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

**2 KINGS-021. THE REDISCOVERED LAW AND ITS EFFECTS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord: and Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. 9. And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord. 10. And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book: and Shaphan read it before the king. 11. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes. 12. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king s, saying, 13. Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us. 14. So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her. 15. And she said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me, 16. Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: 17. Because they have forsaken Me, and have burnt incense unto other gods, that they might provoke Me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore My wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched. 18. But to the king of Judah, which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard; 19. Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I speak against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before Me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. 20. Behold, therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again."*

*2 Kings 22:8-20*

We get but a glimpse into a wild time of revolution and counter-revolution in the brief notice that the servants of Amon, Josiah's father, conspired and murdered him in his palace, but were themselves killed by a popular rising, in which the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead, and so no doubt balked the conspirators plans. Poor boy! he was only eight years old when he made his first acquaintance with rebellion and bloodshed. There must have been some wise heads and strong arms and loyal hearts round him, but their names have perished. The name of David was still a spell in Judah, and guarded his childish descendant's royal rights. In the eighteenth year of his reign, the twenty-sixth of his age, he felt himself firm enough in the saddle to begin a work of religious reformation, and the first reward of his zeal was the finding of the book of the law. Josiah, like the rest of us, gained fuller knowledge of God's will in the act of trying to do it so far as he knew it. Light is sown for the upright.

**I.** We have, first, the discovery of the law. The important and complicated critical questions raised by the narrative cannot be discussed here, nor do they affect the broad lines of teaching in the incident. Nothing is more truthful-like than the statement that, in course of the repairs of the Temple, the book should be found,--probably in the holiest place, to which the high priest would have exclusive access. How it came to have been lost is a more puzzling question; but if we recall that seventy-five years had passed since Hezekiah, and that these were almost entirely years of apostasy and of tumult, we shall not wonder that it was so. Unvalued things easily slip out of sight, and if the preservation of Scripture depended on the estimation which some of us have of it, it would have been lost long ago. But the fact of the loss suggests the wonder of the preservation. It would appear that this copy was the only one existing,--at all events, the only one known. It alone transmitted the law to later days, like some slender thread of water that finds its way through the sand and brings the river down to broad plains beyond. Think of the millions of copies now, and the one dusty, forgotten roll tossing unregarded in the dilapidated Temple, and be thankful for the Providence that has watched over the transmission. Let us take care, too, that the whole Scripture is not as much lost to us, though we have half a dozen Bibles each, as the roll was to Josiah and his men.

Hilkiah's announcement to Shaphan has a ring of wonder and of awe in it. It sounds as if he had not known that such a book was anywhere in the Temple. And it is noteworthy that not he, but Shaphan, is said to have read it. Perhaps he could not,--though, if he did not, how did he know what the book was? At all events, he and Shaphan seem to have felt the importance of the find, and to have consulted what was to be done. Observe how the latter goes cautiously to work, and at first only says that he has received a book. He gives it no name, but leaves it to tell its own story,--which it was then, and is still, well able to do. Scripture is its own best credentials and witnesses whence it comes. Again Shaphan is the reader, as it was natural that a scribe should be, and again the possibility is that Josiah could not read.

**II.** One can easily picture the scene while the reader's voice went steadily through the commandments, threatenings, and promises,--the deepening eagerness of the king, the gradual shaping out before his conscience of God's ideal for him and his people, and the gradual waking of the sense of sin in him, like a dormant serpent beginning to stir in the first spring sunshine.

The effect of God's law on the sinful heart is vividly pictured in Josiah's emotion. By the law is the knowledge of sin. To many of us that law, in spite of our outward knowledge of it, is as completely absent from our consciousness as it had been from the most ignorant of Josiah's subjects; and if for once its searchlight were thrown into the hidden corners of our hearts and lives, it would show up in dreadful clearness the skulking foes that are stealing to assail us, and the foul things that have made good their lodgment in our hearts and lives. It always makes an epoch in a life when it is really brought to the standard of God's law; and it is well for us if, like Josiah, we rend our clothes, or rather our heart, and not our garments, and take home the conviction, I have sinned against the Lord.

The dread of punishment sprang up in the young king's heart, and though that emotion is not the highest motive for seeking the Lord, it is not an unworthy one, and is meant to lead on to nobler ones than itself. There is too much unwillingness, in many modern conceptions of Christ's gospel, to recognise the place which the apprehension of personal evil consequences from sin has in the initial stages of the process by which we are translated from the kingdom of darkness into that of God's dear Son.

**III.** The message to Huldah is remarkable. The persons sent with it show its importance. The high priest, the royal secretary, and one of the king's personal attendants, who was, no doubt, in his confidence, and two other influential men, one of whom, Ahikam, is known as Jeremiah's staunch friend, would make some stir in the second quarter, on their way to the modest house of the keeper of the wardrobe. The weight and number of the deputation did honour to the prophetess, as well as showed the king's anxiety as to the matter in hand. Jeremiah and Zephaniah were both living at this time, and we do not know why Huldah was preferred. Perhaps she was more accessible. But conjecture is idle. Enough that she was recognised as having, and declared herself to have, direct authoritative communications from God.

For what did Josiah need to inquire of the Lord concerning the words of this book? They were plain enough. Did he hope to have their sternness somewhat mollified by the words of a prophetess who might be more amenable to entreaties or personal considerations than the unalterable page was? Evidently he recognised Huldah as speaking with divine authority, and he might have known that two depositories of God's voice could not contradict each other. But possibly his embassy simply reflected his extreme perturbation and alarm, and like many another man when God's law startles him into consciousness of sin, he betook himself to one who was supposed to be in God's counsels, half hoping for a mitigated sentence, and half uncertain of what he really wished. He confusedly groped for some support or guide. But, confused as he was, his message to the prophetess implied repentance, eager desire to know what to do, and humble docility. If dread of evil consequences leads us to such a temper, we shall hear, as Josiah did, answers of peace as authoritative and divine as were the threatenings that brought us to our senses and our knees.

**IV.** The answer which Josiah received falls into two parts, the former of which confirms the threatenings of evil to Jerusalem, while the latter casts a gleam athwart the thundercloud, and promises Josiah escape from the national calamities. Observe the difference in the designation given him in the two parts. When the threatenings are confirmed, his individuality is, as it were, sunk; for that part of the message applies to any and every member of the nation, and therefore he is simply called the man that sent you. Any other man would have received the same answer. But when his own fate is to be disclosed, then he is the king of Judah, who sent you, and is described by the official position which set him apart from his subjects.

Huldah has but to confirm the dread predictions of evil which the roll had contained. What else can a faithful messenger of God do than reiterate its threatenings? Vainly do men seek to induce the living prophet to soften down God's own warnings. Foolishly do they think that the messenger or the messenger's Sender has any pleasure in the death of the wicked; and as foolishly do they take the message to be unkind, for surely to warn that destruction waits the evildoer is gracious. The signal-man who waves the red flag to stop the train rushing to ruin is a friend. Huldah was serving Judah best by plain reiteration of the words of the book.

But the second half of her message told that in wrath God remembered mercy. And that is for ever true. His thunderbolts do not strike indiscriminately, even when they smite a nation. Judah's corruption had gone too far for recovery, and the carcase called for the gathering together of the vultures, but Josiah's penitence was not in vain. I have heard thee is always said to the true penitent, and even if he is involved in widespread retribution, its strokes become different to him. Josiah was assured that the evil should not come in his days. But Huldah's promise seems contradicted by the circumstances of his death. It was a strange kind of being gathered to his grave in peace when he fell on the fatal field of Megiddo, and his servants carried him in a chariot dead, ... and buried him in his own sepulchre (2 Kings 23:30). But the promise is fulfilled in its real meaning by the fact that the threatenings which he was inquiring about did not fall on Judah in his time, and so far as these were concerned, he did come to his grave in peace.