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

**EXODUS-021. THE LOVE OF THINE ESPOUSALS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And He said unto Moses, Come up unto the Lord, thou, and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; and worship ye afar off. 2. And Moses alone shall come near the Lord; but they shall not come nigh, neither shall the people go up with him. 3. And Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do. 4. And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5. And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt-offerings, and sacrificed peace-offerings of oxen unto the Lord. 6. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basons; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. 8. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words. 9. Then went up Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel; 10. And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under His feet as it were a pared work of a sapphire-stone, and as it were the body of heaven in His clearness. 11. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink. 12. And the Lord said unto Moses, Come up to Me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them."*

*Exodus 24:1-12*

An effort is needed to feel what a tremendous and unique fact is narrated in these words. Next to the incarnation, it is the most wonderful and far-reaching moment in history. It is the birthday of a nation, which is God's son. It is the foundation stone of all subsequent revelation. Its issues oppress that ancient people to-day, and its promises are not yet exhausted. It is history, not legend, nor the product of later national vanity. Whatever may come of analysing sources and of discovering redactors, Israel held a relation to God all its own; and that relation was constituted thus.

**I. Note the preliminaries of the covenant.**

The chapter begins with the command to Moses to come up to the mount, with Aaron and other representatives of the people. But he was already there when the command was given, and a difficulty has been found (or, shall we say, made) out of this. The explanation seems reasonable and plain enough, that the long section extending from Exodus xx. 22, and containing the fundamental laws as spoken by God, is closed by our verses 1 and 2, which imply, in the very order to Moses to come up with his companions, that he must first go down to bring them. God dismisses him as a king might end an audience with his minister, by bidding him return with attendants. The singular use of the third person in reference to Moses in the third verse is not explained by supposing another writer; for, whoever wrote it, it would be equally anomalous.

So he comes down from the stern cloud-encircled peak to that great plain where the encampment lay, and all eyes watch his descent. The people gather round him, eager and curious. He recounts all the judgments, the series of laws, which had been lodged in his mind by God, and is answered by the many-voiced shout of too swiftly promised obedience. Glance over the preceding chapters, and you will see how much was covered by all that the Lord hath spoken. Remember that every lip which united in that lightly made vow drew its last breath in the wilderness, because of disobedience, and the burst of homage becomes a sad witness to human weakness and changefulness. The glory of God flashed above them on the barren granite, the awful voice had scarcely died into desert silence, nerves still tingled with excitement, and wills were bowed before Jehovah, manifestly so near. For a moment, the people were ennobled, and obedience seemed easy. They little knew what they were saying in that brief spasm of devotion. It was high-water then, but the tide soon turned, and all the ooze and ugliness, covered now, lay bare and rotting. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. We may take the lesson to ourselves, and see to it that emotion consolidates into strenuous persistency, and does not die in the very excitement of the vow.

The pledge of obedience was needed before the Covenant could be made, and, as we shall find, was reiterated in the very centre of the ceremonial ratification. For the present, it warranted Moses in preparing for the morrow's ritual. His first step was to prepare a written copy of the laws to which the people had sworn. Here we come across an old, silenced battery from which a heavy fire used to be directed against the historical accuracy of the Pentateuch. Alphabetic writing was of a later date. There could not have been a written code. The statement was a mere attempt of a later age to claim antiquity for comparatively modern legislation. It was no more historical than similar traditions in other countries, Sibylline books, etc. All that is out of court now. Perhaps some other guns will be spiked in due time, that make a great noise just at present. Then comes the erection of a rude altar, surrounded by twelve standing stones, just as on the east of Jordan we may yet see dolmens and menhirs. The altar represents the divine presence; and the encircling stones, Israel gathered around its God. The group is a memorial and a witness to the people,--and a witness against them, if disobedient. Thus two permanent records were prepared, the book and the monument. The one which seemed the more lasting has perished; the more fragile has endured, and will last to the world's end.

**II. Note the rite of ratification of the covenant.**

The ceremonial is complex and significant. We need not stay on the mere picture, impressive and, to our eyes, strange as it is, but rather seek to bring out the meaning of these smoking offerings, and that blood flung on the altar and on the crowd. First came two sorts of sacrifices, offered not by priests, but by selected young men, probably one for each tribe, whose employment in sacrificial functions shows the priestly character of the whole nation, according to the great words of Exodus xix. 6. Burnt-offerings and peace-offerings differed mainly in the use made of the sacrifice, which was wholly consumed by fire in the former, while it was in part eaten by the offerer in the latter. The one symbolised entire consecration; the other, communion with God on the basis of sacrifice. The sin-offering does not appear here, as being of later origin, and the product of the law, which deepened the consciousness of transgression. But these sacrifices, at the threshold of the covenant, receive an expiatory character by the use made of the blood, and witness to the separation between God and man, which renders amity and covenant friendship impossible, without a sacrifice.

They must have yielded much blood. It is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two parties to the covenant, like the cloven animals in Abraham's covenant. One half is sprinkled on the altar, or, as the word means, swung,--which suggests a larger quantity and a more vehement action than sprinkling does. That drenching of the altar with gore is either a piece of barbarism or a solemn symbol of the central fact of Christianity no less than of Judaism, and a token that the only footing on which man can be received into fellowship with God is through the offering of a pure life, instead of the sinner, which, accepted by God, covers or expiates sin. There can be no question that the idea of expiation is at the very foundation of the Old Testament ritual. It is fashionable to regard the expiatory element of Christianity as Hebrew old clothes, but the fact is the other way about. It is not that Christianity has not been able to rid itself of a rude and false conception, but that Judaism had its sacrifices appointed by God, in order to prepare the way for the true offering, which takes away sin.

The expiation by blood having been thus made, the hindrances to the nation's entering into covenant are removed. Therefore follows in logical order the next step, their formal (alas! how purely formal it proved to be) taking on themselves its obligations. The freshly written book is produced, and read there, to the silent people, before the bloody altar, beneath the peak of Sinai. Again the chorus of assent from a thousand throats echoes among the rocks. They accept the conditions. They had done so last night; but this is the actual contract on their part, and its place in the whole order of the ceremony is significant. It follows expiation, without which man cannot enter into friendship with God, without the acceptance of which man will not yield himself in obedience. The vows which God approves are those of men whose sins are covered.

The final step was the sprinkling of the people with the blood. The division of the blood into two portions signifies that it had an office in regard to each party to the covenant. If it had been possible to pour it all on the altar, and then all on the people, that would have been done. The separation into two portions was inevitable; but in reality it is the same blood which, sprinkled on the altar, expiates, and on the worshipper, consecrates, cleanses, unites to God, and brings into covenant with Him. Hence Moses accompanies the sprinkling of the people with the explanation, This is the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you, upon all these conditions (Rev. Ver. margin). It ratifies the compact on both sides. God hath made it, in accepting the sprinkled blood; they have made it, in being sprinkled therewith. But while the rite sets forth the great gospel truth of expiation, the Covenant moves within the region of law. It is made on the basis of all these words, and is voidable by disobedience. It is the Magna Charta of the nation, and its summing up is this do, and thou shalt live. Its promises are mainly of outward guardianship and national blessings. And these are suspended by it, as they were in fact contingent, on the national observance of the national vow. The general idea of a covenant is that of a compact between two parties, each of whom comes under obligations contingent on the other's discharge of his. Theologians have raised the question whether God's covenant is of this kind. Surely it is. His promises to Israel had an if, and the fulfilment of the conditions necessarily secured the accomplishment of the promises. The ritual of the first covenant transcends the strictly retributive compact which it ratified, and shadows a gospel beyond law, even the new covenant which brings better gifts, and does not turn on do, but simply on the sprinkling with the blood of Jesus. The words of Moses were widened to carry a blessing beyond his thoughts, which was disclosed when, in an upper chamber, a dying man said to the twelve representatives of the true Israel, This is the new covenant in My blood, drink ye all of it. The blood which Moses sprinkled gave ritual cleansing, but it remained outside the man. The blood of Jesus gives true purification, and passes into our veins to become our life. The covenant by Moses was do and live; that in Christ is believe and live. Moses brought commandments, and on them his covenant was built; Christ brings gifts, and His covenant is all promises, which are ours on the simple condition of taking them.

**III. Note the vision and feast on the basis of the covenant.**

The little company that climbed the mountain, venturing within the fence, represented the whole people. Aaron and his sons were the destined priests. The elders were probably seventy, because that number is the product of the two perfect numbers, and perhaps with allusion to the seventy souls who went down into Egypt with Jacob. It is emphatically said that they saw the God of Israel, for that day's covenant had made him so in a new closeness of relationship. In token of that new access to and possession in Him, which was henceforth to be the prerogative of the obedient people, some manifestation of His immediate presence was poured on their astonished eyes. It is needless to inquire its nature, or to ask how such a statement is consistent with the spirituality of the divine nature, or with what this same book of Exodus says, There shall no man see Me, and live. The plain intention is to assert that there was a visible manifestation of the divine presence, but no attempt is made to describe it. Our eyes are stayed at the pavement beneath His feet, which was blue as sapphire, and bright as the cloudless sky gleaming above Sinai. It is enough to learn that the secret of the Lord is with them to whom He shows His covenant; that, by the power of sacrifice, a true vision of God may be ours, which is in a mirror, darkly, indeed, but yet is real and all sufficing. Before the covenant was made, Israel had been warned to keep afar lest He should break through on them, but now He laid not His hand upon them; for only blessing can stream from His presence now, and His hand does not crush, but uphold.

Nor is this all which we learn of the intercourse with God which is possible on the ground of His covenant. They did eat and drink. That may suggest that the common enjoyments of the natural life are in no way inconsistent with the vision of God; but more probably it is meant to teach a deeper lesson. We have remarked that the ritual of the peace-offering included a feast on the sacrifice before the Lord, by which was signified communion with Him, as at His table, and this meal has the same meaning. They who stand in covenant relations with God, feed and feast on a sacrifice, and thereby hold fellowship with Him, since He too has accepted the sacrifice which nourishes them. So that strange banquet on Sinai taught a fact which is ever true, prophesied the deepest joys of Christian experience, which are realised in the soul that eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, and dimly shadowed the yet future festival, when, cleansed and consecrated by His blood, they who have made a covenant with Him by His sacrifice, shall be gathered unto Him in the heavenly mount, where He makes a feast of fat things and wines on the lees well refined, and there shall sit, for ever beholding His glory, and satisfied with the provisions of His house.