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

**GENESIS-042. JOSEPH, THE PRIME MINISTER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is? And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou art: Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled: only in the throne will I be greater than thou. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck; And he made him to ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried before him, Bow the knee: and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I am Pharaoh, and without thee shall no man lift up his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-paaneah; and he gave him to wife Asenath the daughter of Poti-pherah priest of On. And Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt. And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. And in the seven plenteous years the earth brought forth by handfuls. And he gathered up all the food of the seven years, which were in the land of Egypt, and laid up the food in the cities: the food of the field, which was round about every city, laid he up in the same."*

*Genesis 41:38-48*

At seventeen years of age Joseph was sold for a slave; at thirty he was prime minister of Egypt (Gen. 37:2; 41:46). How long his prison life lasted is uncertain; but it was long enough for the promises contained in his early dreams to try him (Ps. 105:19) whether his faith would stand apparent disappointment and weary delay. Like all the Scripture narratives, this history of Joseph has little to say about feelings, and prefers facts. But we can read between the lines, and be tolerably sure that the thirteen years of trial were well endured, and that the inward life had grown so as to fit him for his advancement. We have here a full-length portrait of the prime minister, or vizier, which brings out three points--his elevation, his naturalisation, and his administration.

Joseph had not only interpreted Pharaoh's dream, but had suggested a policy in preparation for the coming famine. He had recommended the appointment of a wise and discreet man, with supreme authority over the land. Pharaoh first consulted his servants, and, with their consent, possibly not very hearty, appointed the proposer of the plan as its carrier-out, quoting to him his own words, wise and discreet.

The sudden installing of an unknown prisoner in high office has often been thought hard to believe, and has been pointed to as proof of the legendary character of the story. But the ground on which Pharaoh put it goes far to explain it. He and his servants had come to believe that God spoke through this man, that the Spirit of God was in him. So here was a divinely sent messenger, whom it would be impiety and madness to reject. Observe that Pharaoh and Joseph both speak in this chapter of God. There was a common ground of recognition of a divine Being on which they met. The local colour of the story indicates a period before the fuller revelation, which drew so broad a line of demarcation between Israel and the other nations.

Joseph's sudden promotion is made the more intelligible by the probability which the study of Egyptian history has given, that the Pharaoh who made him his second in command was one of the Hyksos conquerors who dominated Egypt for a long period. They would have no prejudices against Joseph on account of his being a foreigner. A dynasty of alien conquerors has generally an open door for talent, and cares little who a man's father is, or where he comes from, if he can do his work. And Joseph, by not being an Egyptian born, would be all the fitter an instrument for carrying out the policy which he had suggested.

His ceremonial investiture with the insignia of office is true to Egyptian manners. The signet ring, as the emblem of full authority; the chain, as a mark of dignity; the robe of fine linen (or rather of cotton), which was a priestly dress--all are illustrated by the monuments. The proclamation made before him as he rode in the second chariot has been very variously interpreted. It has been taken for a Hebraised Egyptian word, meaning Cast thyself down; and this interpretation was deemed the most probable, until Assyrian discovery brought to light that abarakku is the Assyrian name of the grand vizier (Fr. Delitzsch, Hebrew Language Viewed in the Light of Assyrian Research, p. 26). Sayce proposes another explanation, also from the cuneiform tablets: There was a word abrik in the Sumerian language, which signified a seer, and was borrowed by the Semitic Babylonians under the varying forms of abrikku and abarakku. It is abrikku which we have in Genesis, and the title applied by the people to the "seer" Joseph proves to be the one we should most naturally expect. The Tel el-Amarna tablets show that the knowledge of cuneiform writing was common in Egypt (Sayce, Higher Criticism and the Monuments, p. 214). This explanation is tempting, but it is perhaps scarcely probable that the proclamation should have been in any other language than Egyptian, or should have had reference to anything but Joseph's new office. It was not as seer that he was to be obeyed, but as Pharaoh's representative, even though he had become the latter because he had proved himself the former.

But in any case, the whole context is accurately and strongly Egyptian. Was there any point in the history of Israel, down to an impossibly late date, except the time of Moses, at which Jewish writers were so familiar with Egypt as to have been capable of producing so true a picture?

The lessons of this incident are plain. First stands out, clear and full, the witness it bears to God's faithfulness, and to His sovereign sway over all events. What are all the persons concerned in the narrative but unconscious instruments of His? The fierce brothers, the unconcerned slave-dealers, Potiphar, his wife, the prisoners, Pharaoh, are so many links in a chain; but they are also men, and therefore free to act, and guilty if acting wrongly. Men execute God's purposes, even when unconscious or rebellious, but are responsible, and often punished, for the acts which He uses to effect His designs.

Joseph's thirteen years of trial, crowned with sudden prosperity, may read all of us, and especially young men and women, a lesson of patience. Many of us have to fight our way through analogous difficulties at the outset of our career; and we are apt to lose heart and get restive when success seems slow to come, and one hindrance after another blocks our road. But hindrances are helps. If one of Joseph's misfortunes had been omitted, his good fortune would never have come. If his brethren had not hated him, if he had not been sold, if he had not been imprisoned, he would never have ruled Egypt. Not one thread in the tapestry could have been withdrawn without spoiling the pattern. We cannot afford to lose one of our sorrows or trials. There would be no summer unless winter had gone before. There is a bud or a fruit for every snowflake, and a bird's song for every howl of the storm.

Plainly, too, does the story read the lesson of quiet doing of the work and accepting the circumstances of the moment. Joseph was being prepared for the administration of a kingdom by his oversight of Potiphar's house and of the prison. His character was matured by his trials, as iron is consolidated by heavy hammers. To resist temptation, to do modestly and sedulously whatever work comes to our hands, to be content to look after a jail even though we have dreamed of sun and moon bowing down to us, is the best apprenticeship for whatever elevation circumstances--or, to speak more devoutly, God--intends for us. Young men thrown into city life far away from their homes, and whispered to by many seducing voices, have often to suffer for keeping themselves unspotted; but they are being strengthened by rough discipline, and will get such promotion, in due time, as is good for them. But outward success is not God's best gift. It was better to be the Joseph who deserved his high place, than to have the place. The character which he had grown into was more than the trappings which Pharaoh put on him. And such a character is always the reward of such patience, faith, and self-control, whether chains and chariots are added or not.

Little need be said about the other points of the story. Joseph's naturalisation as an Egyptian was complete. His name was changed, in token that he had completely become a subject of Pharaoh's. The meaning of the formidable-looking polysyllable, which Egyptian lips found easier than Joseph, is uncertain. At present the origin of the first syllable is still doubtful, and though the latter part of the name is certainly the Egyptian n-ti-pa-ankh ("of the life"), it is difficult to say in which of its different senses the expression pa-ankh ("the life") is employed (Sayce, ut supra, p. 213). The prevailing opinion of Egyptian experts is that it means Support of life.

The naturalising was completed by his marriage to Asenath (supposed to mean One belonging to the goddess Neith), a daughter of a high officer of state, Poti-phera (meaning, like its shortened form, Potiphar, The gift of Ra the sun-god). Such an alliance placed him at once in the very innermost circle of Egyptian aristocracy. It may have been a bitter pill for the priest to swallow, to give his daughter to a man of yesterday, and an alien; but, just as probably, he too looked to Joseph with some kind of awe, and was not unwilling to wed Asenath to the first man in the empire, wherever he had started up from.

But should not Joseph's religion have barred such a marriage? The narrator gives no judgment on the fact, and we have to form our own estimate. But it is not to be estimated as if it had occurred five or six centuries later. The family of Jacob was not so fenced off, nor was its treasure of revelation so complete, as afterwards. We may be fairly sure that Joseph felt no inconsistency between his ancestral faith, which had become his own in his trials, and this union. He was risking a great deal; that is certain. Whether the venture ended well or ill, we know not. Only we may be very sure that a marriage in which a common faith is not a strong bond of union lacks its highest sanctity, and is perilously apt to find that difference in religious convictions is a strong separator.

Joseph's administration opens up questions as to Egyptian land tenure, and the like, which cannot be dealt with here. In the earlier days of the monarchy the country was in the hands of great feudal lords; ...the land belonged to them absolutely.... But after the convulsion caused by the Hyksos conquest and the war of independence, this older system of land tenure was completely changed.... The Pharaoh is the fountain head, not only of honour, but of property as well.... The people ceased to have any rights of their own (Sayce, ut supra, p. 216).

We may note Joseph's immediate entrance upon office and his characteristic energy in it. He went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. No grass grew under this man's feet. He was ubiquitous, personally overseeing everything for seven long years. Wasteful consumption of the abundant crops had to be restrained, storehouses to be built, careful records of the contents to be made, after Egyptian fashion. The people, who could not look so far as seven years ahead, and wanted to enjoy, or make money out of, the good harvests, had to be looked after, and an army of officials to be kept in order. Dignity meant work for him. Like all true men, he thought more of his duty than of his honours. Depend on it, he did not wear his fine clothes or ride in the second chariot, when he was hurrying about the country at his task.

He had come out of prison to reign, and, as we all find, if we are God's servants, to reign means to serve, and the higher the place the harder the task. The long years of waiting had nourished powers which the seven years of busy toil tested. We must make ourselves, by God's help, ready, in obscurity, and especially in youth, for whatever may be laid on us in after days. And if we understand what life here means, we shall be more covetous of spheres of diligent service than of places of shining dignity. Whatever our task, let us do it, as Joseph did his, with strenuous concentration, knowing, as he did, that the years in which it is possible are but few at the longest.