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

**EXODUS-029. THE GOLDEN CALF by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 2. And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. 3. And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. 4. And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving-tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. 5. And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, To-morrow is a feast to the Lord. 6. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. 7. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves: 8. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them: they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto, and said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.... 30. And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin: and now I will go up unto the Lord; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. 31. And Moses returned unto the Lord, and said, Oh! this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. 32. Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written. 33. And the Lord said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book. 34. Therefore now go, lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee. Behold, Mine Angel shall go before thee: nevertheless in the day when I visit I will visit their sin upon them. 35. And the Lord plagued the people, because they made the calf, which Aaron made."*

*Exodus 32:1-8, 30-35*

It was not yet six weeks since the people had sworn, All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and be obedient. The blood of the covenant, sprinkled on them, was scarcely dry when they flung off allegiance to Jehovah. Such short-lived loyalty to Him can never have been genuine. That mob of slaves was galvanised by Moses into obedience; and since their acceptance of Jehovah was in reality only yielding to the power of one strong will and its earnest faith, of course it collapsed as soon as Moses disappeared.

We have to note, first, the people's universal revolt. The language of verse 1 may easily hide to a careless reader the gravity and unanimity of the apostasy. The people gathered themselves together. It was a national rebellion, a flood which swept away even some faithful, timid hearts. No voices ventured to protest. What were the elders, who shortly before saw the God of Israel, doing to be passive at such a crisis? Was there no one to bid the fickle multitude look up to the summit overhead, where the red flames glowed, or to remind them of the hosts of Egypt lying stark and dead on the shore? Was Miriam cowed too, and her song forgotten?

We need not cast stones at these people; for we also have short memories for either the terrible or the gracious revelations of God in our own lives. But we may learn the lesson that God's lovers have to set themselves sometimes dead against the rush of popular feeling, and that there are times when silence or compliance is sin.

It would have been easy for the rebels to have ignored Aaron, and made gods for themselves. But they desired to involve him in their apostasy, and to get official sanction for it. He had been left by Moses as his lieutenant, and so to get him implicated was to stamp the movement as a regular and entire revolt.

The demand to make gods (or, more probably, a god) flew in the face of both the first and second commandments. For Jehovah, who had forbidden the forming of any image, was denied in the act of making it. To disobey Him was to cast Him off. The ground of the rebellion was the craving for a visible object of trust and a visible guide, as is seen by the reason assigned for the demand for an image. Moses was out of sight; they must have something to look at as their leader. Moses had disappeared, and, to these people who had only been heaved up to the height of believing in Jehovah by Moses, Jehovah had disappeared with him. They sank down again to the level of other races as soon as that strong lever ceased to lift their heavy apprehensions.

How ridiculous the assertion that they did not know what had become of Moses! They knew that he was up there with Jehovah. The elders could have told them that. The fire on the mount might have burned in on all minds the confirmation. Note, too, the black ingratitude and plain denial of Jehovah in the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt. They refuse to recognise God's part. It was Moses only who had done it; and now that he is gone they must have a visible god, like other nations.

Still sadder than their sense-bound wish is Aaron's compliance. He knew as well as we do what he should have said, but, like many another man in influential position, when beset by popular cries, he was frightened, and yielded when he should have set his face like a flint. His compliance has in essentials been often repeated, especially by priests and ministers of religion who have lent their superior abilities or opportunities to carry out the wishes of the ignorant populace, and debased religion or watered down its prohibitions, to please and retain hold of them. The Church has incorporated much from heathenism. Roman Catholic missionaries have permitted converts to keep their old usages. Protestant teachers have acquiesced in, and been content to find the brains to carry out, compromises between sense and soul, God's commands and men's inclinations.

We need not discuss the metallurgy of verse 4. But clearly Aaron asked for the earrings, not, as some would have it, hoping that vanity and covetousness would hinder their being given, but simply in order to get gold for the bad work which he was ready to do. The reason for making the thing in the shape of a calf is probably the Egyptian worship of Apis in that form, which would be familiar to the people.

We must note that it was the people who said, These be thy gods, O Israel! Aaron seems to keep in the rear, as it were. He makes the calf, and hands it over, and leaves them to hail it and worship. Like all cowards, he thought that he was lessening his guilt by thus keeping in the background. Feeble natures are fond of such subterfuges, and deceive themselves by them; but they do not shift their sin off their shoulders.

Then he comes in again with an impotent attempt to diminish the gravity of the revolt. When he saw this, he tried to turn the flood into another channel, and so proclaimed a feast to Jehovah !--as if He could be worshipped by flagrant defiance of His commandments, or as if He had not been disavowed by the ascription to the calf, made that morning out of their own trinkets, of the deliverance from Egypt. A poor, inconsequential attempt to save appearances and hallow sin by writing God's name on it! The god whom the Israelites worshipped under the image of a calf, was no less another god before Me, though it was called by the name of Jehovah. If the people had their idol, it mattered nothing to them, and it mattered as little to Jehovah, what name it bore. The wild orgies of the morrow were not the worship which He accepts.

What a contrast between the plain and the mountain! Below, the shameful feast, with its parody of sacrifice and its sequel of lust-inflamed dancing; above, the awful colloquy between the all-seeing righteous Judge and the intercessor! The people had cast off Jehovah, and Jehovah no more calls them My, but thy people. They had ascribed their Exodus first to Moses, and next to the calf. Jehovah speaks of it as the work of Moses.

A terrible separation of Himself from them lies in thy people, which thou broughtest up, and Moses bold rejoinder emphasises the relation and act which Jehovah seems to suppress (verse 11). Observe that the divine voice refuses to give any weight to Aaron's trick of compromise. These are no worshippers of Jehovah who are howling and dancing below there. They are worshipping it, and sacrificing to it, not to Him. The cloaks of sin may partly cover its ugliness here, but they are transparent to His eyes, and many a piece of worship, which is said to be directed to Him, is, in His sight, rank idolatry.

We do not deal with the magnificent courage of Moses, his single-handed arresting of the wild rebellion, and the severe punishment by which he trampled out the fire. But we must keep his severity in mind if we would rightly judge his self-sacrificing devotion, and his self-sacrificing devotion if we would rightly judge his severity.

No words of ours can make more sublime his utter self-abandonment for the sake of the people among whom he had just been flaming in wrath, and smiting like a destroying angel. That was a great soul which had for its poles such justice and such love. The very words of his prayer, in their abruptness, witness to his deep emotion. If Thou wilt forgive their sin stands as an incomplete sentence, left incomplete because the speaker is so profoundly moved. Sometimes broken words are the best witnesses of our earnestness. The alternative clause reaches the high-water mark of passionate love, ready to give up everything for the sake of its objects. The book of life is often spoken of in Scripture, and it is an interesting study to bring together the places where the idea occurs (see Ps. lxix. 28; Dan. xii. 1; Phil. iv. 3; Rev. iii. 5). The allusion is to the citizens roll (Ps. lxxxvii. 6). Those whose names are written there have the privileges of citizenship, and, as it is the book of life (or of the living), life in the widest sense is secured to them. To blot out of it, therefore, is to cut a man off from fellowship in the city of God, and from participation in life.

Moses was so absorbed in his vocation that his life was less to him than the well-being of Israel. How far he saw into the darkness beyond the grave we cannot say; but, at least, he was content, and desirous to die on earth, if thereby Israel might continue to be God's people. And probably he had some gleam of light beyond, which enhanced the greatness of his offered sacrifice. To die, whatever loss of communion with God that involved here or hereafter, would be sweet if thereby he could purchase Israel's restoration to God's favour. We cannot but think of Paul willing to be separated from Christ for his brethren's sake.

We may well think of a greater than Moses or Paul, who did bear the loss which they were willing to bear, and died that sin might be forgiven. Moses was a true type of Christ in that act of supreme self-sacrifice; and all the heroism, the identification of himself with his people, the love which willingly accepts death, that makes his prayer one of the greatest deeds on the page of history, are repeated in infinitely sweeter, more heart-subduing fashion in the story of the Cross. Let us not omit duly to honour the servant; let us not neglect to honour and love infinitely more the Lord. This man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses. Let us see that we render Him

Thanks never ceasing,

And infinite love.