

Abanah or Jordan?

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MANY voices are lifted up to-day in praise of Abanah and Pharpar. People protest that the old ways of religion are narrow, and that the claim that they alone lead to God is extravagant. The world has other streams in it than the Jordan—why should I not wash in one of them? There are Greeks in history as well as Hebrews—why should I not make my choice of teacher? Zechariah speaks (8²⁸) of a time when ten men out of all the nations will take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, 'We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.' Well, it is natural for a man to set his own country first, but why should all other nations sit in thrall to Israel? People say, 'We get more good from Wordsworth, from Ruskin, from Emerson. These men really help us, raising and purifying our thoughts, why should you always drive us back upon the Bible as the one authority?' If they were quite frank, many people in all the Churches would exclaim with Peter, 'Let us here make three or thirty tabernacles, and get the good of many teachers in one place.' In this exclamation of misunderstanding, let me speak first to the advocates of Jordan, and then of Abanah.

1. Let us be candid and admit that a good deal of this protest is due to faults of our own. The Church in the past has been unjust to much that is supremely excellent. It has been so anxious to exalt the grace that is received by faith that it has been far too willing to make over to Abanah and Pharpar all the achievements and even all the good qualities of the natural man; because they do not save, they have been spoken of with a kind of impatience as if they had no significance at all. And yet, what treasures are discovered in that region! Courage, chivalry, truth, the trust of children, the ungrudging tenderness of women, the unflinching loyalty to truth of people who yet, in a technical sense, are not religious. It is not surprising that men of resolute morality should sometimes say, 'These are the things for which we care; and if they belong to Abanah and not

'Are not Abanah and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean?'—2 Kings v. 12.

to Jordan, if these are mere secular moralities and not a part of religion, our choice is quickly made.' I say these sweeping judgments on the part of Christian preachers are responsible for much of the protest of to-day.

And there is another injustice of which the Church has been guilty. After all, Abanah and Pharpar are God's rivers too, and His people have been far too slow to recognize what of His power and thought is in them. Think what books are. Our literature has grown out of a Christian civilization, and is rich in actual Christian ideas. But beyond that there are seeds of truth and of thought in writers who were before Christ or apart from Christ. The early Greek Fathers spoke of a scattered word; they felt that, in their measure, Plato and his fellows, whenever they touched their highest, became prophets and witnesses beforehand of the Christ. It was only in later days that this unwisdom appeared which inclined men in a mistaken zeal to draw the line too closely, and separate the sacred from the secular. It is never safe to say what books cannot achieve; Emerson speaks of their 'genial, *miraculous* force.' One great writer confesses that it was Wordsworth who recreated his supreme divinity, giving him a new and living Spirit in place of a Deity who had hardened into an idol, and that is a witness which might be repeated by many. God, certainly, has not left Himself without a witness in what is called secular literature. Think of what books do for our life, how much poorer it would be in emotion and hope and understanding but for them. A great writer takes you by the hand, and he leads you—a blunt and undiscerning man, with much in your conditions which is fitted to harden—into the company of people who are kinder, braver, simpler than your fellows of every day. He makes you for the time the companion of a little child, and forces you to recognize 'the frailty which appeals to forbearance, the innocence which symbolizes the heavenly, the simplicity which lies so far apart from your worldly ways.' And you lay the book

down, with thoughts at work within you which have long been strangers. That is the effect of all the greatest literature. It makes us feel vividly and with understanding conditions for which the ordinary life may give little opportunity, and so it may save us from the cramping influence of our daily business. It may keep the door open for us which leads out into the great world of men, with their real lives and pains and faith. That is not a trifling service; and if it be the duty of a Christian man to think of such things as are pure and lovely and of good report, this sphere of human achievement can never safely be ignored.

Of course, in the protest on behalf of Abanah there is a considerable element of indolence. People often say that a book does them good, or, for that matter, that a preacher does them good, because there is no difficulty in understanding him. You do not need to stir up your mind to meet and grapple with him, which for many hearers is a supreme commendation. You take a book which speaks in the language of to-day, and which raises questions about which people are talking, and it finds its audience ready made. A new novel may have far more readers in a year than Macbeth, because it yields what is in it more easily. But what would your judgment be of a man or woman who measured them on that account, and set aside the older work as out of date? Laziness has no right to dictate. A book, just because it is for all time, may require a patient and reverent study which many people will not give. Its office is to deliver them from the servitude in which they live to their own day and its little round of thoughts and questions, and make them free of the greater world of the thought and emotion of all time. That means strain, and no book is harder to read than a great part of Scripture. It is only by labour and patience and teachableness that men can find their way into it, coming a little further at every fresh return; and in the end, the sense remains with them that there is far more to be discovered yet.

So let me repeat that God is not jealous, and that His people also should not be jealous of Abanah and Pharpar. They are His rivers. He made the earth, and He looks on it with nothing of disdain. Even to those who might be called His enemies, He does not grudge their virtues. His loving-kindness is over *all* His works, and we should learn something of His large indulgence.

'Divinity need not be ashamed,' says an old writer, 'to wear the jewels and earrings of Egypt;' they are in many things so full of lustre, and so excellent. The Church has been learning this lesson, and yet the record of her disdain and narrowness lives on in the impatience and protest of men to-day. Here are books, they say, which serve us greatly, here are qualities of character which are wholly noble and lovely, and yet these books and qualities are under suspicion. They are said not to be of Jordan. Well, if that be so, say these protesters, we have the less regard for Jordan. That is a fair retort; and it is one which we, who believe in our hearts in the power of Jordan, must guard against.

2. But now, let me speak to those who are advocates of Abanah. People who express their preference in this way are in danger of forgetting what the question really is about. When a man makes comparison of Jordan or Abanah, of Scripture or poetry, of evangelism or ethical discourse, he is apt to lay stress on what is not the point. I find this more interesting, he says, fresher and more original; I prefer this man for his style, for his wit and charm. But that is not where the matter is decided, and he who thinks of Christ and of Christian preaching only in that way has not really faced the question. Let me put the matter thus: the great French preacher Ravignan said to Lacordaire, 'I hear that you had such a crowd at your last sermon that the people were sitting even on the top of the confessionals.' 'Ah! perhaps,' said the other; 'but you manage to make them go *into* the confessionals.' That is a real distinction. There is the one interest—of a spectator, who admires from outside, and there is the entirely distinct and separate interest of the man who wants to possess. The one preacher had the people clustering like bees on every vantage ground in the cathedral, and they admired and preferred,—and by his own confession, went away unaltered. The other armed his words with hooks and stings, and when the people—far fewer this time—went away, the word went with them, and wrought in them. In which case would you say that Christ was truly preached? Is it a message for admiration or a message with result?

Now when we talk of Jordan and Abanah, let us make the point of contrast clear. Emerson says: 'People imagine that the place the Bible holds in the world it owes to miracles. It owes it

simply to the fact that it came out of a profounder depth of thought than any other book, and the effect must be proportionate.' But that does not yet bring us to where the matter must be judged. Here was a man stricken with leprosy—a sort of living death; it had begun, and for all that the skill of his time could do, it was bound to run on to the end. Leprosy had none of the grace which gives a man, at least, a speedy quittance from his pains; slowly it wore life out, darkening, in the meanwhile, every prospect. Nothing had taste or savour, nothing was cheering; horror and strange loneliness waited for the victim. And it was in view of that the choice had to be made. A thousand things might be said for Abanah, but if a man wants healing, other considerations are irrelevant. His crowded and various life is narrowed to the one consideration, I am a sick man, a lost man. Love of country might have its word, the memory of the glint of pools which he had known in his boyhood, and the sense that, in comparison, Jordan's turbid waters were unlovely. But then, scattering all such memories, the other thought drove in, but could Abanah at its fairest give a leper health? Friends, the Christian faith asks for judgment not on the ground of the stimulus which it has for minds, or the charm which it also can disclose when rightly handled; it stands or falls as a religion of salvation, a religion of deliverance. In this world there has never been wanting the agonizing cry for help. Some of us know of themselves what draws it forth. It comes from men like Naaman, stricken with mortal sickness and facing hopelessly out towards the dark. It comes when men are overwhelmed by the blind perplexity of the world, in which everything seems awry. It comes when a man is crushed by the burden of himself, by the sense that his own life is out of joint; and as he dwells on the thought of his demerit, he feels that for all that, he or the whole universe of creatures can attempt he is beyond recovery. And just because these feelings are near and possible for every one, Jesus Christ is all the world's Saviour. It is easy for men standing by to try, and soothe him. The horror is not in their hearts, and they cannot even imagine how a remedy should be seriously desired. But the horror is in his heart—a principle of judgment going on to anticipate the judgments of a higher tribunal with more effectual sentences. Of course the man of prosperous common sense suspects

delusion, but there are many things which we cannot see when we are well and prosperous, and there is a tremendous reality in the horror of a man who knows that he is lost, and who does not know where to turn. That is where Christ offers Himself. The Christian faith is nothing less than 'a casket of precious remedies,' and what sets it up above all systems besides is its power of bringing health and hope to a desperate creature. It claims that it can do something, that it can bring back purity of heart, and the settled peace, and the joy of reconciliation. If you are to judge between Abanah and Jordan, it is there that the judgment must be made.

Now when that is said, we need no longer be surprised that the remedy should not wait upon our liking. Why Jordan? Are there no other streams? Will what lies close to my home not do as well? That is talking foolishly, for we have nothing to do with preferences here, but with effectiveness. There is no wanton avoidance of what is homely, no flouting of human nature; there is the search for what will do the work. If you wish for stimulus, interest, debate, you may find them also within the Church of Jesus, but these are not its office. It speaks of salvation. The others may interest and charm, but soon their influence finds its limit. Christ wishes to make another man of you, and your preference for them may simply mean that you are not prepared for change. 'What meets us in the Gospels,' says Estlin Carpenter, 'is not so much novelty of teaching in the sense of the announcement of truths unknown before, but newness of being, originality of character, a fresh outlook upon the world, an unexpected demand for action, a closer walk with God.' 'Newness of being,'—that is what Christ claims to give, a clean heart, a heart which hopes and which receives; and 'an unexpected demand for action.' He says to you who have lived for twenty years impotent and futile, Arise and walk. Begin to care for other men; bear their burdens, and think less about your own. I bore a cross; come you after me, bearing a cross also. It is no wonder that all the indolence of our nature is in revolt against a remedy like that. Arise!—and I cannot arise. Some think it too good to be true, and so they will not try it; and some think it too hard and forbidding, and they go away in a rage. But wisdom is justified of her children.

The remedy which Jesus offers is in bringing us to God. 'I am the Way,' He said, 'no man cometh to the Father but by me.' He, who is Mediator, faces you with His promise that you may be the friend of God from this very moment. That is salvation; out of the whirl of unsubstantial things, which come and go, to attain to Him who is true. Sickness and loneliness can well be borne when that is attained. The tyranny of things visible is relaxed when that Invisible is revealed. Do you remember what Bunyan says of Christian when he came to the Cross?—'The burden loosed from his shoulders and fell from off his back into the sepulchre, and I saw it no more.' That is the experience of every man who comes to see how God takes upon Himself the task of setting His creatures right. I fear that much of our preference for Abanah is due to our human unwillingness to meet God. We have our own thoughts about Him, and we welcome new thoughts, with which we can play for a while and then lay them aside when serious matters of business intrude. But nakedly to see Him and 'to hear him as the heart heareth,' so that there is no room for doubt, to lie naked and open in

His sight, how many of us shrink from that? And that is what the Bible lives for; the end of Scripture is not merely to give us thoughts of God, 'but to bring us into a human communion of love with God.' Christ shows us what God is, but, more than that, He helps us to Him, and makes our relation with Him simple and childlike. Looking to these desperate conditions of our mortal life, where men often have to cry aloud for help, He says, 'Ask, and ye shall receive.' If you, with all your faults, give your child what good you can, will your Heavenly Father not give the Holy Spirit to those that *ask*? Jordan lies as near as that, across your very path, a word to believe, a Friend to trust, a gift to accept, and the mere receiving of it may change the face of the world for you. Sometimes our pride is up in arms,—that is when we are little conscious of need; but there are also days when above all feelings is the thankfulness that we have to do no more—only to wash in Jordan, to go down into the river at our feet. Ah, friends, if any of your hearts are sore to-day, you will rejoice to hear of a remedy so near and so plain.

Recent Foreign Theology.

The Psychology of Religion.

ONE of the most encouraging signs of the times is the number of books, from the pens of men of real ability and scholarship, which have recently appeared on the subject of Christian experience. Far too long had the fashion prevailed in the theological world of attributing intellectuality to works dealing with the *prolegomena* but denying it to works devoted to the *interiora*; so that a book remotely resembling the *Evidences* of Paley had far more chance of being crowned with academic recognition than one of the same nature as Jonathan Edwards' *Religious Affections*. Not infrequently this was most unjust, for many books on the subjects which lie on the borderland between philosophy or science and theology were, in spite of their pretentiousness and obscurity, very shallow, while deep thinking was often put into books intended to feed the piety of the common Christian.

But a welcome change has taken place, and we seem on the way to recognize that the most meritorious theological writing is that which treats of those experiences which all Christians acknowledge as the essence and secret of their religion. Professor James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* has been greeted with enthusiasm and sold in thousands. It appears to have been the outcome of the association of the distinguished author with Starbuck, whose queer volume on *The Psychology of Religion* has also found many readers. From within the Ritschlian camp has come quite recently *Der Begriff der Bekehrung*, by Johannes Herzog, which has not yet attracted much attention but is an extremely able performance. And now from Henri Bois we receive, together, two books of the same character, *Le Réveil au Pays de Galles* and *Quelques Réflexions sur la Psychologie des Réveils*.

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