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a *Grace Notes* course

## Old Testament History

by Alfred Edersheim

**History 508**

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*Grace Notes*

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## by Alfred Edersheim

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### III\_14 Othniel - Ehud – Shamgar

#### Judges 3:5-31

THE first scene presented in the history of the Judges is that of Israel's intermarriage with the heathen around, and their doing "evil in the sight of Jehovah," forgetting Him, and serving "Baalim and the groves."<sup>1</sup> And the first "judgment" on their apostasy is, that they are "sold" by the Lord into the hand of "Chushan-rishathaim, king of Mesopotamia," or rather of "Aram-naharaim," "the highland by the two streams" (Euphrates and Tigris). Curiously enough, there is an ancient Persian tradition, according to which the monarchs of Iran, who held dominion "by the streams," waged war against Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor. Of their heroes, who are described as Cushan, or from the land of Chusistan (= Scythians, Parthians?), the most notable is Rustan or Rastam, a name evidently akin to Rishathaim.<sup>2</sup> And so ancient heathen records once more throw unexpected light upon the historical narratives of the Old Testament. The oppression had lasted full eight years when Israel "cried"<sup>3</sup> unto Jehovah." The deliverer raised up for them was Othniel, the younger brother of Caleb, whose bravery had formerly gained him the hand of his wife (1:12-15). But his success now was not due to personal prowess.

"The Spirit of Jehovah was"<sup>4</sup> upon him, and he judged Israel, and went out to war." For the first time in the Book of Judges we meet here the

<sup>1</sup> "Baalim and the Astartes" (Ashtaroth or Asheroth).

<sup>2</sup> Jewish tradition and most commentators translate the name: "twofold sin," in supposed allusion to a twofold wrong against Israel. But this is, to say the least, a very strained explanation.

<sup>3</sup> The same word as that used of Israel in Exodus 2:23.

<sup>4</sup> The expression here and in 11:29 is, "was upon" him; in 6:34, it is "clothed him;" in 14:6, 19; 15:14, "came upon" or "lighted upon." The attentive reader will note the important difference of meaning in each of these terms. In the first case there is permanence - at least to carry out a special purpose; in the second, the idea is of surrounding, protecting, or enduing; and, in the third, of suddenness, implying a power, wholly from without, descending unexpectedly at the right moment, and then withdrawn. All have, however, this in common, that the influence comes straight from the Spirit of God.

statement, that "the Spirit of Jehovah" "was upon," or "clothed," or else "came upon" a person.

We naturally connect the expression with what we read of "the manifold gifts of the Spirit" as these are detailed in Isaiah 11:2, which were distributed to each as God pleased, and according to the necessity of the time (1 Corinthians 12:11). But, in thinking of these influences, we ought to bear two things in mind. First: although, in each case, the influence came straight from above - from the Spirit of God - for the accomplishment of a special purpose, it was not necessarily, as under the New Testament dispensation, a sanctifying influence. Secondly: this influence must not be regarded as the same with the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart. This also belongs to the New Testament dispensation. In short, these gifts of the Holy Spirit were miraculous, rather than gracious - like the gifts in the early Church, rather than as "the promise of the Father." In the case of Othniel, however, we note that the Spirit of God "was upon" him, and that, under His influence, "he judged" Israel, even "before he went out to war." And so, while ancient Jewish tradition in all other instances paraphrases the expression, "the Spirit of the Lord," by "the spirit of strength," in the case of Othniel - "the lion of God"<sup>5</sup> - it renders it: "the spirit of prophecy." A war so undertaken must have been successful, and "the land had rest forty years."<sup>6</sup>

The next judgment to rebellious Israel came likewise from the east. Quite on the eastern boundary of Reuben and of Gad lay the land of Moab. One of the chieftains of its tribes, Eglon,<sup>7</sup> now allied himself with the old enemies of Israel, Ammon and Amalek, the former occupying the territory south of Reuben, the latter the districts in the far south-west, below Philistia. Eglon swept

<sup>5</sup> This, or else "my lion is God," is the rendering of the name.

<sup>6</sup> The text does not make it clear whether Othniel died at the end of these forty years; only that he died after the land had obtained rest.

<sup>7</sup> We infer that Eglon was not the king of all Moab, because in that case he would not have exchanged its capital Rabbath Moab for Jericho, and also from the fact that, after the death of Eglon and the destruction of his garrison, the war does not seem to have been carried on by either party.

over the possessions of the trans-Jordanic tribes, crossed the river, and made Jericho, which was probably rebuilt as a town, though not as a fortress, his capital. Having thus cut the land, as it were, into two, and occupied its center and garden, Eglon reduced Israel for eighteen years to servitude. At the end of that period the people once more "cried unto the Lord," and "the Lord raised them up a deliverer," although Holy Scripture does not say that in his mode of deliverance he acted under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord. In the peculiar circumstances of the case this silence is most significant.

The "deliverer" was "Ehud (probably, the praised one), the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man left-handed," or, as the original has it, "shut up" <sup>8</sup> or "weak" "as to his right hand." The conspiracy against Eglon was well planned. Ehud placed himself at the head of a deputation charged to bring Eglon "a present," or, more probably, the regular tribute, as we gather from the similar use of the word in 2 Samuel 8:2, 6; 17:3, 4. But Ehud carried under his raiment a two-edged dagger, a cubit long; according to the LXX translation, about three-quarters of a foot. The tribute was delivered, no doubt with many protestations of humility and allegiance <sup>9</sup> on the part of Ehud, and the deputation graciously dismissed.

It was needful for his plan, and probably in accordance with his wish to involve no one else in the risk, that the rest should be done by Ehud alone. Having seen his fellow- countrymen safely beyond "the quarries that were by Gilgal," or, rather, as the term implies, beyond "the terminal columns" (always objects of idolatrous worship),

<sup>8</sup> Not paralyzed - the term occurs in Psalm 69:15. Cassel has some very curious remarks on this subject. Benjamin means "son of the right hand;" yet it seems a peculiarity of Benjamin to have had left-handed warriors (see Judges 20:16). Similarly we read of certain African races, that they mostly fought with the left hand (Stobaeus, Ecl. phys. i. 52). The Roman hero, who, like Ehud delivered his country of its foreign oppressor, was Scavola - left-handed. The left was in ancient times the place of honor, because it was the weaker and less protected side (Xenoph. Cyrop. viii. 4). Similarly, the sea (in Hebrew, yam) was always regarded as the right side of a country - that of liberty, as it were.

<sup>9</sup> The term used here is the same as ordinarily employed for the offering of gifts and sacrifices to the Deity.

that divided the territory of Eglon from that of Israel, he returned to the king, whose confidence his former appearance had no doubt secured. The narrative here is exceedingly graphic. The king is no longer in the palace where the deputation had been received, but in his "upper chamber of cooling," a delicious summer-retreat built out upon the end of the flat roof. Ehud professes to have "a secret errand," which had brought him back when his companions were gone.

All the more that he does not ask for the withdrawal of the king's attendants does Eglon bid him be "Silent!" in their presence, which, of course, is the signal for their retirement. Alone with the king, Ehud saith, in a manner not uncommon in the East: "I have a message from God unto thee," on which Eglon, in token of reverence, rises from his seat. <sup>10</sup> This is the favorable moment, and, in an instant, Ehud has plunged his dagger up to the hilt into the lower part of his body, with such force that the blade came out behind. Not pausing for a moment, Ehud retires, closes and locks the doors upon the murdered king, and escapes beyond the boundary.

Meanwhile the king's attendants, finding the room locked, have waited, till, at last, they deem it necessary to break open the doors. The horror and confusion consequent upon the discovery of the murder have given Ehud still further time. And now the preconcerted signal is heard. The shrill blast of the trumpet in Seirath (perhaps the "hairy" or "wooded") wakes the echoes of Mount Ephraim. All around from their hiding troop the men of Israel. The first object is to haste back towards Jericho and take the fords of Jordan, so as to allow neither help to come, nor fugitives to escape; the next to destroy the garrison of Moab. In both, Israel are successful, and, "at that time" - of course, not on that precise day - 10,000 of Moab are slain, all of them, as we should say, fine men and brave soldiers. "And the land had rest fourscore years."

<sup>10</sup> It was common in antiquity to rise when receiving a direct message from the king. This is the origin of the liturgical practice of rising when the Gospel is read.

Ancient history, both Greek and Roman, records similar stories,<sup>11</sup> and, where the murderer has been a patriot, elevates him to the highest pinnacle of heroism. Nay, even Christian history records like instances, as in the murder of Henry III and Henry IV of France, the former, even in its details, so like the deed of Ehud. But strikingly different from the toleration, and even commendation, of such deeds by the Papacy is the judgment of the Old Testament. Its silence is here severest condemnation. It needed not cunning and murder to effect deliverance. Not one word of palliation or excuse is said for this deed. It was not under the influence of "the Spirit of Jehovah" that such deliverance was wrought, nor is it said of Ehud, as of Othniel, that he "judged Israel." Even Jewish tradition compares Ehud to the "ravener wolf" which had been the early emblem of his tribe, Benjamin (Genesis 49:27).

It must have been during this period of eighty years' rest,<sup>12</sup> that another danger at least threatened Benjamin. This time it came from an opposite direction - from the west, where the Philistines held possession. "After" Ehud (3:31), that is, after his example, a notable exploit was performed by Shamgar ("the name of a stranger"?). Under the impulse of sudden sacred enthusiasm, he seized, as the first weapon to hand, an ox-goad, commonly used to urge on the oxen in plowing. The weapon is formidable enough, being generally about eight feet long, and six inches round at the handle, which is furnished with an iron horn to loosen the earth off the plough, while the other end is armed with a long iron spike. With this weapon he slew no fewer than 600 Philistines, whom, probably, panic seized on his appearance.<sup>13</sup> The exploit seems to have been solitary, and we read neither of further war, nor yet of Shamgar's rule, only that for the time the danger of a Philistine incursion was averted.

<sup>11</sup> Thucyd. vi. 56; Polyb. v. 81; Plut. Caesar, 86; Curtius, vii. 2, 27; comp. Cassel, u.s.

<sup>12</sup> This view is also taken by Jewish interpreters, though not by Josephus.

<sup>13</sup> Greek legend has a similar story of Lycurgos chasing Dionysos and the Bacchantes with an ox-goad (Il. vi. 135). Israel in Canaan.

### III\_15 The Oppression Of Jabin And Sisera - Deborah And Barak - The Battle Of Taanach - The Song Of Deborah

#### Judges 4 and 5

DARKER and darker are the clouds which gather around Israel, and stranger and more unexpected is the deliverance wrought for them. It had begun with Othniel, truly a "lion of God." But after the "lion of God" came one left-handed, then a woman, then the son of an idolater, and then an outlaw of low birth, as if it were ever to descend lower and lower, till the last stage is reached in the Nazarite, Samson, who, as Nazarite, is the typical representative of Israel's calling and strength, and, as Samson, of Israel's weakness and spiritual adultery. Yet each period and each deliverance has its characteristic features and high points. The narrative opens as if to resume the thread of Israel's continuous history, only temporarily broken by Ehud's life: "And the children of Israel continued to do evil in the eyes of Jehovah - and Ehud was dead." This furnished a long wished-for opportunity.

It had been about a century before when a Jabin ("the prudent" or "understanding," - no doubt the monarch's title, like Pharaoh or Abimelech) had marshaled the chieftains of Northern Palestine against Joshua, and been signally defeated (Joshua 11:1-10). Since then his capital had been restored and his power grown, till now it seemed the fitting moment to recover his ancient empire. As we understand the narrative, the hosts of Jabin had swept down from Hazor in the far north, and occupied the possessions of Naphtali, Zebulun, and Issachar. While Jabin himself continued in his capital, his general, Sisera ("mediation," "lieutenant"?) held the southern boundary of the annexed provinces, making his head-quarters at Harosheth ha Gojim - "the smithy of the nations" - perhaps so called from being the arsenal where his iron war-chariots, armed with scythes, were made. The site of this place is probably somewhere in the neighborhood of Bethshean, which afterwards formed the southernmost point of Galilee. Evidently it must have been south of Mount Tabor, to which Barak afterwards marched from Kedron, in the north of Naphtali. For, irrespective of the utterly helpless state of the country, as

described in Judges 5:6, Sisera would not have allowed Barak to turn his flank or to march on his rear.<sup>14</sup> The occupation of the north of Palestine by Sisera had lasted twenty years. Relief must have seemed well-nigh hopeless. On the one hand, the population was wholly disarmed (Judges 5:8); on the other, Sisera had no less than nine hundred war-chariots - means of attack which Israel most dreaded. But as often before, so now, suffering led Israel to cry unto the Lord - and help was soon at hand.

One of the most painful circumstances in the history of the Judges is the utter silence which all this time seems to envelop Shiloh and its sanctuary. No help comes from the priesthood till quite the close of this period. Far away in Mount Ephraim God raised up a woman, on whom He had poured the spirit of prophecy. It is the first time in this history that we read of the prophetic gift. The sacred text conveys, that she exercised it in strict accordance with the Divine law, for it is significantly added in connection with it, that "she judged Israel at that time." Deborah, "the bee,"<sup>15</sup> is described as a "burning woman."<sup>16</sup> The meeting-place for all in Israel who sought judgment at her hands was between Ramah and Bethel, under a palm-tree,<sup>17</sup> which afterwards bore her name. Thence she sent for Barak ("lightning,") the son of Abinoam ("my father" - God - "is favor"), from the far north, from Kadesh in Naphtali. His ready obedience proved his preparedness. But when Deborah laid on him the

Divine command "gradually to draw"<sup>18</sup> an army of 10,000 men to Mount Tabor, Barak shrank from it, unless Deborah would accompany him.

This evidently proved distrust in the result of the undertaking, which in turn showed that he looked for success to the presence of man, rather than entirely to the power of God. Accordingly, he must learn the folly of attaching value to man; and Deborah predicted, that not Israel's leader, but a woman, wholly unconnected with the battle, would have the real triumph.

Accompanied by Deborah, Barak now returned to Kadesh, whither he summoned the chiefs<sup>19</sup> of Naphtali and Zebulun. All plans being concerted, the combatants converged in small companies, from all roads and directions, "on foot," towards the trysting-place. About six or eight miles east of Nazareth rises abruptly a beautifully-shaped conical mountain, about 1,000 feet high.

This is Mount Tabor ("the height"), its sloping sides covered with trees, and affording from its summit one of the most extensive and beautiful prospects in Palestine. Here the army under Barak and Deborah gathered. Tidings soon reached the head-quarters of Sisera. His chariots could of course only fight to advantage in the valleys, and he naturally marched north-west to the plain of Jezreel or Esdraelon. This has ever been, and will prove in the final contest (Revelation 16:16), the great battle-field of Israel. It was now the first of many times that its fertile soil was to be watered with the blood of men.

Sisera had chosen his position with consummate skill. Marching in almost straight line upon the plain of Megiddo, his army was now posted at its entrance, resting upon the ancient Canaanitish town of Taanach (Judges 5:19, comp. Joshua 12:21). Behind, and at his left flank, were the mountains of Manasseh, before him opened the basin of the valley, merging into the plain of Esdraelon, watered by the Kishon. Into this plain

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I cannot adopt the localization proposed by Dr. Thomson (Land and Book, ch. 29), north of the hills that bound the Plain of Jezreel, although the suggestion is supported by Mr. Grove.

<sup>15</sup> Although there may be differences as to the mode of its derivation, there is none as to the real import of the name.

<sup>16</sup> The Authorized Version translates "the wife of Lapidoth." The latter word means "torches," and the meaning, as brought out by Cassel, seems to be "a woman of a torch-like spirit;" the Hebrew for wife and woman being the same. Jewish tradition has it, that she was the wife of Barak, "lightning," Barak and Lapidoth being, of course, closely connected terms.

<sup>17</sup> The palm-tree was the symbol of Canaan; and the name Phoenician is derived from its Greek equivalent.

<sup>18</sup> This is the meaning of the word, as appears from Exodus 12:21.

<sup>19</sup> This we infer, as it could not have served any purpose to have gathered the tribes themselves so far north, while it would certainly have attracted the attention of the enemy.



must Barak's army descend "on foot," badly armed, without experienced officers, without cavalry or chariots - and here his own 900 war-chariots would operate to best advantage. It was not even like one of those battles in which mountaineers hold their own fastnesses, or swoop down on their enemies in narrow defiles. On the contrary, all seemed to tell against Israel - but this, that God had previously promised to draw Sisera and his army to the river Kishon, and to deliver them into Barak's hand. Then once more did the Lord appear as "a man of war," and fight on the side of His people. It is said: "And Jehovah discomfited," or rather, "threw into confusion, Sisera and all his chariots, and all his host." The expression is the same as when Jehovah fought against Egypt (Exodus 14:25), and again when before Gibeon Joshua bade sun and moon stand still (Joshua 10:10). It indicates the direct interference of the Lord through terrible natural phenomena; (comp. also its use in 2 Samuel 22:15; Psalm 18:14; 144:6). As we gather from Judges 5:20-22, a fearful storm swept down from heaven in face of the advancing army. The battle must have drawn towards Endor, where its fate was finally decided (Psalm 83:9, 10). Presently the war-chariots were thrown into confusion, and instead of being a help became a source of danger. The affrighted horses carried destruction into the ranks of the host. Soon all were involved in a common panic. A scene of wild confusion ensued. It was impossible to retreat, and only in one direction could flight be attempted. And now the waters of Kishon had swollen into a wild torrent which swept away the fugitives! <sup>20</sup>

To escape capture, Sisera leaped from his chariot, and fled on foot northwards towards Hazor. Already he had passed beyond Kadesh, and almost reached safety. There the boundary of Naphtali was marked by what was known as "the oakwood at the twin tents of wandering" (Elon be-Zaananim; comp. Joshua 19:33). Here Heber the Kenite had pitched his tent, having separated from his brethren, who had settled in the extreme south at Arad (Judges 1:16). Living quite on the

boundary of Jabin's dominion, and not being really Israelites, the clan of Heber had been left unmolested and "there was peace between Jabin, king of Hazor, and the house of Heber the Kenite."

Only outward, not real peace! There is something wild and weird about the appearance of these Kenites on the stage of Jewish history. Originally an Arab tribe <sup>21</sup> they retain to the last the fierceness of their race. Though among Israel, they never seem to amalgamate with Israel, and yet they are more keenly Israelitish than any of the chosen race.

In short, these stranger-converts are the most intense in their allegiance to the nation which they have joined, while at the same time they never lose the characteristics of their own race. We mark all this, for example, in the appearance of Jehonadab, the son of Rechab (2 Kings 10:15), and again much later during the troubles that befell Judah in the time of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 35). Jael, "the chamois," the wife of Heber, was among the Kenites what Deborah, the "torch-woman," was in Israel, only with all the characteristics of her race developed to the utmost. At her tent-door she meets the fugitive Sisera. She disarms his suspicions; she invites him to rest and security; she even sacrifices the sacred rights of hospitality to her dark purpose. There is something terrible and yet grand about that fierce woman, to whom every other consideration is as nothing, so that she may avenge Israel and destroy its great enemy. All seems lawful to her in such an undertaking; every means sanctified by the end in view. She has laid the worn warrior to rest; she has given him for refreshment of the best her tent affords. And now, as he lies in heavy sleep, she stealthily withdraws one of the long iron spikes to which the tent-cords are fastened, and with a heavy hammer once, again, and yet a third time, strikes it into his temples. It is not long before Barak - a "lightning" in pursuit as in battle - has reached the spot. Jael lifts aside the tent-curtain and shows him the gory corpse. In silence Barak turns from the terrible spectacle. But the power of Jabin and his dominion are henceforth forever destroyed.

<sup>20</sup> The battle must be read in connection with the song of Deborah (Judges 5), which furnishes its details.

<sup>21</sup> They were Midianites, descendants of Abraham by Keturah - undoubtedly a Bedouin tribe.

There is, as it seems to us, not a word in Scripture to express its approbation of so horrible a deed of deceit and violence - no, not even in the praise which Deborah in her song bestows upon Jael. It was not like Deborah's war, nor like Barak's battle, but strictly Kenite. Her allegiance to the cause of the people of God, her courage, her zeal, were Israelitish; their fanatical, wild, unscrupulous manifestation belonged to the race from which she had sprung, to the traditions amidst which she had been nurtured, and to the fiery blood which coursed in her veins - they were not of God nor of His word, but of her time and race. Heathen history tells of similar deeds, and records them with highest praise; Scripture with solemn silence. Yet even so Jehovah reigneth, and the fierce Arab was the sword in His hand!

1. "Then sang Deborah and Barak on that day, saying:
2. For the loose flowing of the long hair,<sup>22</sup> For the free dedication of the people, Praise ye Jehovah!
3. Hear O kings, hearken O rulers,<sup>23</sup> I - to Jehovah will I sing, Will psalmody<sup>24</sup> to Jehovah, the God of Israel!
4. Jehovah, when Thou didst come forth from Seir, When Thou marchdest from out the fields of Edom, The earth trembled, also the heavens dropped, Even the clouds dropped water.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The language is extremely difficult, and the most different interpretations have been proposed. We have adopted the ingenious view of Cassel, which represents Israel, as it were, taking the Nazarite vow for God and against His enemies.

<sup>23</sup> Comp. Psalm 2:2 - these, of course, are kings and princes of the heathen.

<sup>24</sup> Always used of sacred song with instrumental accompaniment.

<sup>25</sup> Deborah begins with the record of God's great doings of old in the wilderness, the later parallel being in Psalm 68:7, 8. Comp. here especially Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 33:2, and for the expressions, Psalm 47:5; 114:7; Isaiah 63:12; 64:2; Jeremiah 10:10; Joel 3:16.

5. The mountains quaked before Jehovah - This Sinai before Jehovah, the God of Israel.<sup>26</sup>
6. In the days of Shamgar, the son of Anath, In the days of Jael,<sup>27</sup> the highways ceased,<sup>28</sup> And they who went on paths, went by roundabout ways.
7. Deserted was the open country<sup>29</sup> in Israel - deserted - Till I arose, Deborah, I arose a mother in Israel!
8. Chose they new gods - Then war at the gates - If shield was seen or spear Among forty thousand in Israel!<sup>30</sup>
9. My heart towards the rulers of Israel, Those who freely vowed (dedicated) themselves among the people. Praise ye Jehovah!
10. Ye that ride on white<sup>31</sup> she-asses, Ye that sit on coverings<sup>32</sup> Ye that walk by the way - consider!<sup>33</sup>
11. From the noise (sound, voice) of the archers between the draw-wells<sup>34</sup> - There they rehearse the righteous deeds<sup>35</sup> of Jehovah, The mighty

<sup>26</sup> Here the first stanza of the first division of this song ends. There are in all three sections, each of three stanzas. The reader will have no difficulty in marking the progress of thought.

<sup>27</sup> Cassel, as I think fancifully, regards "Jael," not as referring to the wife of Heber, but as a poetic name for Shamgar or Ehud.

<sup>28</sup> Or were deserted.

<sup>29</sup> That is, the country with open villages and towns, in opposition to walled cities.

<sup>30</sup> That is, "shield and spear were not seen." So low had the fortunes of Israel fallen before their enemies.

<sup>31</sup> The expression is not without difficulty; Cassel would render it by pack-saddled.

<sup>32</sup> The reference here is evidently to abiding in tents, whether the word be rendered mats, carpets, garments, or coverings.

<sup>33</sup> Viz., the contrast between the insecurity of former times and the present happy condition. Cassel happily points out that, as in Psalm 1:1, the reference is to the three classes: those who sit, who stand, and who go.

<sup>34</sup> The language is very difficult. To us it seems to indicate the contrast between the noise of battle and the peaceful scene of the maidens, who can now go without fear outside the gates to draw water.

<sup>35</sup> The righteous deeds are here the mighty deeds, and so we have rendered it in the next line.



deeds of His open country <sup>36</sup> in Israel - Then went down to the city gates the people of Jehovah!

## PART II

12. Awake, awake, Deborah, Awake, awake - utter the song; Arise, Barak, and lead captive thy captives, son of Abinoam!

13. Then went down a remnant of the mighty, of the people, Jehovah went down for me among the heroes!

14. From out of Ephraim - his root in Amalek; <sup>37</sup>  
After thee: Benjamin among thy nations <sup>38</sup> - From Machir <sup>39</sup> come down they who bear rule, From Zebulon who draw out with the staff of the writer. <sup>40</sup>

15. But the princes of Issachar were with Deborah - And Issachar the foundation <sup>41</sup> of Barak, Pouring on foot into the valley! By the brooks of Reuben great resolves of heart <sup>42</sup>

16. Why abodest thou among the folds To hear the flutes of the flocks? By the brooks of Reuben great ponderings of heart!

17. Gilead dwells on the other side Jordan! <sup>43</sup> And Dan, who pass upon ships? Asher sitteth by the sea-shore, And by its bays resteth!.

<sup>36</sup> Seems to mean: His mighty deeds in reference to, or as seen in the villages and unwallled towns of Israel.

<sup>37</sup> There seems an allusion here to the ancient glory of the tribes: Ephraim, from which sprang Joshua, the conqueror of Amalek.

<sup>38</sup> "Nations," here equivalent to heathens, and the reference is to Ehud.

<sup>39</sup> Machir is Manasseh, Genesis 50:23.

<sup>40</sup> These two tribes then distinguished for peaceful avocations. Such was the former glory of Israel. In the next stanza Deborah proceeds to sketch the present state of the tribes.

<sup>41</sup> In his territory the battle was fought - the rendering "foundation" is after the Jewish commentaries.

<sup>42</sup> Here begins the censure of the tribes who should have taken part.

<sup>43</sup> Such is its plea.

18. Zebulon a people that jeoparded its life unto death, And Naphtali on the heights of the field!

19. Came kings - warred - Then warred the kings of Canaan, In Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo - Spoil of silver took they none!

20. From heaven warred, The stars out of their paths warred against Sisera!

21. The river Kishon swept them away, River of encounters, <sup>44</sup> River Kishon! March forth my soul in strength!

22. Then clattered the hoofs of the horse From the racing and chasing of his mighty.

23. Curse ye Meroz, <sup>45</sup> saith the Angel of Jehovah, Curse ye - cursed its inhabitants, For they came not to the help of Jehovah, The help of Jehovah against the mighty!

## PART III.

24. Blessed among women, Jael, The wife of Heber, the Kenite, Among women in the tent <sup>46</sup> blessed!

25. Water asked he - milk she gave, In the cup of the noble <sup>47</sup> brought she thickened milk <sup>48</sup>

26 Her hand to the tent-nail sendeth forth, And her right hand to the ponderous hammer of workmen - Hammers she Sisera, shivers <sup>49</sup> his head, Cleaves and pierces his temple!

<sup>44</sup> The common rendering is "ancient river;" Cassel translates "river of help." I prefer "battle," the root being: to meet or to encounter, obviam ire. Kishon, "the winding one." Ancient Jewish tradition has it that this battle was fought on the Passover, which is not unlikely, as the Kishon is swollen during the rainy season, but quite dry in summer.

<sup>45</sup> Probably a place near Endor, whose inhabitants joined not in the pursuit of Sisera.

<sup>46</sup> Such women as live in tents - pastoral and nomadic, as all the Kenites were.

<sup>47</sup> The cup used on state occasions, as it were.

<sup>48</sup> Cream, or thickened milk (it is a mistake of interpreters to suppose that it was thickened to make him intoxicated); or else camel's milk.

<sup>49</sup> We almost seem to hear the three strokes of the hammer by which her bloody work is done.

27. Between her feet he winds - he falls - he lies -  
Between her feet he winds - he falls - Where he  
winds there he falls desolated! <sup>50</sup>

28. High up through the window spies - anxiously  
she calls, The mother of Sisera - cut through the  
lattice: 'Why tarrieth his chariot to come, Why  
linger the steps of his war-chariots?'

29. The wise of her princesses answer - Nay, she  
herself answers her words to herself: 'Are they not  
finding - dividing spoil -

30. A maiden-twain maidens to the head of the  
warriors - Spoil of dyed garments to Sisera, Spoil  
of dyed garments - many-colored kerchief - A  
dyed garment, twain many-colored kerchiefs for  
the necks of the prey! <sup>51</sup>

31. So perish all Thine enemies, Jehovah - And let  
those who love Him be like the going forth of the  
sun in his strength! And the land had rest forty  
years.

### III\_16 Midianitish Oppression - The Calling Of Gideon - Judgment Begins At The House Of God - The Holy War - The Night-Battle Of Moreh

#### Judges 6:1 to 7:22

WITH the calling of Gideon commences the  
second period in the history of the Judges. It lasted  
altogether less than a century. During its course  
events were rapidly hastening towards the final  
crisis. Each narrative is given with full details, so  
as to exhibit the peculiarity of God's dealings in  
every instance, the growing apostasy of Israel, and  
the inherent unfitness even of its best  
representatives to work real deliverance.

The narrative opens, as those before, with a record  
of the renewed idolatry of Israel. Judgment came  
in this instance through the Midianites, with whom  
the Amalekites and other "children of the east"  
seem to have combined. It was two hundred years  
since Israel had avenged itself on Midian

<sup>50</sup> The description of the effects corresponding to the three  
strokes of the hammer.

<sup>51</sup> With each captive maiden the warrior would also receive  
one dyed garment and twain many-colored kerchiefs. In the  
arduous task of translating this, one of the most difficult  
passages of Scripture, Cassel's Commentary has been of  
greatest use, although its suggestions are too often fanciful.

(Numbers 31:3-11). And now once more, from the  
far east, these wild nomads swept, like the modern  
Bedawin, across Jordan, settled in the plain of  
Jezreel, and swooped down as far as Gaza in the  
distant south-west. Theirs was not a permanent  
occupation of the land, but a continued desolation.  
No sooner did the golden harvest stand in the  
field, or was stored into garners, than they  
unexpectedly arrived. Like the plague of locusts,  
they left nothing behind. What they could not  
carry away as spoil, they destroyed. Such was the  
feeling of insecurity to life and property, that the  
people made them "mountain-dens, and caves, and  
strongholds," where to seek safety for themselves  
and their possession. Seven years had this terrible  
scourge impoverished the land, when the people  
once more bethought themselves of Jehovah, the  
God of their fathers, and cried unto Him. This  
time, however, before granting deliverance, the  
Lord sent a prophet to bring Israel to a knowledge  
of their guilt as the source of their misery. The call  
to repentance was speedily followed by help.

1. The calling of Gideon. - Far away on the south-  
western border of Manasseh, close by the  
boundary of Ephraim, was the little township of  
Ophrah, <sup>52</sup> belonging to the family of Abiezer <sup>53</sup>  
(Joshua 17:2; 1 Chronicles 7:18), apparently one  
of the smallest clans in Manasseh (Judges 6:15).  
Its head or chief was Joash - "Jehovah strength,"  
or "firmness."

As such he was lord of Ophrah. In such names the  
ancient spiritual faith of Israel seems still to linger  
amidst the decay around. And now, under the great  
oak by Ophrah, suddenly appeared a heavenly  
stranger. It was the Angel of Jehovah, the Angel of  
the Covenant, Who in similar garb had visited  
Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18). Only there He  
had come, in view of the judgment about to burst,  
to confirm Abraham's faith - to enter into  
fellowship with him, while here the object was to  
call forth faith, and to prove that the Lord was  
ready to receive the vows and prayers of His  
people, if they but turned to Him in the appointed  
way. This may also explain, why in the one case

<sup>52</sup> Ophrah means township. This Ophrah is to be  
distinguished from that in Benjamin.

<sup>53</sup>

the heavenly visitor joined in the meal,<sup>54</sup> while in the other fire from heaven consumed the offering (comp. Judges 13:16; 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Chronicles 7:1).

Close by the oak was the winepress of Joash, and there his son Gideon<sup>55</sup> was beating out the wheat with a stick. Alike the place and the manner of threshing were quite unusual, and only accounted for by the felt need for secrecy, and the constant apprehension that at an unexpected moment some wild band of Midianites might swoop down upon him. If, as we gather from the Angel's salutation, Gideon was a strong hero, and if, as we infer from his reply, remembrances and thoughts of the former deeds of Jehovah for Israel had burned deep into his heart, we can understand how the humiliating circumstances under which he was working in his father's God-given possession, in one of the remotest corners of the land, must have filled his soul with sadness and longing.

It is when "the strong warrior" is at the lowest, that the Messenger of the Covenant suddenly appears before him. Not only the brightness of His face and form, but the tone in which He spake, and still more His words, at once struck the deepest chords in Gideon's heart. "Jehovah with thee, mighty hero!" Then the speaker was one of the few who looked unto Jehovah as the help-giver; and he expressed alike belief and trust! And was there not in that appellation "mighty warrior" a sound like the echo of national expectations - like a call to arms? One thing at least the Angel immediately gained. It was - what the Angel of His Presence always first gains - the confidence of Gideon's heart. To the unknown stranger he pours forth his inmost doubts, sorrows, and fears. It is not that he is ignorant of Jehovah's past dealings, nor that he questions His present power, but that he believes that, if Jehovah had not withdrawn from Israel, their present calamities could not have rested upon

them. The conclusion was right and true, so far as it went; for Israel's prosperity or sufferings depended on the presence or the absence of Jehovah. Thus Gideon's was in truth a confession of Israel's sin, and of Jehovah's justice. It was the beginning of repentance. But Gideon had yet to learn another truth - that Jehovah would turn from His anger, if Israel only turned to Him; and yet another lesson for himself: to put personal trust in the promise of God, based as it was on His covenant of love, and that whether the outward means to be employed seemed adequate or not.

But Gideon was prepared to learn all this; and, as always, gradually did the Lord teach His servant, both by word, and by the sight with which He confirmed it. The reply of the Angel could leave no doubt on the mind of Gideon that a heavenly messenger was before him, Who promised that through him Israel should be saved, and that simply because He sent him. It is not necessary to suppose that Gideon understood that this messenger from heaven was the Angel of the Covenant. On the contrary, the revelation was very gradual. Nor do the questions of Gideon seem strange - for such they are rather than doubts. Looking around at his tribe, at his clan, and at his own position in it, help through him seemed most unlikely, and, if we realize all the circumstances, was so. Only one conclusive answer could be returned to all this: "I shall be with thee." The sole doubt now left was: Who was this great I AM? - and this Gideon proposed to solve by "asking for a sign," yet not a sign to his unbelief, but one connected with worship and with sacrifice. Jehovah granted it. As when Moses sought to know God, He revealed not His being but His character and His ways (Exodus 33:18; 34:6), so now He revealed to Gideon not only Who had spoken to him, but also that His "Name" was "Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin."

It would be almost fatal to the proper spiritual understanding of this, as of other Biblical narratives, if we were to transport into it our present knowledge, ideas, and views. Remembering the circumstances of the nation, of

<sup>54</sup> The Targum puts it: "they seemed to eat," and Cassel argues that, as theirs was not real humanity, neither was their eating. This, of course, is quite different from the eating on the part of our Lord, which was real - since His humanity and His body were real and true.

<sup>55</sup> "One who cuts down," a warrior.

Gideon, and of Israel; remembering also the stage of spiritual knowledge attainable at that period, and the difficulty of feeling really sure Who the speaker was, we can understand Gideon's request (6:1-17): "Work for me a sign that THOU (art He) Who art speaking with me." It is difficult to imagine what special sign Gideon was expecting. Probably he had formed no definite idea. Suffice it, he would bring a sacrificial gift; the rest he would leave to Him. And he brought of the best. It was a kid of the goats, while for the "cakes," to be offered with it, he took a whole ephah of flour, that is, far more than was ordinarily used. But he does all the ministry himself; for no one must know of it. To dispense with assistance, he puts the meat and the cakes in the "bread-basket," "and the broth in a pot." Directed by the Angel, he spreads his offering on a rock.

Then the Angel touches it with the end of His staff; fire leaps out of the rock and consumes the sacrifices; and the Angel has vanished out of his sight. There was in this both a complete answer to all Gideon's questions, and also deep symbolic teaching. But a fresh fear now fills Gideon's heart. Can one like him, who has seen God, live? To this also Jehovah gives an answer, and that for all times: "Peace to thee - fear not - thou shalt not die!" And in perpetual remembrance thereof - not for future worship - Gideon built an altar there, <sup>56</sup> and attached to it the name, "Jehovah-Peace!"

2. One part was finished, but another had to begin. Jehovah had called - would Gideon be ready to obey? For judgment must now begin at the house of God. No one is fit for His work in the world till he has begun it in himself and in his own house, and put away all sin and rebellion, however hard the task. It was night when the command of Jehovah came. This time there was neither hesitation nor secrecy about Gideon's procedure. He obeyed God's directions literally and immediately. Taking ten of his servants, he first threw down the altar of Baal, and cut down the

Asherah - the vile symbol of the vile service of Astarte - that was upon it. <sup>57</sup>

One altar was destroyed, but another had to be raised. For, the altar of Jehovah could not be reared till that of Baal had been cast down. It was now built, and that not in some secret hiding-place, but on "the top of this defense" - either on the top of the hill on which the fort stood, or perhaps above the place where the people were wont to seek shelter from the Midianites. Upon this altar Gideon offered his father's "second bullock of seven years old" - the age being symbolical of the time of Midian's oppression - at the same time using the wood of the Asherah in the burnt-sacrifice. Such a reformation could not, and was not intended to be hidden. The Baal's altar and its Asherah were indeed Joash's, but only as chief of the clan. And when on the following morning the Abiezrites clamored for the death of the supposed blasphemer, Joash, whose courage and faith seem to have been re-awakened by the bold deed of his son, convinced his clan of the folly of their idolatry by an unanswerable argument, drawn from their own conduct. "What!" he exclaimed, in seeming condemnation, "will ye strive for Baal? Or will ye save him? He that will strive for him let him die until the morrow! <sup>58</sup> If he be a god, let him strive for himself, because he has thrown down his altar. And they called him on that day Jerubbaal <sup>59</sup> ('let Baal strive'), that is to say, Let the Baal strive with him, because he has thrown down his altar."

3. The Holy War. - Gideon had now purified himself and his house, and become ready for the work of the Lord. And yet another important result had been secured. The test to which Baal had been put had proved his impotence. Idolatry had

<sup>57</sup> The two were very generally connected, and formed the grossest contrast to the pure service of Jehovah.

<sup>58</sup> That is, if any should seek to vindicate Baal today let him die; wait till tomorrow to give him time!

<sup>59</sup> In 2 Samuel 11:21 he is called Jerubbesheth - besheth, "shame," being an opprobrious name instead of Baal. May this throw any light on the names of Ishbosheth and Mephibosheth? In 1 Chronicles 8:33, 9:39, at least Ishbosheth is called Ish-baal, while in 1 Chronicles 8:34 we have Meribbaal ("strife of," or else "against Baal") instead of Mephibosheth ("glory" or "utterance" of Baal).

<sup>56</sup> The added notice as to its continuance at the time of the writer throws light upon the date of the authorship of the book.



received a heavy blow throughout the land. In Ophrah at least the worship of Jehovah was now alone professed. Moreover, the whole clan Abiezer, and, beyond it, all who had heard of Gideon's deed, perpetuated even in his name, were prepared to look to him as their leader. The occasion for it soon came. Once more the Midianitish Bedawin had swarmed across Jordan; once more their tents covered the plain of Jezreel. Now or never - now, before their destructive raids once more began, or else never under Gideon - must Israel arise! Yet not of his own purpose did he move. In the deeply expressive language of Scripture: "The Spirit of Jehovah clothed Gideon," like a garment round about, or rather like an armor. Only after that he blew the trumpet of alarm. First, his own clan Abiezer "was called after him." Next, swift messengers bore the tidings all through Manasseh, and that tribe gathered. Other messengers hastened along the coast (to avoid the Midianites) through Asher northwards to Zebulun and Naphtali, and they as well as Asher, which formerly had not fought with Barak, obeyed the summons.

All was ready - yet one thing more did Gideon seek. It was not from unbelief, nor yet in weakness of faith, that Gideon asked a sign from the Lord, or rather a token, a pledge of His presence. Those hours in the history of God's heroes, when, on the eve of a grand deed of the sublimest faith, the spirit wrestles with the flesh, are holy seasons, to which the superficial criticism of a glib profession, that has never borne the strain of utmost trial, cannot be applied without gross presumption. When in such hours the soul in its agony is seen to cast its burden upon the Lord, we feel that we stand on holy ground. It is like a stately ship in a terrific gale, every beam and timber strained to the utmost, but righting itself at last, and safely reaching port. Or rather it is like a close following of Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane - with its agony, its prayer, and its victory. In substance, though not in its circumstances, it was the same struggle as that which was waged in the night when Jacob prayed: "I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me;" the same as when, many centuries afterwards, the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Art Thou He, or do we wait for another?"

The "sign" was of Gideon's own choosing, but graciously accorded him by God. It was twofold. On the first night the fleece of wool spread on the ground it was to be full of dew, but the ground all around dry. This, however, might still admit of doubt, since a fleece would naturally attract the dew. Accordingly, the next night the sign was reversed, and the fleece alone remained dry, while the ground all around was wet with dew. The symbolical meaning of the sign is plain. Israel was like that fleece of wool, spread on the wide extent of the nations. But, whereas all the ground around was dry, Israel was filled with the dew, as symbol of the Divine blessing (Genesis 27:28; Deuteronomy 33:13; Proverbs 19:12; Isaiah 26:19; Hosea 14:5; Micah 5:7.). And the second sign meant, that it was equally of God, when, during Israel's apostasy, the ground all around was wet, and the fleece of Jehovah's flock alone left dry.

4. The battle: "For Jehovah and for Gideon!" - The faith which had made such trial of God was to be put to the severest trial. Israel's camp was pitched on the height; probably on a crest of Mount Gilboa, which seems to have borne the name of Gilead. At its foot rose "the spring Harod" - probably the same which now bears the name Jalood. Beyond it was the hill Moreh (from the verb "to indicate," "to direct"), and north of it, in the valley, <sup>60</sup> lay the camp of Midian, 135,000 strong (Judges 8:10), whereas the number of Israel amounted to only 22,000. But even so they were too many - at least for Jehovah "to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." In accordance with a previous Divine direction (Deuteronomy 20:8), proclamation was made for all who were afraid, to "turn and wind about" <sup>61</sup> from Mount Gilead.

Still, Gideon must have been surprised, when, in consequence, he found himself left with only 10,000 men. But even these were too many. To "purify them" (as by refining - for such is the meaning of the word), Gideon was now to bring

<sup>60</sup> "And they camped upon the spring Harod, and the camp of Midian was to him from the north, from the height of Moreh in the valley" (Judges 7:1).

<sup>61</sup> So literally; possibly referring to circuitous routes.

them down to the spring Harod, where those who were to go to battle would be separated from the rest. All who lapped the water with the tongue out of their hands (out of the hollow hand), as a dog lappeth water, were to go with Gideon, the rest to return, each to his own place. Only three hundred were now left, and with these God declared He would save, and deliver the Midianites into Gideon's hand. If we ask about the rationale of this means of distinction, we conclude, of course, that it indicated the bravest and most ardent warriors, who would not stoop to kneel, but hastily quenched their thirst out of the hollow of their hands, in order to hasten to battle. But Jewish tradition assigns another and deeper meaning to it. It declares that the practice of kneeling was characteristic of the service of Baal, and hence that kneeling down to drink when exhausted betrayed the habit of idolaters. Thus the three hundred would represent those in the host of Israel - "all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal" (1 Kings 19:18).<sup>62</sup> They who had been selected now "took victuals from the people<sup>63</sup> in their hands, and the trumpets" - the rest were sent away.

That night the small company of Israel occupied an advanced position on the brow of the steep mountain, that overhangs the valley of Jezreel. Effectually concealed, probably by the shelter of wood or vineyards, the vast straggling camp of Midian spread right beneath them. That night came the Divine command to Gideon to go down to the camp, for God had given it into his hand. And yet, alike in condescension to Gideon's weakness, and to show how thoroughly the Lord had prepared the victory, He first allowed him to ascertain for himself the state of matters in the camp of Midian. Quietly Gideon and his page Phurah ("the branch") crept from rock to rock,

<sup>62</sup> Cassel attempts to find a special meaning in the comparison: "as a dog licketh," as referring to a kind of dog (of which the ancients and the Talmud speak), which was wont, when the crocodile was asleep, to throw itself into its gullet and to kill it.

<sup>63</sup> This seems to be the real meaning of Judges 7:8, whether or not it be deemed needful to emendate the text.

over where the last patrol of the advance-guard<sup>64</sup> kept watch around the camp-fire.

Here they overheard the tale of a strange dream. Alike the dream and its interpretation are peculiarly Eastern and in character. Both would make the deepest impression on those sons of the desert, and, communicated to the next patrol, as the first watch was relieved by the second, must have prepared for that panic which, commencing with the advance-guard, was so soon to spread through the whole camp of Midian. The dream was simply this: "Behold, a loaf of barley-bread rolled itself into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent (the principal one, that of the general), and struck it, and it fell, and it turned from above<sup>65</sup> and it was fallen!" To which his neighbor (comrade) replied: "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel; given hath the God into his hand Midian and all his camp." So wondrous seemed the dream and its interpretation, that, when Gideon and his armor-bearer heard it, they bent in silent worship, assuredly knowing that God had given them the victory. In truth, with the tale of this dream the miracle of the victory had already begun.

There is such pictorialness and such truthfulness of detail about all this narrative, that we almost seem to see the events enacted before us. That camp of Bedouins, like locusts in numbers - with their wives, children, and camels, like the sand by the seashore; then the watchfire by which alone they keep guard; the talk over the camp-fire; the dream so peculiarly Bedouin, and its rapid interpretation, no less characteristically Eastern - and yet the while all ordered and arranged of God - while that small band of three hundred Israelites lies concealed on the neighboring height, and Gideon and his "young man," are close by, behind the great shadows which the watch-fire casts, hidden perhaps in the long grass! Then the dream itself! It was all quite natural, and yet most unnatural. The Midianites - especially the advanced-guard, that lay nearest to Israel, could not be ignorant that Gideon and his host occupied

<sup>64</sup> Judges 7:11: "The end of the advance-guard;" the latter seems to be the meaning of Cfhamushim. See Joshua 1:14.

<sup>65</sup> So that the upper part was downwards.



yonder height. Fame would spread, probably exaggerate, the "mighty valor" of Gideon, and the valor of his followers - while the diminished numbers of Gideon would, of course, not be known, as they had retired by circuitous routes. Moreover, the Midianites must also have been aware that this was to Israel a religious war; nor can they have been ignorant of the might of Jehovah.

The fears which all this inspired appear in the interpretation of the dream. But the dream itself was the result of the same feelings. Barley-bread was deemed the poorest food; yet a loaf of this despised provision of slaves rolls itself into Midian's camp, strikes the tent of the leader, turns it upside down, and it falls! Here is a dream-picture of Israel and its victory - all quite natural, yet marvelously dreamed and told just at that particular time. And still, often do dreams, excited by natural causes, link themselves, in God's appointment, to thoughts that come supernaturally.. We have throughout this history marked how often what seemed to happen quite naturally, was used by God miraculously, and how the supernatural linked itself to what, more or less, had its counterpart in the ordinary course of nature. It had been so in the history of Moses and of Israel; it was so when Joshua defeated the allied kings before Gibeon, and when Barak encountered the invincible chariots of Sisera. In each case it was the Lord, Who gave miraculous victory through terrific tempest. So also it had been in an hour, when thoughts of Israel's past and present must have burned deepest into the heart of Gideon, that the Angel stood before him, even as it was by means most natural that God separated from the rest the three hundred who had not bent the knee to Baal, and who alone were to go to the holy war. Thoughts like these do not detract from, they only make the supernatural the more marvelous. Yet they seem also to bring it nearer to us, till we feel ourselves likewise within its circle, and can realize that even our "daily bread" comes to us straight from heaven! Gideon and Phurah have returned to the waiting host. In whispered words he has told what they had witnessed. And now the three hundred are divided into three companies. It is not the naked sword they grasp, for in that night not Israel, but Jehovah is to fight. In one hand each

man holds a trumpet, in the other, concealed in a pitcher, a burning torch. Each is to do exactly as the leader. Silently they creep round to three different parts of Midian's camp. The guard has just been relieved, and the new watchers have settled quietly by the watch-fire. Suddenly a single trumpet is heard, then three hundred - here, there, everywhere the sound of war is raised. The night is peopled with terrors. Now with loud crash three hundred pitchers are broken; three hundred torches flash through the darkness; three hundred voices shout: "The sword for Jehovah and for Gideon!" Then is the enemy all around the camp! No one can say in what numbers. Again and again rings the trumpet-sound; wave the torches. The camp is roused. Men, women, children, camels rush terror-stricken through the dark night. No one knows but that the enemy is in the very midst of them, and that the neighbor whom he meets is an Israelite, for all around still sounds the war-trumpet, flash the torches, and rises the war-cry. Each man's sword is turned against his neighbor. Multitudes are killed or trampled down, and their cries and groans increase the terror of that wild night. A hopeless panic ensues, and ere morning-light, the site of the camp and the road of the fugitives towards Jordan are strewn with the slain.<sup>66</sup>

### **III\_17 Farther Course Of Gideon - The Ephod At Ophrah - - Death Of Gideon - Conspiracy Of Abimelech - The Parable Of Jotham - Rule And End Of Abimelech**

#### **Judges 7:23 to 9:57**

THE tide of battle had rolled towards the Jordan. The fugitives seem to have divided into two main bodies. The quickest, under the leadership of Zebah and Zalmunna, succeeded in crossing the Jordan, and hastened towards the wilderness, while the main body of the army, encumbered with women and cattle, fled in a south-easterly direction, trying to gain the more southern fords of the Jordan within the possession of Issachar, and almost in a straight line with that of Ephraim. The two kings were the object of Gideon's own pursuit,

<sup>66</sup> It is interesting to notice, that both classical and modern history record similar night-surprises, with ensuing panic and slaughter, though, of course, not of the miraculous character of this narrative.

in which he was joined by those of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh, who had shortly before been dismissed from the battle. To overtake the other body of fugitives, Gideon summoned the Ephraimites, directing them to occupy "the waters," or tributaries of Jordan, unto Beth-barah (the house of springs) and the Jordan. The success of Ephraim was complete. A great battle seems to have been fought (Isaiah 10:26), in which the leaders of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb ("the raven" and "the wolf") were taken and slain. The Ephraimites continued the pursuit of the fugitives to the other side of the Jordan, bringing with them to Gideon the gory heads of Oreb and Zeeb. Strange and sad, that their first meeting with Gideon after this victory should have been one of reproaches and strife, on account of their not having been first summoned to the war - strife, springing from that tribal jealousy which influenced for such evil the whole history of Ephraim. Nor was the reply of Gideon much more satisfactory than their noisy self-assertion (8:1-3). To us at least it savors more of the diplomacy of an Oriental, than the straightforward bearing of the warrior of God.

While Ephraim occupied "the waters" and the fords of the Jordan, Gideon himself had crossed the river at the spot where Jacob of old had entered Canaan on his return from Padan-Aram. "Faint yet pursuing," the band reached Succoth; but its "princes" refused even the most useful provisions to Gideon's men. The people of the neighboring Penuel acted in the same heartless manner - no doubt from utter lack of interest in the cause of God, from cowardice, and, above all, from scorn for the small band of 300, with which Gideon had gone in pursuit of the flower of Midian's army. They had calculated the result by the outward means employed, but were destined soon to feel the consequences of their folly. Making a detour eastwards, through the wilderness, Gideon advanced on the rear of Midian, and fell unexpectedly upon the camp at Karkor, which was held by 15,000 men under the command of Zebah and Zalmunna ("sacrifice" and "protection refused"). The surprise ended in defeat and flight, the two Midianite leaders being made prisoners

and taken across Jordan. On his way,<sup>67</sup> Gideon "taught the men of Succoth," by punishing their rulers<sup>68</sup> - seventy-seven in number, probably consisting of either seven, or else five "princes," and of seventy or else seventy-two elders - while in the case of Penuel, which seems to have offered armed resistance to the destruction of its citadel, "the men of the city" were actually slain.

The fate of Gideon's princely captives did not long remain doubtful. It seems that he would have spared their lives, if they had not personally taken part in the slaughter of his brothers, which may have occurred at the commencement of the last campaign, and while the Midianites held Jezreel - possibly under circumstances of treachery and cruelty, prompted perhaps by tidings that Gideon had raised the standard of resistance. It may have been to investigate the facts on the spot, that Gideon had brought back<sup>69</sup> the two princes, or he may have only heard of it on his return. At any rate, the two Midianites not only confessed, but boasted of their achievement. By the law of retaliation they were now made to suffer death, although the hesitation of Gideon's son spared them the humiliation of falling by the hand of a young lad.

The deliverance of Israel was now complete. It had been wrought most unexpectedly, and by apparently quite inadequate means. In the circumstances, it was natural that, in measure as the people failed to recognize the direct agency of Jehovah, they should exalt Gideon as the great national hero. Accordingly, they now offered him the hereditary rule over, at least, the northern tribes. Gideon had spiritual discernment and strength sufficient to resist this temptation. He knew that he had only been called to a temporary

<sup>67</sup> In Judges 8:13 the rendering should be, "from the ascent of Heres," probably a mountain-road by which he came - instead of "before the sun was up."

<sup>68</sup> The notice in 8:14 (literally rendered), that the lad "wrote down for him" the names of the princes, is interesting as showing the state of education at the time even in so remote a district.

<sup>69</sup> We gather that this took place either in Jezreel or at Ophrah from the circumstance that Gideon's son had joined him: 8:20.

work, and that the "rule" which they wished could not be made hereditary. Each "judge" must be specially called, and qualified by the influence of the Holy Spirit. Besides, the latter was not, as since the ascension of our Blessed Savior, a permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a Person, but consisted in certain effects produced by His agency. The proposal of Israel could therefore only arise from carnal misunderstanding, and must be refused.

But Gideon himself was not proof against another temptation and mistake. God had called him not only to temporal, but to spiritual deliverance of Israel. He had thrown down the altar of Baal; he had built up that of Jehovah, and offered on it accepted sacrifice. Shiloh was deserted, and the high priest seemed set aside. Ophrah had been made what Shiloh should have been, and Gideon had taken the place of the high priest. All this had been by express Divine command - and without any reference to the services of the tabernacle. Moreover, Gideon's office had never been recalled. Should it not now be made permanent, at least, in his own person? The keeping of Israel's faith had been committed to his strong hand; should he deliver it up to the feeble grasp of a nominal priesthood which had proved itself incapable of such a trust? It was to this temptation that Gideon succumbed when he asked of the people the various golden ornaments, taken as spoil from the enemy.<sup>70</sup> The gold so obtained amounted to seventeen thousand shekels - or nearly the weight of fifty pounds. With this Gideon made an ephod, no doubt with the addition of the high-priestly breastplate and its precious gems, and of the Urim and Thummim. Here, then, was the commencement of a spurious worship. Presently, Israel went to Ophrah, "a whoring after it," while to Gideon himself and to his house this "thing became a snare."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup>

It is well known that the Midianites delighted in that kind of ornaments. We recognize in this, even to the present day, the habits of the Bedawin. If we bear in mind that the host of Midian consisted of 150,000 men, the weight of gold will by no means appear excessive.

<sup>71</sup>

The Rabbis find here tribal jealousies against Ephraim, within whose territory were Shiloh and the tabernacle.

In truth, the same spiritual misunderstanding which culminated in Gideon's arrogating to himself high-priestly functions, had appeared almost immediately after that night-victory of Jehovah over Midian. Even his reply to the jealous wrangling of Ephraim does not sound like the straightforward language of one who had dismissed the thousands of Israel to go to battle with only three hundred. Again, there is what at least looks like petty revenge about his dealings with Succoth and Peniel; while it is difficult to understand upon what principle, other than that of personal retaliation, he had made the lives of Zebah and Zalmunna wholly dependent upon their conduct towards his own family. And the brief remarks of Scripture about the family-life of Gideon, after he had made the ephod, only tend to confirm our impressions. But, meantime, for "forty years in the days of Gideon," "the country was in quietness," and, however imperfect in its character, the service of Jehovah seems to have been, at least outwardly, the only one professed. Matters changed immediately upon his death. Presently the worship of Baalim becomes again common, and especially that of the "Covenant-Baal" (Baal-berith). There is a sad lesson here. If Gideon had made a spurious ephod, his people now chose a false "covenant-god." And, having first forsaken the Covenant-Jehovah, they next turned in ingratitude from their earthly deliverer, "neither showed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal." Thus sin ever brings its own punishment.

Not far from Ophrah, but in the territory of Ephraim, was the ancient Shechem, connected with so much that was most solemn in the history of Israel. We know the long-standing tribal jealousy of Ephraim and their desire for leadership. Moreover, as we learn from Judges 9:28, Shechem seems to have retained among its inhabitants the lineal representatives of Hamor, the original "prince" and founder of Shechem in the days of Jacob (Genesis 33:19; 34:2; comp. Joshua 24:32). These would represent, so as speak, the ancient feudal heathen aristocracy of the place, and, of course, the original worshippers of Baal. As perhaps the most ancient city in that part of the country, and as the seat of the descendants of Hamor, Shechem seems to have become the center

of Baal worship. Accordingly we find there the temple of the "Covenant-Baal" (Judges 9:4). Possibly the latter may have been intended to express and perpetuate the union of the original heathen with the more modern Israelitish, or "Shechem" part of the population. Here then were sufficient elements of mischief ready: tribal jealousy; envy of the great and ancient Shechem towards little Ophrah; hatred of the rule of the house of Gideon; but, above all, the opposition of heathenism. It is very characteristic of this last, as the chief motive at work, that throughout all the intrigues against the house of Gideon, he is never designated by his own name, but always as Jerubbaal - he that contended against Baal. Contending against Baal had been the origin of Gideon's power; and to the heathen mind it seemed still embodied in that Jehovah-Ephod in the possession of Gideon's sons at Ophrah. The present rising would in turn be the contending of Baal against the house of Gideon, and his triumph its destruction. It only needed a leader. Considering the authority which the family of Gideon must still have possessed, none better could have been found than one of its own members.

Gideon had left no fewer than seventy sons. If we may judge from their connivance at the worship of Baal around, from the want of any recognized outstanding individuality among them, and especially from their utter inability to make a stand even for life against an equal number of enemies, they must have sadly degenerated; probably were an enervated, luxurious, utterly feeble race. There was one exception, however, to this; one outside their circle, and yet of it - Abimelech, not a legitimate son of Gideon's, but one by "a maid-servant," a native of Shechem. Although we know not the possible peculiarities of the case, it is, in general, quite consistent with social relations in the East, that Abimelech's slave-mother should have had influential connections in Shechem, who, although of an inferior grade,<sup>72</sup> could enter into

<sup>72</sup> This appears from the whole account of their transactions, in which the others are always designated as "lords" of Shechem, in our Authorized Version, "men of Shechem," or rather, probably, the citizens - what we would call the "house-owners" of Shechem.

dealings with "the citizens" of the place. Abimelech seems to have possessed all the courage, vigor, and energy of his father; only coupled, alas! with restless ambition, reckless unscrupulousness, and daring impiety. His real name we do not know;<sup>73</sup> for Abimelech, father-king, or else king-father, seems to have been a by-name, probably suggested by his natural qualifications and his ambition.

The plot was well contrived by Abimelech. At his instigation his mother's relatives entered into negotiations with the "citizens" or "householders" of Shechem. The main considerations brought to bear upon them seem to have been: hatred of the house of Gideon, and the fact that Abimelech was a fellow-townsmen. This was sufficient. The compact was worthily ratified with Baal's money. Out of the treasury of his temple they gave Abimelech seventy shekels. This wretched sum, somewhere at the rate of half-a-crown a person, sufficed to hire a band of seventy reckless rabble for the murder of Gideon's sons. Such was the value which Israel put upon them! Apparently unresisting, they were all slaughtered upon one stone, like a sacrifice - all but one, Jotham ("Jehovah [is] perfect"), who succeeded in hiding himself, and thus escaped.

This is the first scene. The next brings us once more to "the memorial by the vale" which Joshua had set up, when, at the close of his last address, the people had renewed their covenant with Jehovah (Joshua 24:26, 27). It was in this sacred spot that "the citizens of Shechem and the whole house of Millo"<sup>74</sup> were now gathered to make Abimelech king! Close by, behind it, to the south, rose Gerizim, the Mount of Blessings. On one of its escarpments, which tower 800 feet above the valley, Jotham, the last survivor of Gideon's house, watched the scene. And now his voice rose above the shouts of the people.

In that clear atmosphere every word made its way to the listeners below. It was a strange parable he

<sup>73</sup> This is rightly inferred by Keil from the meaning of the verb, insufficiently rendered in our Authorized Version: "whose name he called Abimelech" (8:31).

<sup>74</sup> That is, the inhabitants of Millo. Millo was no doubt the castle or citadel close to Shechem.



told, peculiarly of the East, that land of parables, and in language so clear and forcible, that it stands almost unique. It is about the Republic of Trees, who are about to elect a king. In turn the olive, the fig tree, and the vine, the three great representatives of fruit-bearing trees in Palestine, <sup>75</sup> are asked. But each refuses; for each has its own usefulness, and inquires with wonder: "Am I then to lose" my fatness, or my sweetness, or my wine, "and to go to flutter above the trees?"

The expressions are very pictorial, as indicating, on the one hand, that such a reign could only be one of unrest and insecurity, a "wavering" or "fluttering" above the trees, and that, in order to attain this position of elevation above the other trees, a tree would require to be uprooted from its own soil, and so lose what of fatness, sweetness, or refreshment God had intended it to yield. Then, these noble trees having declined the offer, and apparently all the others also, <sup>76</sup> the whole of the trees next turn to the thornbush, which yields no fruit, can give no shadow, and only wounds those who take hold of it, which, in fact, is only fit for burning. The thornbush itself seems scarcely to believe that such a proposal could seriously be made to it. "If in truth" (that is, "truly and sincerely") "ye anoint me king over you, come, put your trust in my shadow; <sup>77</sup> but if not (that is, if you fear so to do, or else find your hopes disappointed), let fire come out of the thornbush and devour the cedars of Lebanon. The application of the parable was so evident, that it scarcely needed the pungent sentences in which Jotham in conclusion set before the people their conduct in its real character. <sup>78</sup>

Jotham had not spoken as a prophet, but his language was prophetic. Three years, not of

<sup>75</sup> The Rabbis understand the three trees as referring to Othniel, Deborah, and Gideon.

<sup>76</sup> This we gather from the fact that "the trees" successively solicit the olive, the fig, and the vine, while afterwards "all the trees" are said to turn to the thorn, as if all of them had been successively asked, and had declined.

<sup>77</sup> Seek shelter under my shadow.

<sup>78</sup> That is, the noblest and the best. The thorn is easily set on fire - indeed, fit for nothing else.

kingdom, but of rule, <sup>79</sup> and the judgment of God, which had been slumbering, began to descend. Scripture marks distinctly both the Divine agency in the altered feeling of Shechem towards Abimelech, and its import as boding judgment.

The course of events is vividly sketched. First, the citizens post "liers in wait" in all the mountain passes, in the vain hope of seizing Abimelech. The consequence is universal brigandage. This device having failed, they next invite, or at least encourage the arrival among them of a freebooting adventurer with his band. It is the season of vintage, and, strange and terrible as it may sound, a service, specially ordered by Jehovah, is observed, but only to be prostituted to Baal. According to Leviticus 19:24, the produce of the fourth year's fruit planting was to be brought as "praise-offerings" (Hillulim) to Jehovah. And now these men of Shethem "made praise offerings" <sup>80</sup> (Hillulim), but went with them into the house of Baal-berith. At the sacrificial feast which followed, wine soon loosened the tongues. It is an appeal to Baal as against the house of Jerubbaal; a revolt of old Shechem against modern Shechem; in favor of the old patrician descendants of Hamor against Abimelech and his lieutenant Zebul. <sup>81</sup> This insulting challenge, addressed in true Oriental fashion to the absent, is conveyed by secret messengers to Abimelech. <sup>82</sup>

That night he and his band move forward. Divided into four companies, they occupy all the heights around Shechem. Ignorant how near was danger, Gaal stands next morning in the gate with his

<sup>79</sup> The expression in 9:22 is not that Abimelech reigned as a king, but that he lorded it.

<sup>80</sup> Our Authorized Version translates wrongly 9:27: "And they went out into the fields,.... and made merry." This last clause should be rendered, "and made Hillulim - praise offerings."

<sup>81</sup> The language is very pictorial in its contrast of young Shechem with old Shechem, or rather Hamor; and in laying emphasis upon the name Jerubbaal. The challenge to Abimelech is, of course, not to be regarded as delivered to himself, but, as so common in the East, addressed to an imaginary Abimelech.

<sup>82</sup> The message of Zebul (9:31) was: "they raise the city against thee," viz., in rebellion - not, as in our Authorized Version, "they fortify the city against thee."

band, in the same spirit of boastfulness as at the festival of the previous night. He is still, as it were, challenging imaginary foes. Zebul is also there. As Abimelech's men are seen moving down towards the valley, Zebul first tries to lull Gaal's suspicions. And now they are appearing in all directions - from the mountains, "from the heights of the land," and one company "from the way of the terebinth of the magicians."

Zebul now challenges Gaal to make good his boasting. A fight ensues in view of the citizens of Shechem, in which Gaal and his band are discomfited, and he and his adherents are finally expelled from the town. If the Shechemites had thought thus to purchase immunity, they were speedily undeceived. Abimelech was hovering in the neighborhood, and, when the unsuspecting people were busy in their fields, he surprised and slaughtered them, at the same time occupying the city, which was razed to the ground and sowed with salt. Upon this the citizens of the tower, or of Millo, sought refuge in the sacred precincts of "the hall of the god Berith." But in vain. Abimelech set it on fire, and 1000 persons perished in the flames. Even this did not satisfy his revenge. He next turned his forces against the neighboring town of Thebez. Reduced to the utmost straits, its inhabitants fled to the strong tower within the city. Thither Abimelech pursued them. Almost had the people of Thebez shared the fate of the citizens of Millo, when Abimelech's course was strangely arrested. From the top of the tower a woman cast down upon him an "upper millstone." As the Rabbis put it, he, that had slaughtered his brothers upon a stone, was killed by a stone. Abimelech died as he had lived. Feeling himself mortally wounded, ambitious warrior to the last, he had himself run through by the sword of his armor-bearer, to avoid the disgrace of perishing by the hand of a woman. But his epitaph, and that of the men of Shechem who had perished by his hand, had been long before written in the curse of Jotham.

### **III\_18 Successors Of Abimelech - Chronology Of The Period - Israel's Renewed Apostasy And Their Humiliation Before Jehovah - Oppression By The Ammonites - - Jephthah - His History And Vow - The Successors Of Jephthah**

#### **Judges 10 to 12**

THE sudden and tragic end of Abimelech seems to have awakened repentance among the people. It is thus that we explain the mention of his name (10:1) in connection with three judges, who successively ruled over the northern tribes. The first of these was Tola ("scarlet-worm"),<sup>83</sup> the son of Puah (probably "red dye") and grandson of Dodo, a man of Issachar. His reign lasted twenty-three years, and was followed by that of Jair ("Enlightener"), who judged twenty-two years. The family notice of the latter indicates great influence, each of his thirty sons appearing as a "chief" (riding on "ass-colts"), and their property extending over thirty out of the sixty cities (1 Kings 4:13; 2 Chronicles 2:23) which formed the ancient Havoth-Jair, or circuits of Jairs<sup>84</sup> (Numbers 32:41; Deuteronomy 3:14).

These forty-five years of comparative rest conclude the second period in the history of the Judges. The third, which commences with fresh apostasy on the part of Israel, includes the contemporaneous rule of Jephthah and his successors - Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15) - in the north and east, and of Samson in the south and west. While in the north and east Jephthah encountered the Ammonites, Samson warred against the Philistines in the south-west. The oppression of Ammon over the eastern and northern tribes lasted eighteen years (10:8, 9); the rule of Jephthah six years (12:7); that of his three

<sup>83</sup> Some have translated this by the son of "his uncle," viz., the uncle of Abimelech. But this seems unlikely, as Gideon was of Manasseh, and Tola of Issachar. The names of Tola and Puah, or Phuvah (Genesis 46:13; Numbers 26:23), as well as that of Jair, were tribal names.

<sup>84</sup> Certain critics have imagined a discrepancy between the earlier notice in Numbers 32:41, etc., and that in the text. But the text does not say that the Havoth-Jair obtained its name in the period of the Judges - rather the opposite, as will appear from the following rendering of Judges 10:4: "and they had thirty cities (of) those which are called the circuit of Jair even unto this day."



successors twenty-five years - covering in all a period of forty-nine years. On the other hand, the oppression of the Philistines lasted in all forty years (13:1), during twenty years of which (15:20) Samson "began to deliver Israel" (13:5), the deliverance being completed only twenty years later under Samuel, when the battle of Ebenezer was gained (1 Samuel 7). Thus Abdon, Jephthah's last successor in the north, must have died nine years after the battle of Ebenezer. These dates are of great importance, not only on their own account, but because they show us the two parallel streams of Israel's history in the north and the south. Again, the coincidence of events in the south with those in the north casts fresh light upon both. Thus, as Eli's high-priestly administration, which in a general sense is designated as "judging Israel," lasted forty years (1 Samuel 4:18), and his death took place about twenty years and seven months before the victory of Samuel over the Philistines (1 Samuel 6:1; 7:2), it is evident that the first twenty years of Eli's administration were contemporary with that of Jair in the east, while the last twenty were marked by the Philistine oppression, which continued forty years. In that case Samson must have been born, and have grown up during the high priesthood of Eli, and most of his exploits, as judging Israel for twenty years, taken place under Samuel, who gained the battle of Ebenezer, and so put an end to Philistine oppression, a short time after the death of Samson. In connection with this we may note, that Samuel's period of judging is only mentioned after the battle of Ebenezer (1 Samuel 7:15).

There is another and very important fact to be considered. The terrible fate which overtook the house of Gideon, culminating in the death of Abimelech, seems forever to have put an end to the spurious ephod-worship of Jehovah, or to that in any other place than that He had chosen, or through any other than the Levitical priesthood. Accordingly, the sanctuary of Shiloh and its ministers now come again, and permanently, into prominent notice. This not only in the case of Eli and Samuel, but long before that. This appears from the sacred text. For when, previous to the calling of Jephthah, the children of Israel repented, we are told that they "cried unto the Lord," and that the Lord spake unto them, to which they in

turn made suitable reply (Judges 10:10, 11, 15). But the peculiar expressions used leave no doubt on our mind, that the gathering of Israel before the Lord had taken place in His sanctuary at Shiloh, and the answer of Jehovah been made by means of the Urim and Thummim (comp. Judges 1:1).

For clearness' sake, it may be well to explain, that Judges 10:6-18 forms a general introduction, alike to the history of Jephthah and his successors, and to that of Samson. In ver. 6 seven national deities are mentioned whom Israel had served, besides the Baalim and Ashtaroah of Canaan. This in opposition to the sevenfold deliverance (vers. 11, 12) which Israel had experienced at the hands of Jehovah.<sup>85</sup> Then follows, in ver. 7, a general reference to the twofold contemporaneous oppression by the Ammonites in the east and north, and by the Philistines in the south and west. In ver. 8 the account of the Ammonites' oppression commences with the statement, that "they ground down and bruised the children of Israel that year," and in a similar manner for eighteen years. In fact, the Ammonites, in their successful raids across the Jordan, occupied districts of the territory of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim, which bordered either on the Dead Sea or on the fords of Jordan.<sup>86</sup>

Next, we have in verses 10-15 an account of Israel's humiliation and entreaty at Shiloh, and of the Lord's answer by the Urim and Thummim. Finally, ver. 16 informs us, how the genuineness of their repentance appeared not in professions and promises, but in the putting away of all "strange gods," and that when there was no immediate prospect of Divine help. After this, to reproduce the wonderful imagery of Scripture: "His soul became short on account of the misery of Israel." That misery had lasted too long; He could not, as it were, be any longer angry with them, nor bear to see their suffering. For, as a German writer

<sup>85</sup> Israel's unfaithfulness is represented as keeping measure, so to speak, with God's mercy and deliverance. The significance of the number seven should not be overlooked. Instead of "the Maonites" in ver. 12 the LXX read "Midianites," which seems the more correct reading. Otherwise it must refer to the tribe mentioned 2 Chronicles 26:7; comp. 1 Chronicles 4:41.

<sup>86</sup> I do not suppose that the Ammonites traversed the land, but that they made raids across the fords of Jordan, and laid waste the contiguous districts.

beautifully observes: "The love of God is not like the hard and fast logical sequences of man; it is ever free.... The parable of the prodigal affords a glimpse of the marvelous 'inconsistency' of the Father, who receives the wanderer when he suffered the consequences of his sin.... Put away the strange gods, and the withered rod will burst anew into life and verdure." And such is ever God's love - full and free. For, in the words of the author just quoted: "Sin and forgiveness are the pivots of all history, specially of that of Israel, including in that term the spiritual Israel."

Now, indeed, was deliverance at hand. For the first time these eighteen years that Ammon had camped in Gilead, the children of Israel also camped against them in Mizpeh, or, as it is otherwise called (Joshua 13:26; 20:8), in Ramath-Mizpeh or Ramoth-Gilead (the modern Salt), a city east of the Jordan, in an almost direct line from Shiloh. The camp of Israel could not have been better chosen. Defended on three sides by high hills, Mizpeh lay "on two sides of a narrow ravine, half way up, crowned by a (now) ruined citadel," which probably at all times defended the city.

"Ramoth-Gilead must always have been the key of Gilead, at the head of the only easy road from the Jordan, opening immediately on to the rich plateau of the interior, and with this isolated cone rising close above it, fortified from very early times, by art as well as by nature." All was thus prepared, and now the people of Gilead, through their "princes," resolved to offer the supreme command to any one who had already begun to fight against the children of Ammon - that is, who on his own account had waged warfare, and proved successful against them. This notice is of great importance for the early history of Jephthah.

Few finer or nobler characters are sketched even in Holy Scripture than Jephthah, or rather Jiphthach ("the breaker through"). He is introduced to us as "a mighty man of valor" - the same terms in which the angel had first addressed Gideon (6:12). But this "hero of might" must first learn to conquer his own spirit. His history is almost a parallel to that of Abimelech - only in the way of contrast. For, whereas Abimelech had of his own accord left his father's house to plan treason, Jephthah was wrongfully driven out by his brothers from his

father's inheritance. Abimelech had appealed to the citizens of Shechem to help him in his abominable ambition; Jephthah to the "elders of Gilead" for redress in his wrong, but apparently in vain (11:7). Abimelech had committed unprovoked and cruel murder with his hired band; Jephthah withdrew to the land of Tob, which, from 2 Samuel 10:6, 8, we know to have been on the northern boundary of Peraea between Syria and the land of Ammon. There he gathered around him a number of freebooters, as David afterwards in similar circumstances (1 Samuel 22:2); not, like Abimelech, to destroy his father's house, but, like David, to war against the common foe. This we infer from Judges 10:18, which shows that, before the war between Gilead and Ammon, Jephthah had acquired fame as contending against Ammon. This life of adventure would suit the brave Gileadite and his followers; for he was a wild mountaineer, only imbued with the true spirit of Israel. And now, when war had actually broken out, "the elders of Gilead" were not in doubt whom to choose as their chief. They had seen and repented their sin against Jehovah, and now they saw and confessed their wrong towards Jephthah, and appealed to his generosity. In ordinary circumstances he would not have consented; but he came back to them, as the elders of Gilead had put it, because they were in distress. Nor did he come in his own strength. The agreement made with the elders of Israel was solemnly ratified before Jehovah.

He that has a righteous cause will not shrink from having it thoroughly sifted. It was not because Jephthah feared the battle, but because he wished to avoid bloodshed, that he twice sent an embassy of remonstrance to the king of Ammon. The claims of the latter upon the land between the Arnon and the Jabbok were certainly of the most shadowy kind. That country had, at the time of the Israelitish conquest, belonged to Sihon, king of the Amorites. True, the Amorites were not its original owners, having wrested the land from Moab (Numbers 21:26). Balak might therefore have raised a claim; but, although he hired Balaam to protect what still remained of his kingdom against a possible attack by Israel, which he dreaded, he never attempted to recover what Israel had taken from the Amorites, although it had originally been

his. Moreover, even in dealing with the Amorites, as before with Edom and Moab, whose territory Israel had actually avoided by a long circuit, the utmost forbearance had been shown. If the Amorites had been dispossessed, theirs had been the unprovoked attack, when Israel had in the first place only asked a passage through their country. Lastly, if 300 years' <sup>87</sup> undisputed possession of the land did not give a prescriptive right, it would be difficult to imagine by what title land could be held. Nor did Jephthah shrink from putting the matter on its ultimate and best ground. Addressing the Ammonites, as from their religious point of view they could understand it, he said: "And now Jehovah God of Israel hath dispossessed the Amorites from before His people, and shouldest thou possess it? Is it not so, that which Chemosh <sup>88</sup> thy god giveth thee to possess, that wilt thou possess; and all that which Jehovah our God shall dispossess before us, that shall we possess?" We do not wonder that of a war commenced in such a spirit we should be told: "And the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah." Presently Jephthah passed all through the land east of the Jordan, and its people obeyed his summons.

We are now approaching what to many will appear the most difficult part in the history of Jephthah - perhaps among the most difficult narratives in the Bible. It appears that, before actually going to war, Jephthah solemnly registered this vow: "If thou indeed givest the children of Ammon into mine hand - and it shall be, the outcoming (one), that shall come out from the door of my house to meet me on my returning in peace from the children of Ammon, shall be to Jehovah, and I will offer that a burnt offering." We know that the vow was paid. The defeat of the Ammonites was thorough and crushing. But on Jephthah's return to his house the first to welcome him was his only daughter - his only child - who at the head of the maidens came to greet the victor. There is a terrible irony about those "timbrels and dances," with which Jephthah's

daughter went, as it were, to celebrate her own funeral obsequies, while the fond father's heart was well-nigh breaking. But the noble maiden was the first to urge his observance of the vow unto Jehovah. Only two months did she ask to bewail her maidenhood with her companions upon the mountains. But ever after was it a custom for the maidens in Israel to go out every year for four days, "to praise <sup>89</sup> the daughter of Jephthah."

Such is the story; but what is its meaning? What did Jephthah really intend by the language of his vow; and did he feel himself bound by it in the literal sense to offer up his daughter as a burnt sacrifice? Assuredly, we shall make no attempt either to explain away the facts of the case, or to disguise the importance of the questions at issue. At the outset we are here met by these two facts: that up to that period Jephthah had both acted and spoken as a true worshipper of Jehovah, and that his name stands emblazoned in that roll of the heroes of the faith which is handed down to us in the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:32). But it is well-nigh impossible to believe that a true worshipper of Jehovah could have either vowed or actually offered a human sacrifice - not to speak of the sacrifice being that of his own and only child. Such sacrifices were the most abhorrent and opposed to the whole spirit and letter of the Law of God (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10), nor do we find any mention of them till the reigns of the wicked Ahaz and Manasseh. Not even Jezebel had ventured to introduce them; and we know what thrill of horror ran through the onlookers, when the heathen king of Moab offered his son an expiatory sacrifice on the walls of his capital (2 Kings 3:26, etc.). But the difficulty becomes well-nigh insuperable, when we find the name of Jephthah recorded in the New Testament

<sup>87</sup> Of course these are round numbers, and not to be regarded as strictly arithmetical.

<sup>88</sup> Chemosh - the destroyer or desolator - the Moabite god of war. He is represented on coins with a sword in his right hand, a spear and lance in his left; the figure being flanked by burning torches.

<sup>89</sup> This is the correct rendering, and not "lament," as in our Authorized Version. There was a curious custom in Israel in the days of our Lord. Twice in the year, "on the 15th of Ab, when the collection of wood for the sanctuary was completed, and on the Day of Atonement, the maidens of Jerusalem went in white garments, specially lent them for the purpose, so that rich and poor might be on an equality, into the vineyards close to the city, where they danced and sung" (see my *Temple: its Services and Ministry at the time of Jesus Christ*, p. 286). Could this strange practice have been a remnant of the maidens' praise of the daughter of Jephthah?

among the heroes of the faith. Surely, no one guilty of such a crime could have found a place there! Still, these are considerations which, though most important, are outside the narrative itself, and in any truthful investigation the latter should, in the first place, be studied by itself.

In so doing we must dismiss, as irrelevant and untruthful, such pleas as the roughness of those times, the imperfectness of religious development, or that of religious ignorance on the part of the outlaw Jephthah, who had spent most of his life far from Israel. The Scripture sketch of Jephthah leaves, indeed, on the mind the impression of a genuine, wild, and daring Gilead mountaineer - a sort of warrior-Elijah. But, on the other hand, he acts and speaks throughout as a true worshipper of Jehovah. And his vow, which in the Old Testament always expresses the highest religious feeling (Genesis 28:20; 1 Samuel 1:11; Psalm 116:14; Isaiah 19:21), is so sacred because it is made to Jehovah. Again, in his embassy to the king of Ammon, Jephthah displays the most intimate acquaintance with the Pentateuch, his language being repeatedly almost a literal quotation from Numbers 20. He who knew so well the details of Scripture history could not have been ignorant of its fundamental principles. Having thus cleared the way, we observe:

1. That the language of Jephthah's vow implied, from the first, at least the possibility of some human being coming out from the door of his house, to meet him on his return. The original conveys this, and the evident probabilities of the case were strongly in favor of such an eventuality. Indeed, Jephthah's language seems to have been designedly chosen in such general terms as to cover all cases. But it is impossible to suppose that Jephthah would have deliberately made a vow in which he contemplated human sacrifice; still more so, that Jehovah would have connected victory and deliverance with such a horrible crime.

2. In another particular, also, the language of Jephthah's vow is remarkable. It is, that "the outcoming (whether man or beast) shall be to Jehovah, and I will offer that a burnt-offering." The great Jewish commentators of the Middle Ages have, in opposition to the Talmud, pointed out that these two last clauses are not identical. It

is never said of an animal burnt-offering, that it "shall be to Jehovah" - for the simple reason that, as a burnt-offering, it is such. But where human beings are offered to Jehovah, there the expression is used, as in the case of the first-born among Israel and of Levi (Numbers 3:12, 13). But in these cases it has never been suggested that there was actual human sacrifice.

3. It was a principle of the Mosaic law, that burnt sacrifices were to be exclusively males (Leviticus 1:3).

4. If the loving daughter had devoted herself to death, it is next to incredible that she should have wished to spend the two months of life conceded to her, not with her broken-hearted father, but in the mountains with her companions.

5. She bewails not her "maiden age," but her "maidenhood" - not that she dies so young, but that she is to die unmarried. The Hebrew expression for the former would have been quite different from that used in Scripture, which only signifies the latter.<sup>90</sup> But for an only child to die unmarried, and so to leave a light and name extinguished in Israel, was indeed a bitter and heavy judgment, viewed in the light of pre-Messianic times. Compare in this respect especially such passages as Leviticus 20:20 and Psalm 78:63. The trial appears all the more withering when we realize, how it must have come upon Jephthah and his only child in the hour of their highest glory, when all earthly prosperity seemed at their command. The greatest and happiest man in Israel becomes in a moment the poorest and the most stricken. Surely, in this vow and sacrifice was the lesson of vows and sacrifices taught to victorious Israel in a manner the most solemn.

6. It is very significant that in 11:39 it is only said, that Jephthah "did with her according to his vow" - not that he actually offered her in sacrifice, while in the latter case the added clause, "and she knew no man," would be utterly needless and unmeaning. Lastly, we may ask, Who would have been the priest by whom, and where the altar on

<sup>90</sup> The Hebrew expression is *bethulim*. If it meant maiden age it would probably, as Keil remarks, have been *neurim* (comp. Leviticus 21:13).

which, such a sacrifice could have been offered unto Jehovah?

On all these grounds - its utter contrariety to the whole Old Testament, the known piety of Jephthah, the blessing following upon his vow, his mention in the Epistle to the Hebrews, but especially the language of the narrative itself - we feel bound to reject the idea of any human sacrifice. In what special manner, besides remaining unmarried,<sup>91</sup> the vow of her dedication to God was carried out, we do not feel bound to suggest. Here the principle, long ago expressed by Clericus, holds true: "We are not to imagine that, in so small a volume as the Old Testament, all the customs of the Hebrews are recorded, or the full history of all that had taken place among them. Hence there are necessarily allusions to many things which cannot be fully followed out, because there is no mention of them elsewhere."

Yet another trial awaited Jephthah. The tribal jealousy of Ephraim, which treated the Gileadites (more especially the half tribe of Manasseh) as mere runaways from Ephraim, who had no right to independent tribal action, scarcely to independent existence - least of all to having one of their number a "Judge," now burst into a fierce war. Defeated in battle, the Ephraimites tried to escape to the eastern bank of the Jordan; but Gilead had occupied the fords. Their peculiar pronunciation betrayed Ephraim, and a horrible massacre ensued.

Six years of rest - "then died Jephthah the Gileadite, and was buried in one of the cities of Gilead." We know not the locality, nor yet the precise place where he had lived, nor the city in which his body was laid. No father's home had welcomed him; no child was left to cheer his old age. He lived alone, and he died alone. Truly, as has been remarked, his sorrow and his victory are a type of Him Who said: "Not my will, but Thine be done." It almost seems as if Jephthah's three successors in the judgeship of the eastern and northern tribes were chiefly mentioned to mark the

contrast in their history. Of Ibzan of Bethlehem,<sup>92</sup> of Elon the Zebulonite, and of Abdon the Pirathonite, we know alike the dwelling and the burying-place. They lived honored, and died blessed - surrounded, as the text emphatically tells us, by a large and prosperous number of descendants. But their names are not found in the catalogue of worthies whom the Holy Ghost has selected for our special example and encouragement.

### III\_19 Meaning Of The History Of Samson - His Annunciation And Early History - The Spirit Of Jehovah "Impels Him" - His Deeds Of Faith

#### Judges 13 to 15

THERE is yet another name recorded in the Epistle to the Hebrews among the Old Testament "worthies," whose title to that position must to many have seemed at least doubtful. Can Samson claim a place among the spiritual heroes, who "through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises?" The question cannot be dismissed with a summary answer, for if, as we believe, the Holy Spirit pronounced such judgment on his activity as a judge, then careful and truthful study of his history must bear it out. But then also must that history have been commonly misread and misunderstood. Let it be remembered, that it is of Samson's activity as a Judge, and under the impulse of the Spirit of God, we are writing, and not of every act of his life. In fact, we shall presently distinguish two periods in his history; the first, when he acted under the influence of that Spirit; the second, when, yielding to his passions, he fell successively into sin, unfaithfulness to his calling, and betrayal of it, followed by the desertion of Jehovah and by His judgment. And, assuredly, the language of the Epistle to the Hebrews could not apply to the period of Samson's God-desertion and of his punishment, but only to that of his first activity or of his later repentance.

<sup>91</sup> In general, the Mishnah condemns in unmeasured terms female asceticism (Sotah iii. 4). But in the Talmud (Sotah 22a) one instance at least is recorded with special praise, in which a virgin wholly devoted herself to prayer. See Cassel in Herzog's Encyclo. 6 p. 475, note.12 Shibboleth means stream, which the Ephraimites pronounced Sibboleth.

<sup>92</sup> The Bethlehem here spoken of is, of course, not that in Judah, but that in Zebulun (Joshua 19:15). The situation of Ajalon, the modern Salem, quite in the north of Zebulun, and of Pirathon in Ephraim, the modern Ferata, six miles west of Nablus, has been ascertained.



It was in the days of Eli the high priest. Strange and tangled times these, when once again principles rather than men were to come to the front, if Israel was to be revived and saved. The period of the Judges had run its course to the end. The result had been general disorganization, an almost complete disintegration of the tribes, and decay of the sanctuary. But now, just at the close of the old, the new was beginning; or rather, old principles were once more asserted. In Eli the Divine purpose concerning the priesthood, in Samson that concerning the destiny and mission of Israel, were to reappear. In both cases, alike in their strength and in their weakness - in the faithfulness and in the unfaithfulness of its representatives. The whole meaning of Samson's history is, that he was a Nazarite. His strength lay in being a Nazarite; his weakness in yielding to his carnal lusts, and thereby becoming unfaithful to his calling. In both respects he was not only a type of Israel, but, so to speak, a mirror in which Israel could see itself and its history. Israel, the Nazarite people - no achievement, however marvelous, that it could not and did not accomplish! Israel, unfaithful to its vows and yielding to spiritual adultery - no depth of degradation so low, that it would not descend to it! The history of Israel was the history of Samson; his victories were like theirs, till, like him, yielding to the seductions of a Delilah, Israel betrayed and lost its Nazarite strength. And so also with Samson's and with Israel's final repentance and recovery of strength. Viewed in this light, we can not only understand this history, but even its seeming difficulties become so many points of fresh meaning. We can see why his life should have been chronicled with a circumstantiality seemingly out of proportion to the deliverance he wrought; and why there was so little and so transient result of his deeds. When the Spirit of God comes upon him, he does supernatural deeds; not in his own strength, but as a Nazarite, in the strength of God, by Whom and for Whom he had been set apart before his birth. All this showed the meaning and power of the Nazarite; what deliverance God could work for His people even by a single Nazarite, so that, in the language of prophecy, one man could chase a thousand! Thus also we understand the peculiar and almost spasmodic character of Samson's

deeds, as also the reason why he always appears on the scene, not at the head of the tribes, but alone to battle.

If the secret of Samson's strength lay in the faithful observance of his Nazarite vow, his weakness sprung from his natural character. The parallel, so far as Israel is concerned, cannot fail to be seen. And as Samson's sin finally assumed the form of adulterous love for Delilah, so that of his people was spiritual unfaithfulness. Thus, if the period of the Judges reached its highest point in Samson the Nazarite, it also sunk to its lowest in Samson the man of carnal lusts, who yielded his secret to a Delilah. As one has put it: "The strength of the Spirit of God bestowed on the Judges for the deliverance of their people was overcome by the power of the flesh lusting against the Spirit." Yet may we, with all reverence, point from Samson, the Nazarite for life, to the great antitype in Jesus Christ, the "Nazarite among His brethren," (Genesis 49:26) in Whom was fulfilled that "which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarite" (Matthew 2:23).

And it is at any rate remarkable that ancient Jewish tradition, in referring to the blessing spoken to Dan (Genesis 49:17, 18), applies this addition: "I have waited for Thy salvation, Jehovah," through Samson the Danite, to the Messiah.

1. Samson's birth. According to the chronological arrangement already indicated, we infer that Samson was born under the pontificate of Eli, and after the commencement of the Philistine oppression, which lasted forty years. If so, then his activity must have begun one or two years before the disastrous battle in which the ark fell into the hands of the Philistines, and in consequence of which Eli died (1 Samuel 4:18).

While in the east and north the Ammonites oppressed Israel, the same sin had brought on the west and south of Palestine the judgment of Philistine domination. Then it was, that once more the Angel of Jehovah came, to teach the people, through Samson, that deliverance could only come by recalling and realizing their Nazarite character as a priestly kingdom unto Jehovah; and that the Lord's Nazarite, so long as he remained such, would prove all-powerful through the strength of



his God. The circumstances connected with the annunciation of Samson were supernatural. In the "secluded mountain village" of Zorah, the modern Surah, about six hours west of Jerusalem, within the possession of Dan, lived Manoah ("resting") and his wife. Theirs, as we judge from the whole history, was the humble, earnest piety which, despite much apostasy, still lingered in Israel.

It is to be observed that, like Sarah in the Old, and the mother of the Baptist in the New Testament, Manoah's wife was barren. For the child about to be born was not only to be God-devoted but God-given - and that in another sense even from his contemporary, Samuel, who had been God-asked of his mother. But in this case the Angel of the Covenant Himself came to announce the birth of a child, who should be "a Nazarite unto God from the womb," and who as such should "begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines."<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, He laid on the mother, and still more fully on the unborn child, the Nazarite obligations as these are detailed in Numbers 6:1-8, with the exception of that against defilement by contact with the dead, which evidently would have been incompatible with his future history.

The appearance of the Angel and His unnamedness had carried to the woman thoughts of the Divine, though she regarded the apparition as merely that of a man of God. Manoah had not been present; but in answer to his prayer a second apparition was vouchsafed. It added nothing to their previous knowledge, except the revelation of the real character of Him Who had spoken to them. For, when Manoah proposed to entertain his guest, he learned that He would not eat of his food, and that His name was "Wonderful." The latter, of course, in the sense of designating His character and working, for, as in the parallel passage, Isaiah 9:6, such names refer not to the being and nature of the Messiah, but to His activity and manifestation - not to what He is, but to what He does. As suggested by the Angel, Manoah now brought a burnt-offering unto Jehovah - for, wherever He manifested Himself, there sacrifice and service might be offered. And when the Angel

"did wondrously;" when fire leaped from the altar, and the Angel ascended in the flame that consumed the burnt-offering, then Manoah and his wife, recognizing His nature, fell worshipping on the ground. No further revelation was granted them; but when Manoah, in the spirit of the Old Testament, feared lest their vision of God might render it impossible for them to live on earth, his wife, more fully enlightened, strove to allay such doubts by the inference, that what God had begun in grace He would not end in judgment. An inference this, applying to all analogous cases in the spiritual history of God's people. And so months of patient, obedient waiting ensued, when at last the promised child was born, and obtained the name of Samson, or rather (in the Hebrew) Shimshon.<sup>94</sup> His calling soon appeared, for as the child grew up under the special blessing of the Lord, "the Spirit of Jehovah began to impel him in the camp of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol."<sup>95</sup>

2. About an hour south-west from Zorah, down the rocky mountain-gorges, lay Timnath, within the tribal possession of Dan, but at the time held by the Philistines. This was the scene of Samson's first exploits.<sup>96</sup>

The "occasion" was his desire to wed a Philistine maiden. Against such union, as presumably contrary to the Divine will (Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3), his parents remonstrated, not knowing "that it was of Jehovah, for he was seeking an occasion from (or on account of) the Philistines." Strictly speaking, the text only implies that this "seeking occasion on account of the Philistines" was directly from the Lord; his proposed marriage would be so only indirectly, as affording the desired occasion. Here then we again come upon man's individuality - his personal choice, as the motive power of which the Lord makes use for higher purposes. We leave aside the question, whether or not Samson had, at the outset, realized a higher Divine purpose in it all, and mark

<sup>93</sup> The conjunction of the two in the text (Judges 13:5) indicates that they were to be regarded as cause and effect.

<sup>94</sup> The name has been variously interpreted. By the Rabbis it is rendered "sunlike," in allusion to Psalm 84:11. Others render it "mighty," "daring," or "he who lays waste."

<sup>95</sup> The exact locality cannot be ascertained. The Spirit of Jehovah began to push, to drive, or impel him.

<sup>96</sup> Hence the expression "Samson went down to Timnath."

two points of vital importance in this history. First, whenever Samson consciously subordinated his will and wishes to national and Divine purposes, he acted as a Nazarite, and "by faith;" whenever national and Divine purposes were made subservient to his own lusts, he failed and sinned. Thus we perceive throughout, side by side, two elements at work: the Divine and the human; Jehovah and Samson; the supernatural and the natural - intertwining, acting together, influencing each other, as we have so often noticed them throughout the course of Scripture history. Secondly, the influences of the Spirit of God upon Samson come upon him as impulses from without - sudden, mighty, and irresistible by himself and by others.

The misunderstanding and ignorance of Samson's motives on the part of his parents cannot fail to recall a similar opposition in the life of our Blessed Lord, even as, reverently speaking, this whole history foreshadows, though "afar off," that of our great Nazarite. But to return. Yielding at last to Samson, his parents, as the custom was, go with him to the betrothal at Timnath. All here and in the account of the marriage is strictly Eastern, and strictly Jewish. Nay, such is the tenacity of Eastern customs, that it might almost serve as descriptive of what would still take place in similar circumstances. But, under another aspect, we are here also on the track of direct Divine agency, all unknown probably to Samson himself. To this day "vineyards are very often far out from the villages, climbing up rough wadies and wild cliffs." In one of these, precisely in the district where he would be likely to meet wild beasts, Samson encountered a young lion. "And the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him," or "lighted upon him," the expression being notably the same as in 1 Samuel 10:10; 11:6; 16:13; 18:10. Samson rent him, as he would have torn a kid. This circumstance became "the occasion against the Philistines." For, when soon afterwards Samson and his parents returned once more for the actual marriage, he found a swarm of bees in the dried skeleton of the lion. The honey, which he took for himself and gave to his parents, became the occasion of a riddle which he propounded, after a custom usual in the East, to the "thirty companions" who acted as "friends of the

bridegroom." The riddle proved too hard for them. Unwilling to bear the loss incurred by their failure - each "a tunic" and a "change-garment," <sup>97</sup> these men threatened Samson's wife and her family with destruction.

The woman's curiosity had from the first prompted her to seek the answer from her husband. But now her importunity, quickened by fear, prevailed. Of course, she immediately told the secret to her countrymen, and Samson found himself deceived and betrayed by his wife. But this was the "occasion" sought for. Once more "the Spirit of Jehovah lighted upon Samson." There was not peace between Israel and the Philistines, only an armed truce. And so Samson slew thirty men of them in Ashkelon, and with their spoil paid those who had answered his riddle. In his anger at her treachery he now forsook for a time his bride, when her father, as it were in contempt, immediately gave her to the first of the "bridegroom's friends."

This circumstance gave "occasion" for yet another deed. Samson returns again to his wife. Finding her the wife of another, he treats this as Philistine treachery against Israel, and declares to his father-in-law and to others around: "This time I am blameless before the Philistines when I do evil unto them."

The threatened "evil" consists in tying together, two and two, three hundred jackals, tail to tail, with a burning torch between them, and so sending the maddened animals into the standing corn of the Philistines, which was just being harvested, into their vineyards, and among their olives. The destruction must have been terrible, and the infuriated Philistines took vengeance not upon Samson, but upon his wife and her family, by burning "her and her father with fire." This was cowardly as well as wicked, upon which Samson "said unto them, If (since) ye have done this, truly when I have been avenged upon you, and after that I will cease." The result was another great slaughter. But Samson, knowing the cowardice of his countrymen, felt himself now no longer safe

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<sup>97</sup> These "change-garments" were costly raiment, frequently changed.

among them, and retired to "the rock-cleft (rock-cave) Etam" ("the lair of wild beasts").

Samson's distrust had not been without sufficient ground. Afraid to meet Samson in direct conflict, the Philistines invaded the territory of Judah and spread in Lehi. Upon this, his own countrymen, as of old, not understanding "how that God by his hand would deliver them," actually came down to the number of 3000, to deliver Samson into the hand of the Philistines. Another parallel this, "afar off," to the history of Him whom His people delivered into the hands of the Gentiles! Samson offered no resistance, on condition that his own people should not attack him. Bound with two new cords, he was already within view of the hostile camp at Lehi; already he heard the jubilant shout of the Philistines, when once more "the Spirit of Jehovah came mightily upon him." Like flax at touch of fire, "flowed his bonds from off his hands."

This sudden turn of affairs, and manifestation of Samson's power, caused an immediate panic among the Philistines. Following up this effect, Samson seized the weapon readiest to hand, the jawbone of an ass, and with it slew company after company, "heap upon heap," till, probably in various encounters, no less than 1000 of the enemy strewed the ground. Only one more thing was requisite. All "this great deliverance" had evidently been given by Jehovah. But had Samson owned Him in it; had he fought and conquered "by faith," and as a true Nazarite? Once more it is through the operation of natural causes, supernaturally overruled and directed, that Samson is now seen to have been the warrior of Jehovah, and Jehovah the God of the warrior. Exhausted by the long contest with the Philistines and the heat of the day, Samson sinks faint, and is ready to perish from thirst. Then God cleaves first, as it were, the rock of Samson's heart, so that the living waters of faith and prayer gush forth, before He cleaves the rock at Lehi. Such plea as his could not remain unheeded. Like that of Moses (Exodus 32:31), or like the reasoning of Manoah's wife, it connected itself with the very covenant purposes of Jehovah and with His dealings in grace. After such battle and victory Samson could not have been allowed to perish from thirst; just as after our Lord's

victory, He could not fail to see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied; and as it holds true of the Christian in his spiritual thirst, after the great conquest achieved for him:

"He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

Then, in answer to Samson's prayer, "God clave the hollow place which is in Lehi," <sup>98</sup> probably a cleft in the rock, as erst He had done at Horeb (Exodus 17:6) and at Kadesh (Numbers 20:8, 11). But the well which sprang thence, and of which, in his extremity, Samson had drunk, ever afterwards bore the significant name En-hakkore, the well of him that had called - nor had called in vain!

### **III 20 The Sin And Fall Of Samson - Jehovah Departs From Him - Samson's Repentance, Faith, And Death**

#### **Judges 16**

THE closing verse of Judges 15 marks also the close of this period of Samson's life. Henceforth it is a record of the terrible consequences, first of using God's gift, entrusted for the highest and holiest purposes, for self-indulgence, and then of betraying and losing it. And this betrayal and loss are ever the consequence of taking for self what is meant for God, just as in the parable of the prodigal son the demand for the portion of goods which belonged to him is followed by the loss of all, by want and misery. And here, in this its second stage, the history of Samson closely follows that of Israel. As Israel claimed for self, and would have used for self the gifts and calling of God; as it would have boasted in its Nazarite-strength and trusted in it, irrespective of its real meaning and the object of its bestowal, so now Samson. He goes down to Gaza, one of the fortified strongholds of the Philistines, not impelled by the Spirit of Jehovah, but for self-

<sup>98</sup> This is unquestionably the meaning of the text, and not, as in the Authorized Version, "a hollow place that was in the jaw." The mistake has arisen from the circumstance that Lehi means a jaw-bone, the locality having obtained the name from Samson's victory with the jaw-bone (Ramath-lehi, "the hill or height of the jaw-bone," Judges 15:17). The name Lehi is used proleptically in ver. 9, 14, that is, by anticipation.

indulgence,<sup>99</sup> confident and boastful in what he regards as his own strength.

Nor does that strength yet fail him, at least outwardly. For God is faithful to His promise, and so long as Samson has not cast away His help, it shall not fail him. But already he is on the road to it, and the night at Gaza must speedily be followed by the story of Delilah. Meanwhile, the men of Gaza and Samson must learn another lesson - so far as they are capable of it. All night the guards are posted by the gates to wait for the dawn, when, as they expect, with the opening of the gates, Samson will leave the city, and they take him prisoner. During the night, however, they may take their sleep; for are not the gates strong and securely fastened? But, at midnight, Samson leaves the city, carrying with him its gates, and putting them down on "the top of a hill which faces towards Hebron,"<sup>100</sup> that is, at a distance of about half an hour to the south-east of Gaza.

Samson had once more escaped the Philistines; but the hour of his fall was at hand. To regard the God-entrusted strength as his own, and to abuse it for selfish purposes, was the first step towards betraying and renouncing that in which it really lay. Samson had ceased to be a Nazarite in heart before he ceased to be one outwardly. The story of Delilah is too well known to require detailed repetition.

Her very name - "the weak" or "longing one" - breathes sensuality, and her home is in the valley of Sorek, or of the choice red grape. The Philistine princes have learned it at last, that force cannot prevail against Samson, until by his own act of unfaithfulness he has deprived himself of his strength. It is the same story as that of Israel and its sin with Baal-Peor. The same device is adopted which Balaam had suggested for the ruin of Israel, and, alas! with the same success. The five princes of the Philistines promise each to give Delilah

1000 and 100 shekels, or 5500 in all, about 700 pounds, as the reward of her treachery. Three times has Samson eluded her persistency to find out his secret. Each time she has had watchers in an adjoining apartment ready to fall upon him, if he had really lost his strength. But the third time he had, in his trifling with sacred things, come dangerously near his fall, as in her hearing he connected his strength with his hair. And yet, despite all warnings, like Israel of old, he persisted in his sin.

At last it has come. He has opened all his heart to Delilah, and she knows it. But Scripture puts the true explanation of the matter before us, in its usual emphatic manner, yet with such manifest avoidance of seeking for effect, that only the careful, devout reader will trace it. The facts are as follows: When Samson betrays his secret to Delilah, he says (16:17): "If I be shaven, then my strength will go from me," whereas, when the event actually takes place, Scripture explains it: "He knew not that Jehovah was departed from him." In this contrast between his fond conceit about his own strength and the fact that it was due to the presence of Jehovah, lies the gist of the whole matter. As one writes: "The superhuman strength of Samson lay not in his uncut hair, but in this, that Jehovah was with him. But Jehovah was with him only so long as he kept his Nazarite vow." Or, in the words of an old German commentary: "The whole misery of Samson arose from this, that he appropriated to himself what God had done through him. God allows his strength to be destroyed, that in bitter experience he might learn, how without God's presence he was nothing at all. And so our falls always teach us best." But, as ever, sin proves the hardest taskmaster. Every indignity is heaped on fallen Samson. His eyes are put out; he is loaded with fetters of brass, and set to the lowest prison work of slaves. And here, also, the history of Samson finds its parallel in that of blinded Israel, with the judgment of bondage, degradation, and suffering, consequent upon their great national sin of casting aside their Nazarite vow.

But, blessed be God, neither the history nor its parallel stops here. For "the gifts and callings of God are without repentance." The sacred text

<sup>99</sup> Cassel tries to prove that the place to which Samson went in Gaza was merely a hostelry - and so the ancient commentaries understood it. But the language of the text does not bear out such interpretation.

<sup>100</sup> So the text literally, and not, as in the Authorized Version, "the top of an hill that is before Hebron," for which, besides, the distance would have been far too great.



expressly has it: "And the hair of his head began to grow, as it was shorn" - that is, so soon as it had been shorn. Then began a period of godly sorrow and repentance, evidenced both by the return of God to him, and by his last deed of faith, in which for his people he sacrificed his life; herein also following the great Antitype, though "afar off." We imagine, that "the lad" who led him to the pillars on which the house of Dagon rested was a Hebrew, cognizant of Samson's hopes and prayers, and who, immediately after having placed him in the fatal position, left the temple, and then carried the tidings to Samson's "brethren" (16:31).

It is a high day in Gaza. From all their cities have the princes of the Philistines come up; from all the country around have the people gathered. The temple of the god Dagon - the fish-god, protector of the sea - is festively adorned and thronged. Below, the lords of the Philistines and all the chief men of the people are feasting at the sacrificial meal; above, along the roof, the gallery all around is crowded by three thousand men and women who look down on the spectacle beneath. It is a feast of thanksgiving to Dagon, of triumph to Philistia, of triumph against Jehovah and His people, and over captive Samson. The image of Dagon - the body of a fish with the head and hands of a man - which less than twenty years before had fallen and been broken before the ark of Jehovah (1 Samuel 5:4), stands once more proudly defying the God of Israel. And now the mirth and revelry have reached their highest point: Samson is brought in, and placed in the middle of the temple, between the central pillars which uphold the immense roof and the building itself. A few words whispered to his faithful Hebrew servant, and Samson's arms encircle the massive pillars. And then an unuttered agonizing cry of repentance, of faith from the Nazarite, once more such, who will not only subordinate self to the nation and to his calling, but surrender life itself! Blind Samson is groping for a new light - and the brightness of another morning is already gilding his horizon. With all his might he bows himself. The pillars reel and give way. With one terrible crash fall roof and gallery, temple and image of Dagon; and in the ruins perish with Samson the lords of the Philistines and the flower of the people.

It has been told in Zorah. Gaza and Philistia are hushed in awe and mourning. Samson's brethren and his father's house come down. From the ruins they search out the mangled body of the Nazarite. No one cares to interfere with them. Unmolested they bear away the remains, and lay them to rest in the burying-place of Manoah his father.

And so ends the period of the judges. Samson could have had no successor - he closed an epoch. But already at Shiloh a different reformation was preparing; and with different weapons will repentant Israel, under Samuel, fight against the Philistines, and conquer!

### **III\_21 Social And Religious Life In Bethlehem In The Days Of The Judges - The Story Of Ruth - King David's Ancestors**

#### **Ruth 1 to 4**

YET another story of a very different kind from that of Samson remains to be told. It comes upon us with such sweet contrast, almost like a summer's morning after a night of wild tempest. And yet without this story our knowledge of that period would be incomplete. It was "in the days when the judges judged" <sup>101</sup> - near the close of that eventful period. West of the Jordan, Jair and Eli held sway in Israel, while east of the river the advancing tide of Ammon had not yet been rolled back by Jephthah, the Gileadite. Whether the incursions of the Ammonites had carried want and wretchedness so far south into Judah as Bethlehem (Judges 10:9), or whether it was only due to strictly natural causes, there was a "famine in the land," and this became, in the wonder-working Providence of God, one of the great links in the history of the kingdom of God. <sup>102</sup>

Bearing in mind the general characteristics of the period, and such terrible instances of religious

<sup>101</sup> Critics differ widely as to the exact time when the events recorded in the Book of Ruth took place. Keil makes Boaz a contemporary of Gideon; but we have seen no reason to depart from the account of Josephus, who lays this history in the days of Eli.

<sup>102</sup> The Book of Ruth occupies an intermediate position between that of the Judges and those of Samuel - it is a supplement to the former and an introduction to the latter. So much "romance" has been thrown about the simple narrative of this book, as almost to lose sight of its real purport.

apostasy and moral degeneracy as those recorded in the two Appendices to the Book of Judges (Judges 17-21), we turn with a feeling of intense relief to the picture of Jewish life presented to us in the Book of Ruth.<sup>103</sup> Sheltered from scenes of strife and semi-heathenism, the little village of Bethlehem had retained among its inhabitants the purity of their ancestral faith and the simplicity of primitive manners.

Here, embosomed amidst the hills of Judah, where afterwards David pastured his father's flocks, and where shepherds heard angels hail the birth of "David's greater Son," we seem to feel once again the healthful breath of Israel's spirit, and we see what moral life it was capable of fostering alike in the individual and in the family. If Boaz was, so to speak, the patriarch of a village, in which the old Biblical customs were continued, the humblest homes of Bethlehem must have preserved true Israelitish piety in its most attractive forms. For, unless the Moabitess Ruth had learned to know and love the land and the faith of Israel in the Bethlehemite household of Elimelech, transported as it was for a time into the land of Moab, she would not have followed so persistently her mother-in-law, away from her own home, to share her poverty, to work, if need be, even to beg, for her. And from such ancestry, nurtured under such circumstances, did the shepherd king of Israel spring, the ancestor and the type of the Lord and Savior of men. These four things, then, seem the object of the Book of Ruth: to present a supplement by way of contrast to the Book of Judges; to show the true spirit of Israel; to exhibit once more the mysterious connection between Israel and the Gentiles, whereby the latter, at the most critical periods of Israel's history, seem most unexpectedly called in to take a leading part; and to trace the genealogy of David. Specially perhaps the latter two. For, as one has beautifully remarked: If, as regards its contents, the Book of Ruth stands on the threshold of the history of

<sup>103</sup>

The Book of Ruth numbers just eighty-five verses. In the Hebrew Bible it is placed among the Hagiographa, for dogmatic reasons on which it is needless to enter. In Hebrew MSS. it is among the five Megilloth "rolls" (Song, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther). Among the Jews it is very significantly read on the feast of weeks.

David, yet, as regards its spirit, it stands, like the Psalms, at the threshold of the Gospel. Not merely on account of the genealogy of Christ, which leads up to David and Boaz, but on account of the spirit which the teaching of David breathes, do we love to remember that Israel's great king sprang from the union of Boaz and Ruth, which is symbolical of that between Israel and the Gentile world.

Everything about this story is of deepest interest - the famine in Bethlehem, "the house of bread," evidently caused, as afterwards its removal, by the visitation of God (Ruth 1:6); the hints about the family of Elimelech; even their names: Elimelech, "my God is king;" his wife, Naomi, "the pleasant," and their sons Mahlon and Chilion (rendered by some "the weak," "the faint;" by others "the jubilant," "the crowned").<sup>104</sup>

The family is described as "Ephrathites of Bethlehem-Judah." The expression is apparently intended to convey, that the family had not been later immigrants, but original Jewish settlers - or, as the Jewish commentator have it, patrician burghers of the ancient Ephrath, or "fruitfulness" (Genesis 35:19; 48:7; comp. 1 Samuel 17:12; Micah 5:2). At one time the family seems to have been neither poor nor of inconsiderable standing (Ruth 1:19-21; 2; 3). But now, owing to "the famine," Ephrath was no longer "fruitfulness," nor yet Bethlehem "the house of bread;" and Elimelech, unable, on account of the troubles in the west, to go for relief either into Philistia or into Egypt, migrated beyond Jordan, and the reach of Israel's then enemies, to "sojourn" in Moab.

There is no need to attempt excuses for this separation from his brethren and their fate on the part of Elimelech, nor for his seeking rest among those hereditary enemies of Israel, outside Palestine, on whom a special curse seems laid (Deuteronomy 23:6). We have only to mark the progress of this story to read in it the judgment of God on this step. Of what befell the family in Moab, we know next to nothing. But this we are emphatically told, that Elimelech died a stranger in

<sup>104</sup>

The rendering of the names by Josephus is evidently fanciful. The widely differing translations, which we have given in the text, show the divergence of critics, who derive the name from so very different roots.



the strange land. Presently Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite wives - Mahlon, Ruth (Ruth 4:10); Chilion, Orpah.

So other ten years passed. Then the two young men died, each childless, and Naomi was left desolate indeed. Thus, as one has remarked: "The father had feared not to be able to live at home. But scarcely had he arrived in the strange land when he died. Next, the sons sought to found a house in Moab; but their house became their grave. Probably, they had wished not to return to Judah, at least till the famine had ceased - and when it had ceased, they were no more. The father had gone away to have more, and to provide for his family - and his widow was now left without either children or possession!" Similarly, we do not feel it needful to attempt vindicating the marriage of these two Hebrew youths with Moabite wives. For there really was no express command against such unions. The instances in Scripture (Judges 3:6; 1 Kings 11:1; Nehemiah 13:23), which are sometimes quoted as proof to the contrary, are not in point, since they refer to the marriage of Hebrews in the land of Israel, not to that of those resident outside its boundaries (comp. Deuteronomy 7:3), and in the case of such marriages this is evidently an important element.

And now tidings reached Moab, that "Jehovah had visited his people to give them bread." Naomi heard in it a call to return to her own land and home. According to eastern fashion, her daughters-in-law accompanied her on the way. When Naomi deemed that duty of proper respect sufficiently discharged, she stopped to dismiss them - as she delicately put it - to their "mother's" houses, with tenderly spoken prayer, that after all their sorrow the God of Israel would give them rest in a new relationship, as they had dealt lovingly both with the dead and with her. Closely examined, her words are found to convey, although with most exquisite delicacy, that, if her daughters-in-law went with her, they must expect to remain forever homeless and strangers. She could offer them no prospect of wedded happiness in her own family, and she wished to convey to them, that no Israelite in his own land would ever wed a daughter of Moab. It was a noble act of self-denial on the part of the aged Hebrew widow by

this plain speaking to strip herself of all remaining comfort, and to face the dark future, utterly childless, alone, and helpless. And when one of them, Orpah, turned back, though with bitter sorrow at the parting, Naomi had a yet more trying task before her. Ruth had, indeed, fully understood her mother-in-law's meaning; but there was another sacrifice which she must be prepared to make, if she followed Naomi. She must not only be parted from her people, and give up forever all worldly prospects, but she must also be prepared to turn her back upon her ancestral religion. But Ruth had long made her choice, and the words in which she intimated it have deservedly become almost proverbial in the church. There is such ardor and earnestness about them, such resolution and calmness, as to lift them far above the sphere of mere natural affection or sense of duty. They intimate the deliberate choice of a heart which belongs in the first place to Jehovah, the God of Israel (1:17), and which has learned to count all things but loss for the excellency of this knowledge. Although the story of Ruth has been invested with romance from its sequel, there is nothing romantic about her present resolve. Only the sternest prose of poverty is before her. Not to speak of the exceedingly depressing influence of her language (1:13, 20, 21), Naomi had been careful to take from her any hope of a future, such as she had enjoyed in the past. In truth, the choice of Ruth is wholly unaccountable, except on the ground that she felt herself in heart and by conviction one of a Hebrew household - an Israelitish woman in soul and life, and that although she should in a sense be disowned by those with whom she had resolved to cast in her lot.

There was stir in the quiet little village of Bethlehem - especially among the women <sup>105</sup> - when Naomi unexpectedly returned after her long absence, and that in so altered circumstances. The lamentations of the widow herself made her even repudiate the old name of Naomi for Mara ("bitter"), for that "Jehovah" had "testified

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<sup>105</sup> The Hebrew text significantly marks "they said," "call me not" (Ruth 1:20) with the feminine gender.

against," and "Shaddai" <sup>106</sup> afflicted her. Whether or not Naomi and her acquaintances really understood the true meaning of this "testifying" on the part of Jehovah, certain it is, that the temporary excitement of her arrival soon passed away, and the widow and her Moabite companion were left to struggle on alone in their poverty. Apparently no other near relatives of Elimelech were left, for Boaz himself is designated in the original as "an acquaintance to her husband," <sup>107</sup> though the term indicates also relationship. And thus through the dreary winter matters only grew worse and worse, till at last early spring brought the barley-harvest.

It was one of those arrangements of the law, which, by its exquisite kindness and delicacy - in such striking contrast to the heathen customs of the time - shows its Divine origin, that what was dropped, or left, or forgotten in the harvest, was not to be claimed by the owner, but remained, as a matter of right, for the poor, the widows, and emphatically also for the "stranger." As if to confute the later thoughts of Jewish narrowness, "the stranger" alone is mentioned in all the three passages where this command occurs (Leviticus 19:9, 10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-22). <sup>108</sup>

Thus would the desolate share in Israel's blessings - and that as of Divine right rather than of human charity, while those who could no longer work for others might, as it were, work for themselves. Yet it must have been a bitter request, when Ruth, as if entreating a favor, asked Naomi's leave to go and glean in the fields, in the hope that she might "find favor" in the sight of master and reapers, so as not to be harshly spoken to, or roughly dealt with. And this was all - all that Ruth had apparently experienced of the "blessedness of following the Lord," for Whose sake she had left home and

<sup>106</sup> Professor Cassel quotes parallel passages from Genesis to show that Shaddai means specially the God Who gives fruitfulness and increase.

<sup>107</sup> Not, as in the Authorized Version, "a kinsman of her husband's." The Rabbis make him a nephew of Elimelech, with as little reason as they represent Naomi and Ruth arriving just as they buried the first wife of Boaz! The derivation of the word Boaz is matter of dispute. We still prefer that which would render the name: "in him strength."

<sup>108</sup> May we ask those who doubt the early authorship of Deuteronomy, how they account for this circumstance?

friends! But there is a sublimeness in the words of Scripture which immediately follow - a carelessness of effect, and yet a startling surprise characteristic of God's dealings. As Ruth went on her bitter errand, not knowing whither, Scripture puts it: - "her hap happened the portion of field belonging to Boaz" - the same Divine "hap" by which sleep fled from Ahasuerus on that decisive night; the same "hap" by which so often, what to the careless onlooker seems a chance "occurrence," is sent to us from God directly.

The whole scene is most vividly sketched. Ruth has come to the field of Boaz; she has addressed herself to "the servant that was set over the reapers," and obtained his leave to "glean" after the reapers, and to "gather in the sheaves." <sup>109</sup> From early morn she has followed them, and, as the overseer afterwards informs Boaz (2:7), "her sitting in the house," whether for rest or talk, had been "but little."

And now the sun is high up in the heavens, when Boaz comes among his laborers. In true Israelitish manner he salutes them: "Jehovah with you!" to which they respond, "Jehovah bless thee!" He could not but have known "all the poor" (in the conventional sense) in Bethlehem, and Ruth must have led a very retired life, never seeking company or compassion, since Boaz requires to be informed who the Moabite damsel was. But though a stranger to her personally, the story of Ruth was well known to Boaz. Seen in the light of her then conduct and bearing, its spiritual meaning and her motives would at once become luminous to Boaz. For such a man to know, was to do what God willed. Ruth was an Israelite indeed, brave, true, and noble. She must not go to any other field than his; she must not be treated like ordinary gleaners, but remain there, where he had spoken to her, "by the maidens," so that, as the reapers went forwards, and the maidens after them to bind the sheaves, she might be the first to glean; she must share the privileges of his household; and he must take care that she should be unmolested.

<sup>109</sup> Professor Cassel has pointed out the distinction between the expression "in the sheaves" (2:7) and "between the sheaves" (ver. 15), the former being after the reapers, the latter among them

It is easier, even for the children of God, to bear adversity than prosperity, especially if it come after long delay and unexpectedly. But Ruth was "simple" in heart; or, as the New Testament expresses it, her "eye was single," and God preserved her. And now, in the altered circumstances, she still acts quite in character with her past. She complains not of her poverty; she explains not how unused she had been to such circumstances; but she takes humbly, and with surprised gratitude, that to which she had no claim, and which as a "stranger" she had not dared to expect. Did she, all the while, long for a gleam of heaven's light - for an Israelitish welcome, to tell her that all this came from the God of Israel, and for His sake? It was granted her, and that more fully than she could have hoped. Boaz knew what she had done for man, and what she had given up for God. Hers, as he now assured her, would be recompense for the one, and a full reward of the other, and that from Jehovah, the God of Israel, under Whose wings she had come to trust. And now for the first time, and when it is past, the secret of her long-hidden sorrow bursts from Ruth, as she tells it to Boaz: "Thou hast consoled me, and spoken to the heart of thine handmaid."

What follows seems almost the natural course of events - natural, that Boaz should accord to her the privileges of a kinswoman; natural also, that she should receive them almost unconscious of any distinction bestowed on her - keep and bring home part even of her meal to her mother-in-law (2:18), and still work on in the field till late in the evening (ver. 17). But Naomi saw and wondered at what Ruth's simplicity and modesty could have never perceived. Astonished at such a return of a day's gleanings, she had asked for details, and then, without even waiting to hear her daughter's reply, had invoked God's blessing on the yet unknown dispenser of this kindness. And so Ruth the Moabitess has begun to teach the language of thanksgiving to her formerly desponding Hebrew mother! But when she has told her story, as before to Boaz, so now to Naomi its spiritual meaning becomes luminous. In her weakness, Naomi had murmured; in her unbelief, she had complained; she had deemed herself forsaken of God and afflicted. All the while, however she and hers might have erred and strayed, God had never left

off His kindness either to the living or to the dead!

<sup>110</sup> And it is only after she has thus given thanks, that she explains to the astonished Ruth: "The man is near unto us - he is one of our redeemers" (comp. Leviticus 25:25; Deuteronomy 25:5). Still even so, no further definite thoughts seem to have shaped themselves in the mind of either of the women. And so Ruth continued in quiet work in the fields of Boaz all the barley-harvest and unto the end of the wheat-harvest, a period of certainly not less than two months.

But further thought and observation brought a new resolve to Naomi. The two months which had passed had given abundant evidence of the utter absence of all self-consciousness on the part of Ruth, of her delicacy and modesty in circumstances of no small difficulty. If these rare qualities must have been observed by Naomi, they could not have remained unnoticed by Boaz, as he daily watched her bearing. Nor yet could Ruth have been insensible to the worth, the piety, and the kindness of him who had been the first in Israel to speak comfort to her heart. That, in such circumstances, Naomi, recognizing a true Israelitess in her daughter-in-law, should have sought "rest" for her - and that rest in the house of Boaz, was alike to follow the clear indications of Providence, and what might be called the natural course of events. Thus, then, all the actors in what was to follow were prepared to take their parts. The manner in which it was brought about must not be judged by our western notions, although we are prepared to defend its purity and delicacy in every particular. Nor could Naomi have well done otherwise than counsel as she did. For the law which fixed on the next-of-kin the duty of redeeming a piece of land (Leviticus 25:25), did not connect with it the obligation of marrying the childless widow of the owner, which (strictly speaking) only devolved upon a brother-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5); although such seems to have been the law of custom in Bethlehem, and this, as we believe, in strict accordance with the spirit and object, if not with the letter of the Divine commandment. Thus Naomi had no legal claim

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<sup>110</sup> It has been rightly observed, that this acknowledgment implied belief in the immortality of the soul - that the dead had not perished, but only gone from hence.

upon Boaz - not to speak of the fact, of which she must have been aware, that there was a nearer kinsman than he of Elimelech in Bethlehem. Lastly, in accordance with the law, it was not Naomi but Ruth who must lay claim to such marriage (Deuteronomy 25:7, 8).

Yet we should miss the whole spirit of the narrative, if, while admitting the influence of other matters, we were not to recognize that the law of redemption and of marriage with a childless widow, for the purpose of "not putting out a name in Israel," had been the guiding principle in the conduct of all these three - Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. And, indeed, of the value and importance of this law there cannot be fuller proof than that furnished by this story itself - bearing in mind that from this next-of-kin-union descended David, and, "according to the flesh," the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Keeping all this in view, we proceed to gather up the threads of our story. By the advice of her mother-in-law, Ruth puts off alike her widow's and her working dress. Festively arrayed as a bride - though, assuredly, not to be admired by Boaz, since the transaction was to take place at night - she goes to the threshing-floor, where, as the wind sprang up at even, Boaz was to winnow his barley. Unobserved, she watcheth where he lies down, and, softly lifting the coverlet, lays herself at his feet. At midnight, accidentally touching the form at his feet, Boaz wakes with a start - and "bent down, and, behold a woman lying at his feet!" In reply to his inquiry, the few words she speaks - exquisitely beautiful in their womanly and Scriptural simplicity - explain her conduct and her motive. Two things here require to be kept in mind: Boaz himself sees nothing strange or unbecoming in what Ruth has done; on the contrary, he praises her conduct as surpassing all her previous claims to his respect. Again, the language of Boaz implies that Ruth, although daring what she had felt to be right, had done it with the fear which, in the circumstances, womanly modesty would prompt. We almost seem to hear the low whispered tones, and the tremor of her voice, as we catch the gentle, encouraging words of Boaz' reply: "My daughter," and as he stills the throbbing of her heart with his kindly-

spoken, fatherly: "Fear not!" No thought but of purity and goodness,<sup>111</sup> and of Israel's law intruded on the midnight converse of those who were honored to become the ancestors of our Lord.

And now he, on his part, has explained to Ruth, how there is yet a nearer kinsman, whose claims must first be set aside, if the law is to be strictly observed. And, assuredly, if observance of the law of redemption, with all that it implied in Israel, had not been the chief actuating motive of Boaz and Ruth, there would have been no need first to refer the matter to the nearer kinsman, since there could be no possible hindrance to the union of those whose hearts evidently belonged to each other.

The conduct of each party having been clearly determined, they lie down again in silence. What remained of the short summer's night soon passed. Before the dawn had so far brightened that one person could have recognized another, she left the threshing-floor, bearing to her mother the gift of her kinsman, as if in pledge that her thoughts had been understood by him, and that her hope concerning the dead and the living would be realized.<sup>112</sup>

The story now hastens to a rapid close. Early in the morning Boaz goes up to the gate, the usual place for administering law, or doing business. He sits down as one party to a case; calls the unnamed nearer kinsman, as he passes by, to occupy the place of the other party, and ten of the elders as witnesses or umpires - the number ten being not only symbolical of completeness, but from immemorial custom, and afterwards by law, that which constituted a legal assembly. To understand what passed between Boaz and the unnamed kinsman, we must offer certain explanations of the

<sup>111</sup> Professor Cassel reminds us of a legal determination in the Mishnah (Yebam ii. 8), which the learned reader may compare. The reference, though apt, however, rather breaks in as prose upon the sublime beauty of the scene. It needed not such determinations to guard the purity of the threshing-floor of Boaz.

<sup>112</sup> We mention, without pronouncing any opinion upon it, that some - alike Jews and Christians - have seen a symbolism in the number six of the measures of barley which Ruth brought with her, as if days of work and toil were done, and "rest" about to be granted.



state of the case and of the law applying to it, different from any hitherto proposed. For the difficulty lies in the sale of the property by Naomi - nor is it diminished by supposing that she had not actually disposed of, but was only offering it for sale. In general we may here say, that the law (Numbers 27:8, 11) does not deal with any case precisely similar to that under consideration. It only contemplates one of two things, the death of a childless man, when his next-of-kin (speaking broadly) is bound to marry his widow (Deuteronomy 25:5); or else a forced sale of property through poverty, when the next-of-kin of the original proprietor may redeem the land (Leviticus 25:25). It is evident, that the former must be regarded as a duty, the latter as a privilege attaching to kinship, the object of both being precisely the same, the preservation of the family (rather than of the individual) in its original state. But although the law does not mention them, the same principle would, of course, apply to all analogous cases. Thus it might, for example, be, that a man would marry the widow, but be unable to redeem the property. On the other hand, he never could claim to redeem property without marrying the widow, to whom as the representative of her dead husband the property attached. In any case the property of the deceased husband was vested in a childless widow. In fact, so long as the childless widow lived, no one could have any claim on the property, since she was potentially the heir of her deceased husband. All authorities admit, that in such a case she had the use of the property, and a passage in the Mishnah (Yebam. iv. 3) declares it lawful for her to sell possessions, though it does seem very doubtful whether the expression covers the sale of her deceased husband's land. Such, however, would have been in strict accordance with the principle and the spirit of the law. In the case before us then, the property still belonged to Naomi, though in reversion to Ruth as potentially representing Elimelech and Mahlon, while the claim to be married to the next-of-kin could, of course, in the circumstances, only devolve upon Ruth. Thus the property still held by Naomi went, in equity and in law, with the hand of Ruth, nor had any one claim upon the one without also taking the other. No kinsman had performed the kinsman's duty to

Ruth, and therefore no kinsman could claim the privilege of redemption connected with the land. With the hand of Ruth the land had, so to speak, been repudiated. But as the kinsman had virtually refused to do his part, and Naomi was unable to maintain her property, she disposed of it, and that quite in the spirit of the law. There was no wrong done to any one. The only ground for passing the land to a kinsman would have been, that he would preserve the name of the dead. But this he had virtually refused to do. On the other hand, it was still open to him to redeem the land, if, at the same time, he would consent to wed Ruth. It would have been the grossest injustice to have allowed the privilege of redeeming a property to the kinsman who refused to act as kinsman. Instead of preserving a name in Israel, it would in reality have extinguished it forever.

This was precisely the point in discussion between Boaz and the unnamed kinsman. Boaz brought, first, before him the privilege of the kinsman: redemption of the land. This he accepted. But when Boaz next reminded him, that this privilege carried with it a certain duty towards Ruth, and that, if the latter were refused, the former also was forfeited, he ceded his rights to Boaz.<sup>113</sup> The bargain was ratified according to ancient custom in Israel by a symbolical act, of which we find a modification in Deuteronomy 25:9. Among all ancient nations the "shoe" was a symbol either of departure (Exodus 12:11), or of taking possession (comp. Psalm 60:8).<sup>114</sup>

In this instance the kinsman handed his shoe to Boaz - that is, ceded his possession to him. Alike the assembled elders, and those who had gathered around to witness the transaction, cordially hailed its conclusion by wishes which proved, that "all the city knew that Ruth was a virtuous woman,"

<sup>113</sup> The reason which he assigns (Ruth 4:6), admits of different interpretations. Upon the whole I still prefer the old view, that his son by Ruth would have been the sole heir - the more so, that in this particular case (as we find in the sequel, 4:15) Ruth's son would be obliged to be "the nourisher" of Naomi's "old age."

<sup>114</sup> A popular illustration of the former is the custom of throwing a shoe after a bride on her departure from her father's home. This also explains the custom of kissing the Pope's slipper, as claiming possession of, and dominion in the Church.



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and were prepared to receive the Moabitess as a mother in Israel, even as Tamar had proved in the ancestry of Boaz. It had all been done in God and with God, and the blessing invoked was not withheld. A son gladdened the hearts of the family of Bethlehem. Naomi had now a "redeemer," not only to support and nourish her, nor merely to "redeem" the family property, but to preserve the name of the family in Israel. And that "redeemer" - a child, and yet not a child of Boaz; a redeemer-son, and yet not a son of Naomi - was the father of Jesse. And so the story which began in poverty, famine, and exile leads up to the throne of David. Undoubtedly this was the main object for which it was recorded: to give us the history of David's family; and with his genealogy, traced not in every link but in symbolical outline,<sup>115</sup> the Book of Ruth appropriately closes. It is the only instance in which a book is devoted to the domestic history of a woman, and that woman a stranger in Israel. But that woman was the Mary of the Old Testament.

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<sup>115</sup> This is not the place to enter into the question of the Old Testament genealogies, but it is evident that five names cannot cover the period of 430 years in Egypt, nor yet other five that from the Exodus to David. On the other hand, it deserves notice that the names mentioned amount exactly to ten - the number of perfection, and that these are again arranged into twice five, each division covering very nearly the same length of period.

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