

Lessons from the life of Elijah

21. "Tarry here, I pray thee" (2 Kgs. 2:1-10)

Stephen Whitehouse

Elijah's course is now almost finished and his time of departure is close at hand. We now see him on his last journey, accompanied by Elisha, to whom is given the power that will enable him to continue the great prophet's work.

THOUGH THERE is no record of what Elijah was occupied with after passing the sentence of death upon King Ahaziah (2 Kgs. 1:15-17), it seems likely that he remained busy. There was to be no retirement from the work of the Truth for Elijah.

Teaching the young prophets the ways of God, and developing the schools of the prophets, were certainly a vital part of Elijah's work. His labour was to "strengthen the things which remain" (Rev. 3:2). The great supernatural wonders on Carmel were now just a distant memory, and what was urgently required was a more permanent arrangement by which God's Word could be preached throughout the land. Similarly with the Lord Jesus Christ, though he performed many extraordinary miracles, his time spent with his apostles was absolutely necessary for the effective preaching of the gospel once he had risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.

Elijah and Elisha leave Gilgal

The account of Elijah's great departure opens with, "And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal" (2 Kgs. 2:1). It would appear, then, that God had already notified Elijah that his exit would take on supernatural proportions, and this caused him to leave Gilgal. Just like Jesus, Elijah had no fixed residence, he moved from one place to another, guided by the Spirit of God (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58). Notice also that faithful Elisha was still there with him. But, though Elisha "ministered" to his master (1 Kgs. 19:21) and "poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kgs. 3:11), it is evident that he was more Elijah's friend and companion than servant.

How significant it is that Elijah's final journey commences at Gilgal! The name actually means 'rolling', and is a powerful reminder of when the

children of Israel, after the crossing of the Jordan, kept their first Passover in the land of Canaan and "did eat of the old corn of the land" instead of the manna which they had been miraculously provided with in the wilderness (Josh. 5:10-12). It was at Gilgal that they renewed the rite of circumcision and so "rolled away the reproach" of their slavery in Egypt (v. 9). It was also in this hallowed place that twelve memorial stones were taken from the bed of the Jordan and set up as a memorial,¹ and where the tabernacle remained till it was finally taken to Shiloh (18:1).

Yet, according to most respected authorities, the Gilgal from which the two prophets set out was not the one of Joshua, but was probably the place now known as Jiljilieh, a town near Nablous (ancient Shechem), about four miles from both Bethel and Shiloh and one of the most ancient sanctuaries of the land (1 Sam. 10:8; 11:15). Observe that the record plainly states that they "went down" to Bethel from Gilgal (2 Kgs. 2:2); and, seeing that the Gilgal of Joshua is in the lowlands of the Jordan, and Bethel is actually 3,000 feet above the plain, it could not have been the place from which Elijah and Elisha set out. However, the sacred name alone would have reminded Elijah and Elisha of the first Gilgal and the memorable scenes witnessed there.

It was when these two great men were leaving Gilgal that Elijah turned to his faithful minister and said, "Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Beth-el". Why had he been sent to Bethel? Probably to visit the prophetic school there. But why should he wish to leave his friend behind? There are various conjectures about this, yet, for whatever reason, Elijah made three serious efforts to rid himself of Elisha (*cf.* vv. 4,6).

Perhaps Elijah knew that his remaining hours were few and so wanted to spend them alone with his God, in quiet and constant prayer. Or it may have been because he was conscious that his departure would be nothing short of marvellous and so wanted to avoid the praise and honour of men. Or quite possibly it might have been Elijah's personal strategy to test the resolve and determi-

1. See Part 12, Jun. 2005, p. 187.

nation of Elisha, a final test to determine whether Elisha was his rightful successor. We would suggest that it is most likely to be the last.

Whatever the reasoning behind Elijah's command to Elisha to leave him, Elisha was not prepared to comply. In fact the younger prophet replied in all earnest, "As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee" (v. 2). This was a most solemn and emphatic oath (*cf.* 1 Sam. 20:3; 2 Kgs. 4:30). His resolve indicates a deep sense of loyalty with a touch of curiosity. Under any normal circumstances Elisha would have obeyed his master, but on this day he would not. He was clearly aware that something quite extraordinary was impending (vv. 3,5) and so he would dutifully remain with his master.

It is worth reminding ourselves of Elisha's first response to Elijah after the great prophet had cast his mantle upon him: "I will follow thee" (1 Kgs. 19:20). But was this a mere impulse to his great calling, or was it a heartfelt, steadfast resolve? Was he really prepared to cleave to Elijah right till the end, or would he flee at the right opportunity and forsake his master? Certainly in all of this, and indeed all that followed, Elisha's determination was tested.

The journey to Bethel

Elijah granted Elisha's request, and they went together to Bethel (2 Kgs. 2:2). Bethel was a place of hallowed memory, and means 'house of God', having been marked out by the glorious vision Jacob received of the angels ascending and descending on the ladder whose top reached to heaven (Gen. 28:10-19). It was here also on a different occasion that "God spake with him" (35:1-15). Significantly, it was of this second occasion that Hosea declared that God also spoke with all Israel (Hos. 12:4,5). And surely Elisha would have been encouraged by this memory of Jacob's determination to hold on. He too must apply the same resolve and not leave the side of this representative of God.

When the two of them journeyed they were greeted by "the sons of the prophets that were at Beth-el" (2 Kgs. 2:3). This new order of prophets is widely recognised as the work of Samuel (1 Sam. 10:9-12; 19:19,20; *cf.* Acts 3:24; Heb. 11:32), and it is no coincidence that Bethel and Gilgal formed two of the three centres that Samuel annually visited to judge Israel (1 Sam. 7:16). It was probably from these beginnings that the schools were formed. These "sons", then, were pupils, and sonship here, no doubt, simply means disciple-

ship. Thus these institutions were places of higher education, having probably fallen into disuse and been revived under Elijah to seal and secure the prophetic victory over Baal-worship.

But what did these "sons" desire? They approached Elisha and said, "Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day?" (2 Kgs. 2:3). Firstly, note that the prophets did not approach Elijah, but instead sought out his servant. Quite possibly they thought that Elijah was of too high a standing to receive such a line of questioning. They also probably felt that Elijah may have been too occupied with preparing for his final hours.

Whatever the reason, it is clear they were all aware that this was the day when Elijah would depart from them. But Elisha was also well acquainted with this fact, which may have been the reason why he responded in such a direct and abrupt manner: "Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace". His heart was already heavy and he did not need to be reminded.

To Jericho

Again Elijah turned to Elisha, asking him to remain at Bethel while he continued on to Jericho (v. 4). So Elisha's first test of loyalty is quickly followed by a second. Elijah desired to make the next part of the journey alone, a section which would be longer and far more difficult. Indeed, the older prophet was very clear as to why he desired to continue unaccompanied: "for the LORD hath sent *me* to Jericho".

Observe how similar this incident is to the one where two of Jesus' disciples journeyed on the road to Emmaus and, totally unbeknown to them, were met by the risen Lord: "And they [the disciples] drew nigh unto the village . . . and he [Jesus] made as though he would have gone further. But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us . . . And he went in to tarry with them" (Lk. 24:28,29). Just like the disciples, nothing was going to hinder Elisha from remaining with his master, so Elisha repeats his previous request (*cf.* 2 Kgs. 2:2) and his master again yields. So the two of them continued together, and "they came to Jericho" (v. 4), the very border of the land of Israel.

Jericho was another sacred site, about five miles west of Jordan. It was the scene of the great victory under Joshua after the children of Israel had entered into the Promised Land (Josh. 6). Importantly, this city had been "accursed", or, simply, 'devoted to destruction' (v. 17; *cf.* Lev. 27:28,29;

Deut. 13:16). So Jericho was the scene where faith overcame the flesh, and the historical significance would not have been lost on these two men.

Again, these two holy men were visited by "the sons of the prophets" (2 Kgs. 2:5), but this time from Jericho. They approached Elisha with the same question as had been asked at Bethel (v. 3), and, for a second time, Elisha responded with the same short and frank reply: "Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace".

Why were the prophets at Bethel and Jericho so insistent on reminding Elisha that Elijah was leaving him that very day? Surely they would have known that Elisha was aware of this truth? Was it because they had simply failed to comprehend why Elisha would so persistently cling on to his master? What would be the benefit of doing this? Surely "the sons of the prophets" would be much better served if Elisha remained and ministered at Bethel or Jericho.

But, in Elisha's mind, remaining fixed to Elijah was far more important. It was as Jesus said: "For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always" (Mt. 26:11). Elisha knew that these parting hours were precious moments indeed; the "sons of the prophets" would remain and continue, but his master would soon be gone. And so, just like another great man, Elisha too "conferred not with flesh and blood" (Gal. 1:16), but continued, regardless of opinion and opposition.

Finally to Jordan

After all the verbal pressure from the prophets, and the long and arduous journey, Elisha must have felt tired. Elijah, possibly sensing this, said for a third and final time: "Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan" (2 Kgs. 2:6). But, as we have come to expect with Elisha, the same dogged reply was returned: "As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee" (v. 6). Elisha's threefold refusal to leave him settled any doubt, if there had been any, that Elisha was fully committed to his cause (*cf.* Jno. 21:15-17).

Another similar incident comes to mind, namely that of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "return thou after thy sister in law", but Ruth responded, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God". It was when Naomi saw that Ruth "was stedfastly minded to go with

her" that, finally, "she left speaking unto her", and "they two went until they came to Beth-lehem" (Ruth 1:15-19). Just like Naomi, Elijah saw how "steadfastly minded" his servant was, and so "they two went on" (2 Kgs. 2:6), leaving Jericho and the young prophets behind.

So the two of them, Elijah and Elisha, continued together and finally arrived at Jordan. Could there have been a more significant and fitting spot? It was here that the Israelites passed over "on dry ground" under Joshua (Josh. 3:17; *cf.* Ps. 114:3). And, while Elijah and Elisha both "stood by Jordan", the "fifty men of the sons of the prophets . . . stood to view afar off" (2 Kgs. 2:7). Evidently the young prophets were aware that something spectacular was about to take place, and so they fastened their eyes on these two men. They showed a respect for Elijah's wish to be alone, yet at the same time a degree of commitment to the prophet and his cause, with obviously a natural touch of curiosity as to what was about to happen.

The dividing of the Jordan

Alone, facing the river, "Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together" (v. 8). Elijah's "mantle" was his "sheepskin" (Septuagint), and he "wrapped it together", or, as this phrase can be alternatively translated, "wrapped up" or "folded it together". With the mantle he "smote the waters", clearly a symbolic act like that of Moses smiting the rock. And did he roll up his mantle in order that it resembled a rod or staff, and thus imitated the very act which Moses performed when he "stretched out his hand over the sea" (Ex. 14:21)? Whatever the reason, the mantle was a symbol of his prophetic office (*cf.* Zech. 13:4), just as the rod was for Moses, and the parting of the river was a demonstration of the power that Almighty God had vested in him.

The narrative now beautifully understates a scene of the most miraculous magnitude: "and they [the waters] were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground" (2 Kgs. 2:8). So the Jordan was to be crossed! What a majestic scene and glorious occasion for these two faithful men! The dividing of these great waters was certainly a fitting prelude to the prophet's exit, and added further drama and tension to an already heart-rending and spine-chilling occasion. The Lord God had decided to honour and magnify these two men before many witnesses (v. 7), just as He had previously done with Moses when he crossed the Red Sea, and later with

Joshua, who also crossed the River Jordan (Josh. 4:1-10).

The children of Israel were to regard Elijah and Elisha as a second Moses and a second Joshua, two men who had brought them out of spiritual Egypt, out of the apostasy of Jezebel, and would lead them into the Kingdom of God. And let us not forget that Elijah again will part great waters and lead others "over dryshod" when he comes again and completes his future work, that of re-gathering and restoring the Jewish people back into the Holy Land.²

Interestingly, the River Jordan is a fitting symbol of human mortality and death. This is evident from the fact that the river empties itself into the Dead Sea—the sea of death—and on its way passes through a city significantly called Adam (Josh. 3:16). How apt, then, that 'Jordan' actually means 'Descender', gradually descending from life to death; for all men are subject to the Edenic curse from the Garden: "dying thou dost die" (Gen. 2:17, Young's Literal). So, in the act of passing through the River Jordan and reversing the waters, we see Elijah as a beautiful type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord passed from death to life, being "the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20). He has made his way through death and has provided a safe way for us. And so the blessing for all those that follow Jesus by being "baptized into his death" is the promise of "newness of life" (Rom. 6:3,4). This is just as the Master said: "He that heareth my word . . . hath everlasting life, and . . . is passed from death unto life" (Jno. 5:24).

Regarding the actual crossing of the Jordan, it is worth considering the significance of crossing over to the eastern side. Moses spent his final hours on the east side of the Jordan (Deut. 3:27; 34:1) before he too was taken and permanently hidden from view (34:6). The similarities between these two men, and their final hours with the children of Israel, should therefore not be lost on us (2 Kgs. 2:11; cf. vv. 16,17).

Elisha's request

Once these two men had crossed over the Jordan, Elijah looked to Elisha and said, "Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee" (v. 9). These are almost the words of a dying father, anxious to bless his spiritual son before his departure (cf. Gen. 27:4); compare Elisha's words, "My father, my father" (2 Kgs. 2:12).

Is this proof that Elijah had been testing his apprentice all the time, and now, aware that his

time was short, had become very desirous of giving Elisha some parting gift? But what would Elisha ask for? Elisha earnestly replied, "I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me" (v. 9). In this short reply we immediately see that Elisha was a man who had the right priorities in life and earnestly desired "treasure in heaven" (Mt. 19:21).

It is the Apostle Paul who exhorted, "covet earnestly the best gifts" (1 Cor. 12:31). Solomon did not ask for "long life", "riches", or "the life of [his] enemies", but rather an "understanding heart to . . . discern between good and bad" (1 Kgs. 3:11,9). Similarly, Elisha realised that the most important gift that God could bestow on him was an ability to understand and teach others. He did not crave fame, rank or wealth, but the power to turn the wicked, to encourage the lowly and to strengthen the upright. This was a gift that could be for the benefit of others. Indeed, it is a lesson in itself when we bring to mind the requests made during our own personal and private prayers.

But what of this "double portion"? We would not suggest that Elisha actually requested a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit, but rather "double" that which had been given to the other prophets. Elisha intended that he might be considered as Elijah's eldest son, heir to his spirit, and successor to his great work. He desired "the double portion", or literally, 'the double mouthful', which was the right of the first-born and heir (Deut. 21:17). He longed to be the next leader of the prophets and so be necessarily equipped for the job in hand.

One only has to glance quickly at the life of Elisha to see that he most certainly did not possess "double" the spirit and power of Elijah. Though some chronologists have argued that Elisha's ministry was twice the length of Elijah's, and some commentators that Elisha performed about twice the number of miracles, we would suggest that this argument is flawed. One only has to review the miracles and wonders that Elijah performed through the power of God to conclude that, though Elisha was to be the rightful heir, he nonetheless lacked the same intensity and majesty of his esteemed master.

But how would Elijah respond to this sincere request? He simply said, "Thou hast asked a hard thing" (2 Kgs. 2:10). We would suggest that the "hard thing" was not in the amount, but in the nature of the request. Though Elijah knew that

2. See Part 10, Apr. 2005, p. 108.

Elisha would succeed him (1 Kgs. 19:16), this was not something he could freely give, since it was not his power, but God's.

Though Elijah could not personally bequeath the "double portion" to Elisha, he responded positively, albeit with one final test: "nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so" (2 Kgs. 2:10). Most probably Elijah was Divinely instructed to give Elisha a sign by which his young successor would know whether his request had been granted by heaven. But the only

way he would receive such a blessing was if he kept his eyes fixed upon his master, which again is an exhortation in its own right.

Therefore, if we too desire our prayers to be answered, to be given a "double portion" in that great day, then we must keep our eyes permanently on our Master and friend, "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

[\(To be concluded\)](#)

"Behold the fig tree"

David Burges

ALL BIBLE READERS are familiar with the fig tree, both as a characteristic tree of the Holy Land and also as an eloquent symbol of God's chosen nation of Israel. The fig and its inferior cousin the sycamore fig both played an important part in daily life in Bible times. But probably many readers will be unaware of the remarkable and complex reproductive system of the trees of the fig genus, which speaks powerfully of 'intelligent design' by the Great Creator.

An ancient tree

There are several hundred species of fig tree, spread throughout the tropics. The common fig (*Ficus carica*) is the first specific tree to be mentioned in the Bible, when Adam and Eve used its broad palmate leaves to hide their shame (Gen. 3:7), and figs have been cultivated from ancient times. Dried figs dating from the Neolithic Age were discovered in the excavation of Gezer, and they were also grown in ancient Egypt.¹ The fig tree is a characteristic Mediterranean species, and it is recognised in Jewish tradition as one of the 'seven fruits' of the Promised Land (Deut. 8:8).²

The sycamore fig (*Ficus sycomorus*) is an African tree, larger and sturdier than the fig. However, its fruit is inferior in both taste and sugar content and hence they were only widely consumed in ancient times by the poor,³ as implied in the avowal of the prophet Amos to his persecutors that he was simply "a herdsman and dresser of sycamore figs" (Amos 7:14, ESV). They were once common in the Land (1 Kgs. 10:27), and it was one of these trees that Zacchaeus climbed in order to see Jesus (Lk. 19:3,4).

Fig tree pollination

A great many plant species are pollinated by insects, which are attracted by colourful flowers, scent and a supply of nectar. Fig trees are unique, however, in that their flowers are completely concealed within a body called the *syconium*. Fig 'fruits' are actually inside-out flower clusters (known as inflorescences). These are hollow, fleshy structures composed of modified stem tissue, lined on the inside with hundreds of minute male and female flowers, completely inaccessible to normal insects.

However, at one end of the syconium, opposite the stalk, is a small opening (the *ostiole*) lined with dense, overlapping scales. Careful, patient observation of figs has revealed that they are completely dependent for their propagation and survival on tiny wasps, only a couple of millimetres long, which alone are able to penetrate the ostiole. These fig wasps are the sole pollinators of fig trees, and, in turn, fig wasps can breed nowhere else but inside figs, a relationship that is a classic example of *mutualism* (where neither party can survive without the other). Furthermore, in general each species of fig is pollinated by a unique species of wasp.

Figs come in two natural sexual forms: wild figs, called *caprifigs*,⁴ with both male and female

1. M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, p. 58.
2. Wheat, barley, vine, fig, pomegranate, olive and date palm (honey).
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 68.
4. Literally 'goat-figs', because it was believed that only goats would eat them.