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

**EZRA-001. THE EVE OF THE RESTORATION by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 2. Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3. Who is there among you of all His people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is the God), which is in Jerusalem. 4. And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, besides the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem. 5. Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. 6. And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered. 7. Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods; 8. Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9. And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, 10. Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. 11. All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem."*

*Ezra 1:1-11*

Cyrus captured Babylon 538 B.C., and the first year here is the first after that event. The predicted seventy years captivity had nearly run out, having in part done their work on the exiles. Colours burned in on china are permanent; and the furnace of bondage had, at least, effected this, that it fixed monotheism for ever in the inmost substance of the Jewish people. But the bulk of them seem to have had little of either religious or patriotic enthusiasm, and preferred Babylonia to Judea. We are here told of the beginning of the return of a portion of the exiles--forty-two thousand, in round numbers.

The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus. That unveils the deepest cause of what fell into place, to the superficial observers, as one among many political events of similar complexion. We find among the inscriptions a cylinder written by order of Cyrus, which shows that he reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting conquered nations. All their peoples, says he, in reference to a number of nations of whom he found members in exile in Babylonia, I assembled and restored to their lands and the gods ... whom Nabonidos ... had brought into Babylon, I settled in peace in their sanctuaries (Sayce, Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments, p. 148). It was, then, part of a wider movement, which sent back Zerubbabel and his people to Jerusalem, and began the rebuilding of the Temple. No doubt, Cyrus had seen that the old plan simply brought an element of possible rebellion into the midst of the country, and acted on grounds of political prudence.

But our passage digs deeper to find the true cause. Cyrus was God's instrument, and the statesman's insight was the result of God's illumination. The divine causality moves men, when they move themselves. It was not only in the history of the chosen people that God's purpose is wrought out by more or less conscious and willing instruments. The principle laid down by the writer of this book is of universal application, and the true philosophy of history must recognise as underlying all other so-called causes and forces the one uncaused Cause, of whose purposes kings and politicians are the executants, even while they freely act according to their own judgments, and, it may be, in utter unconsciousness of Him. It concerns our tranquillity and hopefulness, in the contemplation of the bewildering maze and often heart-breaking tragedy of mundane affairs, to hold fast by the conviction that God's unseen Hand moves the pieces on the board, and presides over all the complications. The difference between sacred and profane history is not that one is under His direct control, and the other is not. What was true of Cyrus and his policy is as true of England. Would that politicians and all men recognised the fact as clearly as this historian did!

**I.** Cyrus's proclamation sounds as if he were a Jehovah-worshipper, but it is to be feared that his religion was of a very accommodating kind. It used to be said that, as a Persian, he was a monotheist, and would consequently be in sympathy with the Jews; but the same cylinder already quoted shatters that idea, and shows him to have been a polytheist, ready to worship the gods of Babylon. He there ascribes his conquest to Merodach, the great lord, and distinctly calls himself that god's worshipper. Like other polytheists, he had room in his pantheon for the gods of other nations, and admitted into it the deities of the conquered peoples.

The use of the name Jehovah would, no doubt, be most simply accounted for by the supposition that Cyrus recognised the sole divinity of the God of Israel; but that solution conflicts with all that is known of him, and with his characterisation in Isaiah xlv. as not knowing Jehovah. More probably, his confession of Jehovah as the God of heaven was consistent in his mind with a similar confession as to Bel-Merodach or the supreme god of any other of the conquered nations. There is, however no improbability in the supposition that the prophecies concerning him in Isaiah xlv, may have been brought to his knowledge, and be referred to in the proclamation as the charge given to him to build Jehovah's Temple. But we must not exaggerate the depth or exclusiveness of his belief in the God of the Jews.

Cyrus's profession of faith, then, is an example of official and skin-deep religion, of which public and individual life afford plentiful instances in all ages and faiths. If we are to take their own word for it, most great conquerors have been very religious men, and have asked a blessing over many a bloody feast. All religions are equally true to cynical politicians, who are ready to join in worshipping Jehovah, Jove, or Lord, as may suit their policy. Nor is it only in high places that such loosely worn professions are found. Perhaps there is no region of life in which insincerity, which is often quite unconscious, is so rife as in regard to religious belief. But unless my religion is everything, it is nothing. All in all, or not at all, is the requirement of the great Lover of souls. What a winnowing of chaff from wheat there would be, if that test could visibly separate the mass which is gathered on His threshing-floor, the Church!

Cyrus's belief in Jehovah illustrates the attitude which was natural to a polytheist, and is so difficult for us to enter into. A vague belief in One Supreme, above all other gods, and variously named by different nations, is buried beneath mountains of myths about lesser gods, but sometimes comes to light in many pagan minds. This blind creed, if creed it can be called, is joined with the recognition of deities belonging to each nation, whose worship is to be co-extensive with the race of which they are patrons, and who may be absorbed into the pantheon of a conqueror, just as a vanquished king may be allowed an honourable captivity at the victor's capital. Thus Cyrus could in a sense worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, without thereby being rebellious to Merodach.

There are people, even among so-called Christians, who try the same immoral and impossible division of what must in its very nature be wholly given to One Supreme. To serve God and mammon is demonstrably an absurd attempt. The love and trust and obedience which are worthy of Him must be wholehearted, whole-souled, whole-willed. It is as impossible to love God with part of one's self as it is for a husband to love his wife with half his heart, and another woman with the rest. To divide love is to slay it. Cyrus had some kind of belief in Jehovah; but his own words, so wonderfully recovered in the inscription already referred to, proved that he had not listened to the command, Him only shalt thou serve. That command grips us as closely as it did the Jews, and is as truly broken by thousands calling themselves Christians as by any idolaters.

The substance of the proclamation is a permission to return to any one who wished to do so, a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple, and an order to the native inhabitants to render help in money, goods, and beasts. A further contribution towards the building was suggested as a free-will offering. The return, then, was not to be at the expense of the king, nor was any tax laid on for it; but neighbourly goodwill, born of seventy years of association, was invoked, and, as we find, not in vain. God had given the people favour in the eyes of those who had carried them captive.

**II.** The long years of residence in Babylonia had weakened the homesickness which the first generation of captives had, no doubt, painfully experienced, and but a small part of them cared to avail themselves of the opportunity of return. One reason is frankly given by Josephus: Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their possessions behind them. The heads of the fathers houses [who may have exercised some sort of government among the captives], the priests and Levites, made the bulk of the emigrants; but in each class it was only those whose spirit God had stirred up (as he had done Cyrus) that were devout or patriotic enough to face the wrench of removal and the difficulties of repeopling a wasted land. There was nothing to tempt any others, and the brave little band had need of all their fortitude. But no heart in which the flame of devotion burned, or in which were felt the drawings of that passionate love of the city and soil where God dwelt (which in the best days of the nation was inseparable from devotion), could remain behind. The departing contingent, then, were the best part of the whole; and the lingerers were held back by love of ease, faint-heartedness, love of wealth, and the like ignoble motives.

How many of us have had great opportunities offered for service, which we have let slip in like manner! To have doors opened which we are too lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the tragedy and the crime of many a life. It is easier to live among the low levels of the plain of Babylon, than to take to the dangers and privations of the weary tramp across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem are a much less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which have to be left. Prudence says, Be content where you are, and let other people take the trouble of such mad schemes as rebuilding the Temple. A thousand excuses sing in our ears, and we let the moment in which alone some noble resolve is possible slide past us, and the rest of life is empty of another such. Neglected opportunities, unobeyed calls to high deeds, we all have in our lives. The saddest of all words is, It might have been. How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring souls that rose to the occasion, and flung ease and wealth and companionship behind them, because they heard the divine command couched in the royal permission, and humbly answered, Here am I; send me!

**III.** The third point in the passage is singular--the inventory of the Temple vessels returned by Cyrus. As to its particulars, we need only note that Sheshbazzar is the same as Zerubbabel; that the exact translation of some of the names of the vessels is doubtful; and that the numbers given under each head do not correspond with the sum total, the discrepancy indicating error somewhere in the numbers.

But is not this dry enumeration a strange item to come in the forefront of the narrative of such an event? We might have expected some kind of production of the enthusiasm of the returning exiles, some account of how they were sent on their journey, something which we should have felt worthier of the occasion than a list of bowls and nine-and-twenty knives. But it is of a piece with the whole of the first part of this Book of Ezra, which is mostly taken up with a similar catalogue of the members of the expedition. The list here indicates the pride and joy with which the long hidden and often desecrated vessels were received. We can see the priests and Levites gazing at them as they were brought forth, their hearts, and perhaps their eyes, filling with sacred memories. The Lord had turned again the captivity of Zion, and these sacred vessels lay there, glittering before them, to assure them that they were not as them that dream. Small things become great when they are the witnesses of a great thing.

We must remember, too, how strong a hold the externals of worship had on the devout Jew. His faith was much more tied to form than ours ought to be, and the restoration of the sacrificial implements as a pledge of the re-establishment of the Temple worship would seem the beginning of a new epoch of closer relation to Jehovah. It is almost within the lifetime of living men that all Scotland was thrilled with emotion by the discovery, in a neglected chamber, of a chest in which lay, forgotten, the crown and sceptre of the Stuarts. A like wave of feeling passed over the exiles as they had given back to their custody these Temple vessels. Sacreder ones are given into our hands, to carry across a more dangerous desert. Let us hear the charge, Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord, and see that we carry them, untarnished and unlost, to the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.