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

**1 KINGS-009. A ROYAL SEEKER AFTER WISDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions. 2. And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones: and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart. 3. And Solomon told her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the king, which he told her not. 4. And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, 5. And the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up unto the house of the Lord; there was no more spirit in her. 6. And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. 7. Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard. 8. Happy are thy men, happy are these thy servants, which stand continually before thee, and that hear thy wisdom. 9. Blessed be the Lord thy God, which delighteth in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel: because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do judgment and justice. 10. And she gave the king an hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon. 11. And the navy also of Hiram, that brought gold from Ophir, brought in from Ophir great plenty of almug trees, and precious stones. 12. And the king made of the almug trees pillars for the house of the Lord, and for the king's house, harps also and psalteries for singers: there came no such almug trees, nor were seen unto this day. 13. And king Solomon gave unto the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, besides that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants."*

*1 Kings 10:1-13*

We feel the breath of a new era in the accounts of Solomon's reign. One most striking peculiarity is the friendly intercourse with the nations around. The horizon has widened, and, instead of wars with Philistines and Ammon, we have alliances with Egypt, Tyre, and, in the present passage, with Sheba, a district of Southern Arabia. The expansion was fruitful of both good and evil. It brought new ideas and much wealth; but it brought, too, luxury and idolatry. Still Israel was meant to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and in this picturesque story of the wisdom-seeking queen, we have the true relation of Israel to the nations in its purest form. The details of the narrative. Interesting as they are, need not occupy us long.

The queen had heard the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, by which seems to be meant his reputation of being gifted with deep knowledge of the divine character as revealed to him. The questions which occupy earnest souls in all lands and ages were stirring in the heart of this woman-chief. The only way, in these old days, to learn the wisdom of the wise, was to go to them. So the streets of Jerusalem saw the strange sight of the long train which had come toiling up from Arabia, laden with its characteristic produce, gold and spices and precious stones, in the enumeration of which is reflected the wonder of the beholders at the unaccustomed procession. But better than all her wealth was the eager woman's thirst for truth. Surely it is a very unworthy and unlikely explanation of her hard questions and purpose to suppose that she came only for a duel of wit,--to pose Solomon with half-playful riddles. The journey was too toilsome, the gifts too large, the accent of conviction in her subsequent words too grave, for that. She was a seeker after truth, and probably after God, and had known the torture of the eternal questions which rise in the mind, and, once having risen, leave no rest till they are answered.

So she came, though half incredulous, hoping to find some solution to what was in her heart, and as thirsty for the answer as her country's sands for water. Only they who have known the pain of carrying such questions, like a fire in their bones, can know the joy which she felt when she found one to whom she could speak them. It is something of a drop to pass from Solomon's wisdom to the list of the splendours of his household, and the effect which these produced on the queen; but the whole account of Solomon's reign is marked by the same naive blending of wisdom and material wealth. In those days, outward prosperity was the sign of divine favour. But even in those days they knew that wisdom was better than rubies. The two elements were both at their height in Solomon's reign, and the lower of them finally got uppermost, and wrecked him. Plain living and high thinking are better than wisdom, which lets itself down to make much of the meat of the table, and a retinue of servants in fine clothes. How many of us would listen much more respectfully to wisdom, if it lived in a palace, than in dens and caves of the earth? The queen's words in verses 6 to 9 are graceful with a woman's tact, and full of feeling. She confesses that she had come half-doubting, even though she risked the journey, and fervently avows how far fame had been unlike itself in this instance, and had diminished, and not magnified. Then she envies the servants who wait on him, because they are so near the fountain, and finally breaks into praise of Solomon's God, whose love to Israel was shown in giving it such a king. One does not know whether praise of God or compliments to Solomon were most in her mind. The words scarcely sound as if she had become a worshipper of God. He is to her but thy God. But we may believe that she carried away some seed which grew up. Then, with munificent interchange of gifts, she and her train glide out of the story, and we lose them in the dark. The account of the wealth brought by Hiram's ships comes singularly in, breaking the narrative of the queen. Its insertion seems to indicate some connection between the fleet and her, and to suggest that Sheba and Ophir were near each other (which would put Ethiopia, where some have located it, out of court), and that she heard of Solomon through it.

The whole incident may be regarded as an illustration of the spirit that should mark all seekers after truth, whether earthly or heavenly. This queen had to win a victory over national prejudices, over the disabilities of her sex, over the temptations of her station, to travel far, and face dangers, and to incur great cost. It was surely no mere playful errand on which she was bent. She was smitten with the sacred impulse to follow knowledge like a sinking star. Seldom, indeed, have rulers made progresses from their dominions for such an end, and seldom have two of them met to confer on such subjects. We shall not rightly measure the relative importance of things unless we resolutely set ourselves to look at them with eyes purged from the illusions of sense, and cleared to see how much better than wealth and all outward good is the possession of truth. All sacrifices made to win it are richly repaid, and wise investments. Even in regard to lower kinds of truth, to win them is worth the effort of a life; and, in regard to the highest kind, which is the personal Truth, he is the wise man who counts all earthly good but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of it. This queen points the path by which all pilgrims of the truth must travel. It is not to be won without effort, without conquest of prejudices, repression of weakness, sacrifices of delights, and long effort. There must be humility, which will gladly learn, if there is ever to be its possession.

Nor can the man that moulds in idle cell

Unto her happy mansion attain.

But in our days, the easier the attainment, the less the appreciation. The queen of Sheba had no books, and she travelled far to get wisdom. We are flooded with all appliances, and many of us would not cross the road to get Solomon's wisdom, but would do much to be invited to feast at his table, or to secure some of the queen's camels load.

This story brings out the true ideal of Israel's relation to the nations. Solomon is the embodiment of his people. His reign is marked by largely increased and amicable relations with his neighbours. These were not all wholesome, and ultimately led to much mischief. But, while the purely commercial connection with Tyre was defective, in that there was no attempt to bring Hiram and the men who worked for the Temple to any knowledge of the God of the Temple, and the relation with Egypt was more unsatisfactory still, in that it meant only the importation of corrupting luxuries and the marriage with an Egyptian princess, an idolatress, this relation with the queen of Sheba was the true one. Solomon did in it what Israel was meant to do for the world. He attracted a seeker from afar, and imparted to her the wisdom that God had given him. He answered the torturing questions and won the confidence of this woman who was groping in the dark, till he led her by the hand to the light. A bond of friendship knit them together, and mutual gifts cemented their amity.

All this is but the putting into concrete form of God's purpose in choosing Israel for His own. It was not meant to retain or to enclose, but to diffuse, the light. The world can only get blessing by one man or people getting it first. As well charge the builder of the lighthouse with partiality because he puts the bright lamps in that narrow room, as find fault with the divine method of making the earth know His name. The lighthouse is reared that the beams may stream out over the tossing, nightly sea. So God appointed to His people of old their task. So He has appointed the same task to His Church to-day. We ought to attract seekers from afar, to win their frank speech when they come, to be able to answer their anxious questions, and to bind them to ourselves in grateful bonds. In these days there are multitudes harassed by the modern forms of the same old, ever-pressing riddles which burdened this ancient queen's heart; and that Church but ill discharges its office which repels rather than draws the seekers, or has no word of illumination for them if they come.

But the highest use to be made of the story is that which Christ made of it. It stands as a perpetual witness against those who are too blind to see the beauty, or too careless to be drawn to listen to the wisdom, of a present Christ. The sacrifices which men can make for lower objects are the most powerful rebukes of their unwillingness to make sacrifices for the highest, just as their capacity of love and trust is of their not loving and trusting Him. The same energy and effort which this queen put forth to reach Solomon, and which men eagerly put forth for some temporal good, would suffice to bring them to the feet of the great Teacher. Her longing for wisdom, her discernment of the person who could give it, and her toilsome journey, rebuke men's indifference to Christ's gifts, their failure to recognise His sweetness and power to make blessed, and their laziness and self-indulgence, which will not take a hundredth part of the pains to secure heaven which they cheerfully expend, and that often in vain, to secure earth. Will the Queen of the south stand alone as witness in that day, or will there not be many out of other lands, who, like her, stretched out their hands to the dimly descried but yearned-for light, and came nearer to it, though they seemed far off, than many who lived in its full blaze and never cared for it? Will it be only Christ's contemporaries who will be condemned by heathen seekers after God, or will there be many of ourselves, convicted of stolid indifference to the Christ who has been beside us all our lives, and has prayed us with much entreaty and in vain, to receive the gift?

They who find their way to Him, and tell Him all that is in their hearts, will have all their questions solved. We have not far to go; for a greater than Solomon is here. If we betake ourselves to Him, and learn of Him, we too shall find that the half was not told us; for Christ possessed is sweeter than all expectation, however high-pitched it may be, and to win Him is the only gain in which there is no disappointment, either at first or at last. We may all have the blessedness of His servants, which stand continually before Him, and not only hear but receive into their spirits His wisdom.