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THE THEOPHANIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT*

By ALEX SOUTTER

I. Hagar's Flight

The story of Hagar's flight (her name, significantly enough, means 'Flight', or 'Wandering') is exquisitely told in the minimum of words in Genesis 16. What gives this passage of Scripture so great importance is the portraiture it contains of the Angel of Jehovah. This is the first manifestation of God in angelic or human form, and therefore the first of the Theophanies of Scripture. So that, despite the smallness of Hagar's moral stature, the record enshrined in these verses is of compelling significance. Eight verses (Gen. 16:7-14), describe what happened at Beer-lahai-roi in the following chiasmus:

- A. The Spring (Divine provision) v. 7.
 - B. God calls Hagar by name (the Grace of God displayed) v. 8.
 - C. Hagar's transposed line of conduct ("return"; "submit") v. 9.
 - D. Racial increase (I will multiply thy seed") v. 10.
 - D. Racial 'head' ("call his name Ishmael") v. 11.
 - C. Ishmael's perverse character. ("wild ass of a man") v. 12.
 - B. Hagar calls God by a new Name (the human response to Grace) v. 13.
 - A. The Well (appropriation of God's provision) v. 14.
- The Ishmaelite race followed in the steps of Ishmael its head.

* It will be helpful for the sake of younger students not acquainted with the subject, that "Theophany" is the term used to describe the manifestation of the presence of God in angelic, or 'human-angelic' form in the early history of Old Testament times. There are at least seven definite instances of these appearances in the books of Exodus, Joshua, and Judges; but there are also other appearances of "the Angel of Jehovah", or "Angel of His Presence" mentioned in connection with the Exodus e.g. Exod 23: 20ff.). These Theophanies were not mere spectacular "happenings", but always had a divine, definite purpose of particular import in them. The clear distinction must be kept, therefore, between the usual meaning of angel used generally to describe spirit-beings of heavenly character, and this particular Angel of the Theophanies.

He was a son of the desert, "a wild ass among men" (R.V.), who dwelt "to the east of his brethren" (v. 12, R.V. marg.). The Bedouin of the desert may well be regarded as Ishmael's descendants. "His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him" well fits the wild ways of the Bedouin of all ages. The term Ishmaelite has also a broader signification in Gen. 37:28 where it is identified with the Midianites.

It seems strange that Ishmael, so untamed and untameable, so restless and resisting, should have sprung from the loins of Abraham. His twelve princely sons and their posterity were as fleshly and wild as their father. The Ishmaelite line continued through the centuries to move in estrangement and alienation from God. In Saul's day two or three of their tribes were driven from the region they occupied east of Jordan (1 Chron. 5:20). There they are called Hagarites. Their destruction was brought about by Reuben, Gad and Manasseh; and the inspired comment is added that the war was of God.

This darksome background throws into greater relief the record of two or three individuals belonging to Ishmael's nomad race who were raised to royal favour in David's reign. First, the Chronicler (1 Chron. 27) in setting down the names of the officers in charge of the king's substance, mentions Obil the Ishmaelite who was, appropriately, over the camels. Who could surpass those sons of the desert in their knowledge of this desert beast of burden? Then, at the end of the intriguing list of twelve names is that of Jaziz who looked after David's sheep. Last but not least! Can we not hear David saying something like this? "Now Jaziz I am putting you in charge of my flocks. Feed them. Shepherd them. Take the oversight thereof not by constraint but willingly; not merely for your monthly wage but of a ready mind. Though now a king I am still a shepherd—your chief shepherd". Then, turning back to 1 Chron. 2:17 we find evidence of another Ishmaelite occupying such a place of privilege that he married Abigail, David's sister. His son Amasa became entrapped in the rebellion of Absalom but he was made commander of David's army notwithstanding. But Joab saw to it that this honour was short-lived.

All this may seem to be an unnecessary digression from the theme in hand. But in reality the history of the race and this happening that heralded its beginnings are in closest harmony. Grace overtook those desert wanderers and gave them to taste of

God's bounty, just as grace overtook Hagar and beckoned her back to that chosen family who dwelt in a chosen land.

Writ large over the record of this divine phenomenon is the *kindness of God*. Phenomenon it undoubtedly was. For the first time in human history One of the Godhead was manifested on earth in angelic form. And to whom? To a low-born Egyptian woman; a slave; a wanderer; to one whose insolence to and contempt for Sarah her mistress compelled the latter abruptly to alter her attitude towards her. The pull of Egypt drew her away from the patriarch's home in Mamre. She fled. And God in angelic guise came down to intercept her by the spring on the way to Shur. Note how God called her by name and singled her out still further by the mention of her occupation, "Hagar, Sarai's maid". She was not left to doubt that she and none other was the object of God's solicitous love and care. We repeat, it was the kindness of God that brought Him to that green spot in the desert there to deal kindly with that young woman in her flight from Sarai. To Eve God had said, "What is this that thou hast done?" Scripture furnishes no further mention of God's direct message to a woman until we come to Gen. 16. This token of divine solicitation came not to Sarai or to any other representative of the godly line, but to Hagar. We may therefore regard this, the first of the Theophanies, as preeminently a demonstration of the kindness of God.

Further, *divine instruction* followed in the wake of this divine visitation. Hagar was doing wrong in returning to Egypt. Her propensity to wander had gained control. But the Lord went after her and turned her face towards the only place that held for her, peace and protection. Abraham was, after all, responsible for the bringing up of the child yet to be born. If Khammurabi's code of laws made it a legal custom for Hagar to become Abraham's concubine (though God's approval did not rest upon it) a higher code of laws—God's own—demanded that the father of the child should rear and nurture him. Hence this correction from the hand of God and the resultant return of Hagar to dwell under Abraham's roof until the time was ripe for her final departure.

Furthermore, the naming of the well shows to what extent this desert experience had been to Hagar a *revelation from God*. A revelation of God's love and care. An unveiling of His thoughts and counsels concerning her. All this filled her with wonder,

and her wonderment is expressed in the name Beer-lahai-roi—"The well of the living One Who seeth", or, "Who reveals Himself". (Hagar led the way in the naming of wells; Abraham named one afterwards; Isaac named three; see 21:31; 26:20, 21, 22). It was indeed amazing grace for God thus to reveal Himself to Hagar, and she knew it. She had been brought up in a land whose gods hid themselves in impenetrable darkness—so the Egyptians believed. She had doubtless learned in Canaan something of the meaning of Abraham's altar, the true way of approach to God. But now in her own experience she comes to know the manner of God's approach to man, not in wrath and anger, but in love and grace. Jehovah comes right to where she is and communicates His way of deliverance to Hagar; all with the intent that she should taste of His goodness and rejoice in His mercy. This revelation is indeed a foreshadowing of the Gospel message from the heart of God to the outcaste and undone.

A perusal of this inspired narrative brings home to heart and mind the *immutability and depth of the divine purposes*. Had we written the story we should have wanted to write about a more happy sequel. In this unique fashion God comes down to earth to speak to an erring creature. He has not appeared in this fashion before. Are the results spectacular, or even from the human viewpoint, wholly satisfactory? Scarcely! Hagar obeyed; but how she ended her days we cannot say. Her progeny lived far from God, and Islamic power in our own day is a grim reminder of it. Yet, knowing the end from the beginning, God appeared to Hagar and gave her to taste of His great goodness. His purposes stood fast despite the waywardness of the creature. When God gives His servants a commission, human standards of success cannot serve as a criterion of its fulfilment or its faithful discharge. The sent one must needs use his time and talent as one who serves God and not man, and leave the results with his Master. When the prophet said, "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought", he did not abandon himself to utter despair, for he went on to say, "Yet surely my judgment is with the Lord, and my work with my God". Our Lord's service on earth was utterly free from failure yet there were many defections among His followers, and even the twelve failed Him at the crucial hour. There was, in many cases, a total lack of response to His overtures of love, and His own nation cast Him out; yet how perfectly

He served. How gloriously He fulfilled, to the last jot and tittle, the will of God enshrined in the volume of the Book.

So that the story of Hagar's flight and Hagar's return highlights this basic principle that divine service can only be rendered for God's highest glory if the servant's gaze is fixed, not on seeming results, but on his unseen Master. We follow Him Who was at once the Author and the Herald of the message given to Hagar, and we must needs fulfil our commission after His pattern, whether the results seem short-lived or of long duration.

THE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP IN PHILIPPI

Whatever we may think of present attempts in various quarters to bring about "Church Unity", no student of the N.T. can fail to understand and acknowledge that the concept of fellowship within the Body of which Christ is Head and Lord is of fundamental importance. It was that for which the Lord Himself prayed ere He went to the cross to lay the foundation upon which "*The Fellowship*" could be made possible thereafter: "I pray . . . that they (all true believers) may be one, even as We are One . . . that they may be perfected into one" (Jn. 17:31-23 R.V.).

There are certain cardinal points which require elucidation, however, if we are to get the Biblical meaning of fellowship rightly. For example, we must be clear that fellowship (or unity) amongst members of Christ's Body is primarily spiritual, and not outward and ecclesiastical. The latter is always inadequate as a full expression of fellowship—as history and experience have abundantly proved. The late Dr. Griffith Thomas put this very clearly in one of his writings: "The church is a congregation not an aggregation. It is a community of those who have Christ for their Source and Centre of life and unity. This unity is not to be confused with unanimity of opinion on every point. Nor is unity to be identified with uniformity of usages and forms of worship. Unity means life, uniformity often means deadness. Nor is it to be limited to a unit of organization. That is an absolute impossibility, remembering differences of time, place, nations, and races in the Church. True unity can exist and flourish without absolute uniformity of opinion and custom, or without needing a unity of organization, because it is a unity of life, nature, teaching, and purpose in Christ."