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

**JEREMIAH-028. AS SODOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. Zedekiah was one and twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah. 2. And he did that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that Jehoiakim had done. 3. For through the anger of the Lord it came to pass in Jerusalem and Judah, till he had cast them out from his presence, that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. 4. And it came to pass, in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came, he and all his army, against Jerusalem, and pitched against it, and built forts against it round about. 5. So the city was besieged unto the eleventh year of king Zedekiah. 6. And in the fourth month, in the ninth day of the month, the famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people of the land. 7. Then the city was broken up, and all the men of war fled, and went forth out of the city by night by the way of the gate between the two walls, which was by the king's garden; (now the Chaldeans were by the city round about) and they went by the way of the plain. 8. But the army of the Chaldeans pursued after the king, and overtook Zedekiah in the plains of Jericho; and all his army was scattered from him. 9. Then they took the king, and carried him up unto the king of Babylon to Riblah in the land of Hamath; where he gave judgment upon him. 10. And the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes: he slew also all the princes of Judah in Riblah. 11. Then he put out the eyes of Zedekiah; and the king of Babylon bound him in chains, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death."*

*Jeremiah 52:1-11*

This account of the fall of Jerusalem is all but identical with that in 2 Kings xxv. It was probably taken thence by some editor of Jeremiah's prophecies, perhaps Baruch, who felt the appropriateness of appending to these the verification of them in that long-foretold and disbelieved judgment.

The absence of every expression of emotion is most striking. In one sentence the wrath of God is pointed to as the cause of all; and, for the rest, the tragic facts which wrung the writer's heart are told in brief, passionless sentences, which sound liker the voice of the recording angel than that of a man who had lived through the misery which he recounts. The Book of Lamentations weeps and sobs with the grief of the devout Jew; but the historian smothers feeling while he tells of God's righteous judgment.

Zedekiah owed his throne to the king of Babylon, and, at first, was his obedient vassal, himself going to Babylon (Jer. 51:59) and swearing allegiance (Ezek. 17:13). But rebellion soon followed, and the perjured young king once more pursued the fatal, fascinating policy of alliance with Egypt. There could be but one end to that madness, and, of course, the Chaldean forces soon appeared to chastise this presumptuous little monarch, who dared to defy the master of the world. Our narrative curtails its account of Zedekiah's reign, bringing into strong relief only the two facts of his following Jehoiakim's evil ways, and his rebellion against Babylon. But behind the rash, ignorant young man, it sees God working, and traces all the insane bravado by which he was ruining his kingdom and himself to God's wrath, not thereby diminishing Zedekiah's responsibility for his own acts, but declaring that his being given over to a reprobate mind was the righteous divine punishment for past sin.

An eighteen months agony is condensed into three verses (Jer. 52:4-6), in which the minute care to specify dates pathetically reveals the depth of the impression which the first appearance of the besieging army made, and the deeper wound caused by the city's fall. The memory of these days has not faded yet, for both are still kept as fasts by the synagogue. We look with the narrator's eye at the deliberate massing of the immense besieging force drawing its coils round the doomed city, like a net round a deer, and mark with him the piling of the mounds, and the erection on them of siege-towers. We hear of no active siege operations till the final assault. Famine was Nebuchadnezzar's best general. Sitting down they watched her there, and grimly waited till hunger became unbearable. We can fill up much of the outline in this narrative from the rest of Jeremiah, which gives us a vivid and wretched picture of imbecility, divided counsels, and mad hatred of God's messenger, blind refusal to see facts, and self-confidence which no disaster could abate. And, all the while, the monstrous serpent was slowly tightening its folds round the struggling, helpless rabbit. We have to imagine all the misery.

The narrative hurries on to its close. What widespread and long-drawn-out privation that one sentence covers: The famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people! Lamentations is full of the cries of famished children and mothers who eat the fruit of their own bodies. At last, on the memorable black day, the ninth of the fourth month (say July), a breach was made, and the Chaldean forces poured in through it. Jeremiah xxxix. 3 tells the names of the Babylonian officers who sat in the middle gate of the Temple, polluting it with their presence. There seems to have been no resistance from the enfeebled, famished people; but apparently some of the priests were slain in the sanctuary, perhaps in the act of defending it from the entrance of the enemy. The Chaldeans would enter from the north, and, while they were establishing themselves in the Temple, Zedekiah and all the men of war fled, stealing out of the city by a covered way between two walls, on the south side, and leaving the city to the conqueror, without striking a blow. They had talked large when danger was not near; but braggarts are cowards, and they thought now of nothing but their own worthless lives. Then, as always, the men who feared God feared nothing else, and the men who scoffed at the day of retribution, when it was far off, were unmanned with terror when it dawned.

The investment had not been complete on the southern side, and the fugitives got away across Kedron and on to the road to Jericho, their purpose, no doubt, being to put the Jordan between them and the enemy. One can picture that stampede down the rocky way, the anxious looks cast backwards, the confusion, the weariness, the despair when the rush of the pursuers overtook the famine-weakened mob. In sight of Jericho, which had witnessed the first onset of the irresistible desert-hardened host under Joshua, the last king of Israel, deserted by his army, was taken in their pits, as hunters take a wild beast. The march to Riblah, in the far north, would be full of indignities arid of physical suffering. The soldiers of that bitter and hasty nation would not spare him one insult or act of cruelty, and he had a tormentor within worse than they. Why did I not listen to the prophet? What a fool I have been! If I had only my time to come over again, how differently I would do! The miserable self-reproaches, which shoot their arrows into our hearts when it is too late, would torture Zedekiah, as they will sooner or later do to all who did not listen to God's message while there was yet time. The sinful, mad past kept him company on one hand; and, on the other, there attended him a dark, if doubtful, future. He knew that he was at the disposal of a fierce conqueror, whom he had deeply incensed, and who had little mercy. What will become of me when I am face to face with Nebuchadnezzar? Would that I had kept subject to him! A past gone to ruin, a present honey-combed with gnawing remorse and dread, a future threatening, problematical, but sure to be penal-- these were what this foolish young king had won by showing his spirit and despising Jeremiah's warnings, It is always a mistake to fly in the face of God's commands. All sin is folly, and every evildoer might say with poor Robert Burns:

I backward cast my e'e

On prospects drear!

An forward, tho I canna see,

I guess an fear.

Nebuchadnezzar was in Riblah, away up in the north, waiting the issue of the campaign. Zedekiah was nothing to him but one of the many rebellious vassals of whom he had to make an example lest rebellion should spread, and who was especially guilty because he was Nebuchadnezzar's own nominee, and had sworn allegiance. Policy and his own natural disposition reinforced by custom dictated his barbarous punishment meted to the unfortunate kinglet of the petty kingdom that had dared to perk itself up against his might. How little he knew that he was the executioner of God's decrees! How little the fact that he was so, diminished his responsibility for his cruelty! The savage practice of blinding captive kings, so as to make them harmless and save all trouble with them, was very common. Zedekiah was carried to Babylon, and thus was fulfilled Ezekiel's enigmatical prophecy, I will bring him to Babylon, ... yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there (Ezek. 12:13).

The fall of Jerusalem should teach us that a nation is a moral whole, capable of doing evil and of receiving retribution, and not a mere aggregation of individuals. It should teach us that transgression does still, though not so directly or certainly as in the case of Israel, sap the strength of kingdoms; and that to-day, as truly as of old, righteousness exalteth a nation. It should accustom us to look on history as not only the result of visible forces, but as having behind it, and reaching its end through the visible forces, the unseen hand of God. For Christians, the vision of the Apocalypse contains the ultimate word on the philosophy of history. It is the Lamb before the Throne, who opens the roll with the seven seals, and lets the powers of whom it speaks loose for their march through the world. It should teach us God's long-suffering patience and loving efforts to escape the necessity of smiting, and also God's rigid justice, which will not shrink from smiting when all these efforts have failed.