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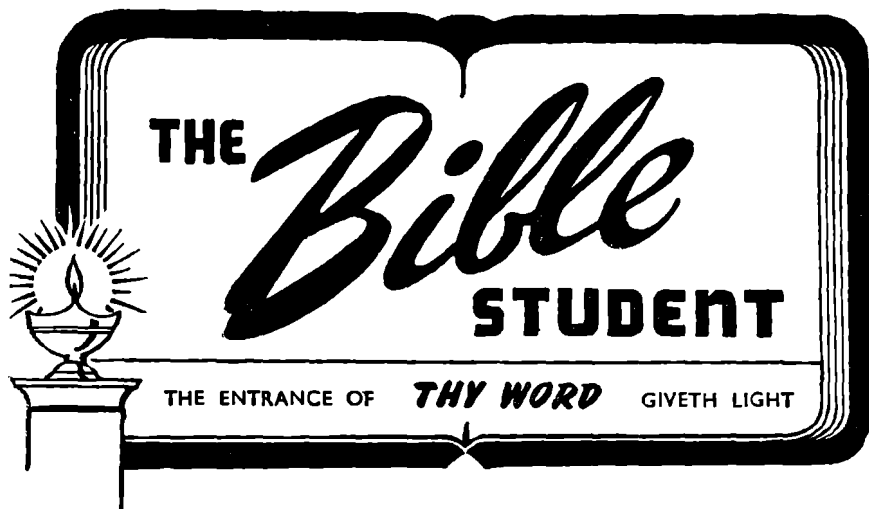
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it to be noted, that the prose narrative itself, however early it may be, gives the lie to the view that a man's sufferings are necessarily the consequence of his sin. The prose narrative thus makes a distinctive and valuable contribution to the treatment of the problem of suffering. How the problem is treated at greater length and in more detail in the poetical body of the book will be the consideration of our next paper.

(to be continued)

THE THEOPHANIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

By ALEX SOUTTER

VI. Gideon and the Angel

Like the dew-filled fleece, Gideon was divinely endued to witness for God in a parched and desolate land. The central feature of the story of his call is the manifestation of Jehovah in angelic form. We have here another of those pre-manifestations of Christ, similar to those already dealt with in these studies. When the Angel is spoken of, the definite article is used, not merely 'an angel', but 'the Angel'. Frequent mention is made of this term—see vv. 11, 12, 20, 21 and 22 (R.V.). It is shown to be synonymous with 'the Lord' (Jehovah)—see vv. 14, 15, and 16—proving that the Angel and Jehovah are one and the same. It is an amazing thought that prior to His incarnation, our Lord's holy footprints hallowed this earth of ours in this mystic fashion. His appearance was evidently that of a man, for there is nothing to show that Gideon was in any wise startled by His presence, when first he saw Him.

The Desolation of Sin was seen all over the land. Israel lay in the dust of defeat. The chosen nation was degraded, demoralised, dismayed. Midian, helped by Amalek and the children of the East, was the aggressor. Midian was the son of Abraham by his wife Keturah, and Abraham sent him away east so that Isaac might dwell undisturbed (Gen. 25:1-6). He is thought to have settled in the Gulf of Akaba. Amalek (Midian's ally)

was Esau's grandson. So they both were distant cousins of the Israelites. But as foes they were merciless. They gave no quarter. And having overcome Israel, they left them with no food. Israel was forced to live in caves. Food and cattle were alike requisitioned by Midian. This inveterate foe should have been subdued. 'Vex the Midianities, and smite them: for they vex you with their wives, wherewith they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor . . . in the day of the plague' (Num. 25:17, 18). It was into the hands of this same clan that Joseph was sold. They stand for the sins of passion that war against the soul. Well might God say to Israel through Moses, 'Vex them'. The sacred writer in Numbers 25 unmasks Israel's sin and shame; he tells the story of how God's people joined themselves to Baal Peor, to their undoing. Fierce judgment followed. And now, 160 years later, Midian who had trapped Israel in the matter of Peor is Israel's cruel tyrant. How frequently this sad tale has been re-told in the lives of God's redeemed ones. The record of Israel's plight provides us with the urge to examine our own spiritual state in the following manner: (1) Where do we dwell? Is our heritage in the heavenlies, or in the caves of the world? (2) What do we sow? Fleshly thoughts and acts and words, or spiritual seed? (3) How do we worship? Do we offer, in the words of Hosea, as young bullocks (same word as in Lev. 4:3) the offering of our lips, or are we so impoverished that we have nothing at all for God? Israel's condition was pitiful in the extreme. In their national life sin had abounded, but in their deep distress they 'cried unto the Lord'. Grace now began to superabound.

An unnamed prophet (vv. 7-10) came with a divine message to erring Israel. This was the first sign of God's gracious visitation, the first token of the intervention of God in a period of darkest declension when the Israelites were so utterly unable to save themselves. The prophet prepared the way both for the Theophany that followed and for the great victory that was won on the field of battle. The Word of God preceded the Work of God; the Message presaged the Miracle. The prophet dealt with God's faithfulness on the one hand and Israel's failure on the other. But it is remarkable how much is said about the former and how little is said of the latter. The man of God certainly indicted Israel, but first and foremost he vindicated God. About 50 words are used to describe what God did; 20 words

are employed to record what God said; and only 7 words form his indictment at the end. Like a skilled physician he set about, not coarsely to rub the salt in a wound that was deep and sore, but to apply the ointment of truth in a way that would at once cleanse and heal. Gideon's questions, later on, reveal an enquiring mind, and this had, in all likelihood, been given its exercise through the prophet's words. The prophet was unnamed. It would be an interesting and instructive study to gather together all those instances where prophets and men of God wrought and taught without their identity being disclosed. See 1 Sam. 2:27-36; 1 Kings 13; 1 Kings 20; 2 Chron. 25. Their presence on the page of Scripture is a refreshing reminder of this fact that whilst the man may be hid, the message never should be hid. 'I have not refrained my lips, O Lord, Thou knowest. I have not hid Thy righteousness within my heart' (Ps. 40:9, 10).

Now we come to *Gideon's Call* (vv. 11-18). Like Joshua whom we considered in our previous study, Gideon belonged to the family of Joseph. There are several points of resemblance between these two men of God that should be noted. To Joshua the Lord said at his commission, 'I will be with thee'; and to Gideon, 'Surely I will be with thee'. Gideon, like Joshua, was a man of valour. Both were men of action, probably men of few words. Both alike knew no neutrality, they refused to have truck with the foe. Moreover, with equal success, they used strange strategy, unheard of strategy, as witness the seven day march around the city and the use of earthen pots and torches; trumpets, pots and torches are strange weapons. And, last, but not least, they both learned the art of giving the soft answer to their petulant fellow clansmen (Josh. 17:14-17; Judg. 8:12) with very pleasing results. But note this arresting contrast: Joshua led Israel as they went forward conquering and to conquer, whereas Gideon assumed the burden of leadership when Israel lay in the trough of trouble and defeat. It is to Gideon's lasting credit that he refused to give up the fight when everything went wrong, he refused to leave his homestead and his God-given inheritance despite Midianite oppression and Amalekite intrusion. He is a picture of each humble, wholehearted believer who cleaves to God and to His Word when so many others abandon their spiritual moorings and drift on amid a wreckage of doubt and uncertainty.

It was to this sturdy young man of Manasseh with horny hand

and flint-like purpose that the Angel of the Lord appeared. No grapes of Eschol had ever loaded his table or filled his winepress, yet the winepress was not left empty or unused—it was made to serve as a threshing floor. His meagre harvest of grain was threshed there. If the wine of joy was gone he saw to it that the staff of life, in modest measure at least, would not be lacking. Thus did faith wrest the initiative from fear, and cause the young Israelite to stand in defiance against a cruel usurper. There are times when all we can do is to 'stand in the evil day and having done all to stand' (Eph. 6:13). Gideon stood; and when the right moment came he went forward to victory.

His memorable meeting with the 'Angel' took place under an oak, or terebinth. On several other occasions the terebinth is seen in Israel's history. The gods that Jacob's household brought from 'across the river' were buried under the terebinth at Shechem (Gen. 35:4)—the place of self-judgment. Absalom hung on the branches of a terebinth (2 Sam. 16:9)—the place of divine judgment. The young (unnamed) prophet of 1 Kings 13 was enticed to disobedience under a terebinth—the place of sin's seduction and therefore the cause of the first judgment as well as the second. Patriarch, prince and prophet are all seen under the terebinth. In the first case it is human worship versus divine worship; in the second, the human will versus the divine will; and in the third, the human word versus the Word of the Living God. Here beside Gideon's terebinth the Creator meets the creature, and as a consequence, worship is devoutly rendered, the will of God acknowledged, and the Word of God accepted and obeyed.

Gideon stood by his family in the hour of distress—his *fidelity* was commendable. With his own hand he threshed wheat in the winepress—his *industry* was exemplary. He stood firm despite the pressure of the enemy and therefore the Angel spoke of him as a mighty man of valor—his *courage* was noteworthy. He unburdened his questions to the Angel regarding the nation's ruin—his *exercise of heart* was genuine. And when commissioned by the Angel to lead the fight he pleaded his own nothingness—his *humility* was real. So much for Gideon. In our next section we must consider the heavenly Visitant and His display of divine solicitude, patience and power.

The Angel by the Rock (vv. 18-21) was none other than Jehovah. First we read in v. 11 that He came and sat under the terebinth. The presence of the Lord in this sitting posture is an impressive reminder of the loving solicitude resident in the heart of God for His erring people. He sat under the tree, waiting for the moment when He could speak the word of encouragement to His servant Gideon. What further proof is needed of God's desire to save the lost? And of His deep yearning to restore His backsliding people? Then when Gideon became responsive to the divine call, he asked the Angel to wait until he could bring his present (oblation) to Him. 'And He said, I will tarry until thou come again' (v. 18). Here is a theme to contemplate. All the while Gideon was absent, all the while he busied himself in preparing the unleavened cakes and the kid and the broth, there under the tree the Upholder of the Universe sat calmly, and with perfect patience, waiting for the return of His servant. The repose of heaven is neither broken nor disturbed by the turmoil of earth. 'Be still and know that I am God'. God Himself is still, and when His holy stillness fills the soul, our weakness is exchanged for His strength, our disquietude is conquered by His heavenly calm. The Angel tarried. All around, Midian had marred Immanuel's earthly Land. Quite near Gideon's winepress Baal's altar had desecrated the family inheritance. The Angel sat in solitude by the Rock. He Himself had originally made that land a pleasant land, but now it lay in ruins. This same divine Person had waited under the oak (Heb. *elon*—see R.V. a different word from terebinth) whilst Abraham made ready his 'morsel' (Gen. 18:5). But the environment there is different from the environment here as the sunlight differs from the darkness. Little did the world know that for that waiting period its Lord and Creator was gracing it with His presence. And later on, when He became incarnate, and when He tabernacled here—not for hours but for years—the world still failed to recognize Him. Of a truth, sin makes the sinner blind.

Gideon at length appeared with his present, or oblation. This word (Heb. *minchah*) is used in a twofold sense in the O.T., (1) a present, as when Jacob sent his present to Esau (Gen. 32:13); and (2) a meal offering or oblation, as in Lev. 2:1, etc. In this case it was made up of a kid, unleavened cakes and broth. (Broth is only twice mentioned in the O.T., here and

in Isa. 65:4). Was it Gideon's intention to provide a meal for the Stranger? The mention of broth would support this view. If so, then we have here a fine illustration of how God turns the temporal into the spiritual; for Gideon's present was transformed into an offering which was divinely accepted. If, on the other hand, Gideon meant it as a meal offering then it was used by the Lord to strengthen his faith in the God of his fathers. It is significant that he brought cakes made from a whole ephah of flour, which was equal to Abraham's three measures of meal (Gen. 18:6). The ephah is mentioned also in the following scriptures: Ruth 2:17: Ruth gleaned an ephah of barley; 1 Sam. 1:24: Hannah offered an ephah of flour; 1 Sam 17:17: Jesse sent an ephah of corn to his sons.

Regarding Gideon's *minchah* three things should be noted. (1) Its costliness. It was costly, like the ointment offered by Mary in John 12. The worth of the offering invariably betokens the spirituality of the offerer. The spiritual worshipper will not offer that which costs him nothing (2 Sam. 24:24). It is the carnal soul who offers the lame and the lean and the blind. Kids were scarce in Gideon's day. Midian had stolen them. His unleavened bread too was offered from a meagre earthly store but he offered it willingly and gladly. (2) Its proper presentment. This was important, inasmuch as the right thing ought only to be done in the right way. Kid and meal offering were brought in a basket but now at the Lord's command they are lifted from the basket and placed on the rock. What if Gideon had not done this? Disorder would have followed. But he obeyed; everything was done in its proper order. And (3) its acceptance. All that had gone before had but led up to this climax. Gideon had done his part; God now crowned his action with a display, a unique display, of His grace and power. The Angel touched the offering with His rod and immediately fire leapt out from the rock and consumed the offering. At other times the fire fell from heaven with this same intent. Prophet, priest and king (Elijah, 1 King 18:38; Aaron, Lev. 9:24; and Solomon, 2 Chron. 7:1) alike saw the fire descend on the sacrifice, the fire of divine acceptance and approval. But here the fire comes up from the rock. Whichever way, the meaning is plain. It was God's fire and it betokened God's approval. Although the fire is no longer visible, this same divine acceptance and approval may be enjoyed

by each redeemed offerer, whether the sacrifice is the believer's body (Rom. 12:1); the believer's money (Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:16); the believer's soul-winning efforts (Rom. 15:16); or the believer's praise (1 Peter 2:5).

The Rock has a special significance. Different words are used for 'rock' in the O.T. The first word (Heb. *tsur*) emphasizes the sharpness characteristic of the rock. The rock that was smitten (Exod. 17:6) comes under this category. The rock to which Moses was commanded to speak (Num. 20:8) is another word (Heb. *sele*) and there the emphasis is on its elevation. The first points to Christ in His humiliation and death. The second points to the Lord crowned with glory and honour at God's right hand. It is very remarkable that both Hebrew words are employed by the inspired writer in Judges 6, the first in v. 21 and the second in v. 20. 'That rock was Christ' (1 Cor. 10:4). Christ in His death is the source, the fountain-head, from whence the life-giving waters flow. Water from the rock brings us salvation from death. Fire from the rock brings certainty in place of doubt. Honey from the rock (Ps. 81:16) gives satisfaction full and free. From the rock there comes this three-fold deliverance—deliverance from death, from doubt, and from dissatisfaction. In other words, safety, certainty, and enjoyment.

The story of the *Two Altars*—forms the next part of the narrative. The one was raised—a monument of Peace; the other was removed—a herald of Power. The one raised was God's; the one removed was Baal's. The first spoke of peace within—'Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.'—Rom. 5. The second brought into exercise a new-found energy—Gideon now began to walk (and work) in newness of life—Rom. 6. The former is a picture of faith; the latter of obedience. Gideon's two altars speak to us of the full-orbed Christian life. Had he refused to build the second, his disobedience would have belied the meaning and significance of the first. Had he not known the meaning of the first, he could not have built the second. The 'peace' altar was symbolic of his life Godward; the other, of his life manward. It was the *name* of the first altar—'*Jehovah Shalom*'—that was given special prominence. It was the *place* that was so significant in the second—'the strong place'—the A.V. is 'rock', but nowhere else is this Heb. word (*maoz*) so translated. It was indeed a rock but it

was also a place of strength, for the man whom God was about to use had been divinely commissioned, graciously accepted, calmly reassured and made strong by the Lord his God. The men of the city raised their voices in opposition to Gideon for they quickly fastened the blame on him for Baal's degradation, but he remained strong for God. He occupied the place of strength for God. And, when news came of the advance of Midian and Amalek it was from the place of strength that he went forth with trumpet in hand, and in the might of the Spirit, to call his brethren from Manasseh, Asher, Naphtali and Zebulon to face the foe.

Then follows the story of the *descent of the dew*. Doubt is a dreadful die-hard. It keeps raising its head long after it has any right to exist. Despite all that God had said and done Gideon doubted still. But the Lord was gracious and sent the double sign of the dew with its double reassurance that the fast approaching battle was as good as won. Dew filled the fleece when all around was dry. Dew wet all the ground when the fleece remained dry. This double sign has an age-long significance. If the Lord's servant is divinely endued with power when all around remains withered and lifeless then he should thank God and take courage. But the warning should all the while be heeded that he may one day become withered and useless while all around showers of blessing are falling. That actually happened to Gideon. The dew departed from his life and service. It may happen to us. Hence the need of watchfulness and prayerfulness. 'Nevertheless', said Nehemiah, 'we made our prayer unto God and set a watch'. We should never lose our alertness. 'What I say unto you I say unto all: WATCH'.

CHRIST of the upward way,
My Guide divine,
Where Thou hast set Thy feet
May I place mine;
And move and march wherever Thou hast trod,
Keeping face forward up the hill of God.