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

**EXODUS-006. A LAST MERCIFUL WARNING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And the Lord said unto Moses, Yet will I bring one plague more upon Pharaoh, and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go hence: when he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether. 2. Speak now in the ears of the people, and let every man borrow of his neighbour, and every woman of her neighbour, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold. 3. And the Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people. 4. And Moses said, Thus saith the Lord, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt; 5. And all the first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the first-born of the maid-servant that is behind the mill; and all the first-born of beasts. 6. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more. 7. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the Lord doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel. 8. And all these thy servants shall come down unto Me, and bow themselves unto Me, saying, Get Thee out, and all the people that follow Thee: and after that I will go out. And he went out from Pharaoh in a great anger. 9. And the Lord said unto Moses, Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you; that My wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt. 10. And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh: and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land.--."*

*Exodus 9:1-10*

The first point to be noted in this passage is that it interposes a solemn pause between the preceding ineffectual plagues and the last effectual one. There is an awful lull in the storm before the last crashing hurricane which lays every obstacle flat. There is silence in heaven before the final peal of thunder. Verses 1 to 3 seem, at first sight, out of place, as interrupting the narrative, since Moses denunciation and prophecy in verses 4 to 8 must have been spoken at the interview with Pharaoh which we find going on at the end of the preceding chapter. But it is legitimate to suppose that, at the very moment when Pharaoh was blustering and threatening, and Moses was bearding him, giving back scorn for scorn, the latter heard with the inward ear the voice which made Pharaoh's words empty wind, and gave him the assurances and commands contained in verses 1 to 3, and that thus it was given him in that hour what he should speak; namely, the prediction that follows in verses 4 to 8. Such a view of the sequence of the passage makes it much more vivid, dramatic, and natural, than to suppose that the first verses are either interpolation or an awkward break referring to a revelation at some indefinite previous moment. When a Pharaoh or a Herod or an Agrippa threatens, God speaks to the heart of a Moses or a Paul, and makes His servant's face strong against their faces.

The same purpose of parting off the preceding plagues from the past ones explains the introduction of verses 9 and 10, which stand as a summary of the whole account of these, and, as it were, draw a line across the page, before beginning the story of that eventful day and night of Israel's deliverance.

Moses conviction, which he knew to be not his own thought but God's revelation of His purpose, pointed first to the final blow which was to finish Pharaoh's resistance. He had been vacillating between compliance and refusal, like an elastic ball which yields to compression and starts back to its swelling rotundity as soon as the pressure is taken off. But at last he will collapse altogether, like the same ball when a slit is cut in it, and it shrivels into a shapeless lump. Weak people's obstinate fits end like that. He will be as extreme in his eagerness to get rid of the Israelites as he had been in his determination to keep them. The sail that is filled one moment tumbles in a heap the next, when the halyards are cut. It is a poor affair when a man's actions are shaped mainly by fear of consequences. Fright always drives to extremes. When he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether. Many a stout, God-opposing will collapses altogether when God's finger touches it. Can thy heart endure in the days that I shall deal with thee?'

Verses 2 and 3 appear irrelevant here, but the command to collect from the Egyptians jewels, which might be bartered for necessaries, may well have been given to Moses simultaneously with the assurance that he would lead forth the people after the next plague, and the particulars of the people's favour and of Moses influence in the eyes of the native inhabitants, come in anticipatively to explain why the request for such contributions was granted when made.

With the new divine command swelling in his heart, Moses speaks his last word to Pharaoh, towering above him in righteous wrath, and dwindling his empty threats into nothingness. What a contrast between the impotent rage of the despot, with his vain threat, Thou shalt die, and the unblenching boldness of the man with God at his back! One cannot but note in Moses prediction of the last plague the solemn enlargement on the details of the widespread calamity, which is not unfeeling gloating over an oppressor's misery, but a yearning to save from hideous misery by timely and plain depicting of it. There is a flash of national triumph in the further contrast between the universal wailing in Egypt and the untouched security of the children of Israel, but that feeling merges at once into the higher one of the Lord s gracious action in establishing the difference between them and their oppressors. It is not safe to dwell on superiority over others, either as to condition or character, unless we print in very large letters that it is the Lord who has made it. There is a flash, too, of natural triumph in the picture of the proud courtiers brought down to prostrate themselves before the shepherd from Horeb, and to pray him to do what their master and they had so long fought against his doing. And there is a most natural assertion of non-dependence on their leave in that emphatic After that I will go out. He is not asserting himself against God, but against the cowering courtiers. Hot anger was excusable, but it was not the best mood in which to leave Pharaoh. Better if he had gone out unmoved, or moved only to great heaviness and sorrow of heart at the sight of men setting themselves against God, and rushing on the thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler to their own ruin. Moses anger we naturally sympathise with, Christ's meekness we should try to copy.

The closing verses, as we have already noticed, are a kind of summing-up of the whole narrative of the plagues and their effects on Pharaoh. They open two difficult questions, as to how and why it was that the effect of the successive strokes was so slight and transient. They give the how very emphatically as being that Jehovah hardened Pharaoh's heart. Does that not free Pharaoh from guilt? And does it not suggest an unworthy conception of God? It must be remembered that the preceding narrative employs not only the phrase that Jehovah hardened Pharaoh's heart, but also the expression that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And it is further to be noted that the latter expression is employed in the accounts of the earlier plagues, and that the former one appears only towards the close of the series. So then, even if we are to suppose that it means that there was a direct hardening action by God on the man's heart, such action was not first, but subsequent to obstinate hardening by himself. God hardens no man's heart who has not first hardened it himself. But we do not need to conclude that any inward action on the will is meant. Was not the accumulation of plagues, intended, as they were, to soften, a cause of hardening? Does not the Gospel, if rejected, harden, making consciences and wills less susceptible? Is it not a savour of death unto death, as our fathers recognised in speaking of gospel-hardened sinners'? The same fire softens wax and hardens clay. Whosoever is not brought near is driven farther off, by the influences which God brings to bear on us.

The why is stated in terms which may suggest difficulties,--that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt. But we have to remember that the Old Testament writers are not wont to distinguish so sharply as more logical Westerns do between the actual result of an event and its purpose. With their deep faith in the all-ruling power of God, whatever had come to pass was what He had meant to come to pass. In fact, Pharaoh's obstinacy had not thwarted the divine purpose, but had been the dark background against which the blaze of God's irresistible might had shone the brighter. He makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and turns opposition into the occasion of more conspicuously putting forth His omnipotence.