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

**1 KINGS-011. THE NEW GARMENTS RENT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"26.* *And Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, an Ephrathite of Zereda, Solomon's servant, whose mother's name was Zeruah, a widow woman, even he lifted up his hand against the king. 27. And this was the cause that he lifted up his hand against the king: Solomon built Millo, and repaired the breaches of the city of David his father. 28. And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valour: and Solomon seeing the young man that he was industrious, he made him ruler over all the charge of the house of Joseph. 29. And it came to pass at that time when Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field: 30. And Ahijah caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces: 31. And he said to Jeroboam, Take thee ten pieces: for thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee: 32. (But he shall have one tribe for My servant David's sake, and for Jerusalem's sake, the city which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel:) 33. Because that they have forsaken Me, and have worshipped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, Chemosh the god of the Moabites, and Milcom the god of the children of Ammon, and have not walked in My ways, to do that which is right in Mine eyes, and to keep My statutes and My judgments, as did David his father. 34. Howbeit I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David My servant's sake, whom I chose because he kept My commandments and My statutes: 35. But I will take the kingdom out of his ion's hand, and will give it unto thee, even ten tribes. 36. And unto his son will I give one tribe, that David My servant may have a light alway before Me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen Me to put My name there. 37. And I will take thee, and thou shalt reign according to all that thy soul desireth, and shalt be king over Israel. 38. And it shall be, if thou wilt hearken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in My ways, and do that is right in My sight, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as David My servant did; that I will be with thee, and build thee a sure house, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee. 39. And I will for this afflict the seed of David, but not for ever. 40. Solomon sought therefore to kill Jeroboam. And Jeroboam arose, and fled into Egypt, unto Shishak king of Egypt, and was in Egypt until the death of Solomon. 41. And the rest of the acts of Solomon, and all that he did, and his wisdom, are they not written in the book of the acts of Solomon? 42. And the time that Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel was forty years. 43. And Solomon slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David his father: and Rehoboam his son reigned in his stead."*

*1 Kings 11:26-43*

Solomon falls into the background in the last part of the story of his reign, and his enemies are more prominent than himself. So long as he walked with God, he was of importance for the historian; but as soon as he forsook God, and was consequently forsaken of His wisdom, he becomes as insignificant as an empty vessel which has once held sweet perfume, or a piece of carbon through which the electric current has ceased to flow. The sunbeam has left that peak, and shines on other summits. Never was there a sadder eclipse.

We are here told first how the instrument for shattering Solomon's kingdom was shaped by himself. It is the old story of a young man of mark, attracting the eyes of the king, being promoted to offices of trust, which at once stir ambition, and give prominence and influence which seem to afford a possibility of gratifying it. The passion for building, so common in Eastern kings, and the cause of so much misery to their subjects, had grown on Solomon; and as his later days were harassed by war, and he had lost the safe defence of God's arm, Jerusalem had to be enclosed by a wall. His father had been able to leave a breach because the Lord was a wall round him and his city; and if Solomon had kept in his paths, he would have had no need to add to the fortifications. The preservation of ancestral piety is for nations and individuals a surer protection than the improvement of ancestral outward defences. Jeroboam made himself conspicuous by his energy (for that rather than valour must be the meaning of the word), and so got promotion. It was natural, but at the same time dangerous, to put him in command of the forced labour of his own tribe, as the narrative shows us was done; for the house of Joseph is the tribe of Ephraim, to which, according to the correct translation of verse 26, he belonged. In such an office he would be thrown among his kinsmen, and would at once gain influence and learn to sympathise with their discontent, or, at any rate, to know where the sore places were, if he ever wanted to inflame them. One can easily fancy the grumblings of the Ephraimites dragged up to Jerusalem to the hated labour, which Samuel had predicted (1 Samuel viii. 16), and how facile it would be for the officer in charge to fan discontent or to win friends by judicious indulgence. How long this went on we do not know, but the fire had smouldered for some time under the unconscious king's very eyes, when it was fanned into a flame by Ahijah's breath.

That is the second stage in the story,--the spark on the tinder. We have heard nothing of prophets during Solomon's reign; but now this man from Shiloh, the ancient seat of the Tabernacle, meets the ambitious young officer in some solitary spot, with the message which answered to his secret thoughts and made his heart beat fast. The symbolic action preceding the spoken word, as usual, supplied the text, of which the word was the explanation and expansion. How pathetic is the newness of the garment! Unworn, strong, and fresh, it yet is rent in pieces. So the kingdom is so recent, with such possibilities of duration, and yet it must be shattered! Thus quickly has the experiment broken down! It is little more than a century since Saul's anointing, little more than seventy years since the choice of David, and already the fabric, which had such fair promise of perpetuity, is ready to vanish away. If we may say so, that new garment represents the divine disappointment and sorrow over the swift corruption of the kingdom. It was probably merely some loose square of cloth which Ahijah tore, with violence proportioned to its newness, into twelve pieces, ten of which he thrust into the astonished Jeroboam's hands. The commentary followed.

Ahijah's prophecy is substantially the same as the previous threatenings to Solomon, which had done no good. Their incipient fulfilment in the wars with Edom and Syria had been equally futile; and therefore God, who never strikes without warning, and never warns without striking if men do not heed, now drops the message into ears that were only too ready to hear. The seed fell on prepared soil, and Jeroboam's half-formed plans would be consolidated and fixed. The scene is like that in which the witches foretell to Macbeth his dignity. Slumbering ambitions are stirred, and a half-inclined will is finally determined by the glimpse into the future. How easily men are persuaded that God speaks, and how willing they are to obey, when their inclinations jump with Heaven's commandments! The prophet's message makes the separation of the kingdoms a direct divine act, and yet it was the breaking up of a divine institution. God's dealings have to be shaped according to facts, and He changes His methods, and lets the feebleness of His creatures and their sins mould His august procedure. The divine Potter, like mere human artisans, has His spoiled pieces of work, and, with infinite resource and patience as infinite, re-shapes the clay into other forms. The separation of the kingdoms was a divine act, and yet it is treated often in the later books as a crime and rebellion. God works out His purposes through men's deeds, and their motives determine whether their acts are sins or obedience. A man may be a rebel while he is doing the will of God, if what he does be done at the bidding of his own selfishness. The separation of the kingdoms was God's doing, but it was brought about by the free action of men obeying most secular impulses of political discontent, and led by a cunning, self-seeking schemer.

Note that the prophecy is in three parts. First, verses 31-33 announce the punishment, with the reservation of a dwindled dominion to the Davidic house, for the sake of their great ancestor and of God's choice of Jerusalem, and solemnly charge on the people the idolatry which the king had introduced. The second part (verses 34-36) postpones the execution of the sentence till after Solomon's death, and assigns the same two reasons for this further forbearance. The third part (verses 37-39) promises Jeroboam the kingdom, and lays down the conditions on which the favours promised to David and his house may be his. The whole closes with the assurance that the affliction of the seed of David is not to be for ever.

The punishment was heavy; for the disruption of the kingdom meant the wreck of all the prosperity of Solomon's earlier days, the hopeless weakness of the divided tribes as against the formidable powers that pressed in on them from north and south, frequent intestine wars, bitter hatred instead of amity. Yet there was another side to it; for the very failure of the human kings made the Messianic hope the more bright, like a light glowing in the deepening darkness, and tumult and oppression might teach those whom prosperity and peace had only corrupted. The great lesson for us is the ruin which follows on departure from God. We do not see national sins followed with equal plainness or swiftness by national judgments; but the history of Israel is meant to show on a large scale what is always true, in the long run, both for nations and for individuals, that it is an evil thing and a bitter to depart from the living God.

Mark, too, that the judgment is wrought out by perfectly natural causes. The separation follows old lines of cleavage. The strength of David's kingdom lay in the south; and Ephraim was too powerful a tribe and too proud of its ancient glories, to acquiesce cheerfully in the pre-eminence of Judah. The oppression of forced labour and heavy taxation was put forward as the reason for the revolt, and, no doubt, was the reason for the readiness with which the ten tribes rallied to Jeroboam's flag. There are two ways of writing history. You can either leave God out, or trace all to Him. The former way calls itself scientific and positive. The latter is the Bible way. Perhaps, if modern history were written on the same principles as the Books of Kings, the divine hand would be as plainly visible,--only it requires an inspired historian to do it. The way of bringing about the judgment for departing from God has changed, but the judgment remains the same to-day as when Ahijah rent his garment.

Between verses 39 and 40 we must suppose an attempt at armed rebellion by Jeroboam. That is implied by the expression that he lifted his hand against the king (verses 26, 27). That attempt must have been put down by Solomon. And that it should have been made shows how little Jeroboam was influenced by religious motives. The prophet's words had set him all afire with ambitious hopes, and he paid no heed to the distinct assurance that Solomon was to be prince all the days of his life. He stretched out a rash, self-willed hand to snatch the promised crown, and broke God's commandment even while he pretended to be keeping it. How different David's conduct in like circumstances! He took no steps to bring about the fulfilment of Samuel's promise at his anointing, but patiently waited for God to do as He had said, in His own time, and meantime continued his lowly work. God's time is the best time; and he who greedily grasps at a premature fulfilment of promised good will have to pay for it by defeat and exile from the modest good that he had.

Jeroboam's flight to Egypt brings that ill-omened name on the page for the first time since the Exodus. It has given occasion to an extraordinary addition to the Septuagint, professing to tell his adventures there,--how he was high in Shishak's favour, and married a princess. That is apparently pure legend; but his residence there was important, as the beginning of Egypt's interference in Israel's affairs. It is an old trick of aggressive nations to side with a pretender to the throne of a country which they covet, and benevolently to strengthen him that he may weaken it. No doubt it was as Jeroboam's ally that Shishak invaded Judah in the fifth year of Rehoboam, and plundered the Temple and the palace. It was a bad beginning for a king of Israel to be a pensioner of Egypt.

The narrative closes with the sad, reticent formula which ends each reign, and in Solomon's case hides so much that is tragic and dark. This was all that could be said about the end of a career that had begun so nobly. If more had been said, the record would have been sadder; and so the pitying narrative casts the veil of the stereotyped summary over the miserable story. There are many instances in history of lives of genius and enthusiasm, of high promise and partial accomplishment, marred and flung away, but none which present the great tragedy of wasted gifts, and blossoms never fruited, in a sharper, more striking form than the life of the wise king of Israel, who in his latter days was a fool. The goodliest vessel may be shipwrecked in sight of port. Solomon was not an old man, as we count age, when he died; for he reigned forty years, and was somewhere about twenty when he became king. But it was when he was old that he fell, and that through passion which should have been well under control long before. The sun went down in a thick bank of clouds, which rose from undrained marshes in his soul, and stretched high up in the western horizon. His career, in its glory and its shame, preaches the great lesson which the Book of Ecclesiastes puts into his mouth as the conclusion of the whole matter': Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.