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

**2 KINGS-017. A KING'S EPITAPH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"6. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. 7. For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, 8. And walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made. 9. And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city. 10. And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: 11. And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as did the heathen whom the Lord carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger: 12. For they served idols, whereof the Lord had said unto them, Ye shall not do this thing. 13. Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets. 14. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the Lord their God. 15. And they rejected His statutes, and His covenant that He made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them. 16. And they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. 17. And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger. 18. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only."*

*2 Kings 17:6-18*

The brevity of the account of the fall of Samaria in verse 6 contrasts with the long enumeration of the sins which caused it, in the rest of this passage. Modern critics assume that verses 7-23 are an interpolation by the Deuteronomic writer, apparently for no reason but because they trace Israel's fall to its cause in idolatry. But surely the bare notice in verse 6, immediately followed by verse 24, cannot have been all that the original historian had to say about so tragic an end of so large a part of the people of God. The whole purpose of the Old Testament history is not to chronicle events, but to declare God's dealings, and the fall of a kingdom was of little moment, except as revealing the righteousness of God.

The main part of this passage, then, is the exposition of the causes of the national ruin. It is a post mortem inquiry into the diseases that killed a kingdom. At first sight, these verses seem a mere heaping together, not without some repetition, of one or two charges; but, more closely looked at, they disclose a very striking progress of thought. In the centre stands verse 13, telling of the mission of the prophets. Before it, verses 7-12, narrate Israel's sin, which culminates in provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 11). After it, the sins are reiterated with noticeable increase of emphasis, and again culminate in provoking the Lord to anger (ver. 17). So we have two degrees of guilt--one before and one after the prophets messages; and two kindlings of God's anger--one which led to the sending of the prophets, and one which led to the destruction of Israel. The lessons that flow from this obvious progress of thought are plain.

**I. The less culpable apostasy before the prophets warnings.**

The first words of verse 7, rendered as in the Revised Version, give the purpose of all that follows; namely, to declare the causes of the calamity just told. Note that the first characteristic of Israel's sin was ungrateful departure from God. There is a world of pathos and meaning in that their God, which is enhanced by the allusion to the Egyptian deliverance. All sins are attempts to break the chain which binds us to God--a chain woven of a thousand linked benefits. All practically deny His possession of us, and ours of Him, and display the short memory which ingratitude has. All have that other feature hinted at here--the contrast, so absurd if it were not so sad, between the worth and power of the God who is left and the other gods who are preferred. The essential meanness and folly of Israel are repeated by every heart departing from the living God.

The double origin of the idolatry is next set forth. It was in part imported and in part home-made. We have little conception of the strength of faith and courage which were needed to keep the Jews from becoming idolaters, surrounded as they were by such. But the same are needed to-day to keep us from learning the ways of the world and getting a snare to our souls. Now, as ever, walking with God means walking in the opposite direction from the crowd, and that requires some firm nerve. The home-made idolatry is gibbeted as being according to the statutes of the kings. What right had they to prescribe their subjects religion? The influence of influential people, especially if exerted against the service of God, is hard to resist; but it is no excuse for sin that it is fashionable.

The blindness of Israel to the consequences of their sin is hinted in the reference to the fate of the nations whom they imitated. They had been cast out; would not their copyists learn the lesson? We, too, have examples enough of what godless lives come to, if we had the sense to profit by them. The God who cast out the vile Canaanites and all the rest of the wicked crew before the sons of the desert has not changed, and will treat Israel as He did them, if Israel come down to their level. Outward privileges make idolatry or any sin more sinful, and its punishment more severe.

Another characteristic of Israel's sin is its being done secretly. Of the various meanings proposed for that word (ver. 9) the best seems to be that it refers to the attempt to combine the worship of God and of idols, of which the calf worship is an instance. Elijah had long ago taunted the people with trying to hobble on both knees, or on two opinions at once; and here the charge is of covering idolatry with a cloak of Jehovah worship. A varnish of religion is convenient and cheap, and often effectual in deceiving ourselves as well as others; but as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he, whatever his cloak may be; and the thing which we count most precious and long most for is our god, whatever our professions of orthodox religion.

The idolatry is then described, in rapid touches, as universal. Wherever there was a solitary watchman's tower among the pastures there was a high place, and they were reared in every city. Images and Asherim deformed every hill-top and stood under every spreading tree. Everywhere incense loaded the heavy air with its foul fragrance. The old scenes of unnamable abomination, which had been so terribly avenged, seemed to have come back, and to cry aloud for another purging by fire and sword.

The terrible upshot of all was to provoke the Lord to anger. The New Testament is as emphatic as the Old in asserting that there is the capacity of anger in the God whose name is love, and that sin calls it forth. The special characteristic of sin, by which it thus attracts that lightning, is that it is disobedience. As in the first sin, so in all others, God has said, Ye shall not do this thing; and we say, Do it we will. What can the end of that be but the anger of the Lord? Because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.

**II. Verse 13 gives the pleading of Jehovah.**

The mission of the prophets was God's reply to Israel's rebellion, and was equally the sign of His anger and of His love. The more sin abounds, the more does God multiply means to draw back to Himself. The deafer the ears, the louder the beseeching voice of His grieved and yet pitying love. His anger clothes itself in more stringent appeals and clearer revelations of Himself before it takes its slaughtering weapons in hand. The darker the background of sin, the brighter the beams of His light show against it. Man's sin is made the occasion for a more glorious display of God's character and heart. It is on the storm-cloud that the sun paints the rainbow. Each successive stage in man's departure from God evoked a corresponding increase in the divine effort to attract him back, till last of all He sent unto them His Son. In nature, attraction diminishes as distance increases; in the realms of grace, it grows with distance. The one desire of God's heart is that sinners would return from their evil ways, and He presses on them the solemn thought of the abundant intimations of His will which have been given from of old, and are pealed again into all ears by living voices. His law for us is not merely an old story spoken centuries ago, but is vocal in our consciences to-day, and fresh as when Sinai flamed and thundered above the camp, and the trumpet thrilled each heart.

**III. The heavier sin that followed the divine pleading.**

That divine voice leaves no man as it finds him. If it does not sway him to obedience, it deepens his guilt, and makes him more obstinate. Like some perverse ox in the yoke, he stiffens his neck, and stands the very picture of brute obduracy. There is an awful alternative involved in our hearing of God's message, which never returns to Him void, but ever does something to the hearer, either softening or hardening, either scaling the eyes or adding another film on them, either being the savour of life unto life or of death unto death. The mission of the prophets changed forgetfulness of God's statutes into rejection of them, and made idolatry self-conscious rebellion. Alas, that men should make what is meant to be a bond to unite them to God into a wedge to part them farther from Him! But how constantly that is the effect of the gospel, and for the same reason as in Israel--that they did not believe in the Lord their God!

The miserable result on the sinners own natures is described with pregnant brevity in verse 15. They followed vanity, and became vain. The worshipper became like the thing worshipped, as is always the case. The idol is vanity, utter emptiness and nonentity; and whoever worships nothingness will become in his own inmost life as empty and vain as it is. That is the retribution attendant on all trust in, and longing after, the trifles of earth, that we come down to the level of what we set our hearts upon. We see the effects of that principle in the moral degradation of idolaters. Gods lustful, cruel, capricious, make men like themselves. We see it working upwards in Christianity, in which God becomes man that men may become like God, and of which the whole law is put into one precept, which is sure to be kept, in the measure of the reality of a man's religion. Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children.

In verses 16 and 17 the details of the idolatry follow the general statement, as in verses 9 to 12, but with additions and with increased severity of tone. We hear now of calves and star worship, and Baal, and burning children to Moloch, and divination and enchantment. The catalogue is enlarged, and there is added to it the terrible declaration that Israel had sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord. The same thing was said by Elijah to Ahab--a noble instance of courage. The sinner who steels himself against the divine remonstrance, does not merely go on in his old sins, but adds new ones. Begin with the calves, and fancy that you are worshipping Jehovah, and you will end with Baal and Moloch. Refuse to hear God's pleadings, and you will sell your freedom, and become the lowest and only real kind of slave--the bondsman of evil. When that point of entire abandonment to sin, which Paul calls being sold under sin, is reached, as it may be reached, at all events by a nation, and corruption has struck too deep to be cast out, once again the anger of the Lord is provoked; but this time it comes in a different guise. The armies of the Assyrians, not the prophets, are its messengers now. Israel had made itself like the nations whom God had used it to destroy, and now it shall be destroyed as they were.

To be swept out of His sight is the fate of obstinate rejection of His commandments and pleadings. Israel made itself the slave of evil, and was made the captive of Assyria. Self-willed freedom, which does as it likes, and heeds not God, ends in bondage, and is itself bondage. God's anger against sin speaks pleadingly to us all, saying, Do not this abominable thing that I hate. Well for us if we hearken to His voice when His anger is kindled but a little. If we do not yield to Him, and cast away our idols, we shall become vain as they. Our evil will be more fatal, and our obstinacy more criminal, because He called, and we refused. Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth? These captives, dragging their weary limbs, with despair in their hearts, across the desert to a land of bondage, were but shadows, in the visible region of things, of the far more doleful and dreary fate that sooner or later must fall on those who would none of God's counsel, and despised all His reproof, but cling to their idol till they and it are destroyed together.