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

**GENESIS-051. A COFFIN IN EGYPT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt."*

*Genesis 50:26*

So closes the book of Genesis. All its recorded dealings of God with Israel, and all the promises and the glories of the patriarchal line, end with a coffin in Egypt. Such an ending is the more striking, when we remember that a space of three hundred years intervenes between the last events in Genesis and the first in Exodus, or almost as long a time as parts the Old Testament from the New. And, during all that period, Israel was left with a mummy and a hope. The elaborately embalmed body of Joseph lay in its gilded and pictured case, somewhere in Goshen, and was, no doubt, in the care of the Israelites, as is plain from the fact that they carried it with them at the exodus. For three centuries, that silent coffin in Egypt preached its impressive messages. What did it say? It spoke, no doubt, to ears often deaf, but still some faint whispers of its speechless testimony would sound in some hearts, and help to keep vivid some hopes.

First, it was a silent reminder of mortality. Egyptian consciousness was much occupied with death. The land was peopled with tombs. But the corpse of Joseph was perhaps not laid in one of these, but remained housed somewhere in sight, as it were, of all Israel. Many a passer-by would pause for a moment, and think; Here is the end of dignity second only to Pharaoh's, to this has come that strong brain, that true heart, Israel's pride and protection is shut up in that wooden case.

The glories of our birth and state

Are shadows, not substantial things;

There is no armour against fate,

Death lays his icy hand on kings.

Yes, but let us remember that while that silent sarcophagus enforced the old, old lesson to the successive generations that looked on it and little heeded its stern, sad teaching of mortality, it had other brighter truths to tell. For the shrivelled, colourless lips that lay in it, covered with many a fold of linen, had left as their last utterance, I die, but God will surely visit you, No man is necessary. Israel can survive the loss of the strongest and wisest. God lives, though a hundred Josephs die. It is pure gain to lose human helpers, if thereby we become more fully conscious of our need of a divine arm and heart, and more truly feel that we have these for our all-sufficient stay. Blessed is the fleeting of all that can pass, if its withdrawal lets the calm light of the Eternal, which cannot pass, stream in uninterrupted on us! When the leaves fall, we see more clearly the rock which their short-lived greenness in its pride veiled. When the many-hued and ever-shifting clouds are swept out of the sky by the wind, the sun that lent them all their colour shines the more brightly. The message of every death-bed and grave is meant to be, This and that man dies, but God lives. The last result of our contemplation of mortality, as affecting our dearest and most needful ones, and as sure to include ourselves in its far-reaching, close-woven net, ought to be to drive us to God's breast, that there we may find a Friend who does not pass, and may dwell in the land of the living, on whose soil the foot of all-conquering Death dare never tread.

Nor are these thoughts all the message of that coffin in Egypt. In the first verses of the next book, that of Exodus, there is a remarkable juxtaposition of ideas, when we read that Joseph died and all his brethren and all that generation. But was that the end of Israel? By no means, for the narrative goes on immediately to say--linking the two things together by a simple and--that the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied and waxed exceeding mighty.

So life springs side by side with death. There are cradles as well as graves.

The individual withers,

And the race is more and more.

Leaves drop and new leaves come. The April days are not darkened, and the tender green of the fresh leaf-buds is all the more vigorous and luxuriant, because it is fed from the decaying leaves that litter the roots of the long-lived oak. Thus through the ages the pathetic alternation goes on. Penelope's web is ever being woven and run down and woven again. Joseph dies; Israel grows. Let us not take half-views, nor either fix our thoughts on the universal law of dissolution and decay, nor on the other side of the process--the universal emergence of life from death, reconstruction from dissolution. In our individual histories and on the wider field of the world's history, the same large law is at work, which is expressed in the simplest terms by these old words, Joseph died, and all his brethren and all that generation--and the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly. So the wholesome lesson of mortality is stripped of much of its sadness, and retains all its pathos, solemnity, and power to purify the heart.

Again, that coffin in Egypt was a herald of Hope. The reason for Joseph's dying injunction that his body should be preserved after the Egyptian fashion, and laid where it could be lifted and carried away, when the long-expected deliverance was effected, was the dying patriarch's firm confidence that, though he died, he had still somehow a share in God's faithful promise. We do not know the precise shape which his thought of that share took. It may have been merely the natural sentiment which desires that the unconscious frame shall moulder quietly beside the mouldering forms which once held our dear ones. This naturalised Egyptian did his work manfully in the land of his adoption, and flung himself eagerly into its interests, but his heart turned to the cave at Machpelah, and, though he lived in Egypt, he could not bear to think of lying there for ever when dead, especially of being left there alone. There may have been some trace in his wish of the peculiar Egyptian belief that the preservation of the body contributed in some way to the continuance of personal life, and that a certain shadowy self hovered about the spot where the mummy was laid. Our knowledge of the large place filled by a doctrine of a future life in Egyptian thought makes it most probable that Joseph had at least some forecast of that hope of immortality, which seems to us to be inseparable from the consciousness of present communion with God.

But, in any case, Israel had charge of that coffin because the dead man that lay in it had, on the very edge of the gulf of death, believed that he had still a portion in Israel's hope, and that, when he had taken the plunge into the great darkness, he had not sunk below the reach of God's power to give him personal fulfilment of His yet unfulfilled promise. His dying command was the expression of his unshaken faith that, though he was dead, God would visit him with His salvation, and give him to see the prosperity of His chosen, that he might rejoice in the gladness of the nation, and glory with His inheritance. He had lived, trusting in God's bare promise, and, as he lived, he died. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold of the true motive power in the incident, when it points to Joseph's dying commandment concerning his bones as a noble instance of Faith.

Thus, through slow creeping centuries, this silent preacher said--Hope on, though the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come. God is faithful, and will perform His word. There was much to make hope faint. To bring Israel out of Canaan seemed a strange way of investing it with the possession of Canaan. As the tardy years trickled away, drop by drop, and the promise seemed no nearer fulfilment, some film of doubt must have crept over Hope's bright eyes. When new dynasties reigned, and Israel slowly sank into the state of bondage, it must have been still harder to believe that the shortest road to the inheritance was round by Goshen. But through all the darkening course of Israel in these sad centuries, there stood the coffin, the token of a triumphant faith which had leapt, as a trifle, over the barrier of death, and grasped as real the good which lay beyond that frowning wall. We have a better Herald of hope than a mummy-case and a pyramid built round it. We have an empty grave and an occupied Throne, by which to nourish our confidence in Immortality and our estimate of the insignificance of death. Our Joseph does not say--I die, but God will surely visit you, but He gives us the wonderful assurance of identification with Himself, and consequent participation in His glory--Because I live, ye shall live also. Therefore our hope should be as much brighter and more confirmed than this ancient one was as that on which it is based is better and more joyous. But, alas, there is no invariable proportion between food supplied and strength derived. An orchid can fling out gorgeous blooms, though it grows on a piece of dry wood, but plants set in rich soil often show poor flowers. Our hope will be worthy of its foundation, only on condition of our habitually reflecting on the firmness of that foundation, and cultivating familiarity with the things hoped for.

There are many ways in which the apostle's great saying that we are saved by hope approves itself as true. Whatever leads us to grasp the future rather than the present, even if it is but an earthly future, and to live by hope rather than by fruition, even if it is but a short-reaching hope, lifts us in the scale of being, ennobles, dignifies, and in some respects purifies us. Even men whose expectations have not wing-power enough to cross the dreadful ravine of Death, are elevated in the degree in which they work towards a distant goal. Short-sighted hopes are better than blind absorption in the present. Whatever puts the centre of gravity of our lives in the future is a gain, and most of all is that hope blessed, which bids us look forward to an eternal sitting with Jesus at the right hand of God.

If such hope has any solidity in it, it will certainly detach us from the order of things in which we dwell. The world is always tempting us to forget the imperial palace whither we go. The Israelites must have been swayed by many inducements to settle down for good and all in the low levels of fertile Goshen, and to think themselves better off there than if going out on a perilous enterprise to win no richer pastures than they already possessed. In fact, when the deliverance came, it was not particularly welcome, oven though oppression was embittering the peoples lives. But, when hope had died down in them, and desire had become languid, and ignoble contentment with their flocks and herds had dulled their spirits, Joseph's silent coffin must have pealed in their ears--This is not your rest; arise and claim your inheritance. In like manner, the pressure of the apparently solid realities of to-day, the growth of the scientific temper of mind which confines knowledge to physical facts, the drift of tendency among religious people to regard Christianity mainly in its aspect of dealing with social questions and bringing present good, powerfully reinforce our natural sluggishness of Hope, and have brought it about that the average Christian of this day has fewer of his thoughts directed to the future life than his predecessors had, or than it is good for him to have.

Among the many truths which almost need to be rediscovered by their professed believers, that of the rest that remains for the people of God is one. For the test of believing a truth is its influence on conduct, and no one can affirm that the conduct of the average Christian of our times bears marks of being deeply influenced by that Future, or by the hope of winning it. Does he live as if he felt that he was an alien among the material things surrounding him? Does it look as if his true affinities were beyond the grave and above the stars? If we did thus feel, not at rare intervals, when in seasons of calm weather, our souls have sight of that immortal sea, which lies glassy before the throne, and on whose banks the minstrels stand singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, but habitually and with a vivid realisation, which makes the things hoped for more solid than what we touch and handle, our lives would be far other than they are. We should not work less, but more, earnestly at our present duties, whatever these may be, for they would be seen in new importance as bearing on our place in that world of consequences. The more our goal and prize are seen gleaming through the dust of the race-ground, the more strenuous our effort here. Nothing ennobles the trifles of our lives in time like the streaming in on these of the light of eternity. That vision ever present with us will not sadden. The fact of mortality is grim enough, if forced upon us unaccompanied by the other fact that Death opens the gate of our Home. But when the else depressing thought that here we have no continuing city is but the obverse and result of the fact that we seek one to come, it is freed from its sadness, and becomes powerful for good and even for joy. We need, even more than Israel in its bondage did, to realise that we are strangers and pilgrims. It concerns the depth of our religion and the reality of our profiting by the discipline, as well as of our securing the enjoyment of the blessings, of the fleeting and else trivial present, that we shall keep very clear in view the great future which dignifies and interprets this enigmatical earthly life.

Further, that coffin in Egypt was a preacher of patience. As we have seen, three centuries at least, probably a somewhat longer period, passed between the time when Joseph's corpse was laid in it, and the night when it was lifted out of it by the departing Israelites. No doubt, hope deferred had made many a heart sick, and the weary question, Where is the promise of His coming? had in some cases changed into bitter disbelief that the promise would ever be fulfilled. But, for all these years, the dumb monitor stood there proclaiming, If the vision tarry, wait for it.

Surely we need the same lesson. It is hard for us to acquiesce in the slow march of the divine purposes. Life is short, and desire would fain see the great harvests reaped before death seals our eyes. Sometimes the very prospect of the great things that shall one day be accomplished in the world, and we not there to see, weighs heavily on us. Reformers, philanthropists, idealists of all sorts are constitutionally impatient, and in their generous haste to see their ideals realised, forget that raw haste is half-sister to delay and are indignant with man for his sluggishness and with God for His majestic slowness. Not less do we fret and fume and think the days drag with intolerable slowness, before some eagerly expected good rises like a star on our individual lives. But there is deep truth in Paul's apparent paradox, that if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. The more sure the confidence, the more quiet the patient waiting. It is uncertainty which makes earthly hope short of breath, and impatient of delay.

But since a Christian man's hope is consolidated into certainty, and when it is set on God, cannot only say, I trust that it will be so and so, but, I know that it shall, it may well be content to be patient for the fulfilment, as the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years in respect of the magnitude of the changes which may be wrought by the instantaneous operation of His hand when the appointed hour shall strike, and therefore it should not strain our patience nor stagger our faith that a thousand years should be as one day, in respect of the visible approximation achieved in them, towards the establishment of His purpose. The world was prepared for man through countless millenniums. Man was prepared for the advent of Christ through long centuries. Nineteen hundred years have effected comparatively little in incorporating the issues of Christ's work in the consciousness and characters of mankind. Much of the slowness of that progress of Christianity is due to the faithlessness and sloth of professing Christians. But it still remains true that God lifts His foot slowly, and plants it firmly, in His march through the world. So, both in regard to the progress of truth, and the diffusion of the highest, and of the secondary, blessings of Christianity through the nations, and in respect to the reception of individual good gifts, we shall do wisely to leave God to settle the when since we are sure that He has bound Himself to accomplish the fact.

Finally, that coffin in Egypt was a pledge of possession. It lay long among the Israelites to uphold fainting faith, and at last was carried up before their host, and reverently guarded during forty years wanderings, till it was deposited in the cave at Machpelah, beside the tombs of the fathers of the nation. Thus it became to the nation, and remains for us, a symbol of the truth that no hope based upon God's bare word is ever finally disappointed. From all other anticipations grounded on anything less solid, the element of uncertainty is inseparable, and Fear is ever the sister of Hope. With keen insight Spenser makes these two march side by side, in his wonderful procession of the attendants of earthly Love. There is always a lurking sadness in Hope's smiles, and a nameless dread in her eyes. And all expectations busied with or based upon the contingencies of this poor life, whether they are fulfilled or disappointed, prove less sweet in fruition than in prospect, and often turn to ashes in the eating, instead of the sweet bread which we had thought them to be. One basis alone is sure, and that is the foundation on which Joseph rested and risked everything--the plain promise of God. He who builds on that rock will never be put to shame, and when floods sweep away every refuge built on sand, he will not need to make haste to find, amid darkness and storm, some less precarious shelter, but will look down serenely on the wildest torrent, and know it to be impotent to wash away his fortress home.

There is no nobler example of victorious faith which prolonged confident expectation beyond the insignificant accident of death than Joseph's dying commandment concerning his bones. His confidence, indeed, grasped a far lower blessing than ours should reach out to clasp. It was evoked by less clear and full promises and pledges than we have. The magnitude and loftiness of the Christian hope of Immortality, and the certitude of the fact on which it reposes, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, should result in a corresponding increase in the firmness and clearness of our hope, and in its power in our lives. The average Christian of to-day may well be sent to school to Joseph on his death-bed. Is our faith as strong as--I will not ask if it is stronger than--that of this man who, in the morning twilight of revelation, and with a hope of an eternal possession of an earthly inheritance, which, one might have thought, would be shattered by death, was able to fling his anchor clean across the gulf when he gave injunction, Carry my bones up hence'? We have a better inheritance, and fuller, clearer promises and facts on which to trust. Shame to us if we have a feebler faith.