

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 21

THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

"And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him. And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said. While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen. And it came to pass, that on the next day, when they were come down from the hill, much people met him." (LUKE 9:28-37).

"AND I SAW ANOTHER MIGHTY ANGEL COME DOWN FROM HEAVEN, CLOTHED WITH A CLOUD; AND A RAINBOW WAS UPON HIS HEAD, AND HIS FACE WAS AS IT WERE THE SUN, AND HIS FEET AS PILLARS OF FIRE."- REVELATION 10:1. [311]

IN the former chapter we found the gates of glory closing on Elijah and his triumphal chariot of fire. He had entered that silent land, from whose bourne no traveller ever returns to this nether world. It was now a thousand years since he had taken his place among its redeemed multitudes; - A fixed star in the unchanging heavenly firmament.

For many centuries, however, the whole Jewish nation had entertained a confident expectation of his reappearance somewhere on the old scene of his labours, - an expectation founded on the remarkable, though enigmatical words of Malachi, - all the more remarkable and memorable from being the last announcement of the last of their prophets - "**Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.**" That utterance (partially and typically fulfilled perhaps in the ministry of the Baptist, but whose true and literal accomplishment may yet be future") ¹ had as shadowy fulfilment also in the sublime scene we are now to consider.

In perfect keeping with the sudden dramatic changes of his older history, like some blazing

meteor, the "*Prophet of Fire*" wanders back again to earth; or rather, as the satellite follows its parent sun, he appears in transfigured glory, by the side of the same "Living Jehovah," before whom it was his boast formerly to stand. But it was now Jehovah-JESUS - "**God manifest in the flesh!**" The mysterious humiliation of that adorable Being was about to terminate in a darker night of suffering.

In the prospect of undergoing the agonies of the garden and the cross, His divine Father had decreed a preliminary hour of glory and triumph. On the height of one of the mountains of the covenant land, delegates from the redeemed Church in earth and Heaven met to do Him homage, - sustaining His soul in the prospect of treading the wine-press of the wrath of Almighty GOD.

Out of the glorious throng of ransomed worshippers in the upper sanctuary, from Abel downwards, two appeared as representatives of the Church triumphant. Whether they were specially chosen for this high behest by GOD Himself, or whether they volunteered their lofty services, we cannot tell. If the latter, we may imagine, how, as the adorable Father announced His purpose of delegating messengers to glorify the Son of His love; and as He asked the question, amid the hushed stillness of the glorified throng - "**Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?**" - One bright spirit, glowing amid the ranks of Seraphim, and still burning with the old unabated ardour of earth, is heard to respond, "**Here am I, send me!**"

It was a magnificent spectacle, indeed, which last occupied our attention - the ascent of the Prophet - conqueror in his chariot of flame. But he himself tells the disciples, in the topic which engages their talk and thoughts on the Mount, [313] that there is One theme infinitely more glorious than translation - viz., that mighty deed of dying love, - atoning suffering, - without which no horses of fire could ever have been yoked to the ascending chariot, nor any entering made within the gate into the heavenly city.

The contrast is striking and worthy of note, between the Old and New Testament delineations of the character of Elijah.

In the one he is almost from first to last presented to us as the Minister of vengeance, the Herald of wrath - severe, vigorous, stern; while, if left to glean our estimate from the few incidental notices contained in the Gospel, we meet him as the minister of kindness to the widow of Sarepta; - an example of the power of effectual fervent prayer, "**turning the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.**"

"This remarkably illustrates," as a recent writer well observes, "the great differences which may exist between the popular and contemporary view of an eminent character, and the real settled judgment formed in the progress of time, when the excitement of his more brilliant but more evanescent deeds has passed away. Precious, indeed, are the scattered hints and faint touches which enable us thus to soften the harsh outlines or the discordant colouring of the earlier picture.

In the present instance, they are peculiarly so. That wild figure, that stern voice, those deeds of blood which stand out in such startling relief from the pages of the old records of Elijah, are seen by us, all silvered over with the white and glistening light of the mountain of Transfiguration. Under that heavenly light, Ahab and Jezebel, Baal and Ashtaroth, are forgotten, as we listen to

the Prophet talking to our Lord of that event which was [315] to be the consummation of all that He had suffered and striven for" ²

Let us then approach this pavilion of glory, and catch our last sight of the Prophet on earth, till we meet Him on a better Transfiguration mount, where we shall have the brightness of the earthly scene without any of its transience.

The traditional locality of the Transfiguration, which as early as the sixth century was assigned to Tabor, is now abandoned by all modern writers. That it was ever selected, seems to have arisen from the one fact, or rather misconception, that this mountain answered apparently better than any other single eminence in Palestine to the description of the evangelist Mark, "**an high mountain apart.**" When, however, the passage in the Gospel comes to be narrowly examined, the word "**apart**" is found really to refer, not to the position of the mountain, but to that of the disciples. Besides, the objections to Tabor are in other respects insuperable.

It is shewn by the most learned of Biblical travellers, that a fortified town must, during this very period of our Lord's life and ministry, have occupied the summit of the hill, the ruins of which are still remaining. ³

More than this, the chronological order of the narrative gives to the old reputed site a strong improbability. Harmonizing the evangelistic narrative, it will be found that the Redeemer had just been sojourning with His disciples in the region round Cesarea-Philippi, the extreme north of Palestine.

It is far from probable, that during the intervening six days, He would take the [316] long journey of fifty miles to the foot of Mount Tabor, on the confines of Zebulon and Naphtali. It is much more likely that He would select one of the spurs or ridges of snow-covered HERMON as a meet high altar for this scene of "**excellent glory.**"

The expression in Luke is, "**He went up into a mountain.**" As he was at that time under the shadow of this great giant, the solitary Alp of Northern Palestine, no mountain could so well answer the distinctive epithet applied by the evangelist. "It is impossible," says Dr Stanley, "to look up from the plain to the towering peaks of Hermon, almost the only mountain which deserves the name in Palestine, and one of whose ancient titles was derived from this circumstance, and not be struck with its appropriateness to the scene. That magnificent height, mingling with all the views of the north, from Shechem upwards, though often alluded to as the northern barrier of the Holy Land, is connected with no historical event in the Old or New Testament. Yet this fact of its rising high above all the other hills of Palestine, and of its setting the last limit to the wanderings of Him who was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, falls in with the supposition which the words inevitably force upon us. High up on its sunny slopes there must be many a point where the disciples could be taken '*apart by themselves.*' Even the transient comparison of the celestial splendour, with the snow where alone it could be seen in Palestine, should not perhaps be wholly overlooked." ⁴

Such, then, may have been the wondrous earthly frame to the dazzling heavenly picture.

It is an old tradition of the Christian Church, that the Transfiguration took place on the

anniversary of the death of Moses, the first day of the month Adar. If the time was thus possibly connected with one of the two illustrious saints; it was from a spot commanding a distant prospect of those very places where once he wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, afflicted, tormented, that the old Tishbite seer now "**saw his Lord's glory - the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.**" ⁵

We shall endeavour in the present chapter to depict the circumstantial of the Transfiguration-scene itself, - leaving for the concluding one the more special objects it was designed to subserve, particularly in its connection with the appearance of Elijah. [319]

It was after a season of unremitting labour in the great work of His ministry, that the Redeemer ascended this "**high mountain**" for rest and prayer. We know that "**the evening**" was the season He usually selected for these "*Sabbaths of His soul.*" Moreover, as the same evangelist informs us that the three disciples who accompanied Him were "**heavy with sleep,**" and finishes his account of the transaction by stating that "**on the next day they came down from the hill;**" - are we not abundantly warranted in supposing that the Transfiguration took place during night? If this conclusion be correct, what an additional pictorial interest does it impart to the scene! The sun has already set, far to the west, over the great sea; - all nature is hushed to repose, - nothing is heard but the rippling of the mountain streams, - nothing is seen but the pale silvery moonlight, falling on the everlasting snows of the mountain, - or, high above, myriad stars, like temple lamps lit in the outer court of some august sanctuary; - these, however, about to be quenched, for the time, by the seraphic radiance which is presently to stream forth from the Holiest of all.

We cannot resist pausing for a moment on the threshold of this consecrated shrine, in order to mark the grand prelude to the manifestation of the excellent glory - JESUS PRAYS.

On that lonely hill top, or ridge, the Son of Man and Lord of all, pours out His soul, as a strong wrestler, in the ear of His Father in Heaven. The moon and stars listen to their Maker's voice; and that voice, the voice of Prayer - pleadings for Himself, - intercessions for the world - the Church - for His disciples - for us!

It is well worthy of note, though the remark be a trite one, that all the great events and crises of the Saviour's incarnation-life are hallowed by prayer.

- He prays at His baptism, and lo! the heavens are opened.
- He prays in the garden - "**Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass;**" and "**being in an agony He prayed the more earnestly.**"
- At the cross He prays, "**Father forgive:**" "**Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.**"
- His very cry in the hour of His GOD - desertion - "**My God, my God!**" - was an impassioned prayer!

We have all in our diverse human experiences, though separated by an untravelled distance from those of the Divine Redeemer, our crises-hours - solemn emergencies - terrible moments of temptation - sore suffering - crushing disappointment - poignant bereavement. [320]

Shall we not learn, from the Prince of sufferers, our true preparation against the dark and cloudy

day?

If Almighty strength and Infinite purity needed to be thus girded for the struggle-hour, how can such weaklings as we are, dispense with the sacred privilege?

Oh, that in all time of our wealth, when climbing the giddy heights of prosperity, - led out by Satan to "**the exceeding high mountain;**" - tempted to surrender or compromise principle in order to propitiate the world's maxims and fashions, and barter a good conscience for its perishable baubles, - obsequious to man, disloyal and unfaithful to GOD; or, in all time of our tribulation, when called to climb the mount of trial, - we would listen in thought for our protection and safety, our encouragement and example, to the voice of Him "**who, when He was on earth, made supplication with strong crying and tears to Him that was able to save Him from death; and was heard in that He feared.**"

The three disciples selected from the apostolic company to be the representatives of the Church on earth, at their Lord's Transfiguration, are Peter and the two sons of thunder. Peter "the Rock," - James, the first of the twelve who was to suffer death for his Master's sake - John, the favoured disciple, whose head afterwards leaned on the bosom of incarnate Love.

Wearied with the fatigues of the day, these infirm watchers fall asleep. They continue locked in slumber till a strange unearthly light is felt playing on their eyelids. Is it a dream? a trance? They wake up; and lo! a spectacle of overpowering glory bursts upon them. The Lord they left praying, is now seen before them, arrayed in garments woven as with sunbeams, - His raiment emitting light, vying in whiteness with the virgin snow; or as Mark, in his own graphic way of delineation adds, "**So as no fuller [321] on earth can white them.**"

A bright fleecy cloud surrounds Him with a halo of glory; and on either side of the transfigured Saviour there is a glorified form.

The apostles gaze in mute wonder. As their adorable Master is engaged in converse with these mysterious visitants from another world the question must have passed from lip to lip - "Who are these arrayed in white robes and whence came they?" They do not require, however, to wait a reply. Either by revelation, or more probably from hearing their Lord addressing the two glorified ones by name, they know that they are in the presence of none other than MOSES and ELIAS. "With what profound interest, - with what trembling transport, - would they gaze on the two Fathers of the Nation, whose names must have been embalmed in their holiest memories since the dawn of earliest childhood.

"What!" we may imagine them exclaiming, as they fixed their eyes first on the older saint, - "Is this indeed the great Shepherd who led Israel like a flock; who did marvellous things in the sight of their fathers, in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan? Is this he whose rod smote the tongue of the Red Sea, - whose feet trod the steeps of Sinai, - who spake amidst its lightnings and thunders face to face with GOD?"

What! is this indeed the great Elijah - the old seer of Gilead - the faithful witness for Jehovah in Israel's most degenerate age - the mighty wrestler on Carmel - the homicide at the Kishon - the fiery minister of vengeance - the herald of righteousness, - whose earlier life of tempest and

earthquake and fire merged at last into the still small voice of love, - he who was taken to Heaven alive in a whirlwind, and who was prophesied of by Malachi as the precursor of [322] the great and dreadful day of the Lord?

The earthly character and mission of both, presented a lowly yet striking reflection of Him they had now come to honour.

Their messages, had been received like His with scornful indifference.

One had, in a noble spirit of self-sacrifice, surrendered his bright prospects as heir to the throne of Egypt; the other, with fearless devotion to truth, had confronted royal frowns, and offered a heroic protest against the nation's guilt, in the name of his dishonoured Master. No more befitting attendants surely could have been selected to do homage to Him, who "**made Himself of no reputation;**" - left, His throne and crown for a manger and a cross, - "**the faithful and true Witness,**" who came "**not to do His own will, but the will of the Father who sent Him.**"

The eyes of the earthly and the heavenly delegates are alike fixed on the great central figure of the group, - the toil-worn sorrow-stricken Man, who, a few hours before, had climbed the steep ascent with weary limb and burdened soul, but who is now radiant with superhuman glory, the true Apocalyptic Angel "**standing in the sun.**"

The face of one of these heavenly attendants, fifteen hundred years before, had been seen resplendent by the camp of assembled Israel, but it was a borrowed lustre. He had come forth from the presence-chamber of GOD on Sinai, and the ineffable brightness still lingered by reflection on his countenance. In the case of the Redeemer on the Transfiguration-mount, that glory was inherent. The rays of indwelling Deity, imprisoned in His body of humiliation, burst through the casement of flesh. - the lustre of eternity streamed through the veil of His humanity. "Moses," it has been observed, "only shewed the brightness of the Father's [323] glory, He was that brightness."

No wonder that Peter, in an ecstasy of impulsive joy, exclaims, "**Lord, it is good for us to be here;**" and that he even proposed the erection of three tabernacles, where their Lord and His glorified attendants might take up a permanent abode, and, enthroned on these majestic peaks of Hermon, reign over regenerated Israel.

But gaze we yet a little longer, and there is a new phase in this diorama of heavenly splendour.

A cloud of yet more transcendent brightness descends on the head of the Saviour and His two celestial companions. It is nothing less than the Shekinah, or Divine glory, the symbol and emblem of a present Deity, - the same cloud which of old preceded in a pillar - form the march through the wilderness; which hovered over the ark in the tabernacle, and over the holy of holies in the Jerusalem temple.

The three disciples seem, at this juncture, to have been shut out and excluded by the new cloudy canopy. They became greatly afraid; the appearance of the cloud struck them with awe. This feeling, moreover, increased as they felt themselves thus dissociated and dis severed from their Lord, whose presence a moment before, radiant though it was with almost intolerable brightness,

had yet been to them the blessed pledge of security and safety.

A voice issues from the cloud. A message comes to them from the midst of the excellent glory - **"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him,"** It is the sublime attestation of GOD the Father. "He installs the Son as sovereign of the kingdom." ⁶

He consecrates Him as Prophet, Priest, and King for evermore. [324]

If such be the utterance of the Eternal Father in this seraphic scene, let us return for a moment to Elias, and inquire what part he takes in the august conference. Are his lips sealed? Does he appear as a mere dumb witness, a passive spectator, mutely doing homage to his great Lord, and then silently winging his arrowy flight back among the ministering Seraphim? No, he does speak, and we listen with profound interest to the theme with which he breaks silence. He and Moses are the first messengers from the spirit-land who have visited our earth, - the first voyagers who have ever come back with tidings from the undiscovered shores!

What then, we curiously inquire, is the theme which engrosses their thoughts what the subject of their heavenly converse, - what communications have they brought down with them from the realms of light, wherewith to gladden their Lord in His hour of glorification?

When we last parted from Elijah it was when he was taken to Heaven in his fiery chariot. Does he talk of this? or, now that the scenes of his old labours are faintly descried under the star-lit heavens, do these suggest to him the rehearsal of his own life-marvels, or those of his sainted companion? or does he commune of the nobler inheritance on which he had since entered - the thousand years - the millennium of bliss, since last he trod the earth? - does he speak of the last song in which he had joined with the celestial worshippers, or of the last embassy of love on which he had sped, or of his lofty association with the brotherhood of Seraphim, - ministers of flaming fire, - who keep the lamps of the heavenly temple continually burning? No, none of these.

His topic of converse, and that of his illustrious compeer is [325] the last we should have dreamt of as being selected for ecstatic triumph.

It is DEATH! - "Death," that awful anomaly in GOD's universe- "Death," the theme of all others indwelt on in Heaven, because there unknown. Death too, the King of Terrors, - lording it over the Prince of Life, - for it was Death about to vanquish none other than the August Being who was now glorified under that canopy of dazzling splendour.

Moreover, it was death in peculiar and abnormal form,

- not the gentle dismissal of the soul to the unseen world,
- not the tranquil sleep of His "beloved" which GOD gave to one of these saints,
- nor the holy beatific rapture he vouchsafed. to the other,
- but death specifically spoken about as occurring at "Jerusalem;"
- a death mysteriously associated, at all events to the Omniscient Son of GOD, with a thorn-crown, and bitter anguish, and an accursed tree, - a fearful baptism of blood!

Nor would it appear that the strange converse was limited to the glorified attendants, - the transfigured Saviour Himself joined in that wondrous talk. 'Speak not,' He seems to say, 'of my crown; speak to me rather of my cross; speak to me, even at this moment of my glorification, of that bitter humiliation which awaits me. It is by being "**lifted up**," not as now in glory, but lifted up in suffering and anguish, that I am to "**draw all men unto me!**"

But the hour of triumph is at an end, the dazzling lustre has faded from the Redeemer's raiment, the celestial voices are hushed, the vision has passed away. Emerging from the cloud and returning to the three still terrified disciples, their Lord finds them, in the extremity of their fears, to have lost all consciousness. They are still "**heavy with sleep.**"

Alas! for weak, fragile human [326] nature, even in seasons when it might well be expected to rise above its weakness. These disciples slept now in the hour of their Master's rapture, as they slept afterwards in the hour of His sorrow. Ah, men "**of like passions!**" If Elijah saw them then from his cloudy canopy, he would remember the juniper-tree, and be silent. "**What doest thou here, Elijah?**"

What! my own disciples, "**could ye not watch with me one hour?**" Blessed for us who may be mourning over our dull, lethargic frames, losing by our slothfulness many bright transfiguration-experiences - the blessings of the mount: - happy for us that there is a day and a world coming, when the gentle rebuke of an injured Saviour shall never more be needed - "Why sleep ye!" For "there shall be no night there!"

But He is faithful that promised - "**I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.**"

The hour of manifested glory has made no change in the sympathizing tenderness of the Brotherman. He is still "**that same Jesus**" - He comes to the disciples, as He had done oft before, in their weakness and terror; touches them, and with gentle voice says, "**Arise, be not afraid.**"

They lifted up their eyes, - the cloud - the glory - the celestial visitants - the voice, were gone; "**they saw no man save Jesus only.**"

The morning light was again tipping the eastern hills, - and they must hasten down the slopes of the mount, once more to encounter stern duty, temptation and trial [327]

¹ *The reader is referred to some interesting details on this subject in the Appendix, page 345. [312]*

² *Smith's Biblical Dictionary, art. "Elijah".*

³ *Robinson, vol. ii., p. 359.*

⁴ *"Standing amid the ruins of Cesarea, we do not need to ask what that '**high mountain**' is. The lofty ridge of Hermon rises over us, and probably on one or other of those wooded peaks above us that wondrous event took place." - Porter, vol. ii., in loco. [317]*

"What other hill could it be than the southward slope of that goodly mountain Hermon, which is indeed the centre of all the Promised Land, from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of

Egypt - the mount of fruitfulness, from which the springs of Jordan descended to the valleys of Israel. Along its mighty forest avenues, until the grass grew fair with the mountain lilies, His feet dashed in the dew of Hermon, He must have gone to pray His first recorded prayer about death: and from the steep of it, before He knelt, could see to the south all the dwelling-place of the people that had sat in darkness and seen the great light - the land of Zebulon and of Naphtali, Galilee of the nations, - could see even with His human sight the gleam of that lake by Capernaum and Chorazin, and many a place loved by Him and vainly ministered to, whose house was now left unto them desolate. And, chief of all, far in the utmost blue, the hills above Nazareth sloping down to His old home: hills on which the stones yet lay loose that had been taken up to cast at Him when he left them for ever." - Ruskin on Mountain Beauty; Modern Painters, vol. iv., p. 392.

⁵ *The following, from the graphic pages of a recent traveller, describing [318] a visit to Hermon and its vicinity, suggests another remarkable association and coincidence, viz., that Elijah must have been brought at this time into singular proximity with one of the great temples of the false deity whose worship it had been the main object of his life to overthrow, - the Prophet of Fire, probably within sight of one of the principal shrines of the "Fire God." "We went to the large temple, of which a great deal still remains in situ. It was placed with the angles to the cardinal points, in order that the south-west side should face the Baal temple raised on the highest point of Hermon." Of this latter temple the writer thus speaks: "A massive wall once encircled the highest peak of the mountain, and a temple stood here. The ground is covered with the large hewn stones of the outer wall; a few of them were beveled, and we saw some bold simple sculpturing on some of the others - the style reminding us of Dier-el-Ashayr. That a temple, dedicated to Baal, once existed here is to be gathered from the name of Baal-Hermon, applied in Judges 3:3, and I Chronicles 5:23. And Jerome testifies to the fact. No one could stand on that summit and turn his eyes from east to west, from north to south, without feeling that no worshipper of the sun could have left so grand a spot unconsecrated to their GOD." - Beaujort's Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines, vol. ii., p. 14.*

⁶ *Olshausen.*

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