. But when on the one side is God's command, and on the other such doleful discouragements, they are more than folly, they are sin.

It is bracing to turn from the creeping prudence which leaves God out of the account, to the cheery ring of Caleb's sturdy confidence. His was a minority report, signed by only two of the Commission. These two had seen all that the others had, but everything depends on the eyes which look. The others had measured themselves against the trained soldiers and giants, and were in despair. These two measured Amalekites and Anaks against God, and were jubilant. They do not dispute the facts, but they reverse the implied conclusion, because they add the governing fact of God's help. How differently the same facts strike a man who lives by faith, and one who lives by calculation! Israel might be a row of ciphers, but with God at the head they meant something. Caleb's confidence that we are well able to overcome was religious trust, as is plain from God's eulogium on him in the next chapter (Num. xiv. 24). The lessons from it are that faith is the parent of wise courage; that where duty, which is God's voice, points, difficulties must not deter; that when we have God's assurance of support, they are nothing. Caleb was wise to counsel going up to the assault at once, for there is no better cure for fear than action. Old soldiers tell us that the trying time is when waiting to begin the fight. The native hue of resolution gets sicklied o er with the paleness that comes from hesitation. Am I sure that anything is God's will? Then the sooner I go to work at doing it, the better for myself and for the vigour of my work.

This headstrong rashness, as they thought it, brings up the other spies once more. Notice how the gloomy views are the only ones in their second statement. There is nothing about the fertility of the land, but, instead, we have that enigmatical expression about its eating up its inhabitants. No very satisfactory explanation of this is forthcoming. It evidently means that in some way the land was destructive of its inhabitants, which seems to contradict their former reluctant admission of its fertility. Perhaps in their eagerness to paint it black enough, they did contradict themselves, and try to make out that it was a barren soil, not worth conquering. Fear is not very careful of consistency. Note, too, the exaggerations of terror. All the people are sons of Anak now. The size as well as the number of the giants has grown; we were in our own sight as grasshoppers. No doubt they were gigantic, but fear performed the miracle of adding a cubit to their stature. When the coward hears that there is a lion without,--that is, in the open country,--he immediately concludes, I shall be slain in the streets, where it is not usual for lions to disport themselves.

Thus exaggerated and one-sided is distrust of God's promises. Such a temper is fatal to all noble life or work, and brings about the disasters which it foresees. If these cravens had gone up to fight with men before whom they felt like grasshoppers, of course they would have been beaten; and it was much better that their fears should come out at Kadesh than when committed to the struggle. Therefore God lovingly permitted the mission of the spies, and so brought lurking unbelief to the surface, where it could be dealt with. Let us beware of the one-eyed prudence which sees only the perils in the path of duty and enterprise for God, and is blind to the all-sufficient presence which makes us more than conquerors, when we lean all our weight on it. It is well to see the Anakim in their full formidableness, and to feel that we are as grasshoppers in our own sight and in theirs, if the sight drives us to lift our eyes to Him who sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof, however huge and strong, are as grasshoppers.