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

**1 KINGS-015. A PROPHET'S STRANGE PROVIDERS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word. 2. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 3. Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 4. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. 5. So he went and did according unto the word of the Lord. for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. 6. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook. 7. And it came to pass after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. 8. And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, 9. Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. 10. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. 11. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. 12. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. 13. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. 14. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. 15. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. 16. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which He spake by Elijah."*

*1 Kings 17:1-16*

The worst times need the best men. The reign of Ahab brought a great outburst of Baal worship, imported by his Phoenician wife, which threatened to sweep away every trace of the worship of Jehovah. The feeble king was absolutely ruled by the strongwilled Jezebel, and everything seemed rushing down to ruin. One man arrests the downward movement, and with no weapon but his word, and no support but his own dauntless courage, which was the child of his faith, works a revolution in Israel. Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than Elijah the Tishbite. Bugged, stern, solitary, he has no commission to reveal new truth. He is not a prophet, like later ones whose words were revelation.

Little is preserved of his sayings. His task was to reform and restore, not to advance; and his endowments of spirit and power corresponded to his work. The striking peculiarities of this heroic figure will appear as we go on with his history. For the present, we have to consider the three points of this narrative.

**I. The Prophet and the King.**

The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes into the midst of Ahab's court like a thunderbolt. What did Jezebel think of this wild man from the other side of Jordan, with his long hair and his loose mantle, who thus fronted Ahab and her? Nothing is told us of his descent; it is even questionable whether the reading which calls him the Tishbite is correct. We only know that he was of Gilead, and therefore used to a ruder, freer, simpler life than that in kings palaces.

The natural conclusion from the narrative is that the prophet and the king had never met before; and, if so, the stern brevity of the threat is even more remarkable. In any case, the absence of explanation of reasons for the drought, or of credentials of Elijah, or of offers of mercy on condition of repentance, give a peculiarly grim aspect to the message, and make it a dangerous one to carry to such a hearer as Ahab, stirred up by Jezebel. When God commands us to speak, no thought of peril must make us dumb. If the word of the Lord is to sound from our lips with power, it must first have absolute sway over ourselves. One man with God at his back, who fears nothing, can work marvels.

God's servant is men's master. The vision of God's Presence paled the splendour, and blunted the perils, of the court of Samaria. Ahab was but a poor puppet in the sight of eyes that saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up. So the very first words of Elijah lay bare the secret spring of his fiery energy and courage. Before whom I stand,--that is the thought to put nerve, daring, and disregard of earth into a man.

James's comment on this incident assumes that the declaration to Ahab followed earnest prayer that it might not rain, and that the word which should end the drought was also prayer. The truest lover of his country or of any men may sometimes have to wish for losses and sorrows. Elijah did not open and shut the heavens, but his prayer had power to move the Hand that openeth and no man shutteth.

**II. The Prophet and the Ravens.**

One would like to know how Elijah made his escape from Ahab; but the whole story is marked by sudden appearances and disappearances. He flashes into sight and flames for a moment, and then is swallowed up in the dark again. The exact position of the brook Cherith is doubtful. It would seem most natural to look for it across Jordan, as safer and more familiar ground to Elijah than any of the tributaries on the western side. At all events, somewhere among the savage rocks in some wady with a trickle of water down it, and rank vegetation that would help to hide him, he lurked for an indefinite period, alone with God.

Why did he flee? Not only for safety, but that the period of the drought might be prolonged till it had done its work, and that the prophet might learn more lessons for his calling. Good Obadiah would have made a place for the chief of the prophets in his caves; but the man who is to do work like Elijah's must live in solitude. Cherith was part of the training for Carmel. The flight thither was as much an act of obedient faith as was the appearance before the king. However the necessity of flight was impressed on the prophet, it was impressed on him as manifestly not his own plan, but God's command; and though the journey was a weary one, and the appointed place of refuge inhospitable, the command was unhesitatingly obeyed. He was not left to wonder how he was to be fed when he got there, but God gave him, what He seldom gives--a previous assurance of miraculous provision, which obviously met some unspoken thought. We do not usually know how we are to be fed in the solitude till we get there; but if our doubting hearts object, But, Lord, there is nothing at Cherith but a brook and some ravens, He sometimes gives us assurance that these will be enough. Whether or no, the duty is the same,--to follow God's voice, whether it take us face to face with Ahab and Jezebel or into the wild gorge.

Note that the same words are employed about the ravens and the widow: I have commanded the... to feed thee. God has ways of reaching the mysterious animal instinct and the mysterious human will, and each, in its own way, obeys. It is needless to try to pare down the miracle by saying that, of course, ravens would haunt the water-courses in drought, and that the food which they brought might be for their young, and so on. The daily regularity of the supply takes it out of the natural category, to say nothing of the remarkable breed which the ravens must have been of, if they brought their young ones food within reach and let the prophet take it.

People take offence at the abundance of miracles in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and assert that some of them, this among the rest, are for unworthily trivial occasions. But the grave crisis in Israel is to be taken into account, which involved the necessity for unusual manifestations of divine power, and very evident credentials for the prophets; and the preparation of Elijah for his tremendous struggle was, even to our eyes, surely an adequate end for miracle. How could he doubt that God had sent him and would care for him, with such memories as those of his winged purveyors? How could he doubt future words which should come to him, when he recalled how marvellously this one had been fulfilled? The silence of the ravine, the long days and nights of solitude, the punctual arrival of his food, would all tend to weld his faith into yet more close-knit strength. If we may so say, it was worth God's while to work miracles, to make Elijah. The highest end of creation is the production of God-fearing men. All things serve the soul that serves God.

**III. The Prophet and the Widow.**

The little stream that came down the wady dried up after a while; and Elijah, no doubt, would wonder what was to be done next, as he saw it daily sending a thinner thread to Jordan. But he was not told till the channel was dry, and the pebbles in its bed bleaching in the sun. God makes us sometimes wait on beside a diminishing rivulet, and keeps us ignorant of the next step, till it is dry. Patience is an element in strength. It was a far cry from Cherith to Zarephath, right across the kingdom of Ahab; and to run for refuge to a dependency of Zidon, Jezebel's country, looked like putting his head in the lion's mouth. But the same command which the ravens had obeyed had smoothed his way.

So he girded up his loins, and left, no doubt reluctantly, the brook for a city. How his heart would bow in adoring thankfulness, when the first person he saw outside the little city was the widow! He knew her; did she know him? The natural interpretation of verse 9 is that, at the time when God spoke to Elijah, he had already commanded the woman. But the despondent tone of her answer seems against that idea; and perhaps we are to suppose that, just as the ravens were commanded and knew not by whom, so this woman received the command, when she saw the travel-stained and gaunt stranger, through her womanly impulses of compassion, not knowing who moved them nor what she did when she sheltered the man whose life was, at that moment, the most important in the world. The motions of pity and charity are of God, and He commands us to help when He sets before us those who need help.

The whole incident was a lesson to the prophet. He might well have thought that God had sent him to a strange helper in this poor widow with her empty cupboard; and it must have taken some faith on his part to reassure her with his cheery Fear not! The prediction of the undiminishing stores demanded as much faith from its speaker as from its hearer.

It was a lesson in faith for the woman too. Her use of the phrase the Lord thy God may imply some inclination to the worship of Jehovah, and so there may have been a little glimmer of faith in her; but she was full of sorrow and despair, and yet willing to help the stranger with the little water in a vessel, though the morsel of bread in thine hand was beyond her power. Elijah's apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith. Sometimes self-denying duty is made clearly imperative on us, before we hear the promise which, believed, will make it easy. They who have ears to hear the command, and hearts to obey, even if it seem to strip them of all, will soon hear the assurance that secures abundance. The barrel would have been empty by nightfall, if the meal in it had been used for the woman and her son. The continuance of supply depended on her obedience, which, in its turn, depended on faith in the prophet as a messenger of God. There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth. The use of earthly goods for God's service may not be rewarded with the increase of them; but, if the barrel is not kept full of meal, the heart will be kept full of peace, which is better. No sacrifice for God is ever thrown away. He remains in no man's debt.

The incident has a further bearing, as an instance of a divine benediction resting on heathendom. The synagogue at Nazareth pointed that lesson for us. Elijah and the widow both learned that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth, and that His prophets have a mission to every race. The woman rebuked, by her pity and self-denying benevolence, the prejudices of Israel; the prophet foreshadowed, by his familiar abode with one won from idolatry to the worship of God, the universal aspect of the Jewish religion, and its destiny to overleap the narrow bounds of the nation. Charity and pity have no geographical limits. Much less can the love of God and the light of His revelation be bounded by any narrower circle than the circumference of the world.