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

**EXODUS-003. THE ARK AMONG THE FLAGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. 2. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. 3. And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. 4. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him. 5. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. 6. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews children. 7. Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? 8. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. 9. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it. 10. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water."*

*Exodus 2:1-10*

**I.** It is remarkable that all the persons in this narrative are anonymous. We know that the names of the man of the house of Levi and his wife were Amram and Jochebed. Miriam was probably the anxious sister who watched what became of the little coffer. The daughter of Pharaoh has two names in Jewish tradition, one of which corresponds to that which Brugsch has found to have been borne by one of Rameses very numerous daughters. One likes to think that the name of the gentle-hearted woman has come down to us; but, whether she was called Meri or not, she and the others have no name here. The reason can scarcely have been ignorance. But they are, as it were, kept in shadow, because the historian saw, and wished us to see, that a higher Hand was at work, and that over all the events recorded in these verses there brooded the informing, guiding Spirit of God Himself, the sole actor.

Each only as God wills Can work--God's puppets, best and worst, Are we: there is no last nor first.

**II.** The mother's motive in braving the danger to herself involved in keeping the child is remarkably put. When she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him. It was not only a mother's love that emboldened her, as it does all weak creatures, to shelter her offspring at her own peril, but something in the look of the infant, as it lay on her bosom, touched her with a dim hope. According to the Septuagint translation, both parents shared in this. And so the Epistle to the Hebrews unites them in that which is here attributed to the mother only. Stephen, too, speaks of Moses as fair in God's sight. As if the prescient eyes of the parents were not blinded by love, but rather cleared to see some token of divine benediction resting on him. The writer of the Hebrews lifts the deed out of the category of instinctive maternal affection up to the higher level of faith. So we may believe that the aspect of her child woke some prophetic vision in the mother's soul, and that she and her husband were of those who cherished the hopes naturally born from the promise to Abraham, nurtured by Jacob's and Joseph's dying wish to be buried in Canaan, and matured by the tyranny of Pharaoh. Their faith, at all events, grasped the unseen God as their helper, and made Jochebed bold to break the terrible law, as a hen will fly in the face of a mastiff to shield her brood. Their faith perhaps also grasped the future deliverance, and linked it in some way with their child. We may learn how transfiguring and ennobling to the gentlest and weakest is faith in God, especially when it is allied with unselfish human love. These two are the strongest powers. If they are at war, the struggle is terrible: if they are united, the weakest is as David, and David as an angel of God. Let us seek ever to blend their united strength in our own lives.

Will it be thought too fanciful if we suggest that we are taught another lesson,--namely, that the faith which surrenders its earthly treasures to God, in confidence of His care, is generally rewarded and vindicated by receiving them back again, glorified and sanctified by the altar on which they have been laid? Jochebed clasped her recovered darling to her bosom with a deeper gladness, and held him by a surer title, when Miriam brought him back as the princess's charge, than ever before. We never feel the preciousness of dear ones so much, nor are so calm in the joy of possession, as when we have laid them in God's hands, and have learned how wise and wonderful His care is.

**III.** How much of the world's history that tiny coffer among the reeds held! How different that history would have been if, as might easily have happened, it had floated away, or if the feeble life within it had wailed itself dead unheard! The solemn possibilities folded and slumbering in an infant are always awful to a thoughtful mind. But, except the manger at Bethlehem, did ever cradle hold the seed of so much as did that papyrus chest? The set of opinion at present minimises the importance of the individual, and exalts the spirit of the period, as a factor in history. Standing beside Miriam, we may learn a truer view, and see that great epochs require great men, and that, without such for leaders, no solid advance in the world's progress is achieved. Think of the strange cradle floating on the Nile; then think of the strange grave among the mountains of Moab, and of all between, and ponder the same lesson as is taught in yet higher fashion by Bethlehem and Calvary, that God's way of blessing the world is to fill men with His message, and let others draw from them. Whether it be law, or grace and truth, a man is needed through whom it may fructify to all.

**IV.** The sweet picture of womanly compassion in Pharaoh's daughter is full of suggestions. We have already noticed that her name is handed down by one tradition as Merris, and that Meri has been found as the appellation of a princess of the period. A rabbinical authority calls her Bithiah, that is, Daughter of Jehovah; by which was, no doubt, intended to imply that she became in some sense a proselyte. This may have been only an inference from her protection of Moses. There is a singular and very obscure passage in 1 Chronicles 4:17-18, relating the genealogy of a certain Mered, who seems to have had two wives, one the Jewess, the other Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh. We know no more about him or her, but Keil thinks that Mered probably lived before the exodus; but it can scarcely be that the daughter of Pharaoh, his wife, is our princess, and that she actually became a daughter of Jehovah, and, like her adopted child, refused royal dignity and preferred reproach. In any case, the legend of her name is a tender and beautiful way of putting the belief that in her there was some good thing towards the God of Israel.

But, passing from that, how the true woman's heart changes languid curiosity into tenderness, and how compassion conquers pride of race and station, as well as regard for her father's edict, as soon as the infant's cry, which touches every good woman's feelings, falls on her ear! One touch of nature makes the whole world kin. All the centuries are as nothing; the strange garb and the stranger mental and spiritual dress fade, and we have here a mere woman, affected, as every true sister of hers to-day would be, by the helpless wailing. God has put that instinct there. Alas that it ever should be choked by frivolity or pride, and frozen by indifference and self-indulgence! Gentle souls spring up in unfavourable soil. Rameses was a strange father for such a daughter. How came this dove in the vulture's cage? Her sweet pity beside his cold craft and cruelty is like the lamb couching by the lion. Note, too, that gentlest pity makes the gentlest brave. She sees the child is a Hebrew. Her quick wit understands why it has been exposed, and she takes its part, and the part of the poor weeping parents, whom she can fancy, against the savage law. No doubt, as Egyptologists tell us, the princesses of the royal house had separate households and abundant liberty of action. Still, it was bold to override the strict commands of such a monarch. But it was not a self-willed sense of power, but the beautiful daring of a compassionate woman, to which God committed the execution of His purposes.

And that is a force which has much like work trusted to it in modern society too. Our great cities swarm with children exposed to a worse fate than the baby among the flags. Legislation and official charity have far too rough hands and too clumsy ways to lift the little life out of the coffer, and to dry the tears. We must look to Christian women to take a leaf out of Bithiah s book. First, they should use their eyes to see the facts, and not be so busy about their own luxury and comfort that they pass the poor pitch-covered box unnoticed. Then they should let the pitiful call touch their heart, and not steel themselves in indifference or ease. Then they should conquer prejudices of race, pride of station, fear of lowering themselves, loathing, or contempt. And then they should yield to the impulses of their compassion, and never mind what difficulties or opponents may stand in the way of their saving the children. If Christian women knew their obligations and their power, and lived up to them as bravely as this Egyptian princess, there would be fewer little ones flung out to be eaten by crocodiles, and many a poor child, who is now abandoned from infancy to the Devil, would be rescued to grow up a servant of God. She, there by the Nile waters, in her gracious pity and prompt wisdom, is the type of what Christian womanhood, and, indeed, the whole Christian community, should be in relation to child life.

**V.** The great lesson of this incident, as of so much before, is the presence of God's wonderful providence, working out its designs by all the play of human motives. In accordance with a law, often seen in His dealings, it was needful that the deliverer should come from the heart of the system from which he was to set his brethren free. The same principle which sent Saul of Tarsus to be trained at the feet of Gamaliel, and made Luther a monk in the Augustinian convent at Erfurt, planted Moses in Pharaoh's palace and taught him the wisdom of Egypt, against which he was to contend. It was a strange irony of Providence that put him so close to the throne which he was to shake. For his future work he needed to be lifted above his people, and to be familiar with the Egyptian court as well as with Egyptian learning. If he was to hate and to war against idolatry, and to rescue an unwilling people from it, he must know the rottenness of the system, and must have lived close enough to it to know what went on behind the scenes, and how foully it smelled when near. He would gain influence over his countrymen by his connection with Pharaoh, whilst his very separation from them would at once prevent his spirit from being broken by oppression, and would give him a keener sympathy with his people than if he had himself been crushed by slavery. His culture, heathen as it was, supplied the material on which the divine Spirit worked. God fashioned the vessel, and then filled it. Education is not the antagonist of inspiration. For the most part, the men whom God has used for His highest service have been trained in all the wisdom of their age. When it has been piled up into an altar, then the fire of the Lord falls.

Our story teaches us that God's chosen instruments are immortal till their work is done. No matter how forlorn may seem their outlook, how small the probabilities in their favour, how divergent from the goal may seem the road He leads them, He watches them. Around that frail ark, half lost among the reeds, is cast the impregnable shield of His purpose. All things serve that Will. The current in the full river, the lie of the flags that stop it from being borne down, the hour of the princess's bath, the direction of her idle glance, the cry of the child at the right moment, the impulse welling up in her heart, the swift resolve, the innocent diplomacy of the sister, the shelter of the happy mother's breast, the safety of the palace,--all these and a hundred more trivial and unrelated things are spun into the strong cable wherewith God draws slowly but surely His secret purpose into act. So ever His children are secure as long as He has work for them, and His mighty plan strides on to its accomplishment over all the barriers that men can raise.

How deeply this story had impressed on devout minds the truth of the divine protection for all who serve Him, is shown by the fact that the word employed in the last verse of our lesson, and there translated drawn, of which the name Moses is a form, is used on the only occasion of its occurrence in the Old Testament (namely Psalm xviii. 16, and in the duplicate in 2 Sam. xxii. 17) with plain reference to our narrative. The Psalmist describes his own deliverance, in answer to his cry, by a grand manifestation of God's majesty; and this is the climax and the purpose of the earthquake and the lightning, the darkness and the storm: He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters. So that scene by the margin of the Nile, so many years ago, is but one transient instance of the working of the power which secures deliverance from encompassing perils, and for strenuous, though it may be undistinguished, service to all who call upon Him. God, who put the compassion into the heart of Pharaoh's dusky daughter, is not less tender of heart than she, and when He hears us, though our cry be but as of an infant, with no language but a cry, He will come in His majesty and draw us from encompassing dangers and impending death. We cannot all be lawgivers and deliverers; but we may all appeal to His great pity, and partake of deliverance like that of Moses and of David.