

Chapter 21

Israel's Invasion of Canaan under Joshua

MOSES HAVING confided Yahweh's memorial song to the priests for preservation, delivered his parting blessing to the tribes, and ascended "the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah," and there yielded up his life and was buried, "and no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.... And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face in all the signs and the wonders which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt" ([Deut. 34:6-11](#)).

But the work of which Moses was the most signal instrument was yet unfinished. Israel yet sojourned on alien soil, and the land of promise was occupied by seven powerful nations with "cities walled to heaven," the cup of whose iniquity was come to the full. It was needful that these should be destroyed, for such was Yahweh's decree; and it was needful that Israel should be peaceably settled in their stead under the institutions Which had been delivered to Moses on Sinai. How was this to be done in view of all the natural difficulties of the case? A continuance of divine co-operation was needful if the enterprise upon which Israel was embarked were not to end in disaster and ruin to the whole congregation. And this continuance was provided for. Joshua, who had been divinely nominated to the successorship of Moses, and upon whom Moses before his death laid his hands, was thus addressed by Yahweh: "Moses my servant is dead; now, therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, thou and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them.... There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life. *As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee.* I will not fail thee nor forsake thee."

Joshua, having received these and other words of exhortation, bestirred himself executively. The first thing was to arrange for the crossing of the Jordan. On this point Yahweh's directions to him were explicit. As an ordinary operation, it would have been difficult for a miscellaneous multitude to have got over a broad flowing river, especially at a time of year when Jordan overflowed all its banks ([Josh. 3:15](#)). Yahweh determined that this difficulty should be miraculously overcome by stopping the water above the place of passage, and so leaving a channel of the river dry for Israel to get over. The performance of this work of power was associated with faith and obedience on the part of Israel. Israel was to prepare beforehand: the priests, bearing the ark, were to advance to the brink of the swollen river, and step into the water; and the water was to be stopped in its downflowing current as soon as the feet of the priests touched the water. The water would then soon drain away, and the passage would be clear for the crossing of the assembly. It so came out: and the multitude passed over while the priests stood in the centre of the dry channel.

Two things were accomplished by this, both necessary—one more than the other. An obstacle was removed from the path of Israel's work; but more important and essential than that, in the presence of the recent removal of Moses, so long the head of the assembly, Joshua was publicly acknowledged and commended to Israel as their appointed leader. This was Yahweh's own interpretation: "This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, *that they may*

know that as I was with Moses, so will I be with thee” ([Josh. 3:7](#)). This object it realised most effectually, as it was well calculated to do: and that such an object was a necessary one, will be apparent when it is realised that Israel’s willing compliance was necessary for the execution of the work about to be done—the subjugation of the seven nations of Canaan, and the establishment of a divine civilisation through all the land in their place. A third object was accomplished akin to the whole purpose of the Egyptian marvels. This was thus defined when the passage of the Jordan was accomplished. Twelve stones taken from the midst of the Jordan having been pitched in Gilgal, Joshua said: “When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land. For the Lord, your God, dried up the waters of the Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up from before us until we were gone over, THAT ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH MIGHT KNOW THE HAND OF YAHWEH, THAT IT IS MIGHTY; THAT YE MIGHT FEAR YAHWEH YOUR GOD FOR EVER” ([Josh. 4:20–24](#)). This was the great object aimed at in all the miraculous co-operations of Yahweh with Israel. The miracles were no idle display of power. They were not like the prodigies of heathen fable, or the pretended miracles of impostors of every kind and hue. They accomplished very practical objects in a dignified and effectual manner, and they aimed at a result—the result defined in the capital letters above—which such means, and such means alone, were calculated to establish. As we saw in the earlier chapters, God’s existence could only be made palpably apparent in works of intelligently directed power; and only on the undoubted fact of His existence could authority be obtained for the commandments and promises delivered in His name. Israel’s history is a history of this operation among men—with results which have already largely affected the fortunes of mankind, but which are only the foundation for a more effective work in its next stage at the return of Christ to the earth in power and great glory.

A number of other manifestations of the visible hand of God in the days of Joshua will be sufficiently dealt with in a rapid summary. On the re-circumcision of Israel, after crossing the Jordan, the invisible angelic leader of the host showed himself to Joshua ([Jos. 5:13](#)) by which Joshua’s individual faith was strengthened for the difficult enterprise upon which he was entering. Jericho, the first fortified city attacked, was given into Israel’s hands after a brief investment of the most unmilitary character that ever took place. Jehovah directed them to walk round the place, once every day for six days, led by the priests, blowing seven trumpets of rams’ horns, and headed by the armed men; and on the seventh day to do the same, seven times. On the accomplishment of these appointed peregrinations, the walls (undermined by the disintegrating force of the divine will) fell down, and Israel had but to go forward and do the appointed work of destruction on the city. By this, Israel were made to see that God was with them under Joshua, as He had been with them under Moses: while a knell was sent through the hearts of the doomed inhabitants in all the land.

At the next stage of the campaign, Yahweh discomfited a coalition of the Canaanites in the open field at Gibeon, “casting great stones from heaven upon them unto Azekah so that they were more which died from the hailstones than they which the children of Israel slew with the sword” ([Josh. 10:11](#)). On the same occasion, to expedite the work of judgment, the diurnal motion of the earth was arrested at the petition of Joshua, or else the sun’s rays were broken at an increasing angle, with the desired result that “the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day” (verse [13](#)). This is one of the things that in our generation a man is considered foolish for receiving. There is no reason why it should not be

received. It is testified in books proved divine, by Christ's endorsement, and in many other ways. The wise of this world think the thing recorded is an impossibility. What is this but dogmatism? How do they know it is impossible? The fact that they have not seen such a thing is no proof that it never occurred, and cannot occur. It is absurd to maintain that the power that holds the universe in the iron grip of a common law cannot modify the action of that law in detail, if there is a need. It is a question of fact and not of philosophy. Philosophy is shallower than its mediocre worshippers imagine. Even the laws of mathematics only amount to the observation of the ordinary relations of the universe. They can throw no light on the questions of whether other and higher relations are possible. The speculation that the arrest of the earth's revolution would have deranged the movements of the entire universe presupposes that there is no regulating power, which is not to be conceded on the mere strength of the inability of scientific observation to discover such a power. God is undiscoverable to human search, because His greatness is too vast and subtle for human detection, and because He fends off all the prying of curiosity and human presumption, as shown by all the lessons of revelation. Finally, it may be that the earth's revolution was not arrested, but that the sunlight was gradually deflected at a slowly-increasing angle, with the effect of causing the sun to appear to remain stationary. God has many ways of working. It is only a question if He doubled the length of the natural day for the thorough performance of Israel's work. He could do it; we need not trouble about the how; we could not understand much about it if we were told, for even the common light of the sun, and all the ordinary operations of nature, are utterly beyond our comprehension as to the how. We only know them as facts. It is the height of presumption to assert that there are no other facts than we know, or that we are not to receive an authenticated fact if it happens to be outside the narrow circle of our experience. It was also in the nature of miracle to "harden the hearts of the kings, that they should come against Israel in battle, that He might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that He might destroy them, as the Lord commanded Moses" ([Josh. 11:20](#)). This, however, would not be obviously miraculous. The nations would simply exhibit that disposition of reckless disregard, which is by no means an uncommon spectacle among mankind. There would, nevertheless, be a difference. The common indiscretions of men are due to what they are in themselves, while this would be generated by divine influence operating upon them, as came to pass in the case of Israel themselves afterwards in later ages, when, as Josephus testifies, the Jews seemed to act under a divine fury, impelling them to such wild attitudes and courses towards the Romans, as brought on their complete destruction.

The infatuated Canaanites were powerless before the sword of Joshua, and it came to pass in five years or so, that "Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had said unto Moses: and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel, according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war" ([Josh. 11:23](#)). Then another scene presents itself. When Israel settled in the peaceable possession of the land, the visible hand of God was for a while withdrawn, except in so far as the divine presence was in the tabernacle of the testimony at Shiloh, where it was pitched. At first, Israel were obedient to the law which had been given them. So long as Joshua lived, and all the elders who overlived him, "who had seen all the great works of the Lord that he did for Israel," Israel faithfully served the Lord; but when these had passed off the scene, the next generation became restive under divine restraints, and not only disobeyed the commandments that concerned their own ways, but actually discarded the worship of Yahweh, and turned aside to the idolatries practised by the surviving Canaanites whom they had disobediently failed to exterminate. The next exhibition of the visible hand of God was, therefore, one of anger. An angel of Yahweh came to Bochim, and, reminding them of what

Yahweh had done for them, asked them why they had disobeyed His voice in making a league with the idolatrous inhabitants of the land. The angel's words produced a momentary sorrow, which found vent in national tears ([Jud. 2:5](#)). But the tears soon dried away, and the people soon relapsed into their apostate ways, in punishment of which Yahweh raised up trouble for them, and gave them into the hands of their neighbours, who brought them into deep affliction. In their trouble, they returned to Yahweh, and He had mercy upon them, and raised up deliverers. This happened several times. In the course of these deliverances, the visible hand of God was shown several times. The case of Gideon is peculiarly interesting.

In his days, "Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried unto the Lord." The first response to Israel's cry was a message by a prophet, upbraiding them with their disobedience. But next (for Yahweh is merciful) "there came an angel of Yahweh, and sat under an oak," at a spot in Ophrah, where Gideon was threshing wheat in concealment from the Midianites. The angel saluted Gideon with these words: "Yahweh is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." Gideon, not knowing his visitor was an angel, but supposing he was only a man, asked why evil had befallen them if Yahweh were with them, and where all the miracles were, of which their fathers had told them. Whatever answer (not recorded) may or may not have been given to this question, the angel informed Gideon that he (Gideon) was to effect Israel's deliverance from the Midianites. The intimation filled Gideon with surprise, on account of his smallness and family obscurity. The angel rejoined in Yahweh's name, "Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite Midian as one man." Gideon, realising the character of his visitor, desired some evidence of the reality of the matter, that he might be sure his senses did not deceive him: "Shew me a sign that thou talkest with me. Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee and bring forth my present." The angel consented to wait, and Gideon went into his house and got ready a meal of cakes, meat and broth, to set before the angel. On his return with the food prepared, he found the angel sitting in the same position (under the oak). The angel directed him to put the flesh and cakes on an adjacent rock, and to pour out the broth. Gideon did so, and the angel then touched the articles of food with the end of a staff he had in his hand, upon which an instant and complete combustion of the whole occurred. The cakes, flesh, and broth disappeared in flame, and the angel disappeared at the same moment. The object of this wonder was powerfully attained. Gideon, whose faith it was necessary thus to fortify as the instrument of the impending deliverance of Israel, "perceived that he (his visitor) was an angel of Yahweh," and he instantly set to work to take the necessary measures for achieving the work assigned to him. As the result of those measures, "all the Midianites, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east gathered together." Gideon also gathered the Israelites; but his force was so small compared with the mustering masses of the well-appointed enemy, that he naturally felt a twinge of misgiving, and a desire to have some further guarantee that there was no mistake about the divine origin and support of his enterprise. "He said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand as thou hast said, Behold I will put a fleece of wool on the floor: if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand as thou hast said." God is not unreasonable: He desired Gideon to be quite certain that the angelic message was a reality. Therefore He complied with Gideon's request. Early on the morrow Gideon, going out to the fleece, found it drenched with moisture, while the ground on which it lay was dry. He wrung out of it a bowlful of water. But Gideon had again a misgiving. Perhaps some one overheard his prayer, and wet the fleece in water and put it out on the ground. He would like to make assurance doubly sure. If he could have the sign reversed—if the ground might be wetted while the fleece should remain dry (he knew no man could do that)—but he was

afraid to propose it. However, he did propose it. He said to God, “Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once”; and he spoke, and made his proposal. “And God did so that night, for it was dry on the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground” ([Jud. 6:40](#)). There is no more distinct illustration of the object of miracle in all the Scriptures than this. It is either to make His power known, as in the case of the Egyptian plagues, or (as in this) it is to give warranty of the divinity of any work in which God proposes to employ the voluntary co-operation of man.

The next instance of the visible hand of God is similiar. It was about a hundred years later on when, Israel having been a long time in bitter servitude to the Philistines, the time had arrived when God would deliver them. The angel of Yahweh appeared to the wife of Manoah, of the family of the Danites, in Zorah, and informed her of the coming birth of Samson, for this purpose, and of the need for bringing him up as a Nazarite. The woman, without knowing the nature of her visitor, described him to her husband as “a man of God (with) countenance like the countenance of an angel of God—very terrible” ([Jud. 13:6](#)). Manoah entreated Yahweh that the man might return to them to instruct them how to bring up the child that should be born. Manoah’s request was granted, and the angel returned and repeated the message, with instructions how the mother was to treat herself. Manoah, who “*knew not that he was an angel of Yahweh,*” asked the man’s name, and pressed him to accept their hospitality. The angel declined on both points, but consented to remain while Manoah offered an offering to Yahweh. “And Manoah took a kid with a meat offering and offered it upon a rock unto Yahweh. And the angel did wondrously. And Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came to pass when the flame went up toward heaven that *the angel of Yahweh ascended in the flame of the altar....* Then Manoah knew that he was an angel of Yahweh” ([Jud. 13:19–21](#)). Afterwards came the birth of Samson, who was tended, in accordance with the angel’s instructions, with all the scrupulous care which such a prelude to his birth would generate.

When Samson was grown to manhood, he evinced a supernatural strength which enabled him single-handed to work his will upon the enemies of Israel, and finally to deliver his people. The record of his exploits is a record of miracle, in so far as his great strength was miraculous; but in so far as those exploits were natural to great strength, the narrative need not particularly engage our attention. Suffice it, that the whole episode was one of many instrumentalities by which the feeble and struggling nationality of Israel was divinely kept alive in the midst of unfriendly surroundings, which, left to themselves, would have destroyed it from the earth, as in the case of all other nationalities of that time. The miraculous was a necessary element occasionally brought to bear in the process by which this result was achieved. The agencies employed were in the main natural, but, in the right manipulation of these, the visible hand was necessary at certain points, and the time of Samson was one of these.