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

**1 SAMUEL-005. THE OLD JUDGE AND THE YOUNG KING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15.* *Now the Lord had told Samuel In his ear a day before Saul came, saying, 16, To-morrow, about this time I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over My people Israel, that he may save My people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me. 17. And when Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over My people. 18. Then Saul drew near to Samuel in the gate, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, where the seer's house is. 19. And Samuel answered Saul, and said, I am the seer: go up before me unto the high place; for ye shall eat with me to-day, and to-morrow I will let thee go, and will tell thee all that is in thine heart. 20. And as for thine asses that were lost three days ago, set not thy mind on them; for they are found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father's house? 21. And Saul answered and said, Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me? 22. And Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons. 23. And Samuel said unto the cook, Bring the portion which I gave thee, of which I said unto thee, Set it by thee. 24. And the cook took up the shoulder, and that which was upon it, and set it before Saul. And Samuel said, Behold that which is left I set it before thee, and eat: for unto this time hath it been kept for thee since I said, I have invited the people. So Saul did eat with Samuel that day. 25. And when they were come down from the high place into the city, Samuel communed with Saul upon the top of the house. 26. And they arose early: and it came to pass about the spring of the day, that Samuel called Saul to the top of the house, saying, Up, that I may send thee away. And Saul arose, and they went out both of them, he and Samuel, abroad. 27. And as they were going down to the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid the servant pass on before us, (and he passed on,) but stand thou still a while, that I may shew thee the word of God."*

*1 Samuel 9:15-27*

Both the time and the place of the incidents here told are unknown. No note is given of the interval that had elapsed since the elders deputation. All that we know is that on the previous day Samuel had had the divine communication mentioned in verse 15, and that some days are implied as spent by Saul in his quest for his fathers asses, Equally uncertain is the name of the city. It was not Samuel's ordinary residence; it was in the land of Zuph, an unknown district; it was perched, like most of the cities, on a hill; it had fountains lower down the slope, and a high place farther up, where there was a building large enough for a feast. How strangely vivid the picture of this anonymous city is, and how we can yet see the maidens coming down to the fountains, the wearied travellers toiling up, and the voluble abundance of the directions given them!

**I.** The first thing we have to note is the premonitory word of the Lord. Observe the picturesque and forcible expression, had uncovered the ear of Samuel. It is more than picturesque. It gives in the strongest form the fact of a revelation, both as to its origin and its secrecy. It is vain to represent the transition from judgeship to monarchy as a mere political revolution, inaugurated by Samuel as a fore-seeing statesman. It is misleading to speak of him, as Dean Stanley does, as one of the men who mediate between the old and the new. His opinions and views go for just nothing in the transaction, and he is simply God's instrument. The people's desire for the king, and God's answer to it, were equally independent of him. His own ideas were dead against the change, and at each step in bringing it about the divine causality is everything, and he is nothing but its obedient servant. It is hopeless to sift out a naturalistic explanation from the narrative, which is either supernatural or nothing. Note the three points of this communication,-- God's sending Saul, the command to anoint, and the motive ascribed to God. As to the first, how striking that full-toned authoritative I will send is! Think of the chain of ordinary events which brought Saul to the little city,--the wandering of a drove of asses, the failure to get on their tracks, the accident of being in the land of Zuph when he got tired of the search, the suggestion of the servant; and behind all these, and working through them, the will and hand of God, thrusting this man, all unconscious, along a path which he knew not. Our own purposes we may know, but God's we do not know. There is something awful in the thought of the issues that may spring from the smallest affairs, and we shall be bewildered and paralysed if once we get a glimpse of the complicated web which is ever being woven in the loom of time, unless we, too, can, by faith, see the Weaver, and then we shall be at rest. Call nothing trivial, and seek to be conscious of His guiding hand.

The command to Samuel to anoint Saul is no product of Samuel's own reflection, but comes to him, in this imperative form, before he has seen Saul, like a commission in blank, in regard to which he has no option, and in the origin of which he had no share. It was a piece of painful work to devolve his authority, like Aaron's having to strip off his robes before he died, and to put them on his son. But there is no trace of wounded feeling in Samuel. He is true to his childhood's word, Speak, for Thy servant heareth, and, no doubt, he had the reward which obedience ever has to sweeten the bitterest draught, the reward of a quiet heart.

The reason as given in the last clause of the verse ought to have made Samuel's self-abnegation easier. God sets him the example. Israel had rejected Him, but He still calls them My people, and looks upon them in tender care, and hears their cry. There is no contradiction here with the aspect of the concession to the people's wish, which appeared in the former section. Hasty criticism tries to make out discrepancies in the accounts, because it does not recognise one of the plainest characteristics of Scripture; namely, its habit of stating strongly and exclusively that side of a complicated matter which is relevant to the purpose in hand, and leaving the other sides to be presented in due time. The three accounts of the election give three different reasons for it. In chapter viii., the people put it on the ground of Samuel's age and his son's unfitness, and God treats it as national rejection of Him. Here it appears as due, on the part of the people, to their fear of the Philistines, and on the part of God to His loving yielding to their cry. In 1 Samuel xii. 12, Samuel traces it to the fear of Ammonite invasion. Are these contradictory or supplementary accounts? Certainly the latter. Though Israel had in heart rejected God, and He gave them a king that they might learn how much better they would have been without one, it is as true that He lovingly listened to the cry of their fear, and answered them, in pity and tender care, by giving them the king whom they desired, and who would deliver them from their enemies. Let us learn how patient of our faithless follies, and how full of long-suffering love, even in anger, He is. The same gift of His providence, regarded in one light, is loving chastisement, and in another is loving compliance with our cry and swift help to our need in the shape that we desire, but in both aspects is good and perfect. Note, too, that God's look is active, and is the bringing of the needed aid, and that He waits for our cry before He comes with His help.

**II.** The meeting of Samuel and Saul. They encounter each other in the gate,--the prophet on his way to the sacrifice, the future king with his head full of his humble quest. Samuel knows Saul by divine intimation as soon as he sees him, but Saul does not know Samuel. His question indicates the noble simplicity, without attendants or trappings, of the judge's life; but it also suggests the strange isolation of these early days, and the probable indifference of Saul to religion. If he had cared much about God's rule in Israel, he could scarcely have been so ignorant as his servant's words about the seer, and his failure to know him when he saw him, show Saul to have been. He had not cared to see Samuel in any of the latter's circuits, and now he only wants to get some information from a diviner about these unfortunate asses. What a contrast between the thoughts of the two, as they looked at each other! Saul begins by consulting Samuel as a magician; he ends by seeking counsel from the witch at Endor. Samuel's words are beautiful in their smothering of all personal feeling, and dignified in their authority. He at once takes command of Saul, and prepares him by half-hints for something great to come. The direction to go up before me is a sign of honour. The invitation to the sacrificial feast is another. The promise to disclose his own secret thoughts to Saul may, perhaps, point to some hidden ambitions, the knowledge of which would prove Samuel's prophetic character. The assurance as to the asses answers the small immediate occasion of Saul's resort to him, and the dim hint in the last words of verse 20, rightly translated, tells him that all that is desirable in Israel is for him, and for all his father's house. He went out to look for his father's asses, and he found a kingdom. The words were enigmatical; but if Saul knew of the impending revolution, they could scarcely fail to dazzle him and take away his breath. His answer is more than mere Oriental self-depreciation. Its bashful modesty contrasts sadly with the almost insane masterfulness and arrogant self-will of his later years. Fair beginnings may end ill, and those who are set in positions of influence have hard work to keep steady heads, and to sail with low sails.

**III.** The feast. Up at the high place was some chamber used for the feasts which followed the sacrifices. A company of thirty--or, according to another reading, of seventy--persons had been invited, and the stately young stranger from Benjamin, with his servant (a trait of the simple manners of these days), is set in the place of honour, where wondering eyes fasten on him. Attention is still more emphatically centred on him when Samuel bids the cook bring a part of the sacrifice which he had been ordered to set aside. It proves to be the shoulder or thigh, the priest's perquisite, and therefore probably Samuel's. To give this to another was equivalent to putting him in Samuel's place; and Samuel's words in handing it to Saul make its meaning plain. It is that which hath been reserved. It has been kept for thee till the appointed time, and that with a view to the assembled guests. All this is in true prophetic fashion, which delighted in symbols, and these of the homeliest sort. The whole transaction expressed the transference of power to Saul, the divine reserving of the monarchy for him, and the public investiture with it, by the prophet himself. The veil was intentional, and intentionally thin. Cannot we see the flush of surprise and modesty on Saul's cheek, as he tore the pieces from the significant shoulder, and hear the whispers that ran through the guest-chamber?

**IV.** The private colloquy. When the simple feast was over, the strangely assorted pair went down to Samuel's house, and there, on the quiet house-top, where were no curious ears, held long and earnest talk. No doubt Samuel told Saul all that was in his heart, as he had said that he would, and convinced him thereby that it was God who was speaking to him through the prophet. Nor would exhortations and warnings be wanting, which the old man's experience would be anxious to give, and the young one's modesty not unwilling to receive. Saul is a listener, not a speaker, in this unreported interview; and Samuel is in it, as throughout, the superior. The characteristic which marked the beginning of the Jewish monarchy was stamped on it till the end. The king was inferior to the prophet, and was meant to take his instructions from him when he appeared. Saul was docile on that first day, when he was half dazed with his new prospects, and wholly grateful to Samuel; but the history will show us how soon the fair promise of concord was darkened, and how fiercely he chafed at Samuel's attempted control.

One can fancy his thoughts as he lay in the starlight, on the house-top, that night, and gazed into the astounding future that had opened before him. Had there been any true religion in him, it would have been a wakeful night of prayer. But, more likely, as the event proves, the ambition and arrogance which were deep in his nature, though hitherto undeveloped, were his counsellors, and drove Samuel's wisdom out of his head.

As soon as the morning-red began to rise in the East, Samuel sent him away, to secure, as would appear, privacy in his departure. With simple courtesy the prophet accompanied his guest, and as soon as they had got down the hill beyond the last house of the city, he bids Saul send on his servant, that he may speak a last word to him alone. Our text stops before the solemn anointing, and leaves these two standing there, in the fresh morning, type of the new career opening for one of them. What a contrast in the men! The one has all his long life been true to his first vow, Speak, for Thy servant heareth, and now has come, in fulness of years, and reverenced by all men, near the end of his patient, faithful service. His work is all but done, and his heart is quiet in the peace which is the best reward of loving and doing God's law. Ripened wisdom, calm trust, unhesitating submission cast a glory round the old man, who is now performing the supreme act of self-abnegation of his lifetime, and, not without a sense of relief, is laying the burden, so long and uncomplainingly borne, on the great shoulders of this young giant. The other has a humble past of a few years rapidly sinking out of his dazzled sight, and is in a whirl of emotion at the startling suddenness of his new dignity. When one thinks of Gilboa, and the desperate suicide there, how pathetic is that strong, jubilant young figure, in the morning light, below the city, as he bows his head to receive the anointing which, little as he knew it, was to prove his ruin! A life begun by obedient listening to God's voice, and continued in the same, comes at last to a blessed end, and is crowned with many goods. A life which but partially accepts God's will as its law, and rather takes counsel of its own passions and arrogant self-sufficiency, may have much that is bright and lovable at its beginning, but will steadily darken as it goes on, and will set at last in eclipse and gloom.