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

**ACTS-086. ROME PROTECTS PAUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the Temple, I was in a trance; 18. And saw Him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning Me. 19. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on Thee: 20. And when the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. 21. And He said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles. 22. And they gave him audience unto this word, and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live. 23. And as they cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air, 24. The chief captain commanded him to be brought into the castle, and bade that he should be examined by scourging; that he might know wherefore they cried so against him. 25. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said unto the centurion that stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned? 26. When the centurion heard that, he went and told the chief captain, saying, Take heed what thou doest: for this man is a Roman. 27. Then the chief captain came, and said, Tell me, art thou a Roman? He said, Yea. 28. And the chief captain answered, With a great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said, But I was free born. 29. Then straightway they departed from him which should have examined him: and the chief captain also was afraid, after he knew that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. 30. On the morrow, because he would have known the certainty wherefore he was accused of the Jews, he loosed him from his bands, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down, and set him before them."*

*Acts 22:17-30*

The threatened storm soon burst on Paul in Jerusalem. On the third day after his arrival he began the ceremonial recommended by the elders to prove his adherence to the law. Before the seven days during which it lasted were over the riot broke out, and he was saved from death only by the military tribune hurrying down to the Temple and dragging him from the mob.

The tribune's only care was to stamp out a riot, and whether the victim was that Egyptian or not, to prevent his being murdered. He knew nothing, and cared as little, about the grounds of the tumult, but he was not going to let a crowd of turbulent Jews take the law into their own hands, and flout the majesty of Roman justice. So he lets the nearly murdered man say his say and keeps the mob off him. It was a strange scene--below, the howling zealots; above, on the stairs, the Christian apologists guarded from his countrymen by a detachment of legionaries; and the assembly presided over by a Roman tribune.

It is very characteristic of Paul that he thought that his own conversion was the best argument that he could use with his fellow-Israelites. So he tells his story, and this section strikes into his speech at the point where he is coming to very thin ice indeed, and is about to vindicate his work among the Gentiles by declaring that it was done in obedience to a command from heaven. We need not discuss the date of the trance, whether it was in his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion or, as Ramsay strongly argues, is to be put at the visit mentioned in Acts xi. 30 and xii. 25.

We note the delicate, conciliatory skill with which he brings out that his conversion had not made him less a devout worshipper in the Temple, by specifying it as the scene of the trance, and prayer as his occupation then. The mention of the Temple also invested the vision with sanctity.

Very noticeable too is the avoidance of the name of Jesus, which would have stirred passion in the crowd. We may also observe that the first words of our Lord, as given by Paul, did not tell him whither he was to go, but simply bade him leave Jerusalem. The full announcement of the mission to the Gentiles was delayed both by Jesus to Paul and by Paul to his brethren. He was to get quickly out of Jerusalem; that was tragic enough. He was to give up working for his own people, whom he loved so well. And the reason was their rooted incredulity and their hatred of him. Other preachers might do something with them, but Paul could not. They will not receive testimony of thee.

But the Apostle's heart clung to his nation, and not even his Lord's command was accepted without remonstrance. His patriotism led him to the verge of disobedience, and encouraged him to put in his But, Lord, with boldness that was all but presumption. He ventures to suggest a reason why the Jews would, as he thinks, receive his testimony. They knew what he had been, and they must bethink themselves that there must be something real and mighty in the power which had turned his whole way of thinking and living right round, and made him love all that he had hated, and count all that he had prized but dung. The remonstrance is like Moses', like Jeremiah's, like that of many a Christian set to work that goes against the grain, and called to relinquish what he would fain do, and do what he would rather leave undone.

But Jesus does not take His servants' remonstrances amiss, if only they will make them frankly to Him, and not keep muttering them under their breath to themselves. Let us say all that is in our hearts. He will listen, and clear away hesitations, and show us our path, and make us willing to walk in it. Jesus did not discuss the matter with Paul, but reiterated the command, and made it more pointed and clear; and then Paul stopped objecting and yielded his will, as we should do. When he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. The Apostle had kept from the obnoxious word as long as he could, but it had to come, and he tells the enraged listeners at last, without circumlocution, that he is the Apostle of the Gentiles, that Jesus has made him so against his will, and that therefore he must do the work appointed him, though his heart-strings crack with seeming to be cold to Israel.

The burst of fury, expressed in gestures which anybody who has ever seen two Easterns quarrelling can understand, looks fitter for a madhouse than an audience of men in their senses. They yelled and tore their garments (and their beards, no doubt), and clutched handfuls of dust and tossed it in the air, like Shimei cursing David. What a picture of frenzied hate! And what was it all for? Because Gentiles were to be allowed to share in Israel's privileges. And what were the privileges which they thus jealously monopolised? The favour and protection of the God who, as their own prophets had taught them, was the God of the whole earth, and revealed Him to Israel that Israel might reveal Him to the world.

The less they entered into the true possession of their heritage, the more savagely they resented sharing it with the nations. The more their prerogative became a mere outward thing, the more they snarled at any one who proposed to participate in it. To seek to keep religious blessings to one's self is a conclusive proof that they are not really possessed. If we have them we shall long to impart them. Formal religionists always dislike missionary enterprise.

The tribune no doubt had been standing silently watching, in his strong, contemptuous Roman way, the paroxysm of rage sweeping over his troublesome charge. Of course he did not understand a word that the culprit had been saying, and could not make out what had produced the outburst. He felt that there was something here that he had not fathomed, and that he must get to the bottom of. It was useless to lay hold of any of these shrieking maniacs and try to get a reasonable word out of them. So he determined to see what he could make of the orator, who had already astonished him by traces of superior education, and was evidently no mere vulgar firebrand or sedition-monger. He might have tried gentler means of extracting the truth than scourging, but that process of examination, as it is flatteringly called, was common, and has not been antiquated for so many centuries that we need wonder at this Roman officer using it.

Paul submitted, and was already tied up to some whipping-post, in an attitude which would expose his back to the lash, when he quietly dropped, to the inferior officer detailed to superintend the flogging, the question which fell like a bombshell. Possibly the Apostle had not known what the soldiers were ordered to do with him till he was tied up. We cannot tell why he did not plead his citizenship sooner. But we may remember that at Philippi he did not plead it at all till after the scourging. Why he delayed so long in the present instance, and why he at last spoke the magic words, I am a Roman citizen, we cannot say. But we may gather the two lessons that Christ's servants are often wise in submitting silently to wrongs, and that they are within their rights in availing themselves of legal defences against illegal treatment. Whether silence or protest is the more expedient must be determined in each case by conscience, guided by the sought-for guidance of the enlightening Spirit. The determining consideration should be, Which course will best glorify my Master?

The information brought the tribune in haste to the place where the Apostle was still tied up. The tables were turned indeed. His brief answer, Yea, was accepted at once, for to claim the sacred name of Roman falsely would have been too dangerous, and no doubt Paul's bearing impressed the tribune with a conviction of his truthfulness. A hint of contempt and doubt lies in his remark that he had paid dearly for the franchise, which remark implies, Where did a poor man like you get the money then? A shameful trade in selling citizens' rights was carried on in the degraded days of the Empire by underlings at court, and no doubt the tribune had procured his citizenship in that way. Paul's answer explains that he was born free, and so was above his questioner.

That discovery put an end to all thought of scourging. Paul was at once liberated, and the tribune, terrified that he might be reported, seeks to repair his error and changes his tactics, retaining Paul for safety in the castle, and summoning the Sanhedrim, to try to find out more of this strange affair through them. The great council of the nation had sunk low indeed when it had to obey the call of a Roman soldier.

Thus once more, as so continually in the Acts, Rome is friendly to the Christian teachers and saves them from Jewish fury. To point out that early protection and benevolent sufferance is one purpose of the whole book. The days of Roman persecution had not yet come. The Empire was favourable to Christianity, not only because its officials were too proud to take interest in petty squabbles between two sects of Jews about their absurd superstitions, but reasons of political wisdom combined with supercilious indifference to bring about this attitude.

The strong hand of Rome, too, if it crushed national independence, also suppressed violence, kept men from flying at each other's throats, spread peace over wide lands, and made the journeyings of Paul and the planting of the early Christian Churches possible. It was a God-appointed, though an imperfect, and in some aspects, mischievous unity, and prepared the way for that higher form of unity realised in the Church which finally shattered the coarser Empire which had at first sheltered it. The Caesars were doing God's work when they were following their own lust of empire. They were yoked to Christ's chariot, though unwitting and unwilling. To them, as truly as to Cyrus, might the divine voice have said, I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me.