

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 19

FAREWELL VISITS TO THE SONS OF THE PROPHETS

"And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel. And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan." - II KINGS 2:1-7.

"AS YE KNOW HOW WE EXHORTED AND COMFORTED, AND CHARGED EVERY ONE OF YOU, (AS A FATHER DOTHS HIS CHILDREN.)" - I THESSALONIANS 2:11.

"AND THEY ALL WEPT SORE, AND FELL ON PAUL'S NECK, AND KISSED HIM; SORROWING MOST OF ALL FOR THE WORDS WHICH HE SPAKE, THAT THEY SHOULD SEE HIS FACE NO MORE. AND THEY ACCOMPANIED HIM UNTO THE SHIP" ACTS 20:37, 38. [282]

THE eventful time has at length arrived, when, from his changeful and chequered life-experience, the pilgrim seer is to be upborne in a fiery chariot to his heavenly rest and crown. And yet, notwithstanding the divine premonition he had evidently received of the honour in store for him, we never could guess from his bearing and demeanour that anything extraordinary was impending.

Another day, and he would be soaring, in his magnificent flight, amid angels, kindred spirits in the upper sanctuary, - ministers of flaming fire, - communing with the sainted fathers and patriarchs of his nation, - ay, gazing on the ineffable glories of GOD Himself.

How such an anticipation would have overpowered most men, and made the repression of

exultant feeling an impossibility!

But it was different with this moral hero. He betrays no apparent emotion. We meet him on the way from Gilgal, walking side by side with Elisha - calm, unmoved, unagitated. He appears more like a father, making farewell visits to his scattered family, before undertaking some long pilgrimage. Even when he meets his friends in this his last journey, he makes no reference to the peerless honour awaiting him. He sounds no trumpet before him. He could easily have gathered all Israel to the heights of the Jordan valley, to witness the wondrous spectacle [283] of his departure.

But with the humility of true greatness he keeps the secret locked in his bosom: perhaps the one dominant thought in his great soul, with the vision of that fiery rapture before him, was - 'What have I done, after all, to merit such an ovation as this?'

"O thou noble Tishbite," says Krummacher, "how does thy august aspect cast us all into the shade! Thou desirest to be nothing that GOD may be everything, and tremblest lest thou shouldst be taken for more than a dark shadow to set off the divine glory. Concealing the secret of thy approaching triumph, thou fliest the eye of witnesses, and seekest a veil for thy glory, afraid lest anyone should admire and praise, instead of the Sun, the little dew-drop that reflects his beams. And yet thou hadst not seen Him who spake, '**I am meek and lowly in heart;**' '**I seek not mine own honour, but him that sent me.**' We have seen Him - the Beloved of the Father, - and yet how clearly does His image shine in thee, compared with us! Yes, we penetrate thy motive - we understand thy wishes, and are covered with shame!"

As in the case of Naomi's remonstrance with Ruth in a former age, it is probable that Elijah, with the view of testing the fidelity and attachment of Elisha, thus addressed his trusted brother-prophet at Gilgal, "**Tarry thee here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Bethel.**" He repeats the same at Bethel; and yet again at Jericho. But Elisha's constancy was unshaken. He was no summer friend, forsaking the prop on which he had long leaned when it was about to be removed. No importunities would deter him from discharging the last offices of hallowed earthly attachment.

Dissimilar as we have seen the two in many ways were, in [284] feelings and character, Elisha had been taught too tenderly to love and revere that once rough, stern spirit, to whom he owed so much, to desert him in the closing scene. And he solemnly protests, "**As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.**" ¹

We are introduced, in this concluding portion of Elijah's history, to some new localities - Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho.

In the previous passages of his life, with the exception of the one incident of his flight to the Sinai wilderness, our interest was concentrated in the northern kingdom around Samaria, Jezreel, and Carmel in this closing chapter, it is transferred to the border cities of the two nations, the valley of the Jordan, and the giant mountain range on its eastern banks.

Let us pause to say a word in passing, regarding Gilgal, the place from which the two prophets are represented as starting together in company, and whither Elijah had purposely gone to make

the first of these his farewell visits.

It is only recent explorers who have solved satisfactorily the topographical difficulties which surround this place of their departure. The old, immemorial Gilgal, which formed Joshua's first encamping ground after entering Canaan, was situated in the lower valley of the Jordan in front of Jericho. By a glance at any map of Palestine, it will at once be observed [285] that it would have been a strange circuitous route for Elijah to have taken in order to reach the ford of the Jordan, had he travelled, (as has been generally taken for granted,) from the Gilgal of Joshua north to Bethel, and thence from Bethel back to Jericho.

Moreover, the peculiarity of the expression in verse 2, "**So they went down to Bethel,**" would be manifestly inappropriate with reference to the city of Israel's encampment. No one could be said to "**descend**" from it to "**the holy city,**" seeing that the way from the Gilgal of the Jordan valley to Bethel, is a gradual ascent of twelve hundred feet. We must seek its locality, therefore, somewhere among the mountains towards the north.

The remains of a city or village, Jiljilia, on a steep, flat-topped hill, in the borders of Ephraim, north-west of Bethel, from which Ebal and Gerizim and the distant Hermon are seen northwards, and the mountains of Gilead towards the east, seems conclusively to point to the real locality of Elijah's present sojourn. ²

Indeed, this "mountain-Gilgal" is incidentally mentioned long previously by Moses in connection with the old Canaanitish kingdom:

"Are they not on the other side Jordan, by the way where the sun goeth down, in the land of the Canaanites, which dwell in the champaign over against Gilgal, beside the plains of Moreh?" (Deuteronomy 11:30.) ³

But leaving this point of mere geographical interest, let us proceed to note the object of Elijah's farewell visits to these three favoured cities.

There was an unwonted and unmistakable stir and excitement [286] in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho that day.

Companies of young men - called here "**Sons of the Prophets**" - are seen gathering in earnest and arrested groups, - and when the two reverend men of GOD are welcomed in their midst, they beckon Elisha aside, and the secret is with trembling lips whispered by the surrounding youth in his ears- "**Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master .from thy head to-day?"**

To this query, the reply was given with bated breath- "**Yea, I know it indeed,** - hush! be silent;"

This introduces us to a new and most interesting phase in Elijah's history.

We have hitherto been contemplating him in his public aggressive character,

- as the bold reformer
- the defender of the old faith

- the unsparing "iconoclast"
- the uncompromising antagonist of the Baal worshippers
- GOD's ordained minister of fire and judgment against the workers of iniquity
- the vindicator of the Divine righteousness
- the avenger alike of Israel's defiled sceptre and polluted altars.

Here we have him under a new representation; - no longer engaged on the outward bulwarks he had so nobly strengthened and defended, but occupied with an equally momentous work.

Directed, doubtless, mainly by the Spirit of GOD, but inspired also by his own apprehension for the decay of true religion throughout the land in this period of degeneracy, he had spent his closing years in providing for the spiritual well-being of the generation to come by establishing three, if not more, "Schools;" - the Universities, - or, if we might be allowed the modern term, the "Divinity halls," or Missionary seminaries of the age. By instructing in these, the flower of the Hebrew youth, in the great principles of the theocracy and the religion of their [287] ancestors, he ensured the existence of a seed to serve his GOD, when he should be gathered to his fathers in the Church above.

We must regard these Colleges - these repositories of sacred truth and learning, specially as the institutes of Elijah. True, indeed, we read of similar "**schools of the Prophets**" in the age and under the venerable presidency of Samuel, in Gibeah and Ramah.⁴

Interesting, however, [288] as these earlier institutions were, they were temporary in their character, compared with those of the age of Elijah.

They seem to have had no fixed external constitution or organisation, - to have partaken more of the character of voluntary associations or combinations of youth, whose object was very much the cultivation of sacred poetry and music, and which were discontinued and superseded in the reign of David, by the new era he inaugurated in the services of the sanctuary and in sacred song.

Moreover, the people in the age of Samuel, mainly through their reverence and love for his exalted character, and their gratitude for deliverance by his prayers from Philistine oppression, were imbued with his pious spirit. Though the priesthood had degenerated, the heart of the nation was sound. Samuel's influence, were it nothing else, had secured their loyalty to the GOD he so faithfully served.

In Elijah's age all was different.

A withering blight had passed over the old theocratic devotion. The people were woefully demoralized. Seduced by court influence, and by their own corruptions, they had lapsed into abominable idolatries. So lamentable indeed was the general apostasy, that, as we have seen, he who was best conversant with the gangrened condition of the body politic, had uttered the desponding plaint, "**I am left alone!**"

May it not have been one of the many sacred lessons Elijah was taught at Horeb, - or rather, may it not have been one of the practical results of the assurance given him there, that there were yet seven thousand leal-hearted in the land, his being led thus to adopt means permanently to secure

some of this residuary "leaven," for the benefit of succeeding ages?

What better method could he devise, for protecting and perpetuating [289] the purity of truth and worship, than founding a number of godly Schools, - nurseries of devotion and sacred literature.

What more hallowed or befitting occupation for the evening of his own life, - when silvered locks had now displaced the raven hair of former days, and the giant strength of Cherith and Carmel had to bow to the inexorable demands of advancing years, - than to be engaged in rearing up and indoctrinating a noble band of young Israelites in the principles of the old theocracy?

He seems to have made the words and the prayer of the Psalmist his own: "**O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now, also, when I am old and gray-headed, O God, forsake me not, until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come**" (Psalm 71:17,18).

We can only form a dim conjecture and conception of these closing eight years of hallowed occupation in the southern cities of Israel.

If the Tishbite's bodily frame was more fragile than in the chivalrous days of earlier manhood; his soul, at least, burned, as ever, with inextinguishable fire. We can think of him gathering these children of the corrupt faith around him, - expounding the great principles of the Levitical and Moral Law, - making them minutely conversant with the details of their sacred books - the design (so far as was then revealed) of the complicated typical and ceremonial dispensation:- alternating these several pursuits, as in the earlier schools, with the study of sacred poetry and music: above all, exhorting his hearers to holy boldness and steadfastness in the faith, in the midst of an infidel and apostate age; and to [290] transmit the great doctrines of the faith unimpaired to posterity, that the people which should be created might praise the Lord. ⁵

We may only further add, that these schools, in the kingdom of Israel, so far compensated for the want of the Temple services and Levitical priesthood, instituted in the metropolis of the kingdom of Judah. ⁶

If it be a new light, therefore, it is surely an interesting one, to regard Elijah as the founder, in one sense, of Ecclesiastical Colleges; - the first head and principal of a Religious University; gathering around him a band of ingenuous youth and imbuing them with the truth set forth in his own great life motto "**The Lord liveth before whom I stand!**"

Indeed, if he had done nothing else, he would ever have been honoured, in this connection, as a benefactor of his people, - the conservator, as he had already proved himself the defender of the faith.

What a joy to the aged man to see these altar fires kindled in the Temple of GOD before his own lamp was put out, - these stars lighting up the theocratic firmament, ere he vanished like the sun from their sight, to shine in a brighter hemisphere!

How he would now feel rebuked for his old saying, "**I only am left!**" How unreasonable and unwarrantable would his gloomy anticipations now appear, when he beheld these "**arrows in the**

hand of the mighty!"

Happy would he be [291] who had thus "**his quiver full of them;**" and who, in looking round on such "**nourishers of his old age,**" could say, with a grateful heart, to the GOD he served, - "**Behold I and the children whom thou hast given me.**"

We may cease to wonder, then, at these eager groups, gathered on that memorable day, around the city gates, at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho. The Spirit of GOD, - whose influence, we have reason to believe, was specially poured out on these Prophetical students, - had communicated to them the fact that their reverend head and father was about to be taken up to his glorious reward.

Let us endeavour to realise the scene.

Let us picture the youths assembled at one of the college-gates here mentioned:- say that of Bethel. 'Shall we ever see him again? Shall we get his farewell benediction and blessing?' Thus we may imagine them interchanging their hopes and fears; when, all at once, they descry in the distance the well-known figure, in company with Elisha. With hearts bursting with fond, yet mingled emotions, they go forth to meet him!

They have gathered lovingly around the object of their veneration, outside the gates of the city, somewhere in the moorish track still scattered with the stones, out of which Jacob, ages before, made his rude pillow. With delicate reticence, they make no allusion to their Spiritual Father of the approaching event. He has said nothing of his severance from them, - and they, with becoming deference, do not broach the theme uppermost in all their minds. To Elisha alone they confide the eager question, 'Is it indeed the case? Is it true? Can it be?' "Yes, indeed, it is," is the reply, "I know it - be silent!" [292]

As if he said, 'It is too tender a theme to be mooted. Let there be no parting scene, - give and receive the parting farewell, in mute expressive silence!'

Let us just listen, in passing, to the grand philosophy of death, contained in these simple words of the sons of the prophets,- (what a comfort to those mourning the loss of beloved relatives) - "**Knowest thou that THE LORD will take**" thy master - thy friend - thy husband - thy wife - thy child "**away to-day.**"

They are taken; but knowest thou not it is "**the LORD.**"

Oh rejoice, it is not until He calls they can be "**taken.**" "**The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken.**" "**HE turneth man to destruction, and saith, Return, ye children of men.**"

From Bethel, the two men of GOD start on another stage of this last journey. They pursue the old well-known valley - "the long defile" - leading from Ai to Jericho, "which, in other times, formed the route of invading armies into Palestine." 7

On reaching Jericho, the same touching scene, in an interview with the sons of the prophets residing there, is repeated. Last parting counsels and blessings may have been given by Elijah; but, if so, they are not detailed in the simple record. But surely, with reference to himself, it is a

touching farewell memory, that his closing earthly thoughts and deeds are in connection with those beloved sons in the faith, whom he had, for the last decade of his life, watched and tended with such paternal interest and solicitude.

The old helmsman is about to resign his post; but his last thought is for those, who, after he is gone, are to steer the shattered vessel through the surging sea. We may with [293] reverence put into his lips, the farewell words which a Mightier far employed in leaving His college of disciples - "**Now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me!**"

Elijah makes one last effort to test the attachment of Elisha. "**Tarry I pray thee here, for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan.**" But he receives the same reply - "**As the Lord liveth and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee**" and it is briefly added, "**they two went on.**"

They are seen descending the slopes from Jericho, and having crossed the hot undulating sands, they are now approaching by the shelving banks of the "arrowy river."

But there is a last touching and significant incident presented in this picture of the old Prophet's collegiate life. As they are thus standing by the brink of the Jordan - high up on the terraces - the steep, abrupt ridge behind, ⁸ there are ranged fifty of his old Students - fifty Sons of the prophets.

If forbidden the gratification of giving him a personal convoy, they have come out to the most conspicuous of the heights around to follow their master with loving eye, which they could do for a long distance, in that clear Eastern atmosphere, till he be lost from their sight in the gorges on the farther side of the river; sorrowing, like the elders of Ephesus, when, on the shore at Miletus, they bid Paul farewell, that they should see his face no more. We may, surely, gather from this affecting scene, the tenderness of the tie which knit together the old Master and his young disciples; - the sternness of manner of his earlier years being now [294] mellowed and softened by age; or rather, by the grace that was ripening him for immortality. We see in it the realisation of his old vision at Horeb - his own character reflected in that sublime diorama of nature.

The earthquake and whirlwind and fire were now past: the close of his life had its befitting symbol in the "**still small voice.**" "**Mark the perfect man and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace.**" [295]

¹ *We cannot accept as satisfactory the motives imputed to Elijah by some commentators in making the above request to Elisha-viz., his old love of solitude, or his desire that his friend should not witness his translation, and be spared the pain of parting. The presence of Elisha, we shall presently find, was necessary in order to complete his own investiture with the sacred prophetic office by the hands of his departing father. And the fact of the former being an eye-witness, we have every reason to believe, was revealed to Elijah as an accompaniment in his translation.*

² *See Stanley's Sinai, note, p. 306; also Robinson and Van de Velde, in loco]*

³ *See also the learned and conclusive note of Kiel, p. 399].*

⁴ "The chief places where they appear in his (Samuel's) own lifetime is his own birthplace and residence, Ramah, Ramathaim-Zophim, 'the heights,' 'the double heights' of the watchmen. From this, or from some neighbouring heights, they might be seen descending in a long line or chain, which gave its name to their company, with 'psaltery, harp, tabret, pipe, and cymbals.' Or by the dwellings, the leafy huts as they were in later times, on the hill side - 'Naioth in Ramah.' They were settled in a congregation, (such is the word in the Hebrew language,) a church, as it were, within a church, and 'Samuel stood appointed over them.' Under the shadow of his house they dwelt as within a charmed circle. From them went forth an influence which awed and inspired even the wild and reckless soldiers of that lawless age. Song and music and dances were interwoven in some sacred union, difficult for us to conceive in these western or northern regions, yet not without illustrations even at the present day from the religious observances of Spain and of Arabia. But, unlike the dances of Seville and Cairo, the mystical songs and ecstasies of these prophetic schools were trained to ends much nobler than any mere ceremonial observance. Thither in that age of change and dissolution, Samuel gathered round him all that was generous and devout in the people of GOD.

- David, the shepherd-warrior and wandering outlaw;
- Saul, the wild and wayward king;
- Heman, the grandson of Samuel himself, chief singer afterwards in David's court, and known especially as the king's seer;
- Gad, the devoted companion of David in his exile;
- Nathan, his stern reprover in aftertimes, and the wise counsellor of David's wise son

- all, however different their characters and stations, seem to have found a house within those sacred haunts - all caught the same divine inspiration - all were, for the time at least, drawn together by that invigorating and elevating atmosphere. Long before Plato had gathered his disciples round him in the olive grove, or Zeno in the Portico, these institutions had grown up under Samuel in Judea." - Stanley, *Lectures on Jewish Church*, pp. 395-397.

⁵ Lamartine, in visiting one of the remarkable grottoes in Mount Carmel remarks, "The only view from it is over the boundless sea, and the only noise that is heard comes from the breakers continually dashing against the ledges of the promontory. Tradition recounts that this was the School in which Elias taught the knowledge of the mysteries and of sacred poesy," vol. i., p. 189.

⁶ We find, in a later period of Jewish history, reference made to these "sons of the prophets" living in chambers or cells attached to the Temple at Jerusalem - Jeremiah 35:4.

⁷ Stanley.

⁸ A later tradition assigned to these heights the locality of the Saviour's temptation.

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