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

**GENESIS-045. GROWTH BY TRANSPLANTING by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh, and said, My father and my brethren, and their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have, are come out of the land of Canaan; and, behold, they are in the land of Goshen. And he took some of his brethren, even five men, and presented them unto Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said unto his brethren, What is your occupation? And they said unto Pharaoh, Thy servants are shepherds, both we, and also our fathers. They said moreover unto Pharaoh, For to sojourn in the land are we come; for thy servants have no pasture for their flocks, for the famine is sore in the land of Canaan: now therefore, we pray thee, let thy servants dwell in the land of Goshen. And Pharaoh spake unto Joseph, saying, Thy father and thy brethren are come unto thee: The land of Egypt is before thee; in the best of the land make thy father and brethren to dwell; in the land of Goshen let them dwell: and if thou knowest any men of activity among them, then make them rulers over my cattle. And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh: and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said unto Jacob, How old art thou? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from before Pharaoh. And Joseph placed his father and his brethren, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had commanded. And Joseph nourished his father, and his brethren, and all his father's household, with bread, according to their families."*

*Genesis 47:1-12*

**I.** The conduct of Joseph in reference to the settlement in Goshen is an example of the possibility of uniting worldly prudence with high religious principle and great generosity of nature. He had promised his brothers a home in that fertile eastern district, which afforded many advantages in its proximity to Canaan, its adaptation to pastoral life, and its vicinity to Joseph when in Zoan, the capital. But he had not consulted Pharaoh, and, however absolute his authority, it scarcely stretched to giving away Egyptian territory without leave. So his first care, when the wanderers arrive, is to manage the confirmation of the grant. He goes about it with considerable astuteness--a hereditary quality, which is redeemed from blame because used for unselfish purposes and unstained by deceit. He does not tell Pharaoh how far he had gone, but simply announces that his family are in Goshen, as if awaiting the monarch's further pleasure. Then he introduces a deputation, no doubt carefully chosen, of five of his brothers (as if the whole number would have been too formidable), previously instructed how to answer. He knows what Pharaoh is in the habit of asking, or he knows that he can lead him to ask the required question, which will bring out the fact of their being shepherds, and utilise the prejudice against that occupation, to ensure separation in Goshen. All goes as he had arranged. Thanks partly to the indifference of the king, who seems to have been rather a roi fainéant in the hands of his energetic maire du palais, and to have been contented to give, with a flourish of formality, as a command to Joseph, what Joseph had previously carefully suggested to him (vers. 6, 7). There is nothing unfair in all this. It is good, shrewd management, and no fault can be found with it; but it is a new trait in the ideal character of a servant of God, and contrasts strongly with the type shown in Abraham. None the less, it is a legitimate element in the character and conduct of a good man, set down to do God's work in such a world. Joseph is a saint and a politician. His shrewdness is never craft; sagacity is not alien to consecration. No doubt it has to be carefully watched lest it degenerate; but prudence is as needful as enthusiasm, and he is the complete man who has a burning fire down in his heart to generate the force that drives him, and a steady hand on the helm, and a keen eye on the chart, to guide him. Be ye wise as serpents but also harmless as doves.

**II.** We may note in Joseph's conduct also an instance of a man in high office and not ashamed of his humble relations. One of the great lessons meant to be taught by the whole patriarchal period was the sacredness of the family. That is, in some sense, the keynote of Joseph's history. Here we see family love, which had survived the trial of ill-usage and long absence, victorious over the temptation of position and high associates. It took some nerve and a great deal of affection, for the viceroy, whom envious and sarcastic courtiers watched, to own his kin. What a sweet morsel for malicious tongues it would be, Have you heard? He is only the son of an old shepherd, who is down in Goshen, come to pick up some crumbs there! One can fancy the curled lips and the light laugh, as the five brothers, led by the great man himself, made their rustic reverences to Pharaoh. It is as if some high official in Paris were to walk in half a dozen peasants in blouse and sabots, and present them to the president as my brothers. It was a brave thing to do; and it teaches a lesson which many people, who have made their way in the world, would be nobler and more esteemed if they learned.

**III.** The brother's words to Pharaoh are another instance of that ignorant carrying out of the divine purposes which we have already had to notice. They evidently contemplate only a temporary stay in the country. They say that they are come to sojourn--the verb from which are formed the noun often rendered strangers, and that which Jacob uses in verse 9, my pilgrimage. The reason for their coming is given as the transient scarcity of pasturage in Canaan, which implies the intention of return as soon as that was altered. Joseph had the same idea of the short duration of their stay; and though Jacob had been taught by vision that the removal was in order to their being made a great nation, it does not seem that his sons intentions were affected by that--if they knew it. So mistaken are our estimates. We go to a place for a month, and we stay in it for twenty years. We go to a place to settle for life, and our tent-pegs are pulled up in a week. They thought of five years, and it was to be nearly as many centuries. They thought of temporary shelter and food; God meant an education of them and their descendants. Over all this story the unseen Hand hovers, chastising, guiding, impelling; and the human agents are free and yet fulfilling an eternal purpose, blind and yet accountable, responsible for motives, and mercifully ignorant of consequences. So we all play our little parts. We have no call to be curious as to what will come of our deeds. This end of the action, the motive of it, is our care; the other end, the outcome of it, is God's business to see to.

**IV.** We may also observe how trivial incidents are wrought into God's scheme. The Egyptian hatred of the shepherd class secured one of the prime reasons for the removal from Canaan--the unimpeded growth of a tribe into a nation. There was no room for further peaceful and separate expansion in that thickly populated country. Nor would there have been in Egypt, unless under the condition of comparative isolation, which could not have been obtained in any other way. Thus an unreasonable prejudice, possibly connected with religious ideas, became an important factor in the development of Israel; and, once again, we have to note the wisdom of the great Builder who uses not only gold, silver, and precious stones, but even wood, hay, stubble--follies and sins--for His edifice.

**V.** The interview of Jacob with Pharaoh is pathetic and beautiful. The old man comports himself, in all the later history of Joseph, as if done with the world, and waiting to go. Let me die, since I have seen thy face, was his farewell to life. He takes no part in the negotiation about Goshen, but has evidently handed over all temporal cares to younger hands. A halo of removedness lies round his grey hairs, and to Pharaoh he behaves as one withdrawn from fleeting things, and, by age and nearness to the end, superior even to a king's dignity. As he enters the royal presence he does not do reverence, but invokes a blessing upon him. The less is blessed of the better. He has nothing to do with court ceremonials or conventionalities. The hoary head is a crown of honour, Pharaoh recognises his right to address him thus by the kindly question as to his age, which implied respect for his years. The answer of the Hebrew Ulysses, as Stanley calls him, breathes a spirit of melancholy not unnatural in one who had once more been uprooted, and found himself again a wanderer in his old age. The tremulous voice has borne the words across all the centuries, and has everywhere evoked a response in the hearts of weary and saddened men. Look at the component parts of this pensive retrospect.

Life has been to him a pilgrimage. He thinks of all his wanderings from that far-off day when at Bethel he received the promise of God's presence in all places whither thou goest, till this last happy and yet disturbing change. But he is thinking not only, perhaps not chiefly, of the circumstances, but of the spirit, of his life. This is, no doubt, the confession that they were strangers and pilgrims referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews. He was a pilgrim, not because he had often changed his place of abode, but because he sought the city which hath foundations, and therefore could not be at home here. The goal of his life lay in the far future; and whether he looked for the promises to be fulfilled on earth, or had the unformulated consciousness of immortality, and saluted the dimly descried coast from afar while tossing on life's restless ocean, he was effectually detached from the present, and felt himself an alien in the existing order. We have to live by the same hope, and to let it work the same estrangement, if we would live noble lives. Not because all life is change, nor because it all marches steadily on to the grave, but because our true home--the community to which we really belong, the metropolis, the mother city of our souls--is above, are we to feel ourselves strangers upon earth. They who only take into account the transiency of life are made sad, or sometimes desperate, by the unwelcome thought. But they whose pilgrimage is a journey home may look that transiency full in the face, and be as glad because of it as colonists on their voyage to the old country which they call home, though they were born on the other side of the world and have never seen its green fields.

To Jacob's eyes his days seem few. Abraham's one hundred and seventy-five years, Isaac's one hundred and eighty, were in his mind. But more than these was in his mind. The law of the moral perspective is other than that of the physical. The days in front, seen through the glass of anticipation, are drawn out; the days behind, viewed through the telescope of memory, are crowded together. What a moment looked all the long years of his struggling life--shorter now than even had once seemed the seven years of service for his Rachel, that love had made to fly past on such swift wings! That happy wedded life, how short it looked! A bright light for a moment, and

Ere a man could say "Behold!"

The jaws of darkness did devour it up.

It is well to lay the coolness of this thought on our fevered hearts, and, whether they be torn by sorrows or gladdened with bliss, to remember this also will pass and the longest stretch of dreary days be seen in retrospect, in their due relation to eternity, as but a moment. That will not paralyse effort nor abate sweetness, but it will teach proportion, and deliver from the illusions of this solid-seeming shadow which we call life.

The pensive retrospect darkens as the old man's memory dwells upon the past. His days have not only been few--that could be borne--but they have been evil by which I understand not unfortunate so much as faulty. We have seen in preceding pages the slow process by which the crafty Jacob had his sins purged out of him, and became God's wrestler. Here we learn that old wrong-doing, even when forgiven--or, rather, when and because forgiven--leaves regretful memories lifelong. The early treachery had been long ago repented of and pardoned by God and man. The nature which hatched it had been renewed. But here it starts up again, a ghost from the grave, and the memory of it is full of bitterness. No lapse of time deprives a sin of its power to sting. As in the old story of the man who was killed by a rattlesnake's poison fang embedded in a boot which had lain forgotten for years, we may be wounded by suddenly coming against it, long after it is forgiven by God and almost forgotten by ourselves. Many a good man, although he knows that Christ's blood has washed away his guilt, is made to possess the iniquities of his youth. Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done.

But this shaded retrospect is one-sided. It is true, and in some moods seems all the truth; but Jacob saw more distinctly, and his name was rightly Israel, when, laying his trembling hands on the heads of Joseph's sons, he laid there the blessing of the God which fed me all my life long, ...the Angel which redeemed me from all evil. That was his last thought about his life, as it began to be seen in the breaking light of eternal day. Pensive and penitent memory may call the years few and evil, but grateful faith even here, and still more the cleared vision of heaven, will discern more truly that they have been a long miracle of loving care, and that all their seeming evil has been transmuted into good.