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

**EXODUS-030. THE SWIFT DECAY OF LOVE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"15. And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: the tables were written on both their sides; on the one side and on the other were they written. 16. And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables. 17. And when Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said unto Moses, There is a noise of war in the camp. 18. And he said, It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that sing do I hear. 19. And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. 20. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it. 21. And Moses said unto Aaron, What did this people unto thee, that thou hast brought so great a sin upon them? 22. And Aaron said, Let not the anger of my lord wax hot: thou knowest the people, that they are set on mischief. 23. For they said unto me, Make us gods, which shall go before us: for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. 24. And I said unto them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. So they gave it me: then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf. 25. And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:) 26. Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him."*

*Exodus 32:15-26*

Moses and Joshua are on their way down from the mountain, the former carrying the tables in his hands and a heavier burden in his heart,--the thought of the people's swift apostasy. Joshua's soldierly ear interprets the shouts which are borne up to them as war-cries; He snuffeth the battle afar off, and saith Aha! But Moses knew that they meant worse than war, and his knowledge helped his ear to distinguish a cadence and unison in the noise, unlike the confused mingling of the victors yell of triumph and the shriek of the conquered. If we were dealing with fiction, we should admire the masterly dramatic instinct which lets the ear anticipate the eye, and so prepares us for the hideous sight that burst on these two at some turn in the rocky descent.

**I.** Note, then, what they saw. The vivid story puts it all in two words,--the calf and the dancing. There in the midst, perhaps on some pedestal, was the shameful copy of the Egyptian Apis; and whirling round it in mad circles, working themselves into frenzy by rapid motion and frantic shouts, were the people,--men and women, mingled in the licentious dance, who, six short weeks before, had sworn to the Covenant. Their bestial deity in the centre, and they compassing it with wild hymns, were a frightful contradiction of that grey altar and the twelve encircling stones which they had so lately reared, and which stood unregarded, a bowshot off, as a silent witness against them. Note the strange, irresistible fascination of idolatry. Clearly the personal influence of Moses was the only barrier against it. The people thought that he had disappeared, and, if so, Jehovah had disappeared with him. We wonder at their relapses into idolatry, but we forget that it was then universal, that Israel was at the beginning of its long training, that not even a divine revelation could produce harvest in seedtime, and that to look for a final and complete deliverance from the veil that was spread over all nations, at this stage, is like expecting a newly reclaimed bit of the backwoods to grow grass as thick and velvety as has carpeted some lawn that has been mown and cared for for a century. Grave condemnation is the due of these short-memoried rebels, who set up their abomination in sight of the fire on Sinai; but that should not prevent our recognising the evidence which their sin affords of the tremendous power of idolatry in that stage of the world's history. Israel's proneness to fall back to heathenism makes it certain that a supernatural revelation is needed to account for their possession of the loftier faith which was so far above them.

That howling, leaping crowd tells what sort of religion they would have evolved if left to themselves. Where did Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me come from? Note the confusion of thought, so difficult for us to understand, which characterises idolatry. What a hopelessly inconsequential cry that was, Make us gods, which shall go before us! and what a muddle of contradictions it was that men should say These be thy gods, though they knew that the thing was made yesterday out of their own earrings! It took more than a thousand years to teach the nation the force of the very self-evident argument, as it seems to us, the workman made it, therefore it is not God. The theory that the idol is only a symbol is not the actual belief of idolaters. It is a product of the study, but the worshipper unites in his thought the irreconcilable beliefs that it was made and is divine. A goldsmith will make and sell a Madonna, and when it is put in the cathedral, will kneel before it.

Note what was the sin here. It is generally taken for granted that it was a breach of the second, not of the first, commandment, and Aaron's proclamation of a feast to the Lord is taken as proving this. Aaron was probably trying to make an impossible compromise, and to find some salve for his conscience; but it does not follow that the people accepted the half-and-half suggestion. Leaders who try to control a movement which they disapprove, by seeming to accept it, play a dangerous game, and usually fail. But whether the people call the calf Jehovah or Apis matters very little. There would be as complete apostasy to another god, though the other god was called by the same name, if all that really makes his name was left out, and foreign elements were brought in. Such worship as these wild dances, offered to an image, broke both the commandments, no matter by what name the image was invoked.

The roots of idolatry are in all men. The gross form of it is impossible to us; but the need for aid from sense, the dependence on art for wings to our devotion, which is a growing danger to-day, is only the modern form of the same dislike of a purely spiritual religion which sent these people dancing round their calf.

**II.** Mark Moses blaze of wrath and courageous, prompt action. He dashes the tables on the rock, as if to break the record of the useless laws which the people have already broken, and, with his hands free, flings himself without pause into the midst of the excited mob. Verses 19 and 20 bear the impression of his rapid, decisive action in their succession of clauses, each tacked on to the preceding by a simple and. Stroke followed stroke. His fiery earnestness swept over all obstacles, the base riot ceased, the ashamed dancers slunk away. Some true hearts would gather about him, and carry out his commands; but he did the real work, and, single-handed, cowed and controlled the mob. No doubt, it took more time than the brief narrative, at first sight, would suggest. The image is flung into the fire from which it had come out. The fire made it, and the fire shall unmake it. We need not find difficulty in burning a golden idol. That does not mean calcined, and the writer is not guilty of a blunder, nor needed to be taught that you cannot burn gold. The next clause says that after it was burned, it was still solid; so that, plainly, all that is meant is, that the metal was reduced to a shapeless lump. That would take some time. Then it was broken small; there were plenty of rocks to grind it up on. That would take some more time, but not a finger was lifted to prevent it. Then the more or less finely broken up fragments are flung into the brook, and, with grim irony, the people are bid to drink. You shall have enough of your idol, since you love him so. Here, down with him! You will have to take the consequences of your sin. You must drink as you have brewed. It is at once a contemptuous demonstration of the idol's impotence, and a picture of the sure retribution.

But we may learn two things from this figure of the indignant lawgiver. One is, that the temper in which to regard idolatry is not one of equable indifference nor of scientific investigation, but that some heat of moral indignation is wholesome. We are all studying comparative mythology now, and getting much good from it; but we are in some danger of forgetting that these strange ideas and practices, which we examine at our ease, have spread spiritual darkness and moral infection over continents and through generations. Let us understand them, by all means; let us be thankful to find fragments of truth in, or innocent origins of, repulsive legends; but do not let the student swallow up the Christian in us, nor our minds lose their capacity of wholesome indignation at the systems, blended with Christ-like pity and effort for the victims.

We may learn, further, how strong a man is when he is all aflame with true zeal for God. The suddenness of Moses reappearance, the very audacity of his act, the people's habit of obedience, all helped to carry him through the crisis; but the true secret of his swift victory was his own self-forgetting faith. There is contagion in pure religious enthusiasm. It is the strongest of all forces. One man, with God at his back, is always in the majority. He whose whole soul glows with the pure fire, will move among men like flame in stubble. All things are possible to him that believeth. Consecrated daring, animated by love and fed with truth, is all-conquering.

**III.** Note the weaker nature of Aaron, taking refuge in a transparent lie. Probably his dialogue with his brother came in before the process described in the former verses was accomplished. But the narrative keeps all that referred to the destruction of the idol together, and goes by subject rather than by time. We do not learn how Moses had come to know Aaron's share in the sin, but his question is one of astonishment. Had they bewitched him anyhow? or what inducement had led him so far astray? The stronger and devouter soul cannot conceive how the weaker had yielded. Aaron's answer puts the people's wish forward. They said, Make us gods; that was all which they had done. A poor excuse, as Aaron feels even while he is stammering it out. What would Moses have answered if the people had said so to him? Did he, standing there, with the heat of his struggle on him yet, look like a man that would acknowledge any demand of a mob as a reason for a ruler's compliance? It is the coward's plea. How many ecclesiastics and statesmen since then have had no better to offer for their acts! Such fear of the Lord as shrivelled before the breath of popular clamour could have had no deep roots. One of the first things to learn, whether we are in prominent or in private positions, is to hold by our religious convictions in supreme indifference to all surrounding voices, and to let no threats nor entreaties lead us to take one step beyond or against conscience.

Aaron feels the insufficiency of the plea, when he has to put it into plain words to such a listener, and so he flies to the resource of timid and weak natures, a lie. For what did he ask the gold, and put it into the furnace, unless he meant to make a god? Perhaps he had told the people the same story, as priests in all lands have been apt to claim a miraculous origin for idols. And he repeats it now, as if, were it true, he would plead the miracle as a vindication of the worship as well as his absolution. But the lie is too transparent to deserve even an answer, and Moses turns silently from him.

Aaron's was evidently the inferior nature, and was less deeply stamped with the print of heaven than his brother's. His feeble compliance is recorded as a beacon for all persons in places of influence or authority, warning them against self-interested or cowardly yielding to a popular demand, at the sacrifice of the purity of truth and the approval of their own consciences. He was not the last priest who has allowed the supposed wishes of the populace to shape his representations of God, and has knowingly dropped the standard of duty or sullied the clear brightness of truth in deference to the many-voiced monster.

**IV.** Note the rallying of true hearts round Moses. The Revised Version reads broken loose instead of naked, and the correction is valuable. It explains the necessity for the separation of those who yet remained bound by the restraints of God's law, and for the terrible retribution that followed. The rebellion had not been stamped out by the destruction of the calf; and though Moses dash into their midst had cowed the rebels for a time, things had gone too far to settle down again at once. The camp was in insurrection. It was more than a riot, it was a revolution. With the rapid eye of genius, Moses sees the gravity of the crisis, and, with equally swift decisiveness, acts so as to meet it. He stood in the gate of the camp, and made the nucleus for the still faithful. His summons puts the full seriousness of the moment clearly before the people. They have come to a fork in the road. They must be either for Jehovah or against Him. There can be no mixing up of the worship of Jehovah and the images of Egypt, no tampering with God's service in obedience to popular clamour. It must be one thing or other. This is no time for the family of Mr. Facing-both-ways; the question for each man is, Under which King? Moses unhesitating confidence that he is God's soldier, and that to be at his side is to be on God's side, was warranted in him, but has often been repeated with less reason by eager contenders, as they believed themselves to be, for God. No doubt, it becomes us to be modest and cautious in calling all true friends of God to rank themselves with us. But where the issue is between foul wrong and plain right, between palpable idolatry, error, or unbridled lust, and truth, purity, and righteousness, the Christian combatant for these is entitled to send round the fiery cross, and proclaim a crusade in God's name. There will always be plenty of people with cold water to pour on enthusiasm. We should be all the better for a few more, who would venture to feel that they are fighting for God, and to summon all who love Him to come to their and His help.

Moses own tribe responded to the summons. And, no doubt, Aaron was there too, galvanised into a nobler self by the courage and fervour of his brother, and, let us hope, urged by penitence, to efface the memory of his faithlessness by his heroism now.

We do not go on to the dreadful retribution, which must be regarded, not as massacre, but as legal execution. It is folly to apply to it, or to other analogous instances, the ideas of this Christian century. We need not be afraid to admit that there has been a development of morality. The retributions of a stern age were necessarily stern. But if we want to understand the heart of Moses, or of Moses God, we must not look only at the ruler of a wild people trampling out a revolt at the sacrifice of many lives, but listen to him, as the next section of the narrative shows him, pleading with tears for the rebels, and offering even to let his own name be blotted out of God's book if their sin might be forgiven. So, coupling the two parts of his conduct together, we may learn a little more clearly a lesson, of which this age has much need,--the harmony of retributive justice and pitying love; and may come to understand that Moses learned both the one and the other by fellowship with the God in whom they both dwell in perfection and concord.