Genesis - Commentaries by G.S. Byford

Hebron, Hebron: Part 1

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The references to Hebron in Scripture are brief and scanty, but they are concise enough to give the place a typical value hardly exceeded by any other city mentioned in Scripture. Abraham purchased it, and there Sarah died; Caleb conquered it, and there too David reigned for seven years. The name of its builder is not revealed to us. Nor does the statement that “Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt” (Num. 13:22) throw much light upon its history; yet to the believer, the reference is not without significance. The world’s wisdom and learning (“the princes of Zoan are become fools,” Isa. 19:13) are indeed baffled by the simple faith that takes God at His word, and finds its triumph in the proved impotence of nature.1

It is well that we should rightly understand the relations of the Christian to the world. Position in it we have none, as the followers of a Christ rejected by the world but received up in glory. As God is sovereign, so His relation to the world cannot be ours, yet Christ’s present relation to it now determines ours. But for the presence of sin, blessing in the world would have been the rule and not the exception. As it is, it is necessary that both man and the world should be morally prepared to receive the blessing. The evil which the first man has brought in must be borne away (John 1:29), and cast out by the Second man, the Lord from heaven.

Now God had proposed to Abram blessing, not for himself alone, but for the whole earth. “Jehovah had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:1-3).

This revelation of the divine purpose received by faith is what determined Abram’s walk in the land of Canaan, as well as his attitude towards the world of his day. After the death of his father Terah, there yet to Abram remained, in the person of Lot his nephew, what hindered his full adherence to the divine call. The worldliness of Lot soon made a separation inevitable, and Abram, for the first time, realized “the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” “And Jehovah said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward; for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth; so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land, in the length of it, and in the breadth of it; for I will give it thee. Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto Jehovah” (Gen. 13:14-18).

Here then we have the typical character of Hebron fully established. It is the dwelling-place of the man of faith; and not only his dwellingplace, but his place of worship. To Abram the altar and the tent were here inseparable. The tent bespoke the pilgrim character, whilst the altar signified that his links were with God and with heaven. The God of glory had called him out of his country and from his kindred. In obeying the call he judged the world as an unsuitable dwelling-place for one who might at any moment be called upon to entertain heavenly visitors (see chap. 17). Lot had never been a partaker of this heavenly calling; and indeed the path of faith is more frequently trodden alone than in company (compare Rom. 14:22). We may peradventure find in service a true yokefellow, but how little real companionship in the daily walk of faith! This leads us to the consideration of Hebron in connection with the “purchased possession.”

In Gen. 22 some great and precious realities are prefigured which have to do with the removal of the sin of the world, when man will then enjoy the presence of God in the new heaven and new earth, without the necessity, as now, of his going out of the world for it. The church is builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. God dwells in it, it is therefore heavenly in character. Of believers now in it the Lord Jesus could say, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” The mutual love of the Father and of the Son, the obedience of the Son to the Father, the death of Christ as the burnt offering, these are all very vividly presented, and the results are commensurate with the grandeur of that mighty work wrought on the cross. In the new heavens and the new earth wherein righteousness shall dwell, God will be no stranger to man. See Rev. 21:1-5, where this eternally abiding and blessed scene is disclosed to us.

Gen. 24 gives us in type the call of the bride and the marriage of the Lamb; but the chosen of the Father leaves the world in its guilt and distance from God to be united to the Bridegroom on high, and “so shall we be forever with the Lord” (cf. Rev. 19:17). Would that the blessed hope—peculiarly that of the church—might be more effective in producing present separation from the world, and attachment of heart to the One for whom we wait! The death of Christ has for the present closed God’s probation of the world (“Now is the judgment of this world,” said our Lord in view of His cross), and the call of the bride is now for heaven—not the earth. “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto me” (John 12). There is a new center and gathering point, and a power which draws to a Christ who died but who is now risen and exalted on high. The bride is for heaven, and as Isaac (type of Christ risen, Gen. 22, Rom. 9, Heb. 11:19) was not to go to Mesopotamia, out of which his father had been called (24:6), but the bride was to be brought to Isaac in Canaan, so in the Antitype, God by the Spirit is bringing through the wilderness many sons to glory, to be united to His Son in heaven. Then when the Lord Jesus is revealed to the world, it is in judgment, and His bride comes with Him (Rev. 19). Meanwhile, the world seeth Him no more.

Gen. 23, which gives us the death and burial of Sarah, occupies a significant place between the offering up of Isaac in the chapter before, and the call of the bride for Isaac in the chapter that follows. We have thus the death and resurrection of Christ (Isaac); the death and putting away of Israel, of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came (Rom. 9:3-5; 11:15); and meanwhile, consequent on the nation’s rejection of Christ, the Holy Ghost taking out of the world now (Acts 15:14) a people for His name, even Gentiles. And so, believers now are espoused not yet married—as a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2). Convoyed through the wilderness, by the Holy Ghost, we are looking for the Bridegroom who is coming to call us up to meet Him in the air (unseen by the world), to be forever with the Lord. Then will follow the blessed consummation, when the marriage of the Lamb shall come.

What as to Abram in this chapter? The bereaved heart of Abram found consolation in the assurance which faith gave of the certain fulfillment of the promises, and in the hope of resurrection. His faith and hope were in God, and manifested their presence, not in making light of the trials and difficulties of the way, either special or ordinary, but in considering all in the light of the divine counsels—as to the earth, the land of Canaan in gift but not in possession, the supremacy of his seed attested and guaranteed by the oath of God. These were the things that influenced his actions. It was not the independence of a wealthy man who did not choose to be debtor to a stranger; but the knowledge which he had of God characterized him as a stranger here. He confessed himself a “stranger and a sojourner” with them. They answered, that he was a “prince of God” (margin).

Perhaps we have here, further, an illustration of what the heavenly calling is, and what it involves. Prosperity is too often a snare to the believer, who is in danger of using (or, misusing) this very mercy for settling down in comfort here, thus compromising his testimony to God and to heaven. Here was a man whom God had greatly enriched, refusing to be anything but a sojourner in the land which he should afterward receive for an inheritance, content with the purchase of sufficient land for a grave! Thus it was that Hebron became the resting-place of the heirs of promise, who died in faith. Closely connected with the hopes of the living it came to be even in death a witness of that faith which lives and survives the decay of nature, because resting upon God’s word. The Spirit of God in Heb. 11 sets the stamp of divine approbation upon this character of faith, that we may be encouraged to run with patience the race set before us. “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned; but now they seek a better, that is, a heavenly. Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he has prepared for them a city” (vers. 13-16).

[G. S. B.]

(To be continued)

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