New series

Lessons from the life of Elijah

1. "There shall not be dew nor rain these years" (1 Kgs. 17:1)

Stephen Whitehouse

IN 1 KINGS 17 we find Israel in a spiritual pit, constantly plagued by the treacherous dealings of a wicked and corrupt monarch, for "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him" (1 Kgs. 16:30; *cf.* v. 33). This was the beginning of a new and more evil form of idolatry in Israel. Idol temples had arisen throughout the land, with profane altars, stained with the blood of the prophets, defying the Most High and calling out for Divine vengeance.

However, the more mightily idolatry raised its head in the kingdom of Israel, the more powerfully did God show His people that He was Lord, in sending the prophet Elijah abruptly upon the scene. He was to be the remedy for Ahab and his wife Jezebel, the wicked pair who had knowingly substituted for the worship of the God of Abraham that of the deaf and silent Baal.

Elijah the Tishbite

The origin of the prophet is identified by the words "Elijah the Tishbite" (1 Kgs. 17:1). Tishbite comes from a word meaning 'captivity', and is traditionally understood as referring either to a town named Tishbe or to a designation for the settlers in Gilead. He was "of the inhabitants of Gilead", the word translated "inhabitant" (*towshab*) here being the word for a 'sojourner', or 'stranger'. Thus the opening words of chapter 17 could alternatively be rendered: "Elijah the stranger [captive] from among the strangers in Gilead".

This suggests that Elijah was one of a number of strangers or immigrants who had earlier settled in Gilead. This sense of the word translated "inhabitant" here is found elsewhere in Scripture (Gen. 23:4; Ex. 12:45; Lev. 22:10; 25:35,47). What a powerful exhortation! The great prophet was a stranger in his own land, a pilgrim on the earth, yet sought a country, even "a better country, that is, an heavenly" (Heb. 11:13-16).

Elijah owed his greatness, not to high birth or station, or to a native place of renown, but to his spiritual disposition, formed and developed in this area of isolation and extreme loneliness, chiselled out of hard rock and carefully prepared for a Divine role. Elijah's time in Gilead would certainly have served as a powerful influence in the development of his character, providing an excellent training ground for the stern challenges ahead. His lonely dwelling-place consisted of rough lands and mountain ravines, where life involved keeping cattle and flocks, and daily experiences developed steely characters, ready for tough business.

On his journey the prophet would have had time to ponder the meaning of his name, which is derived from the two Hebrew words, *el*, which means Mighty One, and *Yah*, the covenant Name, Yahweh, which is occasionally condensed to the shorter form, Yah. Elijah thus means, 'My God is Yahweh'.

The God of Israel was his God, and this spoke of the close relationship he had with his Maker, and also of how he was God's chosen vessel through whom great power and works would be manifested to the nation of Israel. And not only did he figure in God's immediate plan and purpose with Israel during the days of Ahab and Jezebel, he also has a key role to play in bringing about the future judgements upon the earth when our Lord and Master returns.

"Without father, without mother, without descent" (Heb. 7:3)

It is immediately noticeable that there is no mention of Elijah's family line, nor of his immediate parents; no importance is placed upon his family heritage. This man's life and works are sufficient in themselves to cause us to hearken to his startling message, the direct warnings announced to idolatrous Israel. God's true servants require no genealogy, they belong to a higher order of

things, not regulated by "the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life" (Heb. 7:16).

The silence of the Scriptural record on Elijah's genealogy is surely reminiscent of Melchizedek, "King of righteousness . . . King of Salem", to whom Abraham paid tithes (vv. 2-4). The fact that the Word makes no mention of the genealogies of either this faithful prophet or the King of righteousness is in stark contrast to the list of evil kings who preceded Ahab on the throne, as provided in 1 Kings 16. They were honoured because they had inherited the throne of their fathers, but Elijah and Melchizedek were ordained and honoured from heaven.

The Scriptures are silent on the ancestry of this great prophet, but they do inform us that "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit" (Jas. 5:17,18). Here the word translated "subject to like passions" (*homoiopathēs*) can be alternatively rendered as 'suffering the like with another', and is derived from *homoios*, which means 'like', 'similar', or 'resembling'. This word conveys the feelings of this great prophet; like Jesus he was "touched" with the "infirmities" of his people (Heb. 4:15) and stands in the annals of history as a representative man. Yet in his "weakness" he was "made strong" (11:34) and by God's strength would deliver Israel.

"As the LORD God of Israel liveth . . ."

Elijah burst upon the scene and uttered words of conviction and sheer determination: "As the LORD God [Yahweh Elohim] of Israel liveth . . ." (1 Kgs. 17:1). Here we observe a man, mighty in word and deed, breaking forth like a raging flame. The great prophet informed Ahab that he had been Divinely commissioned from heaven above.

The phrase quoted above occurs here for the first time in Scripture, and it is full of meaning. It asserted that Yahweh, not Baal, was the God of Israel, and that He alone lives; that it was Yahweh, through the work of His mighty angels, the Elohim, who actually governed the land, and not Ahab. This was the God Whom Ahab had forsaken.

Just imagine for a moment the scene, with the prophet standing before the king and his heathen consort. Here was a man standing tall before the most privileged of the day, without the fine scholarship of those who surrounded him. Yet the clarity and authority with which he announced the words of his God would have pierced the heady atmosphere and struck deeply into the heart of Ahab, startling him with the bravery of the announcement. This was without doubt an extraordinary demonstration of courage and passion by a man who had no material standing before their eyes.

". . . before Whom I stand"

Elijah not only came in the Name of the God of Israel, but he made it abundantly clear when he continued with the words, "before Whom I stand", that he also stood in the presence of God. He could have referred to God as did Paul: "Whose I am and Whom I serve" (Acts 27:23; *cf.* 1 Kgs. 18: 15).

The Hebrew word translated "before" is derived from the word for 'face' (*paniym)*, and is understood also to mean 'to the front of', 'in the face of', or 'from before the face of'. Interestingly, this term is used of the faces of the cherubim, which stood in the most holy place of the tabernacle and the temple of Solomon (Ex. 25:20; 37:9; 2 Chron. 3:13), and of the four faces of the four living creatures which the prophet Ezekiel witnessed by the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:6-11,15). The four living creatures in a sense accompanied Elijah, ready to pour judgement upon the land of Israel as in Ezekiel's time; yet, if only they would hearken, the mercy represented by the mercy seat of the most holy would be available to them.

"There shall not be dew nor rain these years"

Elijah issues these words of judgement upon the house of Israel: "there shall not be dew nor rain these years" (1 Kgs. 17:1). This was a special application of the curses rendered under the Law (Lev. 26:19; Deut. 11:16,17; 28:23,24) to the idolatrous kingdom. If only the children of Israel would "love the LORD [their] God, and . . . serve Him with all [their] heart and with all [their] soul" then God had promised them: "I will give you the rain of your land . . . the first rain and the latter rain . . . that thou mayest eat and be full" (Deut. 11:13-15).

But they had also received an explicit warning: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other

gods, and worship them" (v. 16). If they did this He would "shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit", and they would "perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you" (v. 17). In fact, God forbidding dew and rain was a direct contest against Baal, since, according to ancient mythology, Baal was the storm god and was responsible for bringing life-giving rains at certain times of the year and thus restoring fertility to the land.

Notice the specific ordering of Elijah's words: dew, then rain. Dew is essential for vegetation, and rainfall is a gracious visitation of God, reminding us of our Father's continual goodness: "He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). This gracious abundance is in keeping with the provisions of God's covenant with Israel (Deut. 28:12).

The water of life

Spiritually, God pours the "water of life" (Rev. 21:6; 22:1,17) upon the earth to bring forth new life (Jno. 3:3,7; 1 Pet. 1:23) and a "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Moreover, the budding forth from that which has been sown is a symbol of the fruits of righteousness flourishing under the continual application of His Word (Isa. 55:8-11). Therefore, having neither dew nor rain figuratively speaks of the Word of God not being heard or spoken (*cf.* Deut. 32:2). Israel was to become a spiritually barren desert. The great prophet was to be removed from the scene and the Word was to depart with him.

Notice, though, that the prophet declares that there would be no rain, "but according to my word" (1 Kgs. 17:1). The drought would come according to the words of Elijah. The Word through his lips was to strike deep into the heart of the earth, and all that was lush and green would fade and be left languishing. The Father had selected Elijah as His chosen vessel, and His power would be manifested through this man of Gilead.

Observe, then, Elijah as a powerful shadow of the greater one to come, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Master's lips were not merely touched with God's Word as with Elijah, Moses (Ex. 4:15) or Isaiah (Isa. 51:16), but rather he was "the Word . . . made flesh" (Jno. 1:14). His whole life was one of pouring himself out in order to give water in a thirsty place to those who would listen (Hos. 6:3; Jno. 4:14). And the role of our Lord and Master as the great nourisher will continue when he returns to the earth, for "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth" (Ps. 72:6).

A significant time period

On the basis of thirty days in a month, three years and six months constitutes 1,260 days, which is one of the prophetic time periods Daniel speaks about: "a time and times and the dividing of time" (7:25). In the Apocalypse we also have links back to these days of Elijah. There is the reference to Jezebel (2:20), the record of the two witnesses who, like Elijah, had "power to shut heaven, that it rain not" (11:6), and a similar time period of 1,260 days (v. 3).

Relating these things to the faithful witness of Elijah, he sought refuge in Cherith and Zarephath for three-and-a-half years, during which there was no rain. This was a time during which Jezebel and her religious militants did as Daniel prophesied of the papacy; they spoke "great words against the most High" and "[wore] out the saints" (Dan. 7:25). During this time Jezebel "cut off the prophets of the LORD" (1 Kgs. 18:4).

Divine judgement during a time of plenty

What was so particularly bad during Ahab's reign that Elijah had to be sent? Surely all seemed well in Israel. What a strange message this would have seemed, since the kingdom was enjoying peace and the fruits of prosperity! Yet God was surely against them. This is a stark lesson, particularly in similar times of plenty and of fat things. Christ said of the Laodicean ecclesia: "I know thy works . . . because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15,16). Why was the Laodicean ecclesia "lukewarm"? It was "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (v. 17).

Though the children of Israel could declare, "I am rich", yet spiritually they were "wretched . . . and naked". There may have been no apparent signs of God's displeasure, yet their blessings were to be terminated, the windows of heaven would be firmly shut. Let us all observe and take heed: "He that hath an ear, let him hear" (v. 22).

(To be continued)