

Chapter 16

At Mount Sinai

THE MOST wonderful of all the marvels that have marked the history of Israel—(and no other nation upon earth)—was the delivery of an address by Yahweh Elohim from the summit of Mount Sinai to the assembled nation in the plain below. There never was such an event in the history of the race of Adam. Moses emphasises the greatness of the occasion in referring to it after forty years' interval: "Ask now of the days that are past," said he, addressing Israel on the plains of Moab after their forty years' wandering—"the days which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from one side of heaven to the other—whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it? DID EVER PEOPLE HEAR THE VOICE OF GOD SPEAKING OUT OF THE MIDST OF THE FIRE, AS THOU HAST HEARD, AND LIVE?" ([Deut. 4:32](#)). That this was no figure of speech, but the plain description of a literal event, is made certain by the particulars that are recorded concerning the event.

It happened in what we may almost call natural order. It will be recollected that it was at Mount Horeb that Moses received his original commission. It was there that the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush unconsumed, and, in the communication that passed at that time, Moses was informed that, in token of the verity of his mission, when he should have brought forth the people out of Egypt, they would serve God on that mountain ([Ex. 3:12](#)). The work of deliverance had now been accomplished. The nation had crossed the opened Red Sea; had had their wants provided for in a way suitable to their wilderness life; they were on the march, and were now approaching the rugged district where Sinai sternly reared its head at an altitude of 9,000 feet. In the third month after leaving Egypt, they "departed from Rephidim, and were come to the desert of Sinai and had pitched in the wilderness: and there *Israel camped before the mount*" ([Ex. 19:2](#)). So far, Moses had executed the work entrusted to him. He had been sent from Sinai to bring Israel to God, and he had done so. Here he was at the place from which he had been sent; and Israel with him, encamped in their thousands at the base of the mount. What more natural than that Moses should ascend? "Moses *went up unto God*, and Yahweh called unto him out of the mountain." The words spoken to him were words of message unto Israel. "Say to the house of Jacob ... Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings and *brought you unto myself*." This was a matter of fact most natural to be brought into the foreground on the occasion of the arrival at Sinai. Here was the nation, brought by a series of extraordinary interpositions of divine power from Egypt, and set down at the base of Sinai in the divine presence. Yahweh challenges their attention to the fact, with a view to the proposition to be submitted to them. What was the aim, as regarded Israel, of this whole extraordinary episode of the Egyptian deliverance? "Now, therefore, if ye will obey My voice, indeed, and keep My covenant, *then ye shall be a peculiar treasure to Me above all people*: for all the earth is Mine (as much as to say, 'It pertains to Me to do as I will'), and ye shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Moses, descending, called the elders together, and submitted this brief but pregnant message to them. "And all the people answered together, all that the Lord hath spoken we will do." Moses having received the answer of the people, re-ascends the mountain, and reports it to Yahweh.

The basis of the first covenant having thus been laid, Yahweh intimates to Moses His purpose to speak in the hearing of all the people. This wonder of wonders was not to be performed merely as a prodigy, or to gratify the curiosity of the people; it was to be done with a very distinct object in view; it was to place the divine authority of Moses beyond all cavil or doubt. “Lo, I come unto thee in a thick cloud, *that the people may hear when I speak with thee, AND BELIEVE THEE FOR EVER*” ([Ex. 19:9](#)). Apart from the display which was about to be made in the presence of the whole nation, it might have been whispered, by the seditious in the camp, that the messages Moses brought from the summit of Sinai were pretended messages; that he saw nothing, and heard nothing, when he went up, but concocted the messages himself, and went to the top of the mount merely to give colour of divine authority to what he had to say. Such a view, once whispered, would be quickly caught up, and sent round, and loom large in the eyes of subsequent generations of unbelievers as such things generally do, with the result of destroying the authority of Moses for ever. Any spiritual rot like this was effectually prevented by what was about to be done. The worst that could happen afterwards (and that did happen) was disobedience to the law of Moses: the cry could not be, and was never raised that God had not spoken by Moses. Israel in all their generations have been of the mind expressed by the Pharisees when disparaging the claims of Jesus: “We know that God spake unto Moses” ([John 9:29](#)). It will not appear marvellous that such profound and ineradicable conviction should have been produced in the heart of Israel when we consider the means adopted to produce it.

Yahweh appointed a day for the wonderful exhibition. “Be ready against the third day, for the third day *Yahweh will come down IN THE SIGHT OF ALL THE PEOPLE UPON MOUNT SINAI.*” The people having prepared themselves in the way prescribed, the third day arrived; and early in the day, there were portentous preliminaries to the sublime event. “In the morning there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the Mount and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud, so that *all the people that was in the camp trembled.*” The people had been apprized beforehand of the purport of this manifestation, so that, though deeply overawed by the strange convulsion, they submitted themselves to the hands of Moses. “Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God: and they stood at the nether part of the Mount.” As they stood there, the scene grew more vivid and impressive. “Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke.” The moment of supreme expectation arrived; “Yahweh descended upon the mount in fire, and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole Mount quaked greatly. And the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder.” The first symptom of divine intelligence in the heart of this tumult of the elements was the summons to Moses (addressed to him in the hearing of all Israel) to come up. And Moses went up. “And Yahweh said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through to gaze, and many of them perish.” Moses also received instructions to the priests, and then went down and awaited with the people the stupendous occurrence of a speech from God. They had not long to wait. From the midst of the cloud, and the smoke, and the flame (in a momentary pause of the attendant, thunder-peals and trumpet sound, as we must suppose), there came the clear pealing tones of the divine voice, reaching to the utmost part of the vast concourse of people, and making the solitudes of Sinai ring: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water that is under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them: for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and showing mercy unto

thousand of them that love me and keep my commandments,” and so on, to the end of the ten commandments.

When the voice ceased, the thunderings, lightnings, and trumpet sound resumed, and the people gave way to the fear with which they were inspired at the very commencement of the dread proceedings. “They removed and stood afar off.” They said to Moses, “Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us lest we die.” Moses tried to rally them. He said “Fear not, for God is come to prove you, and that His fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.” But the people could not be tranquillised. “The people stood far off.” Moses did not stand far off with them, but “drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” ([Ex. 20:21](#)). Then Yahweh addressed Himself to Moses: “Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, *Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven.* Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold,” etc.

After this, it was natural that Israel should receive implicitly all that Moses had to say to them in the name of God. It is inconceivable that it could have been otherwise. They had had overpowering demonstration of Yahweh’s reality, and of His selection of Moses as His servant in all things. It is impossible to conceive a demonstration more complete. The things they had seen and heard were all beyond the power of man. Who can envelop a mountain with cloud and fire? Who can set the thunders loose? Who can make Sinai shake to its base? And who can speak from haft the height of the Alps and be heard? These things had been done in their presence, and had filled them with fear. Even Moses shared their trepidation ([Heb. 12:21](#)). The stoutest heart might well quail at such a terrible manifestation of the presence of God. It was terrifying, but necessary. It made the people see, as they could not otherwise have been made to see, that the work of Moses was not “of his own mind” as he said ([Num. 16:28](#)), but was the work of the Maker and Possessor of heaven and earth working through him. It did its work effectually; it established a law which has never been altered by man from that day to this. It established the authority of Moses over Israel for ever, as was intended ([Ex. 19:9](#)).

It was all in the nature of “miracle”; nothing else could have served the purpose; how were the people otherwise to become persuaded that the law delivered to them by Moses was of divine authority? But in saying it was a “miracle,” are we to understand the magical unreality suggested to the popular mind by the word? Far otherwise. It was all reality. The fire, and the smoke, and the thunder were as real as any ever seen or heard by mortal sense; so with the earthquake and the sound of the trumpet. There was nothing unusual in them, and the difference between them and ordinary phenomena of sight and sound lay merely in the speciality of causation. They were the same in essence, but not produced as ordinary phenomena are—by the mechanical interaction of the established affinities of nature: they were directly produced by the power evolving all nature at the beginning. God was present by the angels of His power ([Acts 7:38](#); [Heb. 2:2](#)): by His will angelically exerted, which is the ultimate explanation of everything, the mountain shook, became enveloped in flame, and hid in dense masses of cloud and smoke. By the same power, the trumpet voice sounded long and loud, and the ten commandments were pronounced. This power, the will-power of essential Deity, is the potent cause of all things. Morally expressed, it is what the Father wishes men voluntarily to do: but, physically exerted, it is a force irresistible, either for creating or destroying. We are apt to think of it in the former, or passive, sense. When we realise it in the latter, the idea of difficulty vanishes, and we utter a fervent amen to the saying of Christ, “With God nothing is impossible.”

The exhibition of the divine presence on Sinai, in the sight and hearing of assembled Israel, stopped short of the actual vision of the divine person at work. The people saw the tokens and

heard the voice of personal presence, but they saw not the speaker, as Moses was careful afterwards to remind them: “Ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude, only ye heard a voice” ([Deut. 4:12](#)). But what the congregation at large were not permitted to see, a select number of the heads of the people afterwards did with their eyes actually behold by special privilege, on the occasion of the ratification in blood of the covenant made between God and the people. On that occasion, “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, went up, and *they saw the God of Israel*, and there was under His feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness” ([Ex. 24:9–10](#)). This was a distant vision so far as concerned the seventy elders. This appears from the direction to Moses just before the vision was granted. “Come up unto Yahweh, thou and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: and *worship ye afar off*. MOSES ALONE SHALL COME NEAR YAHWEH: but *they shall not come nigh*” ([Ex. 24:1–2](#)). This “seeing of the God of Israel” would, therefore, not be of that close and intimate character vouchsafed to Moses himself on a still later occasion. It would be a general and distant view, in which the divine person would appear more as a nucleus of the glory seen than as a distinctly discernible figure. “The sight of the glory of the Lord,” we are informed, “was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel.” We are further informed that “Moses went into the midst of the cloud, and gat him up into the mount.” The reason of his so doing is to be found in the following words addressed to him by Yahweh: “Come up to me unto the mount and be there, and I will give thee tables of stone and a law and commandments which I have written: that thou mayest teach them” ([Ex. 24:12](#)). Ascending into the mount in compliance with this command, Moses remained in the mount “forty days and forty nights” ([Ex. 24:18](#)), during which “he did neither eat bread nor drink water” ([Ex. 34:28](#); [Deut. 9:9](#)).

This is one of those statements which the temper of the present age considers it weak to believe. In so far as the temper of the present age is a temper leading to the careful discrimination of truth from fable and tradition, the said temper is to be respected; but when it goes beyond this discrimination, and sets itself solidly against manifest truth in one department because it has discovered some modicum of possible truth in another, then it is not to be respected, but set aside with decisive resolution. The truth of Moses stands on strong foundations that cannot be overturned; and we are not to disregard those foundations because we are presented with something in his case that is out of the way of our experience. It is true that we cannot live forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. Not even Dr. Tanner did this: he drank water regularly and copiously, and was barely in life at the end of the period with even this material help. But why are we to say that, because poor mortals of the 19th century cannot subsist without being nourished with food and water, therefore Moses could not, who was nourished another way? Why are we to say that there is no other way of keeping the nerves supplied with the energy of life except by the digestive apparatus? What is food at the foundation but invisible energy made concrete by power and wisdom? Shall we say that God could not supply this invisible energy direct, but must first put it into the form of food before it can be utilised in the upholding of the animal economy? Shall we say that God who made the human machine from the foundation, can only work it in one particular way? The questions suggest the absurdity of the position so congenial to the “temper of the present age.” The sole question is, whether God had to do with the matters we are considering. If He had (and there are no two sides in reality to the question—for two sides means two ways of looking at a subject, equally reasonable, equally probable, equally uncertain, and there are no two such ways in the case of the Mosaic transactions; they are intelligible in only one way of looking at them, and that

is, in recognising God's participation in them as recorded). If God had to do with them, then there is no difficulty at all about a forty days' fast. The supply of food would have been inconvenient on the summit of Sinai for so long a time; and the power of God was there to dispense with it, by providing the life supply another way than by eating. If our strength were kept up from any source, we should not require food. A babe's existence before birth is an illustration. The strength of Moses was kept up from the source of all strength; and it was, therefore, in reality, not a marvel that he was able to do without food for forty days, and that he was none the worse at the end of the period.

Another preternatural circumstance was visible at the end of a second forty days similarly occupied a little later on. When Moses came down from Sinai with the two tables of testimony in his hand, Aaron and all the children of Israel "saw that the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come nigh him" ([Ex. 34:29–30](#)). "And Moses called unto them: and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him: and Moses talked with them. And afterwards all the children of Israel came nigh: and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face" ([Ex. 34:31–33](#)). There is an allegory in this circumstance, as Paul gives us to understand (as in all other circumstances and institutions of the Mosaic law). But we are not concerned on the present occasion to look at the allegorical significance. (Some day we may devote some chapters to this department of the subject.) We look at it as a literal circumstance, which it was in the first case; and we say there is nothing very marvellous, if there be something which people call "miraculous" about this shining of the face of Moses. Any man steeped (and sustained without food) in the effulgence of the divine glory for a period of forty days, would be likely to retain, in his physical fibre, somewhat of the lustre of that state. It is according to the nature of things. All creatures assimilate to the colour and conditions of their surroundings. Even the tree insect takes the colour of the leaf on which it feeds. All creation is the incorporation of the divine power and wisdom. This power is a reality: it is physical though invisible: it is the first form of every substance; the only real ultimate substance, for it is eternal, and all things are "out of" it. Is it a marvel then that Moses, basking in the full flood of the divine luminosity for six weeks, should have his skin impregnated with glory? It would have been a marvel if he could have escaped such a result. It is a circumstance both according to the fitness of things and illustrative of the nature and reality of the divine power and ways. Orthodox theology has deranged many things and erected gratuitous barriers in the way of the reception of the Scriptures.

To Moses, was granted a closer intimacy and a plainer vision of God than to the "seventy nobles of the house of Israel who saw God, and did eat and drink" ([Ex. 24:11](#)). It was granted at his urgent request. Moses said, "I pray thee if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way that I may know thee ... I beseech thee, *shew me thy glory*." God answered, "Thou canst not see my face, for there shall no man see me and live. It shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover thee with my hand while I pass by; and I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen" ([Ex. 33:20–23](#)). On the day appointed, "the Lord descended in a cloud, and stood with Moses there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord ... and Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth and worshipped." There is a grandeur in these circumstances that is not approached by anything recorded in the whole course of human history, except the ascension to the Father of the prophet like unto Moses. The difficulty the mind conceives in the idea of the Eternal Father having thus been seen on the summit of Sinai, disappears in view of the plain intimation we have that it was the Father in angelic manifestation that Moses saw ([Acts 7:38](#);

[Heb. 2:2](#)). If this appears to create another difficulty, that the personage seen by Moses speaks with the absolute prerogative of the Eternal, and refers to the angels as His instruments ([Ex. 23:20](#)), we must remember that there are grades among the angels, as appears from Gabriel's allusion ([Dan. 10:21](#); [Luke 1:19](#)), and as illustrated by the superiority of one of the three who visited Abraham, over the other two (compare [Gen. 18:1–2](#), [22](#), and [19:1](#)). There being grades, if one is selected in particular to be the mouthpiece and representative of the Omnipresent Father, and constituted as such, not by oral instruction—as man delegates man—but by impulse and inflation of the Universal Father-spirit, then such selected name-bearer of Yahweh is practically Yahweh to all with whom he may have to do, and other angels are as subject to him as to the Father. This is illustrated in the case of Jesus, to whom “angels and principalities, and powers are made subject.”

These ocular manifestations of Yahweh were of frequent occurrence in the process of the establishment of the first covenant. They distinguished the case of the work of Moses from all that came after in the history of Israel under the law. Yahweh himself thus distinguishes the case of Moses from that of all other even contemporary prophets: “If there be a prophet among you, I, the Lord, will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. *My servant Moses is not so*, who is faithful in all mine house. WITH HIM WILL I SPEAK MOUTH TO MOUTH, EVEN APPARENTLY, AND NOT IN DARK SPEECHES, AND THE SIMILITUDE OF THE LORD SHALL HE BEHOLD” ([Num. 12:6–8](#)). The record of the death of Moses also informs us that “there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, *whom the Lord knew face to face*” ([Deut. 34:10](#)). In this he pre-figured, “the prophet like unto Moses” who, alone of all the household of God, has approached the presence of the Creator in the capacity of a high priest over that house.

In its literal aspect, the exhibitions of Deity to Moses must strike reason as an appropriate and a necessary thing. It left no element wanting in the evidence of the divinity of the work he was called upon to do. When a man had received audible instructions from the midst of a burning bush unconsumed, and had seen performed by his unconscious hand in the Name of his Interlocutor, a variety of works of power impossible to ordinary nature, and had heard the voice of God on various occasions from the accompanying cloud and otherwise, and had seen all His words verified in actual occurrences, what remained to complete the chain of self-evidence but the sight of the wonderful Being that had accompanied and worked with them in so wonderful a manner for so long a time? It was natural that Moses should desire to see His glory. This remaining link in the chain of connection was supplied, and thus the whole work of Moses was established upon a rock of fact, from which it was impossible anything could afterwards remove it. We live in an interregnum (but a fast-closing interregnum) of that work, and when it is resumed—when the song of Moses and the Lamb fills the heart of Israel with gladness—it will be as real a work to the eye, ear, heart, and sense as was every part of the wonderful work of bringing Israel out of the land of Egypt, 3,300 years ago. The word, and work, and person of Christ will no longer be what it is in the ears of this generation—an idle tale, but the stirring and awe-inspiring, and world-affecting fact of the hour.