

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 1

BIRTHPLACE, APPEARANCE, AND CHARACTER

"And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead" (I Kings 17:1)

"Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire" (Psalm 104:4)

THE life of ELIJAH is, in the truest sense of the word, a poem, - an inspired epic. It is surrounded throughout with a blended halo of heroism and saintliness. Though neither angel nor demigod, but "**a man of like passions**," intensely human in all the varied incidents and episodes of his picturesque history, - he yet seems as if he held converse more with Heaven than earth.

His name, which literally means "*My GOD the Lord*," or "*Jehovah is my GOD*," introduces us to one who had delegated to him superhuman powers; not only an ambassador from above, but the very viceroy and representative of Omnipotence.

He announces himself as standing before the Lord of hosts (I Kings 17:1), as if he were a retainer in the heavenly palace, rather than a citizen of the lower world; coming forth from time to time from his mysterious seclusion to deliver his message, and then retiring again into solitude to wait fresh communications from on high.

No one in Scripture story possesses a more thorough individuality; and this is all the more remarkable, as we have only a few broad touches descriptive of his personal appearance, and of his mental and moral character. But these are [3] so bold and impressive, that there is no mistaking him. He stands out in massive relief from the sacred canvas. Others of illustrious name, who occupy a far larger share of the inspired page, appear shadowy and undefined in comparison with this illustrious product of nature and grace.

He is presented to our view without a note of premonition, - ushered at once on the stage of stirring action full panoplied, - in the colossal manhood and maturity of his being.

This is all our introduction to him, as he confronts the guilty monarch of northern Palestine: **"And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand"** (I Kings 17:1).¹

We have no antecedents in his history. No reference to ancestry, home, education, father, mother, companion, or friend; and this, too, throughout all the rest of his career, till nigh its close.

He appears before us - the Melchizedek of his age - nursed in the wilds of nature for his great and momentous calling. There is a marked contrast in this respect between him and other well-known names in the roll of Hebrew writers.

Pilgrim and wayfarer as he was, with his moveable dwellings and altar, we are familiar with Abraham as "the Father," - the patriarchal chief or sheik, surrounded with the hum of living voices and desert tents,- with wife and sister's son and children, slaves and herdsmen - ever ready, when occasion requires, to dispense the rites of Eastern hospitality. In the life of Moses, we come in contact at every turn with the same human relationships and sympathies. [4]

We can think of his own mother singing Hebrew lullabies by his cradle. We are allowed to picture him in his boyhood, disciplined under the strange influence of the court of Pharaoh, instructed in the sacred schools of Heliopolis "**in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.**" Even in his wilderness exile, the loneliest period of his life, we find him associated, as a family man, with the household and flocks of Jethro.

Samuel, kindred in many respects as he was with the Tishbite in his prophetic calling, was surrounded with the sanctities of a double home and parentage.

We see, on the one hand, the mother who, from his lisping infancy, "**lent him to the Lord,**" year by year bringing him his "**little coat**" to the sanctuary at Shiloh.

On the other, the venerated foster-father on whom he duteously waited in that curtained tabernacle where "**the lamp of God was burning,**" instilling into his susceptible soul his earliest lessons of heavenly wisdom.

David's whole life is domestic, full of tender delineations of strong human sympathies and clinging friendships, manifested alike in the family homestead, the martial camp, and the palace of Zion. Even Elisha, as a writer has remarked, "had his yoke of oxen, parents to bid adieu to, a servant, Gehazi, in attendance on him, the sons of prophets in converse with him. But the mention of Elijah is at intervals, as one appearing in peopled neighbourhoods - no one knew from whence - in the desert, on the hill-tops - seen and recognised as by surprise, in the hairy garment of the prophet - the solitary of GOD - as one without scrip or purse,- even, it may be, as He who had not "**where to lay His head**" - "**having food to eat which man wot not of.**" ² [5]

Among the many influences which are known to mould and develop individual character, external nature must not be overlooked.

The grand and sublime has always proved a "meet nurse" for heroic spirits; and, were this the place, we might illustrate the statement by examples. Gilead, Elijah's birthplace, the cradle of his youth, and where he remained until the time of his shewing unto Israel,- was that wild, rugged, in many parts picturesque country, lying east of the Jordan - the "rocky" region, as the word implies, with its deep ravines and water-courses, its sheepfolds and herds of wild cattle, in contradistinction to Bashan, "the level or fertile land."

It was a region uncultured in more than its physical aspect. "**Galilee of the Gentiles,**" on the western side of the border river, was proverbially a rude province compared with the civilised

tribes of the south of Palestine. But this was, in a still greater measure, the character of those secluded uplands of Gilead.

Contiguous as they were to the roving tribes of Arabia, subject to continual invasions or forays of Bedouin freebooters, the walled towns and villages, common on the western side of Jordan, were here unknown. With the exception of a few mountain strongholds, the inhabitants were obliged, in their nomad existence, to be satisfied with the tent of canvas or goats' hair. And this primitive patriarchal life survived the advancing civilisation of other parts of the country.

"To an Israelite of the tribes west of Jordan," says a recent writer, ³ "the title 'Gileadite' must have conveyed a similar impression, though in a far stronger degree, to that which the title 'Celt' does to us. What the Highlands were, a century ago, to the [6] towns in the lowlands of Scotland, that, and more than that, must Gilead have been to Samaria or Jerusalem."

In this very country had been reared some of the warriors of a former age. "Because Machir was a man of war, therefore he had Gilead and Bashan." (Joshua 17:1).

Jephthah the Gileadite, the wild, lawless hero of his time, issued from these "mountains of prey," and his hapless daughter, with her group of maidens, awoke the echoes of their savage gorges with pathetic wailings. And now, He who had, in a still remoter age, nursed Moses His servant for his great exploits amid the solitudes of the Sinai desert, trains up a worthy successor in the same great Temple.

The soul of Elijah was tutored for his prophetic mission amid the rushing streams, "**the pipings of flocks**," the awful solitudes, and the rough freebooter - life of the most distant territory of the sacred tribes.

Jehovah, in the selection of the human instrument for a great revival in Israel, would magnify the sovereignty of His own grace; He brings balm from half-heathen Gilead to heal the hurt of the daughter of His people;- He chooses no Rabbi nor learned doctor of the schools - no Hierarch with the prestige of hereditary office or outward form of consecration,- but a lay preacher from the Highlands of Palestine,- a man who had graduated in no school but nature - who had been taught, but taught only of Heaven.

Forth he comes, A PROPHET OF FIRE, a burning and a shining light, in one of the darkest periods of Hebrew history - and "**many were to rejoice in his light**."

Some, indeed, have supposed that Elijah was not Hebrew in his origin at all,- that the blood of roving Ishmael was [7] in his veins,- that he sprang from a tribe of Gentiles who inherited from the patriarch Abraham the knowledge of the one true GOD, and retained it longer than the heathen around, owing to their proximity to the land of Canaan; that such a selection, moreover, was purposely made by GOD to rebuke the wayward apostasy of His chosen Israel, and shew them that even from strangers and foreigners He could raise up honoured men for the vindication of His truth and the accomplishment of His purposes. ⁴

Be this as it may, if we draw a portraiture of Elijah even from the materials afforded us in Scripture, we recognize in his outward mien more of the Bedouin than the son of the chosen

race. There stands before us a muscular figure, tawny with the burning suns of Palestine, with long, shaggy raven hair hanging loose over his shoulders.

A modern writer, in speaking of Samson's unshorn locks, compares him to the Merovingian kings, "whose long tresses were the sign of their royal race, which to lose was to lose royalty itself." ⁵

We cannot pronounce in the case of the prophet of Gilead of what these flowing tresses were the symbol,- whether they were the badge of his Divine mission, or as, with the son of Manoah, the token of his strength,- or that, like him, he had taken the vow of the Nazarite. In any case, they form a marked feature in his outward appearance.

He is specially spoken of, in a subsequent period, by Ahaziah's messengers (II Kings 1:8) as "**a hairy man**," (lit., "a lord of hair.").

The children of Bethel, when they came forth and mocked Elisha as "**the bald head**," did so because struck with the contrast between him [8] and the familiar appearance of his shaggy predecessor. Around his shoulders he had flung a loose cape or striped blanket, made either of rough sheep or camel hide, fastened at his breast with a leathern girdle.

Whatever may have been the case with his full tonsured head, this mantle appears to have had some singular significance attached to it. It was to him what the rod was to Moses.

It seemed at once the outward badge of his prophetic office, and the instrument by which his miracles were performed.

It screened him at one time when he held intercourse with GOD in the entrance of the desert cave,- he wrapped it round his face: at another, he would roll it up like a staff, as we shall find him doing at the close of his history, when at its magic touch Jordan was driven back.

It was the legacy which dropped on the shoulders of his successor from the fiery chariot when the whirlwind bore him to Heaven. ⁶

Nor must his physical strength and powers of physical endurance be forgotten in this rapid portraiture. That must have been no ordinary man, surely, who, before the coming nightstorm, and after the toils of an exhausting day, could accomplish such a feat of pedestrianism as to run sixteen miles, and withal outstrip the fleet coursers in Ahab's chariot in reaching the gate of Jezreel.

That must have been no average strength that could sustain the hardships and privations of Cherith, and the long forty days' fast of Horeb.

Such, then, in personal aspect seems to have been THE GREAT ELIJAH:- with no priestly vestment but that hairy [9] tunic of the desert - wanting in courtly attire and perhaps courtly manners and etiquette, but with regal mien and bearing too;- a glorious champion of truth and righteousness.

His name must have been a household word in every home of Israel and beyond it.

Something awful must have been the terror inspired by the man who had the elements of nature delegated to his control; who could seal up the heavens at one time - lock up from a whole nation for years the treasures of the clouds: at another, draw fire from these clouds like a sword from its scabbard, and strew the earth with a hundred dead!

Even the suddenness of his appearances and disappearances are startling and dramatic.

He towers - like one of the sons of Anak - morally as well as physically high above those around him. He reminds us of the brave heroes - though with nobler elements of grandeur in his case - who came across Jordan in high flood to join a former exiled king of Israel- "whose faces were like the faces of lions, and were as swift as the gazelles upon the mountains."

In one word, he was an incarnation of Power.

If early Greece or Rome (not Palestine) had been the theatre of his deeds, he would have had his place amid the gods of Olympus.

As it was, there was no name (that of Abraham and perhaps Moses excepted) more venerated in subsequent ages among his countrymen. But yet, with all his moral and physical superiority, with all his mortifications, his strange ascetic life, Elijah is spoken of, for our encouragement, as "**a man of like passions**" (James 5:17). And it is this which makes his biography so interesting and instructive.

With all his greatness, he had his weaknesses and failings - and failings, [10] too, just in the points of character we should least have expected.

The reprover of Ahab,- the bold, bearded son of the desert who feared GOD, and knew apparently no other fear, so elevated above the foibles, weaknesses, caprices of his fellows - so indifferent to human opinion, whether in the shape of commendation or censure,- can become a craven and coward on hearing the threats of an intriguing woman.

Champion as he was,- a shaggy lion from the coverts of Gilead, who can challenge single-handed a multitude of idolatrous priests,- he cowers away in moping despondency from work and duty.

We shall see in all this - when we come to dwell minutely on these varied incidents - a reflex of our fluctuating selves, which we may take, not to foster or encourage similar collapses, but to prevent us being needlessly disconcerted by the experience of kindred changeful moods in the spiritual life.

"There was but a step," it has been remarked, in the case of Paul, "between the third heavens and the thorn in the flesh;" there was but a step in the case of Elijah between the heights of Carmel and the cave of Horeb.

This Peter of the Old Testament was, like all characters of strong, fervid, vehement

temperament, easily elated, easily depressed. He reminds us of the engine careering along our own highways - a very Hercules in strength - the type and impersonation of grandeur and power: but laid on its side, amid the mangled wrecks it has dragged along with it, nought is more helpless.

Elijah's life, however, as that of "**a man of like passions**," is instructive in more than this. Not only was there in his character a union of weakness with greatness, but, despite of all his apparent solitariness, unworldliness, asceticism, isolation [11] from his fellows, there were not wanting elements of tenderness.

The earthquake, the whirlwind, the fire, which he saw in the Sinai desert, and after all these "the still small voice," formed the reflection of his own inner nature - a union of the terrible with the gentle.

The denouncer of Ahab, the rebuker of kingly iniquity, the slayer at the Kishon, the homicide who, in one day, with his own hands, purpled its waters with the blood of four hundred and fifty priests,- we shall yet see with what considerate tenderness he ministers to the distress of the lonely widow of Zarephath, and with what loving affection he clings at the last to the friendship of the faithful Elisha.

Stern characters are often misunderstood.

There is frequently a union of opposites in the same nature, the stern may appear to predominate, when gentleness and goodness are there, if the world would but believe it.

The official severity of the homeless Prophet was tempered and softened with these latter qualities; while his every action, with the one solitary exception, was governed and pervaded by sterling principle, uncompromising rectitude, unflinching adherence to the will of GOD.

Much as Ahab hated his truthful denunciations, he could not disguise his respect for his candour, boldness, and devotion to Him he so faithfully served. These lofty attributes doubtless Elijah owed not to himself.

It was GOD's training and grace, the power of His Spirit working within him, that made him the man and the hero that he was. The classic fable regarding Hesiod, the unlettered herdsman, but who became the Father of poetry, was a reality in the case of THE PROPHET OF FIRE;- a heavenly flame coming suddenly down and resting on his head, he became the greatest of his age.

The Lord had said to him, as to the prophet [12] of Chebar, "**Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant, harder than flint, have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house.**" (Ezekiel 3:8, 9).

Indeed we often think of the Tishbite as an example of a character surcharged with elements of great power, which, if misdirected, must have been terrible for evil. Left to his own wayward, impetuous, fiery nature, his strong impulses and iron will, the bold Bedouin of Gilead might

have grown up to be the scourge and destroyer, the tempter and corrupter of Israel,- not its Restorer, Reformer, and Saviour,- a vessel of wrath instead of a vessel of mercy.

An angel in might, he might have turned a demon in depravity;- a "Prophet of Fire," not to illumine, but to scathe.

His was a temperament in which evil impulses, had they once obtained sway, would have swept him down rapidly to ruin, and hurried thousands along with him, spreading his evil and baneful influence through a whole generation. But he had been enabled to consecrate all this latent power to the cause of righteousness.

Perhaps, after many a silent soul-struggle, of which the world knows nothing, in the solitudes of his Fatherland, the devil in his nature had been expelled and exorcised; and he had adopted as his Life-motto- "**THE GOD OF ISRAEL WHOM I SERVE, AND BEFORE WHOM I STAND.**"

As a closing practical thought, let us remember how little it often takes to divert elements of character towards good or towards evil. How many, with downward, depraved propensities, [13] have, by godly training, or by dint of moral courage and determination, combined with the grace of GOD, struggled manfully against the stream, and are now firm on the side of religious principle.

How many, on the other hand, with, it may be, nobler natural elements of character,- full of hope and promise,- have, in an evil hour, by one false step, initiated the backward and the downward course to ruin! By one false turn of the helm, they have made shipwreck of faith and of a good conscience. And, though we must not anticipate, we shall find that GOD did not leave His servant - this "**light of Israel,**" whom He had kindled "**for a FIRE**" (Isaiah 10:17) - without high recompense.

He made a stormy life close with a glorious setting: when the cloudy, fitful, changeful moods of his own spirit had, by varied discipline, subsided into calm faith, and obedience, and trust,- he was borne upwards to that rest for the storm-tossed, where "**earthquake, and whirlwind, and fire**" are known no more, to listen through eternal ages to the "still small voice."

Enoch-like, "**he was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for, before his translation, he had this testimony, that he pleased God.**"⁷

¹ "He comes in with a tempest," says Bishop Hall, "who went out with a whirlwind."

² Dr Williams on the *Characters of the Old Testament*, p. 225. [5]

³ See *Smith's Dictionary of the Bible*, in loco

⁴ See Kiel, vol. i., p. 267

⁵ Stanley's *Jewish Church*, p. 364

⁶ It has been noted that the rough cloak or mantle, perhaps in imitation of the Tishbite, was worn by the prophets at a much later period of Hebrew history. See Zechariah 13:4)

⁷ We need hardly wonder that the great German composer should have selected the history of Elijah, with its rapid alternations, its shifting dramatic effects, to give the loftiest and most varied

expression to the art of which he was so consummate a master. Mendelssohn's translation into music of this great life poem,- in which there is such abundant scope for the rendering of the plaintive and pathetic, as well as for the grand and sublime,- is, in the highest sense, a triumph of genius. Even the words to which the music is set, shew that he has thoroughly appreciated alike the character of the Prophet and the scenes through which he moved. [14]

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