

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE START FROM SINAI

“And Moses said unto Hobab, We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee good” (Numbers 10:29).

ISRAEL sojourned under the shadow of Sinai for about eleven months - long enough to see the round of the seasons; but the green verdure of the spring and the fading tints of the autumn would leave no trace on the appearance of those vast sandstone rocks. But what a change had been wrought in their condition! They arrived there a fugitive and unorganized people: they left it a mighty nation in battle array, provided with a sacerdotal system which was to last for centuries, as a type of the Priesthood of CHRIST and his saints; and furnished with a code of laws and sanitary enactments which have been a model for the most civilized peoples of the world.

The very appearance of the camp indicated this marvellous change. In the midst the sacred tent with its brooding cloud, and around it the goodly tents of the people, **“as gardens by the riverside, as lign aloes which the Lord had planted, or as cedars beside the waters.”** The priests and Levites pitched immediately around it, in the inner circle; and around them again the twelve great tribes, three towards each point of the compass, guarding the Tabernacle as a most sacred charge, and as the center of their national life.

It was a marvellous spectacle, also, when the cloud was taken up, and the priests, through the silver trumpets, gave the signal that the camps on the east side should begin to lead off the march. Then Judah passed on first, followed by Issachar and Zebulun; and the sons of Gershom and Merari, with their six wagons, bearing the heavier portions of the Tabernacle (Numbers 7:1-9) came next; and after these Reuben, followed by Simeon and Gad; then the long lines of Kohathites, carrying on their shoulders the vessels of the Holy Service; and, lastly, the remaining six tribes in two great divisions, the one led by Ephraim and the other by Dan.

All was beautifully ordered; and though we may not attribute the mighty revolution which had been thus effected to the unaided genius of Moses, we cannot but feel that, as God for the most part gave his teachings, through minds competent to receive and transmit them, so the mental endowments of Moses must have been of no mean order, that he could so readily take, and keep, and transmit the legislation which made Israel a great people. But side by side with this colossal intellect, there was still a weak, human heart, which betrayed itself in the proposal which he made to Hobab.

I. MOSES PROPOSAL

During their stay at Sinai, it is probable that deputations from neighboring tribes visited the people, and amongst them was this chieftain of a tribe closely related to Moses by marriage. Hobab, we are told, was the son of Reuel, the Midianite, Moses father-in-law. Of course, he knew the country well, every foot of it where the springs lay, and the pastures, and the safest, shortest routes; and so Moses approached him with the request that he would go with them, to give them the benefit of his practical knowledge. **“Leave us not, I pray thee; forasmuch as thou knowest how we are to encamp in the wilderness, and thou mayest be to us instead of eyes”** (chap. 10:31).

This request was, obviously, most natural. Moses was a very lonely man, as we have seen; and it was pleasant to have one bound to him by a blood affinity, to unburden himself to, in any special crisis.

At the same time, it was at variance with the general custom, which even then must have commenced strongly to assert itself, of Israelite exclusiveness.

This national characteristic was acutely perceived and adverted to by Balaam, when he said: **“Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations”** (Numbers 23:9).

The Jew made no intermarriages with neighboring peoples on pain of death; he dressed in a special garb, and differed from all other men to the very dressing of his beard. And all this, to keep the people free from the plague-spots of the earth, which, in the expressive language of Leviticus (18:25), was **“vomiting out her inhabitants.”**

Even though we admit that at the heart of the nation there were more tender emotions towards any who were willing to sympathize with its spirit to a Rahab and a Ruth; to the strangers within its gates; and to the Gentiles, who might in after days be attracted by the light which shines from Zion's hill yet it was an unusual thing for the great lawgiver to go out of his way to utter this winsome invitation to a Midianite prince. And there must have been a strong reason that prompted it.

And shall we not find it in that instinctive shrinking of the human heart from the strange and unknown way? It was because Moses had never gone that way before that he was so eager to obtain Hobab's company, and offered as a bribe that **“what goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto thee”** (Numbers 10:32).

How closely home does this phase of thought come to us all! We do not know what may await us at the next turn of the path, or at the top of the pass; what foes may lurk; what emergencies arise; what unexpected barriers arrest our steps. What if we are going into the midst of the foe; or missing a sweet glen with its luscious herbage; or making for a cul-de-sac, through which we shall find no aperture, and must return! And then how shall we survey the place in time to get suitable camping-grounds for the coming hosts!

How well to have a Hobab who knows the ground!

We seek our Hobabs

- In the advice of sage, grey-haired counsellors;
- In the formation of strong, intelligent, and wealthy committees;
- In a careful observance of precedent.

Anything seems better than a simple reliance on an unseen guide. Now, in one sense, there is no harm in this. We have neither right nor need to cut ourselves adrift from others, who have had special experience in some new ground on which we are venturing.

It is a mistake to live a hermit life, thinking out all our own problems, and meeting all our own questions as best we may. Those who do so are apt to become self-opinionated and full of crotchets.

God often speaks to us through our fellows; they are his ministers to us for good, and we do well to listen to our Samuels, our Isaiahs, our Johns. But there is also a great danger that we should put man before God; that we should think more of the glasses than of that which they are intended to reveal; and that we should so cling to Hobab, as to become unmindful of the true Guide and Leader of souls. When we have given Him his right place, He will probably restore our judges as at the first, and our counsellors as at the beginning; but the first necessity is that the eye should be single towards Himself, so that the whole body may be full of light.

II. THE FAILURE OF HOBAB, AND THE DIVINE SUBSTITUTE

The desert chieftain was by no means enamoured of the proposal of his great relative. He had no desire to leave his tribe, his camping-ground, his free, careless existence, to link his fortunes to that great but ill-mannered host.

And other considerations may have weighed with him.

It was only a month before that Aaron and his sons had been set apart for their sacred work, and the fire of God had fallen on their dedicatory sacrifices. The people had seen and shouted; but before evening their joy had been shrouded in sudden mourning.

For some violation of the sacred ritual, or perhaps, as the subsequent prohibition of wine suggests, for personal misconduct whilst engaged in their ministry, the two young priests had been stricken dead, and Aaron forbidden to weep. This must have struck an awful fear through the camp.

Shortly after this, another incident occurred.

The son of an Israelitish woman, whose father was an Egyptian, had blasphemed the holy name of God, and cursed in the midst of conflict with a man of Israel. The blasphemer had been stoned.

The sentence must have seemed severe, though, as God was King, the sin had amounted to high treason; but the swift and awful vengeance may have been another deterrent cause in influencing the decision of Hobab.

The result of it all was that in reply to Moses request, he said bluntly, **“I will not go; but I will depart unto mine own land, and to my kindred”** (ver. 30).

Moses still further urged and entreated him; but whether he succeeded or not is doubtful; though there are some reasons for thinking that the second request prevailed, because the descendants of the Kenite are numbered amongst the chosen people (Judges 1:16).

But it would seem as if his aid were rendered needless by the provision of guidance immediately promised. Up to this moment the position of the Ark had been in the midst of the host, in front of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh; but henceforth it went three days journey in front of the people, **“to seek out a resting-place for them.”**

We are left to conceive of its lonely journey as it went forward, borne by its attendant band of priests and Levites, and perhaps accompanied by a little group of princes and warriors, and specially by the great lawgiver himself. Far behind, at a distance of miles, followed the camp with its tumult, its murmur of many voices, the cries of little children, the measured tramp of armed bands. But none of these intruded on the silence and solemnity which, like majestic angels, passed forward with that courier group accompanying the Ark, over which cherubic forms were bending. That Moses was there is indubitable; for the august sentences are recorded with which he announced its starting forth and its setting down.

In the one case, looking into the thin air, which seemed to him thronged with opposing forces of men and demons, he cried, **“Rise up, O Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee”**; and in the other he cried, **“Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel”** (verses 35 and 36).

Thus God Himself superseded the proposal of Moses by an expedient which more than met their needs. What consolation there is to each of us, in realizing the spiritual truth underlying this historical fact! We have to pass into the untried and unknown, and know not the way we should take. Some have to go alone. Some with the memory of companions that once went at their side, but whom they will see no more in this life. Some, though at present dowered with dear fellow-pilgrims, are apprehensive and fearful as to the route, and what a day may bring forth.

But amid all JESUS is with them, and goes before them, whether for war or rest. He never will forsake nor leave them. And the days as they pass will enable them to say with ever new meaning, **“I know whom I have believed.”**

The Lord JESUS is the true Ark of the Covenant, who has gone before us through the world and death, through the grave and the last rally of the hosts of darkness, to the glory. We have but to follow Him. It is for Him to scatter our enemies, while we stand still and see his salvation. It is for Him to choose our resting-place, while we lie down and prepare ourselves for new obedience.

Let us not anticipate God's guidance or press on Him unduly. "**He that believeth shall not make haste.**"

Let there be an interval between the Ark and your steps, so that you may see, so far as possible, what God would have you do; and then deliberately, thoughtfully, but with fixed determination, follow. He will "**be to us instead of eyes.**"

And oh, the bliss of knowing that Jesus is not "**three days journey**" distant; but near, so that He is ever between us and our foes. Before they can hurt us they must reckon with Him. In Him, too, is rest; so that we may lie under his shadow with great delight, and know that all must be well, since He has chosen our inheritance for us.

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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