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

**1 KINGS-013. POLITICAL RELIGION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"25. Then Jeroboam built Shechera in mount Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and went out from thence, and built Penuel. 26. And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now shall the kingdom return to the house of David: 27. If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah. 28. Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 29. And he set the one in Beth-el, and the other put he in Dan. 30. And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even unto Dan. 31. And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. 32. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah; and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Beth-el, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed In Beth-el the priests of the high places which he had made. 33. So he offered upon the altar which he had made in Beth-el the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar, and burnt incense."*

*1 Kings 12:25-33*

The details of this section need no long elucidation; for the one fact which it records, namely, the establishment of the calf worship in Israel, is the main point to consider. As for details, we need touch them lightly. The building of Shechem and Penuel is probably to be understood as fortifying; for, in regard to the former town, we know from the preceding section that it was a town before the disruption, and the same is probably true of the latter. Two fortresses, one in the heart of his kingdom, one on the eastern border, where attack might be expected, were Jeroboam's first care.

In estimating his conduct, the fact must be remembered that Ahijah had promised him God's protection and the establishment of his kingdom in his family, on the sole condition of obedience. If he had believed the prophet, something else than building strongholds would have been his prime aim. But he evidently thought that promises were all very well, but thick walls were better. The two things recorded of him are quite of a piece; and the writer seems, by putting them thus side by side, to wish us to note their identity of motive and similarity in character.

The establishment of the calf worship was entirely due, according to this historian, to dread that religious unity would heal the schism of political duality, and that Jeroboam's kingdom and life would be sacrificed to the magnetism which would draw the revolted northern tribes back to render allegiance, where they went up to worship. The calculation was reasonable: but why, in estimating chances, did Jeroboam leave out God's promise? That should have kept him at ease. The calves and the castles were signs of fear and of slight regard to the prophet's word. No doubt, when it suited him, he could vindicate rebellion on the plea of obeying God. The plea would have sounded more genuine if he had shown that he trusted God.

The calves were probably suggested by his Egyptian experiences, where he had seen sacred bulls worshipped living, and mummied dead. But the remembrance of Aaron and the golden calf was evidently present to him, as the almost verbal quotation of Aaron's words shows. If so, the whole transaction is still more accentuated as a revolt against the ritual of the central sanctuary. The much-calumniated Aaron is our example. He was mastered by his brother, but he was right, and we go back to the old original worship of our fathers.

Jeroboam was among the first to employ the expedient, so often resorted to since, of white-washing old-world criminals, in order to provide an ancestry for modern heresies. The calves seem to have been doubled simply as a matter of convenience. When once the principle of saving trouble comes in, in religion, it generally plays a great part. If it were too much to go to Jerusalem, it would soon be too much to go to Bethel, and so Dan must be provided for the north. The calves were symbols of Jehovah, not of other gods, as must be carefully noted. The making of them implied all that followed; for a god must have shrine and priesthood and sacrifice and festivals. The Levites refusing to serve, and probably losing their inheritance, fled to Judah, and a new priesthood was made from among all the people (Rev. Ver.), The Feast of Tabernacles was retained but its date shifted forward a month, perhaps because the harvest, which it closed, was later in the north, but evidently with the design of, as it were, underscoring the religious separation.

The latter part of this passage should perhaps be attached more closely to the next chapter, and understood as describing the one instance of Jeroboam's sacrificing which was so grimly interrupted by the denunciation by the anonymous prophet from Judah. Such are the outlines of the facts. What are the lessons taught by them?

**I.** There is that one already mentioned,--the folly and sin of seeking to help God to fulfil His promises by our poor efforts at making their fulfilment sure to sense. No doubt many of His promises are contingent on our activity in material things; and no man has a right to expect that his bread shall be given him, for instance, unless he contributes the sweat of his brow towards it. But Jeroboam had had the conditions of safety and stability clearly laid down. They were, obedience after the pattern of David (1 Kings 11:38). So there was no need for building Shechem and Penuel, nor for casting calves and serving them. The heavens will stand without our rearing brickwork pillars to hold them up. But it takes much faith to trust God's bare word, and we are all apt to feel safer if we have something for sense to grasp. On the open plain, God guards those who trust Him more securely than if they lay in cities fenced up to heaven. Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls... . For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about.

**II.** Another lesson taught here is the sin of degrading religion to be a mere instrument for securing personal ends. Jeroboam has had many followers among politicians, The average statesman looks on all religions as equally true or untrue, and is ready to be polite to any of them, if he can carry his measures thereby. The long history of the relations of Church and State in the Old World has been little else than the State's hiring and muzzling the Church for its own advantage, and the protests of a faithful few against the degradation of State patronage and consequent control.

In England, Jeroboam and his calves used to be the favourite shocking example of the sin of schism, with which High Church orators were fond of pelting Nonconformists. The true lesson from him and them is precisely the opposite one; namely, the weakening of religion, when it is favoured and endowed by the civil power. The priests of Bethel, who were the creatures of Jeroboam, were not likely to be his or his successors rebukers. When Amos the prophet spoke bold words against a king, it was Amaziah the priest who gave the shameful counsel, O thou seer, flee into the land of Judah, and prophesy there; but prophesy no more at Bethel: for it is the king's sanctuary. Is there no such thing known as a flaming profession of religion, because it is respectable, or opens the way to some good position? Does nobody pose in public, especially about election times, as a liberal supporter of Churches and a devout Church-member, with an eye mainly to votes? Do political parties think it a good thing to get the religious people to go for their ticket? Or, to take less base instances, is there not a whole school who estimate Christianity mainly as valuable as a social force, and, without any deep personal recognition of its loftier aspects, think it well that it should be generally accepted, especially by other people, as it makes them easier to govern, and cements the social fabric?

Christianity is something more than social cement. Jeroboam's policy was a great success, as policy. It both united his kingdom and definitively separated it from Judah. But it was a success purchased at the price of degrading religion into the lackey of a court. Samson went to sleep on Delilah's lap, and she cut off the clustering locks in which his strength lay.

**III.** The true nature of idolatry is brought out in the incident. Jeroboam did not draw Israel away to worship other gods. No charge of that sort is ever made against the calf worship. The images were meant, just as Aaron's, of which they were a reproduction, was meant, to be symbols of Jehovah. The true object of worship was worshipped in a false way. No matter though the image represented Him, its worship was idol worship. There is no ground in the narrative for the surmise of Stanley,--who in this, as usual, simply says ditto to Ewald,--that Jeroboam's motive was the desire to prevent Israel's adopting false gods, and that the calves were a compromise by which he hoped to stem the tide of apostasy to Baal worship. The single motive stated in the text is policy inspired by fear. Jeroboam did not care enough about the worship of Jehovah to mould his statecraft with the view of conserving it. If he had so cared, he could not have set up the calves. His doing so is uniformly regarded in Scripture as idolatry pure and simple; and though it is clearly distinguished from the worship of false gods, it is none the less branded as rebellion against Jehovah.

A visible representation of Jehovah was as much an idol as a similar one of Baal would have been. It necessarily degraded the conception of Him. It brought sense into dangerous prominence as an aid to worship. The symbol might at first, and to the more devout, be a mere symbol, and transparent; but it would soon become opaque, and from symbol turn embodiment, and thence pass to being the very deity represented. It is a feat of abstraction impossible for the ordinary man, to worship before an idol, and not to worship the idol. The strange, awful fascination which idolatry exercised is perhaps gone now from the civilised world. But the lesson remains ever in season, that it is dangerous work to bring in sense as an ally of devotion, because outward things, which at first may be only symbols and helps, are almost certain to become something more.

**IV.** Jeroboam may stand, finally, as a type of the men who suppose themselves to be worshipping God when they are only following their own wills. All his ceremonial had this damning characteristic, that it was devised of his own heart; and so it was himself that was enshrined in his new house of the high places, and himself to whom the sacrifices were offered. Absolute obedience to God's will, whatever perils may seem to attend it, is true worship. Wherever apparent devotion to Him is mingled with burning incense to our own net, the mixture ruins the devotion. Obedience is better than sacrifice. Temptations to take our own way will often appear as the dictates of sound policy, and to neglect them as culpable carelessness. But such paltering with plain commandments is as ruinous as sinful, and is not to be atoned for by outward worship.

What did Jeroboam win by his intrusion of self-will into the region which ought to be sacred to perfect obedience? A troubled reign and the destruction of his house after one generation. One more thing he won; namely, that terrible epithet, which becomes almost a part of his name, Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. What a title to be branded on a man's forehead for ever! It is always a mistake to disobey God. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. This only is the safe motto for churches and individuals, in all the details of worship and of life: Lo, I come to do Thy will, O Lord, and Thy law is within my heart.