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

**1 KINGS-014. THE RECORD OF TWO KINGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"23. In the thirty and first year of Asa king of Judah began Omri to reign over Israel, twelve years: six years reigned he in Tirzah. 24. And he bought the hill Samaria of Shemer for two talents of silver, and built on the hill, and called the name of the city which he built, after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill, Samaria. 25. But Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him. 26. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities. 27. Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and his might that he shewed, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel? 28. So Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria: and Ahab his son reigned in his stead. 29. And in the thirty and eighth year of Asa king of Judah began Ahab the son of Omri to reign over Israel: and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty and two years. 30. And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. 31. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethibaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. 32. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. 33. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."*

*1 Kings 16:23-33*

Jeroboam's son and successor was killed by Baasha, Baasha's son and successor was killed by Zimri, who reigned for a week, and then burned the palace and died in the flames. A struggle for the throne followed between Omri, the commander-in-chief, and Tibni, Tibni died, and Omri reigned. So, in fifty years, the kingdom that was to relieve Israel from oppression staggered through seas of blood, and four kings, or would-be kings, died by violence.

Omri's dynasty lasted about as long, namely, through the reigns of four kings, and was then swept away like the others, in blood and fire. The text gives a meagre outline of the reigns of himself and his son Ahab, of which perhaps the meagreness is the most significant feature. The only fact told of the father is that he built Samaria, and his whole reign is summed up in the damning sentence that he walked in the way of Jeroboam. We learn from the Moabite stone that he waged successful war against that country, and that it was tributary to Israel for forty years. In Micah 6:16, mention is made of the statutes of Omri, as if he had given edicts for idolatry. The reign of Ahab is similarly summarised. His marriage with Jezebel, and the flood of Baal worship which that let loose over the land, are told with horror, in preparation for Elijah's appearance like a dark background that throws up a brilliant figure.

The lessons to be drawn from these severely condensed records, cut down to the bone, as it were, are plain. The first of them is, that when a life is over, the one thing which lasts, or is worth thinking about, is the man's relation to God and His will. Here are twelve years reign in the one case, and twenty-two in the other, all boiled down, so to speak, into half a dozen sentences, and estimated according to one standard only. What has become of all the eager strife, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, that burned so fiercely for awhile? All died down into a handful of grey ashes. And what lies in them like a lump of solid metal that has been melted out of the huge heap of days and deeds that fed the fire? The man's relation to God. That abides; that is recorded; that determines everything else about him. Waving forests that once had sunshine pouring down on their green fronds are represented in a thin seam of coal. Our lives will all come down to this at last. How did he stand towards God and His will is the final question that will be asked about each of us, and the answer to it is the only thing that concerns the dead--or the living either. Men write voluminous biographies of each other. How little their judgments matter to the dead men! Praise or blame are equally indifferent to them. But what matters is, whether God will have to record of us what is recorded of these two wretched kings, or whether He will recognise that the main drift of our poor lives was to serve Him and do His will. He was a great scholar; he made a huge fortune; he rose to be a peer; she was a noted beauty, a leader of fashion, a queen of society--what will all such epitaphs be worth, if God's finger carves silently below them, He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord?

Another lesson from these two reigns is the certain widening of the smallest departure from God. Jeroboam professed to retain the worship of Jehovah, and to introduce only a small alteration in setting up a symbol of Him. He would vehemently have asserted that he was no idolater, and would have shuddered at the very notion of bowing down to the gods of the nations, but in less than fifty years a temple to the Sidonian Baal rose in Samaria, and his worship, with its foul sensuality, was corrupting all Israel. However acute the angle of departure, the line has only to be prolonged, and the distance between it and that from which it diverged will be the distance between heaven and hell, Let no one say: Thus far and no farther will I go. There is no stopping at will on that course, any more than a man sliding down a steeply sloping sheet of smooth ice can pull himself up before he plunges over the edge into the abyss below. That is true as to all departures from God and His law, but it is eminently true as to every tampering with the spirituality of worship. Jeroboam's symbolism led straight to Ahab's unblushing pagan worship of the hideous Sidonian Baal. The craving for symbolical and sensuous accessories of worship, which is strong in most Churches in this aesthetic generation, is perilous. Material aids to worship there must be, so long as we are in the flesh, but the fewer and simpler they are the better, for they are aids which very swiftly become hindrances.

Another lesson from Ahab's reign is the need of detachment from entangling alliances, if we would keep ourselves right with God. It was Israel's calling to be separate from the nations. It was Israel's temptation either to mix with them, or to keep aloof from them in contempt and hatred. Ahab's marriage with Jezebel was, no doubt, thought by his father a clever stroke of policy, assuring them of an ally. But it flooded the nation with the cruel and lustful cult of Baal, and that finally ruined Ahab and his house. God's servants can never mingle themselves with His enemies without harm, unless they mingle with them for the purpose of turning them into His servants. If we prefer the company of those who do not love Jesus, our love to Him must be faint, and will soon be fainter. If Ahab takes Jezebel for his wife, Ahab will soon take Jezebel's foul god for his god.