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

**LEVITICUS-006. THE CONSECRATION OF JOY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"33. And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, 34. Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord. 35. On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. 36. Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord; on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein. 37. These are the feasts of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord, a burnt offering, and a meat offering, a sacrifice, and drink offerings, every thing upon his day: 38. Beside the sabbaths of the Lord, and beside your gifts, and beside all your vows, and beside all your freewill offerings, which ye give unto the Lord. 39. Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. 40. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. 41. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: 43. That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. 44. And Moses declared unto the children of Israel the feasts of the Lord."*

*Leviticus 23:33-44*

These directions for the observance of the great festival at the close of harvest are singularly arranged. Verses 33-36 give part of the instructions for the Feast, verses 37 and 38 interrupt these with a summary of the contents of the chapter, and verses 39 to the end pick up the broken thread, and finish the regulations for the feast. Naturally, this apparent afterthought has been pointed out as clear evidence of diversity of authorship. But a reasonable explanation may be given on the hypothesis of the unity of the section, by observing that verses 33-36 deal only with the sacrificial side of the feast, as worship proper, and thus come into line with the previous part of the chapter, which is occupied with an enumeration of the annual feasts of the Lord (v. 4). It was natural, therefore, that, when the list had been completed by the sacrificial prescriptions for the last of the series, the close of the catalogue should be marked, in verses 37, 38, and that then the other parts of the observances connected with this feast, which are not sacrificial, nor, properly speaking, worship, should be added. There is no need to invoke the supposition of two authors, and a subsequent stitching together, in order to explain the arrangement. The unity is all the more probable because, otherwise, the first half would give the name of the feast as that of tabernacles, and would not contain a word to account for the name.

We need not, then, include the separating wedge, in verses 37, 38, in our present consideration. The ritual of the feast is broadly divided by it, and we may consider the two portions separately. The first half prescribes the duration of the feast as seven days (the perfect number), with an eighth, which is named, like the first, an holy convocation, on which no work was to be done, but is also called a solemn assembly, or rather, as the Revised Version reads, in margin, a closing festival, inasmuch as it closed, not only that particular feast, but the whole series for the year. The observances enjoined, then, are the public assembly on the first and eighth days, with cessation from labour, and a daily offering. We learn more about the offering from Numbers xxix. 12 et seq., which appoints a very peculiar arrangement. On each day there was to be, as on other feast days, one goat for a sin offering; but the number of rams and lambs for the burnt offering was doubled, and, during the seven days of the feast, seventy bullocks were offered, arranged in a singular diminishing scale,--thirteen on the first day, and falling off by one a day till the seventh day, when seven were sacrificed. The eighth day was marked as no part of the feast proper, by the number of sacrifices offered on it, dropping to one bullock, one ram, and seven lambs. No satisfactory account of this regulation has been suggested. It may possibly have meant no more than to mark the first day as the chief, and to let the worshippers down gradually from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

The other half of the regulations deals with the more domestic aspect of the festival. Observe, as significant of the different point of view taken in it, that the first and eighth days are there described, not as holy convocations, but as sabbaths, or, as the Revised Version gives it better, a solemn rest. Observe, also, that these verses connect the feast with the ingathering of the harvest, as does Exodus xxiii. 16. It is quite possible that Moses grafted the more commemorative aspect of the feast on an older harvest home; but that is purely conjectural, however confidently affirmed as certain. To tumble down cartloads of quotations about all sorts of nations that ran up booths and feasted in them at vintage-time does not help us much. The joy of harvest was unquestionably blended with the joy of remembered national deliverance, but that the latter idea was superadded to the former at a later time is, to say the least, not proven. Would it matter very much if it were? Three kinds of trees are specified from which the fruit, that is branches with fruit on them, if the tree bore fruit, were to be taken: palms, thick trees, that is thick foliaged, which could give leafy shade, and willows of the brook, which the Rabbis say were used for binding the others together. Verse 40 does not tell what is to be done with these branches, but the later usage was to carry some of them in the hand as well as to use them for booths. The keynote of the whole feast is struck in verse 40: Ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God. The leafy spoils come into view here as tokens of jubilation, which certainly suggests their being borne in the hand; but they were also meant to be used in building the booths in which the whole nation was to live during the seven days, in commemoration of God's having made them dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. This is all that is enjoined by Moses. Later additions to the ceremonial do not concern us here, however interesting some of these are. The true intention of the feast is best learned from the original simple form. What, then, was its intention? It was the commemoration of the wilderness life as the ground of rejoicing before the Lord. But we must not forget that, according to Leviticus, it was appointed while the wilderness life was still present, and so was not to be observed then. Was it, then, a dead letter, or had the appointment a message of joy even to the weary wanderers who lived in the veritable booths, which after generations were to make a feast of mimicking? How firm the confidence of entering the land must have been, which promulgated such a law! It would tend to hearten the fainting courage of the pilgrims. A divinely guaranteed future is as certain as the past, and the wanderers whom He guides may be sure of coming to the settled home. All words which He speaks beforehand concerning that rest and the joyful worship there are pledges that it shall one day be theirs. The present use of the prospective law was to feed faith and hearten hope; and, when Canaan was reached, its use was to feed memory and brighten godly gladness.

The feast of tabernacles was the consecration of joy. Other religions have had their festivals, in which wild tumult and foul orgies have debased the worshippers to the level of their gods. How different the pure gladness of this feast before the Lord ! No coarse and sensuous delights of passion could live before the pure eyes and perfect witness of God. In His presence must be purity as well as fullness of joy. If this festival teaches us, on the one hand, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of godliness who do not find it full of gladsomeness, it teaches us no less, on the other, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of joy, who look for it anywhere but before the Lord. The ritual of the feast commanded gladness. Joy is a duty to God's children. There were mourners in Israel each year, as the feast came round, who would rather have shrunk into a corner, and let the bright stream of merriment flow past them; but they, too, had to open their heavy hearts, and to feel that, in spite of their private sorrows, they had a share in the national blessings. No grief should unfit us for feeling thankful joy for the great common gift of a common salvation. The sources of religious joy, open to all Christians, are deeper than the fountains of individual sorrow, deep as life though these sometimes seem.

The wilderness life came into view in the feast as a wandering life of privation and change. The booths reminded of frail and shifting dwellings, and so made the contrast with present settled homes the sweeter. They were built, not of such miserable scrub as grew in the desert, and could scarcely throw shade enough to screen a lizard, but of the well-foliaged branches of trees grown by the rivers of water, and so indicated present abundance. The remembrance of privations and trials past, of which the meaning is understood, and the happy results in some degree possessed, is joy. Prosperous men like to talk of their early struggles and poverty. This feast teaches that such remembrance ought always to trace the better present to God, and that memory of conquered sorrows and trials is wholesome only when it is devout, and that the joy of present ease is bracing, not when it is self-sufficient, but when it is thankful. The past, rightly looked at, will yield for us all materials for a feast of tabernacles; and it is rightly looked at only when it is all seen as God's work, and as tending to settled peace and abundance. Therefore the regulations end with that emphatic seal of all His commands, to impress which on our hearts is the purpose of all His dealings with us as with Israel, I am the Lord your God.

We may note our Lord's allusions to the feast. There are probably two, both referring to later additions to the ceremonies. One is in John 7:37. We learn from the Talmud that on each of the seven days (and according to one Rabbi on the eighth also) a priest went down to Siloam and drew water in a golden pitcher, which he brought back amid the blare of trumpets to the altar, and poured into a silver basin while the joyous worshippers chanted the Great Hallel (Psa. 113-118), and thrice waved their palm branches as they sang. We may venture to suppose that this had been done for the last time; that the shout of song had scarcely died away when a stir in the crowd was seen, and a Galilean peasant stood forth, and there, before the priests with their empty vessels, and the hushed multitude, lifted up His voice, so as to be heard by all, and cried, saying: If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. What increased force is given to the extraordinary self-assertion of such words, if we picture this as the occasion of their utterance! Leviticus gives no pre-eminence to any one day, but John's expression, that great day of the feast, may well have been warranted by later developments.

The other allusion is less certain, though it is probable. It is found in the saying at John viii. 12: I am the Light of the world, etc. The Talmud gives a detailed account of the illuminations accompanying the feast. Four great golden lamps were set up in the court, each tended by four young priests. There was not a court in Jerusalem that was not lit up by the lights of the water-drawing. Bands of grave men with flashing torches danced before the people, while Levites accompanied them with harps, psalteries, cymbals, and numberless musical instruments, and another band of Levites standing on the fifteen steps which led to the women's court, chanted the fifteen so-called songs of degrees, and yet others marched through the courts blowing their trumpets as they went. It must have been a wild scene, dangerously approximating to the excitement of heathen nocturnal festivals, and our Lord may well have sought to divert the spectators to higher thoughts. But the existence of the allusion is doubtful.

We have one more allusion to the feast, considered as a prophecy of the true rest and joy in the true Canaan. The same John, who has preserved Christ's references, gives one of his own in Revelation 7:9, when he shows us the great multitude out of every nation with palms in their hands. These are not the Gentile emblems of victory, as they are often taken to be. There are no heathen emblems in the Apocalypse, but all moved within the circle of Jewish types and figures. So we are to think of that crowd of happy palmers as joyously celebrating the true feast of tabernacles in the settled home above, and remembering, with eyes made clear by heaven, the struggles and fleeting sorrows of the wilderness. The emblem sets forth heaven as a festal assembly, as the ingathering of the results of the toils of earth, as settled life after weary pilgrimage, as glad retrospect of the meaning and triumphant possession of the issues of God's patient guidance and wise discipline. Here we dwell in the earthly house of this tabernacle; there, in a building of God ...eternal. Here we are agitated by change, and wearied by the long road; there, changeless but increasing joy will be ours, and the backward look of thankful wonder will enhance the sweetness of the blessed present, and confirm the calm and sure hope of an ever-growing glory stretching shoreless and bright before us.