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

**1 KINGS-012. HOW TO SPLIT A KINGDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And Rehoboam went to Shechem: for all Israel were come to Shechem to make him king. 2. And it came to pass, when Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who was yet in Egypt, heard of it (for he was fled from the presence of king Solomon, and Jeroboam dwelt in Egypt); 3. That they sent and called him. And Jeroboam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spake unto Rehoboam, saying, 4. Thy father made our yoke grievous: now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee. 6. And he said unto them, Depart yet for three days, then come again to me. And the people departed. 6. And king Rehoboam consulted with the old men, that stood before Solomon his father while he yet lived, and said, How do ye advise that I may answer this people? 7. And they spake unto him, saying, If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever. 8. But he forsook the counsel of the old men, which they had given him, and consulted with the young men that were grown up with him, and which stood before him: 9. And he said unto them, What counsel give ye that we may answer this people, who have spoken to me, saying, Make the yoke which thy father did put upon us lighter? 10. And the young men that were grown up with him spake unto him, saying, Thus shalt thou speak unto this people that spake unto thee, saying, Thy father made our yoke heavy, but make thou it lighter unto us; thus shalt thou say unto them, My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins. 11. And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke: my father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 12. So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had appointed, saying, Come to me again the third day. 13. And the king answered the people roughly, and forsook the old men's counsel that they gave him; 14. And spake to them after the counsel of the young men, saying, My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions. 15. Wherefore the king hearkened not unto the people; for the cause was from the Lord, that He might perform His saying, which the Lord spake by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat. 16. So when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not unto them, the people answered the king, saying, What portion have we in David? neither have we inheritance in the son of Jesse: to your tents, O Israel: now see to thine own house, David. So Israel departed unto their tents. 17. But as for the children of Israel which dwelt in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them."*

*1 Kings 12:1-17*

The separation of the kingdom of Solomon into two weak and hostile states is, in one aspect, a wretched story of folly and selfishness wrecking a nation, and, in another, a solemn instance of divine retribution working its designs by men's sins. The greater part of this account deals with it in the former aspect, and shows the despicable motives of the men in whose hands was the nation's fate; but one sentence (verse 15) draws back the curtain for a moment, and shows us the true cause. There is something very striking in that one flash, which reveals the enthroned God, working through the ignoble strife which makes up the rest of the story. This double aspect of the disruption of the kingdom is the main truth about it which the narrative impresses on us.

As to the mere details of the incident, as a political revolution, they are in four stages. First come the terms of allegiance offered to the new king. Rehoboam goes to Shechem, because Israel was gone there. The choice of the place is suspicious; for it was in the tribe of Ephraim, and had been for a time the centre of national life; and its selection at once indicated discontent with the preponderance of Jerusalem, and a wish to assert the importance of the central tribes. No doubt, the choice of the latter city for the capital had caused heart-burning, even during David's time.

Adopting the reading of the Revised Version, we see another suspicious sign in the recall of Jeroboam, and his selection as spokesman; for he had been in rebellion against Solomon (1 Kings xi. 26), and therefore an exile. Probably he had now been the instigator of the discontent of which he became the mouthpiece; and, in any case, his appearance as the leader was all but a declaration of war. His former occupation as superintendent of the forced labour exacted from his own tribe taught him where the shoe pinched, and the weight of the yoke would not be lessened in his representations.

No doubt, the luxury and splendour of Solomon's brilliant reign had an under side of oppression, even though forced labour was not exacted from Israelites (1 Kings 9:22); but probably the severity was exaggerated in these complaints, which were plainly the pretext for a revolt of which tribal jealousy was the main cause, and Jeroboam's ambition the spark that set light to the train. Certainly there was ignoring of the benefits of the peaceful reign, which had brought security and commerce. But there was enough truth in the complaint to make it plausible and effective for catching the people. Had they a right to suspend their allegiance on compliance with their terms?

Israel was neither a despotism, nor simply a constitutional monarchy. God appointed the kings, and had ordained the Davidic house to the throne; and therefore this making terms was, in effect, asserting independence of God's will. Jeroboam was scheming for a crown. The people were shaking off their submission to God. It is very doubtful if concession would have conciliated them. There is nothing elevated, not to say religious, in their motives or acts.

Then comes Rehoboam on the scene. The one sensible thing that he did was to take three days to think. Whether or no his little finger was thicker than his father's loins, his head was not half so wise. Ecclesiastes, speaking in Solomon's name, reckons it a great evil that he must leave his labour to his successor; and who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Certainly Rehoboam had little wisdom either of the higher or lower kind. It was the lower kind which the old counsellors of his father gave him,--that wisdom which is mere cunning directed to selfish ends, and careless of honour or truth. Flatter them to-day, speak them fair, promise what you do not mean to keep, and then, when you are firm in the saddle, let them feel bit and spur. That was all these grey-headed men had learned. If that was what passed for wisdom in Solomon's later days, we need not wonder at revolt.

To act on such motives is bad enough, but to put them into plain words, and offer them as the rule of a king's conduct, is a depth of cynical contempt for truth and kingly honour that indicates only too clearly how rotten the state of Israel was. Have we never seen candidates for Parliament and the like on one side of the water, and for Congress, Senate, or Presidency on the other, who have gone to school to the old men at Shechem? The prizes of politicians are often still won by this stale device. The young counsellors differ only in the means of gaining the object. Neither set has the least glimmer of the responsibility of the office, nor ever thinks that God has any say in choosing the king. Naked, undisguised selfishness animates both; only, as becomes their several ages, the one set recommends crawling and the other bluster. Think of Saul hiding among the staff, David going back to his sheep after he was anointed, Solomon praying for wisdom to guide this people, and measure the depth of descent to this ignoble scramble for the sweets of royalty!

According to 1 Kings 14:21, Rehoboam was forty-one at this time, so his contemporaries could not have been very young. But possibly the number in the present text is an error for twenty-one, which would agree better with the tone of the reference to age here, and with the rash counsel. Note the recurrence, both in Rehoboam's question in verse 9 and in the young advisers answer in verse 10, of the obnoxious speech of the people. That may be accidental, but it sounds as if both he and they were keeping their anger warm by repeating the offensive complaint.

The Revised Version reads, My little finger is thicker, etc., and so makes the sentence not a threat, but the foundation of the following threat in an arrogant and empty assertion of greater power. The fool always thinks himself wiser than the wise dead; the living dog fancies that his yelp is louder than the roar of the dead lion. What can be done with a Rehoboam who brags that he is better than Solomon?

The threat which follows is inconceivably foolish; and all the more so because it probably did not represent any definite intention, and certainly was backed by no force adequate to carry it out. Passion and offended dignity are the worst guides for conduct. Threats are always mistakes. A sieve of oats, not a whip, attracts a horse to the halter. If Rehoboam had wished to split the kingdom, he could have found no better wedge than this blustering promise of tyranny.

Next in this miserable story of imbecility and arrogance comes the answer to the assembly. Shechem had seen many an eventful hour, but never one heavier with important issues than that on which the united Israel met for the last time, and there, in the rich valley with Ebal and Gerizim towering above them, heard the fateful answer of this braggart. A dozen rash words brought about four hundred years of strife, weakness, and final destruction. And neither the foolish speaker nor any man in that crowd dreamed of the unnumbered evils to flow from that hour. Since issues are so far beyond our sight, how careful it becomes us to be of motives! Angry counsels are always blunders. No nation can prosper when moderate complaints are met by threats, and spirited conduct, asserting dignity, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. For nations and individuals that is true.

Here the historian draws back the curtain. On earth stand the insolent king and the now mutinous people, each driving at their ends, and neither free of sin in their selfishness. A stormy scene of passion, without thought of God, rages below, and above sits the Lord, working His great purpose by men's sin. That divine control does not in the least affect the freedom or the guilt of the actors. Rehoboam's disregard of the people's terms was a thing brought about of the Lord, but it was Rehoboam's sin none the less. That which, looked at from the mere human side, is the sinful result of the free play of wrong motives, is, when regarded from the divine side, the determinate counsel of God. The greatest crime in the world's history was at the same time the accomplishment of God's most merciful purpose. Calvary is the highest example of the truth, which embraces all lesser instances of the wrath of man, which He makes to praise Him and effect His deep designs.

Again, the rending of the kingdom was the punishment of sin, especially Solomon's sin of idolatry, which was closely connected with the extravagant expenditure that occasioned the separation. So the so-called natural consequences of transgression constitute its temporal punishment in part, and behind all these our eyes should be clear-sighted enough to behold the operative will of God. This one piercing beam of light, cast on that scene of insolence and rebellion, lights up all history, and gives the principle on which it must be interpreted, if it is not to be misread.

Again, the punishment of sin, whether that of a community or of a single person, is sin. The separation was sin, on both sides; it led to much more. It was the consequence of previous departure. So ever the worst result of any sin is that it opens the door, like a thief who has crept in through a window, to a band of brethren.

Lastly, we have the fierce rejoinder to the empty boast of Rehoboam, and the definitive disruption of the nation. Jeroboam must have fanned the flame skilfully, or it would not have burst out so quickly. There is no hesitation, nor any regret. The ominous cry, which had been heard before, in Sheba's abortive revolt, answers Rehoboam with instantaneous and full-throated defiance. Rancorous tribal hatred is audible in it. Long pent up jealousy and dislike of the dynasty of David has got breath at last: To your tents, O Israel! now see to thine own house, David!

That roar from a thousand voices meant a good deal more than the cowed king's vain threats did. The angry men who raised it, and were the tools of a crafty conspirator, the frightened courtiers and king who heard it, were alike in their entire oblivion of their true Lord and Monarch. God was not in all their thoughts. An enterprise begun in disregard of Him is fated to failure. The only sure foundations of a nation are the fear of the Lord and obedience to His will. If politics have not a religious basis, the Lord will blow upon them, and they will be as stubble.