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A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE TWELVE LEGIONS OF ANGELS IN THE
VALLEY OF JEHOSHAPHAT.*

(ST. MATT. XXVI. 53.)

THERE is always a special interest in acts or phrases of our Lord reported by one only of the Synoptic Evangelists. The reason why particular facts or sayings are confined to one Gospel may be sometimes that the special report reached one Evangelist only, sometimes that that Evangelist alone regarded it as too precious or significant to be lost to the Church, or else that he discerned in it an allusion or a fitness for the spiritual instruction of his destined readers, which did not present itself to the minds of the other sacred writers. Any one of these motives may have weighed with St. Matthew in his report of the words which we are considering.

In the crowded and agitated moments of our Lord's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is quite possible that some only of the words uttered would be remembered and recorded. St. Matthew was present on that momentous occasion, and had himself probably heard those words of Jesus addressed primarily to St. Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot beseech my Father, and He shall even now send me more than twelve legions of angels?" They were words which may have meant more to St. Matthew, with his keen appreciation of prophetic parallelism, than to the other bystanders, more even than to St. Peter himself. This Evangelist would vividly realize that the awful scene before him was taking place on prophetic ground. His feet were standing in the valley of Jehoshaphat, the valley of the judgment of the Lord, the valley of decision, as the prophet Joel had called it. The hope suggested by that ancient prophecy might well have occurred to his mind, and when our Lord's words fell upon his ear.

They would thus respond to a thought working in his soul. The saying is in itself deeply important and interesting as a revelation of Divine possibilities in the mind of Jesus, still more so if it can be associated with any definite word of prophecy, for which the time of fulfilment might seem to have arrived. Was then the suggested possibility of the intervention at that moment of twelve legions of angels an intentional answer to the unspoken hopes of St. Peter and the other disciples resting on a definite prediction associated with the very spot on which they stood?

The circumstances of the hour make this extremely probable. It was a decisive moment of history. The powers of evil were gathered to do their worst to the Son of God. In a true sense the nations were stirred up, and had come to the valley of Jehoshaphat; the harvest was indeed ripe, and the press full, and the vats overflowed, for their wickedness was great. Surely it was time to put in the sickle, to tread the grapes. Surely now the day of the Lord was near in the valley of decision.¹ One thing only was needed to complete the fulfilment of the prophetic picture. Would the Christ now, in accordance with the prophet's appeal, "cause His mighty ones to come down" (Joel iii. 11)? If such were His disciples' hopes, they were doomed to disappointment. Almost in the words of Joel, and certainly, we believe, with reference to them, Jesus affirms His power to beseech the Father to send the hosts of heaven to His aid in that dark hour, but at the same time teaches that not in that way would the Scriptures be fulfilled.

The Master's words came as a crushing blow to the hopes of His disciples. The effect was immediate: "They all forsook Him and fled."

The closeness of the parallelism of our Lord's words with Joel's prophecy depends of course on the interpretation

¹ See Joel iii. 11-14.

given to the expression in chapter iii. 11: "Hither cause Thy mighty ones to come down, O Lord." Although Ewald and others refer "the mighty ones" to the men of Judah, Pusey, Driver, Orelli, Delitzsch, Keil, and most commentators interpret "Thy mighty ones," or "warriors," to mean the angels of the Lord. "The mighty ones of God," says Dr. Pusey, "whom He is prayed to cause to come down, i.e. from heaven, can be no other than the mighty angels, of whom it is said, they are mighty in strength (Ps. ciii. 20, still the same word), to whom God gives charge over His own to keep them in all their ways" (Ps. xci. 1). So also Dr. Driver: "The mighty ones are no doubt the angelic hosts (Ps. lxxviii. 17; Zech. xiv. 5) whom Joel pictures as the agents of Jehovah's will."

The concluding words of this incident: "But all this is come to pass that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (St. Matt. xxvi. 56), are almost without a doubt the words of Christ, and not a comment by the Evangelist. As such they are an instructive guide in the interpretation of prophecy. To the disciples at that moment the intervention of the heavenly host would have seemed an exact fulfilment of an ancient and cherished prediction, and a realization of the Messianic hope. The Lord Jesus, on the contrary, affirms that prophecy, which is the interpretation from age to age of the eternal purpose of God, could not at that moment be fulfilled by any startling intervention of Divine force, but by the passion and death of the Son of man, the first stage in which was submission to arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

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