

Module 206: Abelard

The Story of My Misfortunes, by Peter Abelard; translated by Henry Adams Bellows. Copyright 1922 [reissued by in New York by Macmillan, 1972, with no notification of copyright renewal]. Selected by Stephen Tomkins. Edited for the web by Dan Graves.

“While I was utterly absorbed in pride and sensuality, God’s grace, the cure for both diseases, was forced upon me...”

Abelard Introduction

Peter Abelard, son of a noble Breton house, was a French philosopher. He studied logic, wandering from school to school until he came to Paris, still under the age of twenty. While under the teaching of William of Champeaux, he overcame his master in discussion, beginning a long duel that issued in the downfall of the philosophic theory of Realism. At twenty-two, he set up a school of his own, although opponents barred him from teaching in Paris. Eventually he overcame that restriction, and, without previous training or special study, triumphed in theological debates. He stepped into a chair at Notre-Dame.

Thousands of students came to hear him but other passions began to stir him. He set out to seduce Heloise, a girl known for her scholarship and beauty. To do so, he sought and gained a footing in Fulbert’s house and became tutor to the maiden. He succeeded only too well and boasted openly of his triumph. Heloise gave birth to a son. To appease her furious uncle, Abelard proposed marriage, under the condition that it should be kept secret, in order not to mar his prospects of advancement in the church; but Heloise would not hear of it, fearing to hurt his career. Finally she yielded, Fulbert broadcast the marriage, she denied it for Abelard’s sake, and fled to a convent. Fulbert, believing that Abelard was trying to be rid of the girl, emasculated him. Jealous for Heloise, who was not yet twenty, Abelard persuaded her to become a nun.

Now aged forty, Abelard found the solitude of a monk unbearable and began teaching once more. Again he made enemies and was condemned. Confined to a monastery, he deliberately irritated everyone around him. In his fifties, he wrote the autobiography

from which the excerpt below is taken, to which Heloise responded with three passionate letters that show her in a better light than all his clever words did him.

In Abelard's later years, Bernard of Clairvaux attacked his rationalism and procured his condemnation. Abelard died while traveling to Rome to refute Bernard. Heloise took charge of his remains and was eventually buried beside him.

Although condemned in his own day, Abelard's ideas were essentially those adopted by the church in the following century.

I came to Paris, where the art of logical debate was flourishing, and took lessons from William of Champeaux, a great and distinguished intellectual. At first he liked me a lot, but in the end I upset him deeply by often attacking his opinions in debate, and sometimes I was judged the winner. All the foremost students resented this because I was so young and new to study.

This is how my misfortunes started, which have followed me to the present day. The more famous I got, the more jealousy people felt.

[Abelard starts his own school, which will eventually become the first ever Western University. From this small start to my school, my fame in the art of debating spread, till it began to eclipse not just my fellow students but our teacher. So, more confident in myself than ever, I moved my school to Corbeil, right near Paris, so that I would have more opportunity to embarrass him in debate....

My teaching won such authority that even the most devoted students of my former master, now flocked to my school. The one who had succeeded to my master's chair in the Paris school offered me his post, so that he could become my student.

[Abelard took up theology] In this subject Anselm of Laon, [not the same Anselm who wrote *Why God Became Man*]

had enjoyed the greatest renown for many years.

I looked up this respected man - whose fame was a result of tradition rather than his own talent or intellect. If anyone came to him in confusion on any subject, he went away more confused still. He seemed excellent to those who just listened to him, but anyone who asked him questions realized he was a nobody.

I went to his lectures less and less often - which upset his devoted followers. One day, they asked me what I thought of his lectures on the Bible. I — who had only studied logic — replied that they were very useful for the salvation of the soul, but that it appeared quite extraordinary to me that educated people should not be able to understand the Bible simply by studying it with the commentaries, without the help of a teacher. They laughed at me, and asked if I would dare to do this myself. I said I would try it if they wanted, at which they jeered all the more.

“All right,” they said. “Give us an exposition of a difficult passage of Scripture, and we’ll put your boast to the test.” And they chose that most obscure book Ezekiel.

I accepted the challenge, and invited them to attend a lecture the very next day. They told me I should spend longer on it, offsetting my inexperience by diligent work. I replied indignantly that I was in the habit of succeeding not by practice, but by ability. Only a few people came to this first lecture of mine, because they all thought it would be ridiculous. And yet those who came were so impressed they sang its praises to everybody, and soon crowds were coming to my lectures.

Now this respected man I have told you about was furiously jealous, and began to persecute me for my lectures on the Scriptures as bitterly as William had. So this venerable coward had the impudence to ban me from writing my

commentaries in his school. He claimed this was because they would probably contain blunders, due to my inexperience, which would reflect badly on him. When his students heard about this, they were shocked by this undisguised spite, the worst seen in the history of the world. His obvious rancor redounded to my honor, and did nothing but make me more famous.

For several years I peacefully directed the Paris school from which I had been driven out. I completed the glosses on Ezekiel which I had begun at Laon and everyone who read them said I was as skilled in theology as I had proved myself in philosophy. My school grew and I made a lot of money as well as glory for myself. But prosperity always puffs up the foolish and worldly comfort weakens the soul, leaving it an easy prey to fleshly temptations. I, who had come to regard myself as the only philosopher remaining in the whole world, and had ceased to fear any further disturbance of my peace, began to loosen the rein on my desires, although till now I had always been perfectly self-controlled. The greater progress I made in my lectures on philosophy and theology, the further I slipped from them in the way I lived my life.

And while I was utterly absorbed in pride and sensuality, God's grace, the cure for both diseases, was forced upon me, - though if I had the choice I would, to tell the truth, have shunned it...

There lived in Paris a young girl called Heloise, the niece of one Canon Fulbert. Fulbert's love for her was equaled only by his desire that she should have the best education possible. She was a beauty, and extraordinarily well-educated. This virtue, being rare among women, made her the most worthy of renown in the entire kingdom. After carefully considering all these qualities which usually attract lovers, I decided to unite her with me in the bonds of love - which seemed an easy enough thing to do considering my

fame, youth and handsomeness. I would not have feared rejection from any woman I chose.

[Abelard persuades Fulbert to let him lodge with them as a tutor for Heloise.] We were united first under one roof, and then in our hearts that burned with love. Pretending to study we spent our hours in the happiness of love. In order to allay suspicion I sometimes hit her, but in love, not anger. Then what? No degree of love's progress was left untried by our passion, and if there was any wonder as yet unknown to love, we discovered it. Our inexperience of such delights made us all the more ardent in our pursuit of them, so that our thirst for one another was never quenched.

The more this rapture absorbed me, the less time I gave to philosophy and teaching. I hated the school, and I was always tired. My lecturing became utterly careless and lukewarm, a mere matter of habit. The songs I wrote were no longer about the secrets of philosophy, but love songs - you will have heard of them, because they are now world famous, usually sung by worldly people. And you cannot imagine how upset my students were at the chaos of my mind.

We lost all sense of shame and found ever more opportunities to do what should have shamed us. In the end, like Mars and Venus in the story, we were caught in the act. Soon afterwards, Heloise wrote to me in great joy to say she was pregnant. So one night, I stole her secretly away from her uncle's house, sending her to my home country. She stayed with my sister until she gave birth to a son, whom she named Astrolabe.

I took her to my homeland to marry her, but she violently disapproved of this, because of the danger and the disgrace it would bring me. What penalties, she said, would the world rightly demand of her if she should rob it of so shining a light! What curses would follow such a loss to the Church,

what tears among the philosophers would result from such a marriage!

But when she found that she could not dissuade me from my folly, and because she could not bear to offend me, she gave in.

So, after our son was born, we left him in my sister's care, and returned to Paris where we were secretly married. A few days later, in the early morning, having prayed there all night, we were married before her uncle and a few friends. We went our separate ways and did all we could to conceal our marriage, but her uncle, to assuage his disgrace, broke his word by telling people about it. Heloise swore it was untrue, but that made him punish her repeatedly. When I heard about this, I sent her to a convent near Paris, where she dressed as a nun.

Her uncle thought that I had got rid of her by forcing her to become a nun. Violently enraged, he and his family plotted against me, and one night while I slept they broke in, and enacted a most cruel and most shameful punishment, which astounded the whole world. They cut off those parts of my body with which I had caused their grief.

In the morning, the whole city gathered in front of my house. Words cannot describe their astonishment, grief and uproar - all of which only increased my own suffering. The clerics, especially my pupils, gave me greater torment, than my wounds. In truth I felt the disgrace more than the pain of my body. My incessant thought was of the renown which had so delighted me, now utterly blotted out so swiftly by bad luck. I saw too how just and appropriate God's punishment was.

What path lay open to me after this? How could I ever hold my head high when every finger would point at me in scorn and every tongue speak my blistering shame? I was

overwhelmed when I remembered that, according to the dread letter of the law, God holds eunuchs in such abomination that men thus maimed are forbidden to enter a church because of their filthiness. [Deuteronomy 23:1.]

I must confess that it was the overwhelming sense of my disgrace rather than any ardor for conversion to the religious life that drove me to seek the seclusion of the monastic cloister. Heloise had already, at my bidding, taken the veil and entered a convent. And so we both put on the sacred garments.

Many clerics beseeched me that now, since I was through with learning for the sake of fame, I should pursue it for the love of God alone. They told me to use the talent God had given to me diligently, as he would surely demand it back with interest. [Matthew 25:15] Having worked for the rich before, they said, I should now devote myself to teaching the poor. I could devote my life to study in freedom from the snares of the flesh and the tumultuous life of this world. I would I become a philosopher less of this world than of God.

As befitted my profession, I lectured mainly on theology, but I did not stop teaching the secular arts altogether - to which I was more accustomed, and what my many students wanted. But I used the latter as a hook, luring my students by this bait to the study of the true philosophy.

Discussion Starters

Abelard seems to blame the jealousy of others for all his problems. "This is how my misfortunes started, which have followed me to the present day. The more famous I got, the more jealousy people felt." Do you think he is looking in the wrong direction? What part did his own character have to do with his troubles? Are there statements that seem to blame others for his own actions? Does he ever genuinely take responsibility for his actions?

Does Abelard come across as arrogant?

Is a person automatically a Christian because they study and teach Christian theology? What makes a true Christian? Are there indications that Abelard followed Christ?

Do you think Abelard truly loved Heloise? How do we know the difference between lust and love?

Was Abelard's behavior more shocking because he took advantage of a pupil? How does society react when teachers do that today?

Why do you think Abelard was so embarrassed by what his students and fellow teachers thought of him?

On the whole, how do you assess Abelard's account? Do you believe he is telling the truth about his secret marriage with Heloise?

What does Abelard have to teach us today?

Bible Verses:

Deuteronomy 23:1

Matthew 25:15