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

**EXODUS-009. A PATH IN THE SEA by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19.* *And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them: 20. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night. 21. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. 22. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. 23. And the Egyptians pursued, and went in after them to the midst of the sea, even all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. 24. And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and of the cloud, and troubled the host of the Egyptians, 25. And took off their chariot-wheels, that they drave them heavily: so that the Egyptians said, Let us flee from the face of Israel; for the Lord fighteth for them against the Egyptians. 26. And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen. 27. And Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to his strength when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled against it; and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. 28. And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them. 29. But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. 30. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore. 31. And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses."*

*Exodus 14:19-31*

This passage begins at the point where the fierce charge of the Egyptian chariots and cavalry on the straggling masses of the fugitives is inexplicably arrested. The weary day's march, which must have seemed as suicidal to the Israelites as it did to their pursuers, had ended in bringing them into a position where, as Luther puts it, they were like a mouse in a trap or a partridge in a snare. The desert, the sea, the enemy, were their alternatives. And, as they camped, they saw in the distance the rapid advance of the dreaded force of chariots, probably the vanguard of an army. No wonder that they lost heart. Moses alone keeps his head and his faith. He is rewarded with the fuller promise of deliverance, and receives the power accompanying the command, to stretch forth his hand, and part the sea. Then begins the marvellous series of incidents here recorded.

**I.** The first step in the leisurely march of the divine deliverance is the provision for checking the Egyptian advance and securing the safe breaking up of the Israelitish camp. The pursuers had been coming whirling along at full speed, and would soon have been amongst the disorderly mass, dealing destruction. There was no possibility of getting the crossing effected unless they were held at bay. When an army has to ford a river in the face of hostile forces, the hazardous operation is possible only if a strong rearguard is left on the enemy's side, to cover the passage. This is exactly what is done here. The pillar of fire and cloud, the symbol of the divine presence, passed from the van to the rear. Its guidance was not needed, when but one path through the sea was possible. Its defence was needed when the foe was pressing eagerly on the heels of the host. His people's needs determined then, as they ever do, the form of the divine presence and help. Long after, the prophet seized the great lesson of this event, when he broke into the triumphant anticipation of a yet future deliverance,--which should repeat in fresh experience the ancient victory, The Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rearward, In the place where the need is sorest, and in the form most required, there and that will God ever be to those who trust Him.

We can see here, too, a frequent characteristic of the miraculous element in Scripture, namely, its reaching its end not by a leap, but by a process. Once admit miracle, and it appears as if adaptation of means to ends was unnecessary. It would have been as easy to have transported the Israelites bodily and instantaneously to the other side of the sea, as to have taken these precautions and then cleft the ocean, and made them march through it. Legendary miracle would have preferred the former way. The Bible miracle usually adapts methods to aims, and is content to travel to its goal step by step.

Nor can we omit to notice the double effect of the one manifestation of the divine presence. The same pillar was light and darkness. The side which was cloud was turned to the pursuers; that which was light, to Israel. The former were paralysed, and hindered from advancing a step, or from seeing what the latter were doing; these, on the other hand, had light thrown on their strange path, and were encouraged and helped to plunge into the mysterious road, by the ruddy gleam which disclosed it. So every revelation is either light or darkness to men, according to the use they make of it. The ark, which slew Philistines, and flung Dagon prone on his own threshold, brought blessing to the house of Obededom. The Child who was to be set for the fall, was also for the rising of many. The stone laid in Zion is a sure foundation, and a stone of stumbling. The Gospel is the savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. The same Christ is salvation and destruction. God is to each of us either our joy or our dread.

**II.** The sudden march of the Egyptians having thus been arrested, there is leisure, behind the shelter of the fiery barrier, to take the next step in the deliverance. The sea is not divided in a moment. Again, we have a process to note, and that brought about by two things,--Moses outstretched rod, and the strong wind which blew all night. The chronology of that fateful night is difficult to adjust from our narrative. It would appear, from verse 20, that the Egyptians were barred advancing until morning; and, from verse 21, that the wind which ploughed with its strong ploughshare a furrow through the sea, took all night for its work. But, on the other hand, the Israelites must have been well across, and the Egyptians in the very midst of the passage, in the morning watch, and all was over soon after the morning appeared. Probably the wind continued all the night, so as to keep up the pressure which dammed back the waters, but the path was passable some hours before the gale abated. It must have been a broad way to admit of some two million frightened people with wives and children effecting a crossing in the short hours of part of one night.

But though God used the wind as His besom to sweep a road clear for His people, the effect produced by ordinary means was extraordinary. No wind that ever blew would blow water in two opposite directions at once, as a man might shovel snow to right and left, and heap it in mounds by the sides of the path that he dug. That was what the text tells us was done. The miracle is none the less a miracle because God employed physical agents, just as Christ's miracles were no less miraculous when He anointed blind eyes with moistened clay, or sent men to wash in Siloam, than when His bare word raised the dead or stilled the ocean. Wind or no wind, Moses rod or no rod, the true explanation of that broad path cleared through the sea is--the waters saw Thee, O God. The use of natural means may have been an aid to feeble faith, encouraging it to step down on to the untrodden and slippery road. The employment of Moses and his rod was to attest his commission to act as God's mouthpiece.

**III.** Then comes the safe passage. It is hard to imagine the scene. The vivid impression made by our story is all the more remarkable when we notice how wanting in detail it is. We do not know the time nor the place. We have no information about how the fugitives got across, the breadth of the path, or its length. Characteristically enough, Jewish legends know all about both, and assure us that the waters were parted into twelve ways, one for each tribe, and that the length of the road was three hundred miles! But Scripture, with characteristic reticence, is silent about all but the fact. That is enough. We gather, from the much later and poetical picture of it in Psalm lxxvii., that the passage was accomplished in the midst of crashing thunder and flashing lightnings; though it may be doubted whether these are meant to be taken as real or ideal. At all events, we have to think of these two millions of people--women, children, and followers--plunging into the depths in the night.

What a scene! The awestruck crowds, the howling wind, perhaps the thunderstorm, the glow of the pillar glistening on the wet and slimy way, the full paschal moon shining on the heaped waters! How the awe and the hope must both have increased with each step deeper in the abyss, and nearer to safety! The Epistle to the Hebrews takes this as an instance of faith on the part of the Israelites; and truly we can feel that it must have taken some trust in God's protecting hand to venture on such a road, where, at any moment, the walls might collapse and drown them all. They were driven to venture by their fear of Pharaoh; but faith, as well as fear, wrought in them. Our faith, too, is often called upon to venture upon perilous paths. We may trust Him to hold back the watery walls from falling. The picture of the crossing carries eternal truth for us all. The way of safety does not open till we are hemmed in, and Pharaoh's chariots are almost come up. It often leads into the very thick of what we deem perils. It often has to be ventured on in the dark, and with the wind in our faces. But if we tread it in faith, the fluid will be made solid, and the pathless passable, or any other apparent impossibility be realised, before our confidence shall be put to shame, or one real evil reach us.

**IV.** The next stage is the hot pursuit and the panic of the Egyptians. The narrative does not mark the point at which the pillar lifted and disclosed the escape of the prey. It must have been in the night. The baffled pursuers dash after them, either not seeing, or too excited and furious to heed where they were going. The rough sea bottom was no place for chariots, and they would be hopelessly distanced by the fugitives on foot. How long they stumbled and weltered we are not told, but in the morning watch, that is, while it was yet dark, some awful movement in the fiery pillar awed even their anger into stillness, and drove home the conviction that they were fighting against God. There is something very terrible in the vagueness, if we may call it so, of that phrase the Lord looked ...through the pillar. It curdles the blood as no minuteness of narrative would do. And what a thought that His look should be a trouble! The steady whole of the judge's face is awful, and some creeping terror laid hold on that host of mad pursuers floundering in the dark, as that more than natural light flared on their path. The panic to which all bodies of soldiers in strange circumstances are exposed, was increased by the growing difficulty of advance, as the chariot wheels became clogged or the ground more of quicksand. At last it culminates in a shout of Sauve qui peut! We may learn how close together lie daring rebellion against God and abject terror of Him; and how in a moment, a glance of His face, a turn of His hand, bring the wildest blasphemer to cower in fear. We may learn, too, to keep clear of courses which cannot be followed a moment longer, if once a thought that God sees us comes in. And we may learn the miserable result of all departure from Him, in making what ought to be our peace and blessing, our misery and terror, and turning the brightness of His face into a consuming fire.

**V.** Then comes, at last, the awful act of destruction, of which a man is the agent and an army the victim. We must suppose the Israelites all safe on the Arabian coast, when the level sunlight streams from the east on the wild hurry of the fleeing crowd making for the Egyptian shore. What a solemn sight that young morning looked on! The wind had dropped, the rod is stretched out, the sea returns to its strength; and after a few moments despairing struggle all is over, and the sun, as it climbs, looks down upon the unbroken stretch of quiet sea, bearing no trace of the awful work which it had done, or of the quenched hatred and fury which slept beneath.

We can understand the stern joy which throbs so vehemently in every pulse of that great song, the first blossom of Hebrew poetry, which the ransomed people sang that day. We can sympathise with the many echoes in psalm and prophecy, which repeated the lessons of faith and gratitude. But some will be ready to ask, Was that triumphant song anything more than narrow national feeling, and has Christianity not taught us another and tenderer thought of God than that which this lesson carries? We may ask in return, Was it divine providence that swept the Spanish Armada from the sea, fulfilling, as the medal struck to commemorate it bore, the very words of Moses song, Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea covered them'? Was it God who overwhelmed Napoleon's army in the Russian snows? Were these, and many like acts in the world's history, causes for thankfulness to God? Is it not true that, as has been well said, The history of the world is the judgment of the world'? And does Christianity forbid us to rejoice when some mighty and ancient system of wrong and oppression, with its tools and accomplices, is cleared from off the face of the earth? When the wicked perish, there is shouting. Let us not forget that the love and gentleness of the Gospel are accompanied by the revelation of divine judgment and righteous retribution. This very incident has for its last echo in Scripture that wonderful scene in the Apocalypse, where, in the pause before the seven angels bearing the seven plagues go forth, the seer beholds a company of choristers, like those who on that morning stood on the Red Sea shore, standing on the bank of the sea of glass mingled with fire,--which symbolises the clear and crystalline depth of the stable divine judgments, shot with fiery retribution,--and lifting up by anticipation a song of thanksgiving for the judgments about to be wrought. That song is expressly called the song of Moses and of the Lamb, in token of the essential unity of the two dispensations, and especially of the harmony of both in their view of the divine judgments. Its ringing praises are modelled on the ancient lyric. It, too, triumphs in God's judgments, regards them as means of making known His name, as done not for destruction, but that His character may be known and honoured by men, to whom it is life and peace to know and love Him for what He is.

That final victory over the beast, whether he be a person or a tendency, is to reproduce in higher fashion that old conquest by the Red Sea. There is hope for the world that its oppressors shall not always tyrannise; there is hope for each soul that, if we take Christ for our deliverer and our guide, He will break the chains from off our wrists, and bring us at last to the eternal shore, where we may stand, like the ransomed people, and, as the unsetting morning dawns, see its beams touching with golden light the calm ocean, beneath which our oppressors lie buried for ever, and lift up glad thanksgivings to Him who has led us through fire and through water, and brought us out into a wealthy place.