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

**1 SAMUEL-002. FAITHLESSNESS AND DEFEAT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And the word of Samuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Eben-ezer: and the Philistines pitched in Aphek. 2. And the Philistines put themselves in array against Israel: and when they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines: and they slew of the army in the field about four thousand men. 3. And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us today before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. 4. So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubims: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. 5. And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again. 6. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shout, they said, What meaneth the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the Lord was come into the camp. 7. And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. 8. Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? these are the gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. 9. Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight. 10. And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. 11. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain. 12. And there ran a man of Benjamin out of the army, and came to Shiloh the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head. 13. And when he came, lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God. And when the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out. 14. And when Eli heard the noise of the crying, he said, What meaneth the noise of this tumult? And the man came in hastily, and told Eli. 15. Now Eli was ninety and eight years old; and his eyes were dim, that he could not see. 16. And the man said unto Eli, I am he that came out of the army, and I fled to-day out of the army. And he said, What is there done, my son? 17. And the messenger answered and said, Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God Is taken. 18. And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died: for he was an old man, and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years."*

*1 Samuel 4:1-18*

The first words of verse 1 are closely connected with the end of chapter iii., and complete the account of Samuel's inauguration. The word of the Lord came to Samuel, and the word of Samuel came to all Israel. The one clause tells of the prophet's inspiration, the other of his message and its reception by the nation. This bond of union between the clauses has been broken by the chapter division, apparently for the sake of representing the revolt against the Philistines as due to Samuel's instigation. But its being so is very doubtful. If God had sent the army into the field, He would have prepared it, by penitent return to Him, for victory, as no defeat follows on war which He commands. Probably Samuel's mission made an unwholesome ferment in minds which were quite untouched by its highest significance, and so led to a precipitate rebellion, preceded by no religious reformation, and therefore sure to fail. It was twenty years too soon (1 Sam. vii. 3). Samuel took no part in the struggle, and his name is never mentioned till, at the end of that period, he emphatically condemns all that had been done, and points the true path of deliverance, in return to the Lord with all your heart. So the great lesson of this story is that when Israel fights Philistines, unbidden and unrepentant, it is sure to be beaten,--a truth with manifold wide applications.

The first disastrous defeat took place on a field, which was afterwards made memorable by a great victory, and by a name which lives still as a watchword for hope and gratitude. Happy they who at last conquer where they once failed, and in the retrospect can say, Hitherto the Lord helped, both by defeat and by the victory for which defeat prepared a way! That opening struggle, bloody and grave as it was, was not decisive; for the Israelites regained their fortified camp unmolested, and held together, and kept their communications open, as appears from what followed.

Verses 3 to 5 give us a glimpse into the camp of Israel, and verses 6 to 9 into that of the Philistines. These two companion pictures are worth looking at. The two armies are very much alike, and we may say that the purpose of the picture is to show how Israel was practically heathen, taking just the same views of its relation to God which the Philistines did. Note, too, the absence of central authority. The elders hold a kind of council. Where were Eli the judge and Samuel the prophet? Neither had part in this war. The question of the elders was right, inasmuch as it recognised that the Lord had smitten them, but wrong inasmuch as it betrayed that they had not the faintest notion that the reason was their own moral and religious apostasy. They had not learned the A B C of their history, and of the conditions of national prosperity. They stand precisely on the Pagan level, believing in a national God, who ought to help his votaries, but from some inexplicable caprice does not; or who, perhaps, is angry at the omission of some ritual observance. What an answer they would have got if Samuel had been there! There ought to have been no need for the question, or, rather, there was need for it, and the answer ought to have been clear to them; their sin was the all-sufficient reason for their defeat. There are plenty of Christians, like these elders, who, when they find themselves beaten by the world and the devil, puzzle their brains to invent all sorts of reasons for God's smiting, except the true one,--their own departure from Him.

The remedy suggested by the united wisdom of the leaders was as heathen as the consultation which resulted in it. Let us send for the ark Those who regarded not the God of the ark, says Bishop Hall, think themselves safe and happy in the ark of God. They thought, with that confusion between symbol and reality which runs through all heathen worship, and makes the danger of images, whether in heathenism or in sensuous Christianity, that if they brought the ark, they brought God with it. It was a kind of charm, which would help them, they hardly knew how. Its very name might have taught them better. They call it the ark of the covenant of the Lord; and a covenant has two parties to it, and promises favour on conditions. If they had kept the conditions, these four thousand corpses would not have been lying stiff and stark outside the rude encampment. As they did not keep them, bringing the chest which contained the transcript of them into their midst was bringing a witness of their apostasy, not a helper of their feebleness. Repentance would have brought God. Dragging the ark thither only removed Him farther away. We need not be too hard upon these people; for the natural disposition of us all is to trust to the externals of worship, and to put a punctilious attention to these in the place of a true cleaving of heart to the God who dwells near us, and is in us and on our side, if we cling to Him with penitent love. Even God-appointed symbols become snares. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are treated by multitudes as these elders did the ark. The fewer and simpler the outward observances of worship are, the less danger is there of the poor sense-bound soul tarrying in them, instead of passing by means of them into the higher, purer air beyond.

What right had these presumptuous elders to bring the ark from Shiloh? Eli was its guardian; and he, as appears probable from his anxiety about its fate, did not approve of its removal. But the people took the law into their own hands. There seems some hint that their action was presumptuous profanation, in the solemn, full title given in verse 4: The ark of the covenant of the Lord of Hosts which dwelleth between the cherubim,--as if contrasting His awful majesty, His universal dominion over the armies of heaven and the embattled powers of the universe, and the dazzling light of that glory, which shone in the innermost chamber of the Tabernacle, with the unanointed hands that presumed to press in thither and drag so sacred a thing into the light of common day and the tumult of the camp. Nor is the profanation lessened, but rather increased, by the priestly attendants, Eli's two sons, themselves amongst the worst men in Israel. When Hophni and Phinehas are its priests, the ark can bring no help. Heathenism separates religion from morality altogether. In it there is no connection between worship and purity, and the Old Testament religion for the first time welded these two inseparably together. That tumultuous procession from Shiloh, with these two profligates for the priests of God, and the bearers thinking that they were sure of their God's favour now, whatever their sin, shows how completely Israel had forgotten its own law, and, whilst professedly worshipping Jehovah, had really become a heathen people. The reception of the ark with that fierce shout, which echoed among the hills and was heard in the Philistines encampment, shows the same thing. Not so should the ark have been received, but with tears and confessions and silent awe. No man in all that host had ever looked upon it before. No man ought to have seen it then. Once a year, and not without blood sprinkled on its cover, the high priest might look on it through the cloud of incense which kept him from death, while all the people waited hushed till he came forth, but now it is dragged into the camp, and welcomed with a yell of mad delight, as a pledge of victory. What could display more strikingly the practical heathenism of the people?

Verses 6 to 9 take us into the other camp, and show us the undisguised heathens. The Philistines think just as the other side did, only, in their polytheistic way, they do not use the name Jehovah, but speak first of God and then of gods as having arrived in the camp. The nations dreaded each other's gods, though they worshipped their own; and the Philistines believed quite as much that Jehovah was the Hebrew's God, as that Dagon was theirs. There was to be a duel then between the two superhuman powers. The vague reports which they had heard of the Exodus, nearly five hundred years ago, filled the Philistines with panic. They had but a confused notion of the facts of that old story, and thought that Egypt had met the ten plagues in the wilderness. The blunder is very characteristic, and helps to show the accuracy of our narrative. It would not have occurred to a legend-maker. It sounds strange to us that the Philistines belief that the Hebrews God had come to their help should issue in exhortations to fight like men. But polytheism makes that quite a natural conclusion; and there is something almost fine in the truculent boldness with which they set their teeth for a fierce struggle. They reiterate to one another the charge to quit themselves like men; and while they do not hide from themselves that the question whether they are to be still masters is hanging on the coming struggle, a dash of contempt for the Hebrews who had been their slaves is perceptible.

According to verse 10, the Philistines appear to have begun the attack, perhaps taking the enemy by surprise. The rout this time was complete. The grim catalogue of disaster in verses 10 and 11 is strangely tragic in its dreadful, monotonous plainness, each clause adding something to the terrible story, and each linked to the preceding by a simple and. The Israelites seem to have been scattered. They fled, every man to his tent. The army, with little cohesion and no strong leaders, melted away. The ark was captured, and its two unworthy attendants slain. Bringing it had not brought God, then. It was but a chest of shittimwood, with two slabs of lettered stone in it,--and what help was in that? But its capture was the sign that the covenant with Israel was for the time annulled. The whole framework of the nation was disorganised. The keystone was struck out of their worship, and they had fallen, by their own sin, to the level of the nations, and even below these; for they had their gods, but Israel had turned away from their God, and He had departed from them. Superstition fancied that the presence of the ark secured to impenitent men the favour of God; but it was no superstition which saw in its absence from Shiloh His averted face.

Is there in poetry or drama a more vivid and pathetic passage than the closing verses of this narrative, which tell of the panting messenger and the old blind Eli?

Eben-ezer cannot have been very far from Shiloh, for the fugitive had seen the end of the fight, and reached the city before night. He came with the signs of mourning, and, as it would appear from verse 13, passed the old man at the gate without pausing, and burst into the city with his heavy tidings. One can almost hear the shrill shrieks of wrath and despair which first told Eli that something was wrong. Blind and unwieldy and heavy-hearted, he sat by the gate to which the news would first come; but yet he is the last to hear,--perhaps because all shrank from telling him, perhaps because in the confusion no one remembered him. Only after he had asked the meaning of the tumult, of which his foreboding heart and conscience told him the meaning before it was spoken, is the messenger brought to the man to whom he should have gone first. How touchingly the story pauses, even at this crisis, to paint the poor old man! A stronger word is used to describe his blindness than in 1 Samuel iii. 2, as the Revised Version shows. His fixed eyeballs were sightless now; and there he sat, dreading and longing to hear. The fugitive's account of himself is shameless in its avowal of his cowardice, and prepares Eli for the worst. But note how he speaks gently and with a certain dignity, crushing down his anxiety,--How went the matter, my son? Then, with no merciful circumlocution or veiling, out comes the whole dismal story once again.

Eli spoke no more. His sons death had been the sign given him years before that the threatenings against his house should be fulfilled; but even that blow he can bear. But the capture of the ark is more than a personal sorrow, and his start of horror overbalances him, and he falls from his seat (which probably had no back to it), and dies, silent, of a broken neck and a broken heart. His forty years of judgeship ended thus. He was in many respects good and lovable, gentle, courteous, devout. His kindly treatment of Hannah, his fatherly training of Samuel, his submission to the divine message through the child, his trembling for the ark, his death at the news of its being taken, all indicate a character of real sweetness and true godliness. But all was marred by a fatal lack of strong, stern resolve to tolerate no evil which he ought to suppress. Good, weak men, especially when they let foolish tenderness hinder righteous severity, bring terrible evils on themselves, their families, and their nation. It was Eli who, at bottom, was the cause of the defeat and the disasters which slew his sons and broke his own heart. Nothing is more cruel than the weak indulgence which, when men are bringing a curse on themselves by their sin, restrains them not.