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

**GENESIS-039. THE TRIALS AND VISIONS OF DEVOUT YOUTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jacob dwelt in the land wherein his father was a stranger, in the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age: and he made him a coat of many colours. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it his brethren: and they hated him yet the more. And he said unto them, Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: For, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood round about, and made obeisance to my sheaf. And his brethren said to him, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou Indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brethren: and his father rebuked him, and said unto him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth? And his brethren envied him; but his father observed the saying.-"*

*Genesis 37:1-11*

The generations of Jacob are mainly occupied with the history of Joseph, because through him mainly was the divine purpose carried on. Jacob is now the head of the chosen family, since Isaac's death (Gen. 35:29), and therefore the narrative is continued under that new heading. There may possibly be intended a contrast in dwelt and sojourned in verse 1, the former implying a more complete settling down.

There are two principal points in this narrative,--the sad insight that it gives into the state of the household in which so much of the world's history and hopes was wrapped up, and the preludings of Joseph's future in his dreams.

As to the former, the account of it is introduced by the statement that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, was set to work, according to the wholesome Eastern usage, and so was thrown into the company of the sons of the two slave-women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Delitzsch understands lad in verse 2 in the sense in which we use boy, as meaning an attendant. Joseph was, then, told off to be subordinate to these two sets of his rough brothers. The relationship was enough to rouse hatred in such coarse souls. And, indeed, the history of Jacob's household strikingly illustrates the miserable evils of polygamy, which makes families within the family, and turns brothers into enemies. Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons reflected in their hatred of Rachel's their mothers envy of the true wife of Jacob's heart. The sons of the bondwoman were sure to hate the sons of the free.

If Joseph had been like his brothers, they would have forgiven him his mother. But he was horrified at his first glimpse of unrestrained young passions, and, in the excitement of disgust and surprise, told their evil report. No doubt, his brothers had been unwilling enough to be embarrassed by his presence, for there is nothing that wild young men dislike more than the constraint put on them by the presence of an innocent youth; and when they found out that this milk-sop of a brother was a spy and a telltale, their wrath blazed up. So Joseph had early experience of the shock which meets all young men who have been brought up in godly households when they come into contact with sin in fellow-clerks, servants, students, or the like. It is a sharp test of what a young man is made of, to come forth from the shelter of a father's care and a mother's love, and to be forced into witnessing and hearing such things as go on wherever a number of young men are thrown together. Be not partaker of other men's sins. And the trial is doubly great when the tempters are elder brothers, and the only way to escape their unkindness is to do as they do. Joseph had an early experience of the need of resistance; and, as long as the world is a world, love to God will mean hatred from its worst elements. If we are sons of the day, we cannot but rebuke the darkness.

It is an invidious office to tell other people's evil-doing, and he who brings evil reports of others generally and deservedly gets one for himself. But there are circumstances in which to do so is plain duty, and only a mistaken sense of honour keeps silence. But there must be no exaggeration, malice, or personal ends in the informer. Classmates in school or college, fellow-servants, employees in great businesses, and the like, have not only a duty of loyalty to one another, but of loyalty to their superior. We are sometimes bound to be blind to, and dumb about, our associates evil deeds, but sometimes silence makes us accomplices.

Jacob had a right to know, and Joseph would have been wrong if he had not told him, the truth about his brothers. Their hatred shows that his purity had made their doing wrong more difficult. It is a grand thing when a young man's presence deprives the Devil of elbow-room for his tricks. How much restraining influence such a one may exert!

Jacob's somewhat foolish love, and still more foolish way of showing it, made matters worse. There were many excuses for him. He naturally clung to the son of his lost but never-forgotten first love, and as naturally found, in Joseph's freedom from the vices of his other sons, a solace and joy. It has been suggested that the long garment with sleeves, in which he decked the lad, indicated an intention of transferring the rights of the first-born to him, but in any case it meant distinguishing affection; and the father or mother who is weak enough to show partiality in the treatment of children need not wonder if their unwise love creates bitter heart-burnings. Perhaps, if Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons had had a little more sunshine of a father's love, they would have borne brighter flowers and sweeter fruit. It is fatal when a child begins to suspect that a parent is not fair.

So these surly brothers, who could not even say Peace be to thee! (the common salutation) when they came across Joseph, had a good deal to say for themselves. It is a sad picture of the internal feuds of the house from which all nations were to be blessed. The Bible does not idealise its characters, but lets us see the seamy side of the tapestry, that we may the more plainly recognise the Mercy which forgives, and the mighty Providence which works through, such imperfect men. But the great lesson for all young people from the picture of Joseph's early days, when his whiteness rebuked the soiled lives of his brothers, as new-fallen snow the grimy cake, hardened and soiled on the streets, is, My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not. Never mind a world's hatred, if you have a father's love. There is one Father who can draw His obedient children into the deepest secrets of His heart without withholding their portion from the most prodigal.

Joseph's dreams are the other principal point in the narrative. The chief incidents of his life turn on dreams,--his own, his fellow-prisoners', Pharaoh's. The narrative recognises them as divinely sent, and no higher form of divine communication appears to have been made to Joseph, He received no new revelations of religious truth. His mission was, not to bring fresh messages from heaven, but to effect the transference of the nation to Egypt. Hence the lower form of the communications made to him.

The meaning of both dreams is the same, but the second goes beyond the first in the grandeur of the emblems, and in the inclusion of the parents in the act of obeisance. Both sets of symbols were drawn from familiar sights. The homeliness of the sheaves is in striking contrast with the grandeur of the sun, moon, and stars. The interpretation of the first is ready to hand, because the sheaves were your sheaves and my sheaf. There was no similar key included in the second, and his brothers do not appear to have caught its meaning. It was Jacob who read it. Probably Rachel was dead when the dream came, but that need not make a difficulty.

Note that Joseph did not tell his dreams with elation, or with a notion that they meant anything particular. It is plainly the singularity of them that makes him repeat them, as is clearly indicated by the repeated behold in his two reports. With perfect innocence of intention, and as he would have told any other strange dream, the lad repeats them. The commentary was the work of his brothers, who were ready to find proofs of his being put above them, and of his wish to humiliate them, in anything he said or did. They were wiser than he was. Perhaps they suspected that Jacob meant to set him at the head of the clan on his decease, and that the dreams were trumped up and told to them to prepare them for the decision which the special costume may have already hinted.

At all events, hatred is very suspicious, and ready to prick up its ears at every syllable that seems to speak of the advancement of its object.

There is a world of contempt, rage, and fear in the questions, Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us? The conviction that Joseph was marked out by God for a high position seems to have entered these rough souls, and to have been fuel to fire. Hatred and envy make a perilous mixture. Any sin can come from a heart drenched with these. Jacob seems to have been wise enough to make light of the dreams to the lad, though much of them in his heart. Youthful visions of coming greatness are often best discouraged. The surest way to secure their fulfilment is to fill the present with strenuous, humble work. Do the duty that is nearest thee. The true apprenticeship for a ruler is to serve. Act, act, in the living present. The sheaves may come to bow down some day, but my sheaf has to be cut and bound first, and the sooner the sickle is among the corn, the better.

But yet, on the other hand, let young hearts be true to their early visions, whether they say much about them or not. Probably it will be wisest to keep silence. But there shine out to many young men and women, at their start in life, bright possibilities of no ignoble sort, and rising higher than personal ambition, which it is the misery and sin of many to see fade away into the light of common day, or into the darkness of night. Be not disobedient to the heavenly vision; for the dreams of youth are often the prophecies of what God means and makes it possible for the dreamer to be, if he wakes to work towards that fair thing which shone on him from afar.