

Chapter 22

Israel under the Judges

AFTER THE death of Samson, Israel remained for a time in subjection to the Philistines, Eli being high priest at Shiloh and judging the people according to the law. The corruptions of the priesthood were great and grave, and there was a hiding of the divine countenance. We are told ([1 Sam. 3:1](#)) that “the word of the Lord was precious in those days: there was NO OPEN VISION,” or, as it is worded in connection with another time, “there was no answer from God.” The record of such a fact brings very important inferences with it for those who have any doubt of the divinity of the Bible record. Why should it be stated “there was no open vision”? There was no object to be served by such a record. It is a record of that kind that could only come to be made because it was true: and if made because true in this case, would it not have been made in all other cases where true? The theory of unbelief is that there never was open vision; that revelation is a thing that never took place: and if this theory is true, how is it to be explained that the Bible writers discriminate between times when there was no open vision and times when there was? The recognition and acknowledgment of times when revelation was non-occurrent afford a strong guarantee that the same testimony speaks truly when it records revelation as active. Not that the genuineness of revelation depends upon this argument, because we have the things revealed and the many involved circumstances, spread over a great length of time, to which they stand related, and we know that no other view than the genuineness of the revelation will suit or explain the whole case. Nevertheless, it is important to note the powerful significance of a little circumstance like this, that the writer should say, “there was no open vision” at a certain time in Israel’s history. It has its companion in another circumstance of like significance, that the prophets who prophesied foretold a time when there should be no prophecy: a time when men should search in vain the earth around for the word of active revelation ([Micah 3:6, 7](#); [Amos. 8:11, 12](#)). Such a prophecy is inexplicable on any principle, except that the prophets prophesied by the Spirit of God. If the prophets prophesied by enthusiasm, fanaticism, rant, or natural gift, their prediction of the cessation of their own office is the most wonderful and unintelligible of all their prophecies; still more, in view of the fact that it has come true, as all their other prophecies have, in so far as they belong to the past. The idea is inconsistent with all experience. It is excluded by all the facts of the case. It is the wild and absurd attempt of unbelief to get rid of incorrigible truth.

But the time was at hand for the word of revelation again to be heard. Samuel was to be channel of utterance. He was at present a child, who “knew not the Lord”; who had, by providential circumstances, been placed under the care of Eli, to whom he ministered in little offices connected with the tabernacle in Shiloh. “The child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with Yahweh and also with men” ([1 Sam. 2:26](#)). By and by there came from God an intimation of Samuel’s coming elevation, by a man of God with heavy message to Eli: “*Thou honourest thy sons above me.... I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now Yahweh saith, Be it far from me, for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.... Thou shalt see an enemy in my habitation in all the wealth which God shall give Israel, and there shalt not be an old man in*

thine house for ever. And I will raise me up a faithful priest” ([1 Sam. 2:30](#)). Shortly after this, there was a commencement of that divine communication to Samuel which led up to his appointment as the faithful priest. The circumstance is so interesting in itself that it has become famous wherever the Bible is in circulation, and the subject of many a picture. “Samuel was laid down to sleep” (in his place in the environs of the tabernacle) when Yahweh called him by name. Samuel supposed it was Eli that called, and went to him. Eli told him he had not called, and Samuel lay down again. Yahweh called him again. Samuel again went to Eli saying, “Thou didst call me.” Eli said, “I called not my son; lie down again.” Samuel lay down again, but the voice a third time brought him to Eli, and “Eli perceived that Yahweh had called the child.” He directed him to return to his place of rest, and should the voice again call, to respond, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.” Samuel did so, “And Yahweh came and stood” (that is, the angel came and stood), and called again. Samuel answered, and the angel delivered a message concerning the judgment impending over the house of Eli because of their sins. Samuel afterwards “told Eli every whit, and hid nothing.” “And Samuel grew, and Yahweh was with him and did let none of his words fall to the ground.” The fact became known to all connected with the service of the tabernacle, and the knowledge of it spread through those who came to the tabernacle from far and near. “And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba, knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of Yahweh. And Yahweh appeared again in Shiloh, for Yahweh revealed himself to Samuel, in Shiloh, by the word of Yahweh.”

Thus was the hand of God made visible again in the midst of Israel after an interval. It was the visible hand in the form of direct revelation, both by angelic message and the inspiration of the Spirit. The nature and bearings of these modes of divine manifestation have already been considered in chapter three, and therefore may be passed over. We pass on to the incidents that succeeded in the course of Samuel’s life. Some time after his establishment to be a prophet of Yahweh, Israel made an attempt to throw off the Philistine yoke. They raised an army and went against them. The Philistines met them, and defeated them. Israel then called a consultation: “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.” This proposal to fetch the ark was carried out; and there is a good deal of significance in the circumstance, especially when taken in connection with what came of it. What came of it was simply this—no help at all, but utter ruin, for on a renewal of the battle, Israel was completely routed, and the ark itself taken. But how came Israel to have the idea that the ark would save them? There must have been a history of the ark to justify such a thought. We have such a history in the case of Moses and Joshua. Marvels were wrought in connection with it in their day: allow these, and the divinity of all that follows (to the last verse in Revelation) is established. Deny these, and the confidence of Israel that the ark would save them is without explanation. Not only Israel, but the Philistines had great expectations from the ark, which must have had the same substantial foundation. We read, “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. 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. And the Philistines were afraid, and they said, Woe unto us!... who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that smote the Egyptians with the plagues in the wilderness.” Here were the Philistines afraid and Israel exultant, and yet Israel met with a disastrous overthrow in the battle that ensued. Thirty thousand of Israel’s finest troops fell on the field, and the rest fled in utter rout. On this there arises a very obvious reflection. An event like

this would not have been recorded in Israel's history, by any class of recorder, if it had not occurred. The record of such a humiliation is a monument of unvarnished veracity. True, say one and all—true, true. Israel was undoubtedly defeated. The enemy joins in this recognition—the enemy who would have us regard the record as a lying one in the main. He forgets to note that the veracity shown in the record of a humiliating defeat is a guarantee of veracity on the other occasions when it is victory and not defeat that is described—described, too, in terms of equally colourless candour. If the ark was no protection to Israel on this occasion, what about the opening of Jordan's waters, when the feet of the priests bearing the ark touched the brink of the river at the time of the crossing under Joshua? The truth of the no-help narrative is a pledge of the truth of the all-help narrative. If the latter was the result of vain-glorious invention, the same influence at work would have precluded the writing of the former. If superstitious reverence for the ark was the cause of attributing triumph to the ark, the same superstitious reverence would have prevented the record of Israel's defeat and the capture of the ark by the Philistines. The tenor of the narrative itself excludes the idea of invention or gloss. The Philistines regarded the ark superstitiously, and the unenlightened portion of Israel did so, saying, "Let us fetch the ark, that when IT cometh among us, IT may save us." But the writers of all these Scripture narratives attributed nothing to the ark, but all to the power of God present with them. On this very occasion, when trust was placed in the ark, instead of God, whose symbolic presence it was, the narrative shows us the ark a discredited and helpless piece of furniture in the hands of the enemy—a fact inexplicable on any theory except that of simple truth. This conclusion imparts interest to the scenes next exhibited, which show us the ark a plague in the hands of the Philistines. The Philistines brought the ark in triumph to Ashdod, and placed it in the temple of the idol Dagon. "They set it by Dagon," in token of Dagon having got the upper hand of the God of Israel, which they superstitiously considered the ark to be. This was a change in the situation of things, which evoked a corresponding change in the divine attitude. Though God dishonoured the ark when disobedient Israel clung to it idolatrously as a charm against evil, the case was different when it was used to the dishonour of His own name, and the exaltation of a heathen idol. He would not suffer this insult. He pulled the idol from its pedestal during the night, and flung it prostrate before the ark with a violence that broke off its head and hands. In addition to this, he plagued the inhabitants of the place with a painful disease. The inhabitants rightly interpreted the omens, and refused to allow the ark to remain with them. At a public conference, it was decided to send it to Gath. It was sent to Gath, but the Gathites could not do with it any more than the men of Ashdod. The Gathites suffered exactly as the men of Ashdod had done, "and the hand of the Lord was against the city with a very great destruction." It was next sent to Ekron, and the plagues that destroyed Gath followed the ark to Ekron, "and the cry of the city went up to heaven." These journeys of the ark occupied seven months. By the end of that time, the Philistines resolved to send the ark out of the country. It was not without some reluctance that the chiefs consented to this surrender of the important conquest which they had made. It was partly due to the expostulations of the Philistine "priests and diviners." "Wherefore do ye harden your hearts," said they, "as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? When he had wrought wonderfully among them, did they not let the people go and they departed?" (The tradition of the Egyptian plagues had gone far and wide, and lingered among the eastern nations, as is the wont with such matters in the East to the present day). These Philistine priests made a proposal which should satisfy the objectors (if there were any, which there must have been from the nature of their proposal)—satisfy them, that is, as to whether the plagues afflicting them were attributable to the hand of the God of Israel, or were "a chance that had happened unto them."

They proposed that the ark should be placed on a new cart (made for the purpose, and, therefore, without such affinities as might be feared would attach to one that had been in use in some particular way); and that to the new cart should be yoked two cows in milk, whose calves should be taken from them and secured at home; and then to leave the cows undirected to take what route they liked. The route for the land of Israel lay in one direction, and the road towards the calves in the opposite. In the ordinary working of nature, the disposition of the cows in such circumstances would have been to make straight home to their calves. Would they make towards the calves, or would they take the road to the land of Israel? The Philistines agreed to make the result turn on this. "If the cart goeth up by the way of his own coast to Bethshemesh, then Yahweh hath done us this great evil, but if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that smote us; it was a chance that happened unto us." This was certainly a severe test, and it worked out with unmistakable simplicity and directness. "The kine took the straight way to Bethshemesh, and went along the highway, lowing as they went, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left." The fact is, the animals were divinely impelled, and could no more resist the inclination to make towards Bethshemesh, than in the ordinary circumstances they could resist the inclination to go to the calves. Their decided preference for the route contrary to nature satisfied the lords of the Philistines, who followed them to Bethshemesh, and restored the ark to the land of Israel.

Arriving at Bethshemesh, we have another exhibition of the visible hand of God, which unites signally with the features of the case already considered, in establishing the divine character of the whole transaction. The ark was welcome to the inhabitants, as we may well imagine. "They saw the ark, and were rejoiced to see it." An imaginary narrative must needs have taken the form of depicting a degree of blessedness attending the progress of the ark in its own country corresponding with the distress inflicted on the Philistines while an exile from home. Instead of this, on the arrival of the ark in the midst of Israel, "Yahweh smote the men of Bethshemesh, and the people lamented because Yahweh had smitten of them with a great slaughter. And the men of Bethshemesh said, 'Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?' " Why was this? "Because they had looked into the ark of Yahweh" ([1 Sam. 6:19](#)). The cart had come to a stand in the field of Joshua, a Bethshemite; and the people in the surrounding hills and valleys, seeing it, assembled, and made demonstrations of joy, offering burnt offerings and sacrificing sacrifices. But they also pressed familiarly near, and did that which was forbidden by the law. It was an appointment of the law that none but the high priest and sons were to look on the holy things on pain of death ([Num. 4:15, 20](#)). This law was broken at Bethshemesh; and a destructive manifestation of Yahweh's displeasure was the consequence. If this happened then everything is established, from Genesis to Revelation. If it did not happen, it will baffle ingenuity to explain why a narrative so candid, so circumstantial, and so clear, should invent such a thing—a thing so discreditable to the nation for whom the record was written, and throwing so harsh a light (as looked at from a human standpoint) upon their own God. There might be a degree of plausibility in attributing the record of the ark plagues among the Philistines, to the Jewish vanity of the recorder; but what is to be said about the record of destruction and disaster among the Jews themselves on the return of the ark? Such a record is only intelligible on the principle of its being true—a remark which increasing acquaintance with the Bible will endorse with increasing emphasis, concerning every separate part of the Bible and especially concerning the Bible as a whole.

The Israelites of Bethshemesh, like the Philistines of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron, were anxious to be rid of the ark which had been the occasion of such a calamity in their midst. They therefore

sent messengers to the Israelites of Kirjathjearim, apprising them that the Philistines had returned the ark, and asking them to take charge of it. The Israelites of Kirjathjearim complied with their request. They “came and fetched up the ark of the Lord and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill.” Here the ark remained in quietness twenty years. Meanwhile, “all the house of Israel,” becoming aware of their deserted condition, “lamented after Yahweh.” Samuel, responding to this condition of mind, assembled them and pointed out that the first thing to be done was to put away the strange gods which many of them were worshipping in imitation of the heathen. Israel complied with Samuel’s directions and “served Yahweh only.” Shortly afterwards affairs remaining in affliction with them, he summoned them again at Mizpeh, and made them confess their sins, and prayed for them. The Philistines, hearing of this assembly, and fearing a revolt, came up against them to battle. This put the assembled and defenceless multitude in great fear. Samuel prayed yet more earnestly. “Samuel cried unto Yahweh for Israel, and Yahweh heard him.” The result was soon manifest. While the Philistines were on the point of attacking the assembly, “Yahweh thundered with a great thunder upon the Philistines and discomfited them.” The army, thrown into confusion, broke up and fled, and Israel pursued them with results so disastrous to the Philistines, that “the Philistines came no more into the coast of Israel” during the days of Samuel. Thus God can help and did help by the display of His visible hand. If such displays do not take place now, it is because the Gentiles are in the ascendant and His honour in the dust. The day for the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David is near at hand; and when it arrives, there will arrive with it the re-manifestation of the visible hand of Yahweh in the decision of military conflict in a form and on a scale that will eclipse all former puttings forth of His power, and confound mankind to the end of the world.

Samuel judged Israel during the rest of his days in peace, making a yearly circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpeh. When he was old, an immense national deputation waited on him, petitioning him to appoint a king over them, after the manner of the surrounding nations. They had been in the land nearly five hundred years, and had never had a king. This is something worth thinking about. Why hadn’t they a king? If Israel had been a nation of human origin, kingship would certainly have characterised them from their beginning: for it was the universal institution, and Israel always showed an innate propensity to imitate those around them. Egypt, from whence they came, showed them the example: so did the Canaanitish nations whom they subdued on their arrival. So with Assyria and every nation known, and yet for nearly five hundred years, Israel were without a king. It is impossible to account for this apart from the fact exhibited in their Scripture history, and which came out prominently in connection with this deputation to Samuel, that they were a divinely organised and governed nation; that the high priest was but an intermediary between them and God; and that the judge, or governor for the time being, was but an administrator of the law given them by Moses: that, in fact, God was their king. It was the fact that God was their king that made Samuel grieved at their request that they should have a human head like the surrounding nations. While Samuel was chafing under the displeasure excited by their request, “Yahweh said unto Samuel ... they have not rejected *thee*, but *they have rejected ME, that I should not reign over them*. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherewith they have forsaken me and served other gods, so they do also unto thee” ([1 Sam. 8:7–8](#)). Consider the significance of such an incident in the fifth century of Israel’s national existence. Consider the meaning of such an utterance as this, written ineffaceably in the very heart of their national archives. If the incident did not happen, if the utterance be not true, the existence of such a narrative in Israel’s official records is inexplicable. Because, in that case, we should have to assume that Israel’s

transactions and Israel's records of them were all of human nature and origin; and we should in that case have to explain how such a passage of official history came to be inserted in their records by men writing with human aims and human views of things. Judging from the performances of human nature in all other instances—Jew or Gentile, ancient or modern—this would be an impossibility. The mere existence of this history necessitates its truth; and if true, then God brought Israel out of Egypt, and gave them a law that kept them distinct from all nations in political form for five hundred years. In that case, the Bible is established throughout, from Genesis to Revelation.

Yahweh directed Samuel to comply with the wishes of the people, intending through his compliance to lay, afterwards in David, the foundation of His ultimate purpose to set up over Israel and all nations that blessed ruler in the fear of Yahweh, whom in the 2nd Psalm he styles, "My King." Samuel, divinely directed, appointed Saul over them—a king whom Yahweh "gave them in His anger, and took away in His wrath" ([Hos. 13:11](#)). When Saul had been established as king, Samuel, whose end drew near, assembled Israel to bid them farewell, and to deliver a parting reproof. He said, "Behold, I have hearkened unto your voice in all that ye said unto me, and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walketh before you, and I am old and grey headed ... Now, therefore, stand still, that I may reason with you before Yahweh of all the righteous acts of Yahweh which He did to you and to your fathers." Samuel then briefly rehearsed their history from the day of Jacob's descent into Egypt to the time of their asking a king. In the course of his remarks, he then told them, "Your wickedness is great which ye have done in the sight of Yahweh in asking for a king." He proposed to make this manifest before their eyes by the exhibition of the visible hand of God. He said, "Is it not wheat harvest today? (that is, a time in that climate when thunder and rain were out of the course of nature). I will call unto Yahweh, and He will send thunder and rain, that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great." (What public leader, ancient or modern, ever addressed his constituents in such terms? They are only natural to a man who acts by the authority of God.) And Samuel did as he said. He called unto Yahweh, and Yahweh sent the demonstration requested. (It is easy for God but impossible for man to manipulate the elements that go to make the weather.) "Yahweh sent thunder and rain that day": and the people, as was natural, were afraid. They humbled themselves before Samuel, crying, "Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king." Samuel responded comfortingly, yet in words of unflinching faithfulness. He said "Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following Yahweh, but serve Yahweh with all your heart ... for Yahweh will not forsake His people, for His great Name's sake, because it hath pleased Yahweh to make you His people."