**SERIES 01 (PREACHED IN 1907) - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**05. CHRIST, GREATER THAN ABRAHAM by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*"Art Thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? And the prophets are dead: Whom makest Thou Thyself ... Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad … Before Abraham was born, I am."*

*John 8:53,56,58*

THIS IS the sublimest of all the claims of Christ.

"The high mysteries of Thy name

An angel's grasp transcend:

The Father only glorious claim

The Son can comprehend."

In the presence of such a claim we are compelled to account Jesus a liar, or God. There can be no alternative. John records for us in detail the story of the great controversy at Jerusalem. After prolonged discussion, His enemies in astonishment, in incredulity, and in scorn said to Him, "Art Thou greater than our Father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead; Whom makest Thou Thyself?" We have in these questions the ultimate challenge of the Hebrew people to Christ, and in Christ's reply His ultimate answer to their challenge, and His ultimate claim for Himself. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day: and he saw it, and was glad ... Before Abraham was born, I am." This is the final statement of difference between Judaism and Christianity, and that difference is revealed in the contrast of the persons of Christ and Abraham.

I propose first of all to ask you to think of the greatness of Abraham, in order that we may pass to a consideration of the greatness of Christ by contrast.

Abraham to the Hebrew had a greatness which we may speak of first as historic. They said of him, "our father Abraham," which meant that the nation had sprung from him. And yet they said, "our father Abraham ... is dead." He was an actual personality, exerting an influence upon all his descendants, and yet an influence which came up out of the past.

Thus the greatness of Abraham was also traditional. The master passion of the life of Abraham had been that of faith in God, and gradually, in the history of the nation, that faith had been out-wrought into practice. In the worship of the people, in the law which had come to them ultimately, and in all their long history, Abraham's faith handed on, and handed down, had been the underlying principle of the nation 's life.

The greatness of Abraham, being historic and traditional, could only be described finally as temporal. The whole Hebrew had come from an historic person, Abraham; had been handed down by tradition, and was wholly temporal.

It is most carefully to be noted that Christ did not by a single word He uttered then, or at any other time, detract from the greatness of Abraham. He was Himself, after the flesh, related to the nation. He was Himself, after the flesh, descended from that selfsame Abraham. So far from detracting from the greatness of Abraham, He lifted that greatness on to a higher plane by showing that He was true to the Abrahamic principle rather than they.

Nevertheless, these men in astonishment said to Him, "Art Thou greater than our father Abraham?" He answered immediately, definitely, positively, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad." When they, interpreting His word in the narrowest and most material sense, said, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast Thou seen Abraham?" He made His final claim in these remarkable words, "Before Abraham was born, I am."

Abraham was historic. Christ was historic, and super-historic. Abraham's greatness was traditional; Christ's greatness was living and immediate. Abraham's greatness was temporal. Christ's greatness is age-abiding.

Take the first of these facts. I speak of Christ as historic and super-historic. I am quite conscious of the awkwardness of the definition. I use it for lack of some better term. If you ask me what I mean by it, I would say, to these men who looked into His face, He was an actual Person in history, an unimportant One in their thinking, just a Peasant of Galilee Who had gained some notoriety by His teaching, but yet definitely and positively there, confronting them. Yet He was super-historical. He said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day;" I think that refers to Abraham's spiritual discerning of the ultimate. But I think the part of the declaration means far more. "And he saw it, and was glad." By this He did not merely mean that Abraham had a spiritual apprehension of the ultimate, but that Abraham in that day to which, the Hebrew people were looking back actually saw the day of Christ.

I want to remind you of some facts in the history of Abraham as written for us in the Old Testament. In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis the story is told of the coming of three men to Abraham under the oaks of Mamre, concerning Sodom. Two of them moved away, and left Abraham alone with One. In that chapter it is quietly and definitely affirmed no less than six times that Abraham talked to Jehovah. The Person, the One of the three who remained when the other two passed on to is described as Jehovah, not as the Lord merely, but as Jehovah. In the course of that conversation the Man to whom Abraham was talking is spoken of as "the Judge of all the earth." This Person threatened to destroy Sodom. He moreover received the homage and worship of Abraham, and presently went on His way. In the story of the trial of Abraham in the matter of his son Isaac, it is distinctly affirmed that "God did prove Abraham." In the course of the story you will find a Person referred to as "the angel of Jehovah." Abraham would have offered his son to that Person, with Whom he spoke face to face. These stories declare that Abraham held direct intercourse with Deity, talked with Him face to face as a man talks to his friend, seeing a form, a semblance, and a person, sometimes described as a man, sometimes as an angel of Jehovah. The first question one asks is - if we may use the terminology, of Christianity - was this the first Person of the Trinity, the Father? The answer that we give to that is a simple recitation of the declaration of the New Testament Scriptures, which are nevertheless expressive of Hebrew conviction and belief. Paul in writing to Timothy said, "Now unto the King eternal, incorruptible, invisible, the only be honour and glory for ever and ever." In the same letter again, "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable; Whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to Whom be honour and power eternal." In the Gospel of John we find Jesus Himself making this declaration, "The Father which sent Me, He hath borne witness of Me. Ye have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form." In the prologue John declares, and writes as a Hebrew, with all the conviction of a Hebrew in his heart "No man hath seen God at any time." The whole teaching of the Old Testament and the whole teaching of the New is that God has never been seen in His own essential nature.

What bearing have all these statements upon Christ's declaration that Abraham saw His day. First of all the Old Testament Scriptures reveal the fact that Jehovah made appearances to men in olden time, directly and immediately. References are constantly made to "the angel of the Lord," often to "an angel of the Lord," but these two are never to be confused or confounded, and it is an interesting fact that the Revised Version has maintained the distinction in translation from beginning to end. Wherever you read "the angel of Jehovah," you will find that you are in the presence of one of the ancient Theophanies or manifestations of God.

The New Testament takes up these Theophanies and refers them to the Christ, so that the thought suggested by this word, and verified by the study of the Old and New Testaments in comparison, is that the Person Who stood confronting the Hebrews was One Who had thus appeared to Abraham under the oaks at Mamre, described as Jehovah, and yet Jehovah having taken a form and manifested Himself as man and angel. In that sense it was true that Abraham had seen His day. What the men who confronted Jesus did not understand was that He could be the One of Whom they had often read, the angel of Jehovah, the Man Who conversed with Abraham under the oaks, the One through Whom God had taken form and semblance, in order to speak to Abraham. When Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad," I think His first intention was to claim identity with the One Who long ago had confronted their father Abraham, and had actually spoken to him face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. So that Christ claimed in that first word to be historic, actually there, and yet super-historic, in the sense that wherever you find history there you may find Christ, able to reveal God to men.

Not merely is He greater than Abraham in this regard, but in the fact that He is living and immediate. We have looked at the suggestiveness of those visitations to Abraham. Come further on for a moment and you will find a more striking demonstration of the truth of what I am endeavoring to say. In the history of this selfsame people in the time of Moses, things spoken in the Old Testament of Jehovah, or the angel of Jehovah, in the New Testament are spoken of Christ Himself. Let one or two incidents suffice. I find in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus it is said, "And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai to the top of the mount: and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish." In Acts 7:38, it is written, "This is He that was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received living oracles to give unto us." What in Exodus is declared to be the speaking of Jehovah, in the book of Acts is referred to as the speaking of the angel of Jehovah. In the letter to the Hebrews I read "Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaketh better than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh. For if they escaped not, when they refused him that warned them on earth, much more shall not we escape, who turn away from Him that warneth from heaven: Whose voice then shook the earth; but now He hath promised, saying, Yet once more I will make to tremble not the earth only, but also the heaven." You trace the connection. In Exodus Jehovah is speaking to Moses. The Testament declares it was the angel of Jehovah. The later writer declares it was Jesus who spoke there to Moses. Take another illustration in the very covenant, to the terms of which Moses gave expression. If you read the story carefully you will find that it was the angel of Jehovah who uttered the words of the covenant. Jeremiah declared that the same Person Who uttered the old will utter the new, "Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah." The New Testament identifies Christ with the angel messenger of Jeremiah's prediction, and with the actual Jehovah who uttered the words of the covenant to Moses of old.

In connection with the journeyings of the children of Israel things spoken of in the Old Testament as having been done by the angel of Jehovah are distinctly spoken of in the New as having been done by Christ.

You may take that phrase of Christ, "My day," and put it down wherever you will in the history of the ancient people. It was always His day. The central fact of Hebrew history had been God manifesting Himself as occasion demanded, in different ways: and every manifestation was a manifestation of God in His Son, in the form of a man, in the form of an angel. When He said "My day," He referred to the day of Abraham, to the day of Moses, to the day of the prophets, to the day in which He stood in the midst of the men of Jerusalem. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day." What we speak of as the incarnation was the final Theophany, the outshining of Deity in the form of One of their own number Who instead of visiting the father of the nation, or appearing to the law giver upon the mount, or coming suddenly to disappear again, came and tabernacled amongst men. So Christ claimed, in answer to the criticism of these people, that He was of their nation the source, strength, and inspiration, and that wherever you pass back in their history you may describe the day as His day. So He stood among them, not the Creator of a new tradition, but a living and immediate revelation of according to all necessity, and at all times as God willed.

I come to this last and greatest word of all in which He said, "Before Abraham was born, I am." Here we see Him in ultimate and deepest superiority to Abraham. Abraham's influence was temporal. He was himself temporal, a great man, great in his devotion, great in his faith, great in his victory, great in those forces of character which, dependent upon had started that nation into life and existence. But Christ put Himself by the side of Abraham, declaring, "Before Abraham was born, I am." Notice the contrast of the words. You have noticed that every time I have quoted them I have added the word "born." It is so in the margin. The actual word is an entirely different one from the word Christ used concerning Himself. The word is not the verb to be. It is so when Christ speaks of Himself. The earlier word is one that indicates birth, or at any rate, beginning of being. You may, if you like, read it thus, "Before Abraham was made, I am," or "Before Abraham was born," as I still prefer, "I am." The words are contrasted words, to say nothing of the tense. The tense also is suggestive. "Before Abraham was born, I am," not Before Abraham was born, I was. Had He begun by declaring His priority to Abraham, it would have been inexplicable. When He says, "Before Abraham was born, I am," He utters the word of essential and underived being, the word no man can utter fully. There is a sense in which you and I make use of the phrase "I am" concerning ourselves, and yet we all recognize that no man can say "I am" in its ageless and deathless sense. I today may say I am, and ere I have uttered it, however much I may add by way of explanation, the thing I declared is past. If I describe the fact of my being in terms of days and years, saying I am so many years old, I am not, ere I have said it, I am older. I cannot stand at any fixed point and say, I am. Everything is changing, and I am changing and passing. I am, in a second, becomes I was, and no human being can finally use that word, I am. It is the very word by which God unveiled the supreme fact of His own nature to the great law-giver. Whom shall I say sent me? asked Moses, and the answer came "I am." As Moses perhaps was waiting for something to be added, for some explanation, unveiling or interpretation, the word was repeated, " - that I am. " It is the express and essential word of absolute Deity. It is a word which can only be uttered by a Being of underived existence, living in the essential fact of life, uncreated and unending. This is what Christ said in the presence of these men. Before Abraham appeared, began to be, "I am." Mark the contrast, therefore. Abraham was born and died. He is, therefore, historic, temporal, and his influence is traditional. Said Christ, I am historic, but super-historic, therefore eternal, age-abiding. There is no past tense to His being, and no future. He is at the centre of all life, never having derived, consequently His influence is not traditional, but inspirational. The Hebrew today the devout Hebrew, is influenced by Abraham; but it is a traditional influence. The Christian of today is influenced by Christ, but it is not a traditional influence. I am not influenced by the Christ of nineteen hundred years ago, but by the Christ of this hour and this place and this life. "I am," not I was. Therein is the absolute difference between Abraham and Christ, between Hebraism and Christianity. Mark what this means, and these are the terms of our poor human speech: I cannot state all the meaning of that great word, but let me attempt it in this wise: it means that Christ passed into all the dim uncertainties of the past and possessed them; that Christ speaks directly and immediately to the present, and those who hear and obey receive His own age-abiding life: that Christ encompasses all the future and controls it. I take up my book of history, and go back through all the periods. In the period of degeneration Christ is saying "I am." I go back to those earlier days of the nation when, though blundering, they were following, and there Christ says "I am." I go to the very fountain head of the Hebrew nation, and see that fine majestic figure, the friend of God and men speak of him in a tense that is past, but right there, Christ says "I am."

I go right behind the Hebrew economy and find myself amid an earlier race of men and speak of them as dead and gone; but in those dim distances Christ still stands and says "I am." This is "My day;" I get back at last to the first movements of the creative method which I do not attempt to describe, and there in the beginning also is Christ, for "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with and the Word was God ... All things were made by Him." In the twilight of creation's dawning He is "I am," a present Personality brooding over and ordering the goings of the will of God by manifestation and by speech. If I leave these past things and come into the present, what is Christ saying to us? He is not speaking with a voice that comes thrilling down the centuries. It is not an echo of a far-off voice that speaks tonight. It is the real Christ, right here, saying to us, "I am the bread of life," "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," and for the comfort of broken hearts "I am the resurrection, and the life." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the door." "I am." It is a great word. It is the essential and eternal word of underived and endless life. Jesus took it up out of the ancient economy, and when men were criticizing Him, men who only saw Him as the Galilean peasant, He spoke in human language the unutterable truth; "Before Abraham was born, I am. "

What is the very next thing I read after our text? "They took up stones therefore to cast at Him." Why did they take up stones to cast at Him? Because He had said the unutterable thing. If that declaration of Christ, "Before Abraham was born, I am," had merely been a Messianic claim, they had never taken up stones to cast at Him. They had been attempting to compel Him to a confession of Messiahship. It was because He made that supreme claim, which they understood as a claim of awful blasphemy, they took up stones to cast at Him.

In the presence of that claim, what shall we say? That Jesus was very God. If not, what then? One of two things. He was either insane, or utterly devoid of truth, and therefore a blasphemer. There is no middle course between these views. I am not going to argue them. Nineteen centuries of moral uplift and spiritual vision and the transformation of unfit souls into saints of God, do not result from insanity or lying. We are driven therefore back to the conclusion that while He was very man as I am man, by an infinite mystery that cannot be explained, and I will not be foolish enough to fry to explain it, He was also God, speaking thus in the terms of humanity what He had so often spoken face to face with men before. The Son of God had visited the earth before He came as Jesus of Nazareth. Be patient with me if I say in passing, I will not state it dogmatically, I believe that Melchisedek who met Abraham was the actual Christ. I always believe that was a Christophany, a Theophany, if you will. You may dismiss it. I know it is open to doubt in the minds of many. At least, it is certain that when under those oaks the Man spoke with Abraham, Who was called Jehovah, or the angel of Jehovah, you have that Person in the Trinity through Whom God is ever manifest in the world. He stood at the door of the tent and talked face to face with a man. At last He came tabernacling with men, revealing the essential truths concerning God. The eternal One is here now. This is His day. I have wondered sometimes whether He does not even yet take form and appear to us. We are very blind. We do not see Him. Are you quite sure that it was not He Who knocked at your door and begged a drink of cold water last week? Are you quite sure that He never garbs Himself in human appearance and sits by you? I am not. You say that is speculation and imagination. I know it. I will say anything to insist upon the truth of His living, actual, and eternal existence which He manifested ere He came in human form, as an angel, as a man, and which perhaps He still manifests to souls. It may be in the morning when He will say to some of you, "I was sick and ye visited Me," that you will be startled to find that it is more actual than you dreamed. You tell me I am credulous. I do not state this as dogmatic: but is it not true that we are living in an age which is so materialised that we imagine nothing is real save those things we can see. He Who said "I am," is closer to you now than breathing. He is the One Who was and is the One could say "I am" before Abraham was born.

That is the heart and essence of the Christian religion. It does not deny the Hebrew religion, let no man make so foolish a statement, but fulfils it. Abraham, no Christly soul can ever speak of him other than in terms of respect and admiration and love: and no Christly soul can ever use hard or harsh words of anyone descended from Abraham after the flesh. Christian men and women still declare that their Christ called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, talked to him beneath the oaks of Mamre, led him on through all the pilgrimage of faith, was the living centre of the nation even when it forgot and denied Jehovah, until at last He emerged into incarnate form, and then presently took that form up into glory, there to abide for ever more, the essential Son of the "I am" to Whom men may go in all their weakness and weariness for rest and for healing.

As I said at the beginning, so I say again at the close, no human words can unfold or explain the great mystery, but if we have seen upon the basis of His own comparison and answer to the challenge, something more of His dignity, something more of His glory, then shall we not adore Him, shall we not trust Him, shall we not find ourselves safe and saved as we yield ourselves to Him the greater than Abraham?