

# Lessons from the life of Elijah

## 22. Elijah's departure: taken up in a whirlwind (2 Kgs. 2:11-15)

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*The great moment has finally arrived. Elijah's spiritual warfare is now drawing to a close, and the manner of his removal is to be as marvellous and extraordinary as his life has been.*

**I**N ELIJAH'S EXIT we see the mercy of our God, as Elijah had previously requested that he might die (1 Kgs. 19:4), and had the Father granted his prayer then Elijah would have missed out on a glorious experience. Surely this is a lesson in itself; let us leave our lives in the hands of our God, for He knows best, and allow Him to mould and shape us (Jer. 18:6; cf. Rom. 9:20,21). We should remember that when our prayers appear to have been unanswered, we can rest assured that God has something far better in store for us.

### A foreshadowing of the Master's ascension

In our [previous article](#) we left Elijah and Elisha talking with each other, having just walked dryshod over the River Jordan (2 Kgs. 2:8-10). We are now to consider an astonishing event, the departure of Elijah, and it is worth highlighting right at the outset how similar this account is to the Master's ascension.

Jesus, too, was talking with his disciples when he was taken away from them: "it came to pass, while he blessed them [his disciples], he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven" (Lk. 24:51). So Elijah once again is seen as a type of the greater one to come, who also was to leave his pupils behind in order for them to continue the work of the "still small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:12), namely preaching "the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12).

Also note where this glorious manifestation took place. It occurred on the far side of Jordan, in the place of separation. God sent His chariot for Elijah when he was cut off from the masses, hidden away from view. Does not this remind us again of the circumstances surrounding Messiah's ascension?—for he too was out of the public eye when he ascended from the Mount of Olives, outside Jerusalem (Lk. 24:49-53; Acts 1:9-12).

### "A chariot of fire, and horses of fire"

The record now states, "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire" (2 Kgs. 2:11). What a glorious understatement! But what can be understood by this Divine visitation? To assist us in answering this question there is a clue in a short phrase found elsewhere: "the chariot of the cherubims" (1 Chron. 28:18). So, here, the 'chariot' and 'cherubim' are to be viewed as related terms.

But note also that Elisha saw "a chariot of fire, and horses of fire". Interestingly, the term 'seraphim' (Isa. 6:2,6) means 'fiery', and God is said to make "His ministers a flaming fire" (Ps. 104:4). In addition, the word 'cherubim', as many Hebrew scholars suggest, signifies 'chariots', and the angels are called the "chariots of God" (Ps. 68:17); and, significantly in relation to 2 Kings 2, it is said that God Himself "rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea, He did fly upon the wings of the wind" (Ps. 18:10).

In these quotations there are strong links to Ezekiel's vision when the prophet saw the four living creatures, a clear reference to the cherubim, with their four faces, and the wheel (note also the similarities with the chariots and horses in 2 Kings 2), which come out of the midst of the whirlwind and fire (Ezek. 1; cf. Zech. 1:8; 6:1; Rev. 6:2).

Therefore, we have before us in the phrase, "a chariot of fire, and horses of fire", a combined reference to the Divine chariots of God, His glorious cherubim, through which He manifests Himself. Note also that Elisha, when beholding this dramatic marvel, cried out, "the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof" (2 Kgs. 2:12). This further reinforces the idea that the cherubim can be understood as being the vehicle upon which the Almighty rides as in a chariot.<sup>1</sup> These glorified

1. To read more about the exciting subject of the cherubim readers are referred to three excellent books written by our own brethren: *Phanerosis*, J. Thomas (section: "Yahweh manifested in cherubim", pp. 94-102); *Theophany*, C. C. Walker (chapter 6: "Cherubim and seraphim") and *Ezekiel*, J. Allfree (section: "Visions of God", pp. 21-43).

ones, the “horsemen” here, when manifested to the flesh, can appear as ‘fiery’, but for Elijah they were not going to consume him, but glorify his exit from his prophetic ministrations in Israel.

#### **Elisha to preserve the way of truth**

When Elijah and Elisha saw these glorified ones, what was the Lord God reminding them of? To answer this we must refer back to where the cherubim are first mentioned. It was in the Garden of Eden, after sin had entered into the world, when God evicted Adam and Eve, and “placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).

Thus God placed cherubim<sup>2</sup> in order “to keep the way”. Now the Hebrew verb translated “to keep” here, *shamar*, means ‘to preserve’ or ‘to guard’. The cherubim were to preserve the way of the Truth, to guard against any who would try to do it harm. God’s way was to be kept, preserved and guarded now through the work of Elisha; he indeed was God’s chosen prophet to continue the work of Elijah.

So Elisha saw an extraordinary vision of the Almighty’s power and grace. Surrounding him was a powerful manifestation of God’s angelic host and His great strength and might. God could have selected something far less dramatic, but He chose not to. This was a form that Elisha would understand.

The comfort now to Elijah’s successor was that the chariots and horsemen would remain with him on the earth throughout his ministry, encircling him and hedging him about (2 Kgs. 6:16,17). Though this Divine protection would be invisible to the naked eye, it would be visible through the eye of faith. Elisha was assured, just like the Son of God would later be, that he had with him, as it were, “twelve legions<sup>3</sup> of angels” (Mt. 26:53), indeed a great army of glorified ones. And the four faces of the cherubim, the man, lion, ox and eagle (Ezek. 1:10), would watch over him, just as they had done with Elijah (*cf.* 1 Kgs. 17:1).

Moreover, in these faces we observe the grace and mercy of our God which He has extended to His people; His wisdom, kingly leadership, strength and swiftness. This mercy will finally culminate in a future scene of glory when His people, the saints, will make up the cherubim in the Kingdom of God (Rev. 5:8-14), to pour righteous judgements upon the earth (Isa. 66:15,16) and bring great salvation (Hab. 3:8), thus fulfilling the words of Jesus, “for they [the saints in

the future age] are equal unto the angels” (Lk. 20:36), to die no more.

#### **“Elijah went up by a whirlwind”**

The record now states that when the chariot appeared it “parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kgs. 2:11). This word “whirlwind” can mean a ‘tempest’ or a ‘storm’ (*cf.* Job 38:1; Ezek. 1:4). Elijah was therefore snatched up towards heaven in a majestic demonstration of God’s supreme power through the mighty forces of nature.

But what is meant by Elijah being taken “into heaven” (2 Kgs. 2:11)? There are a number of arguments that can be made. Some brethren have proposed that Elijah was mercifully taken away from view, to die in solitude, as was Moses,<sup>4</sup> whilst others have suggested that Elijah was taken away from the earth, arguing that, like Enoch, he was not to “see death”, but was “not found, because God had translated him” (Heb. 11:5), his life extended till the return of the Master and the judgement seat.<sup>5</sup> It has even been suggested that the messenger who conveyed the Revelation to the Apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, describing himself as “thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets” (Rev. 22:9), may have been none other than Elijah the prophet.<sup>6</sup>

Though a number of theories can be used and possible explanations deployed to assist in understanding this verse, it is still worthwhile referring to a few key Scriptural passages to help us ascertain where Elijah was taken. But before we commence it is important to appreciate one principal point: being taken “into heaven” can simply mean that Elijah was taken into the sky and hidden from public view, physically transported from one place to another, and, we stress,

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2. “Cherubim” (RV) rather than “Cherubims” (AV) is correct, since the word is transliterated from the Hebrew, in which the ‘*im*’ at the end of a word indicates plural.
  3. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a legion is “a division of 3,000–6,000 men, including a complement of cavalry, in the ancient Roman army”.
  4. See *Wrested Scriptures* by R. Abel (p. 116).
  5. See “Elijah in heaven”, J. Thomas, *The Christadelphian*, Vol. 17, p. 438 (1880); *Eureka*, J. Thomas (section: “The reward”, p. 726, Vol. 2), 1875; *The Visible Hand of God*, R. Roberts (section: “Elijah’s removal from the earth”, pp. 380-9), 1925; *The Ministry of the Prophets: Isaiah*, R. Roberts and C. C. Walker (pp. 28-9), 1907.
  6. See *The Story of the Bible*, H. P. Mansfield (Vol. 3, p. 321).

not necessarily taken to a heavenly abiding place (cf. Acts 8:39; 1 Thess. 4:17).

Firstly, the Apostle Paul makes it very clear that natural death comes upon all mankind: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22); "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). Secondly, a letter was received from Elijah during the reign of Jehoram of Judah, many years after this incident (2 Chron. 21:12-15). There can be only two possible explanations here: either he wrote the message prophetically before he was taken, or he wrote it after his ascension. We would suggest that it was more likely to be the latter; that Elijah was still active in service after this event at Jordan. And thirdly, though Elijah "went up . . . into heaven" (2 Kgs. 2:11), Jesus himself firmly said, "no man hath ascended up to heaven" (Jno. 3:13). Why was this so? Because Christ had to "become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20); he was the pattern, and the great harvest was to follow thereafter.

Therefore, we would suggest that this glorious scene was not a means of transporting Elijah away into the heavens, to await his call for judgement, but a powerful symbol that the prophetic office of Elijah had now terminated and that it was to be continued by his rightful successor, Elisha.

#### **"My father, my father"**

When Elisha beheld this unfolding scene of glory he cried aloud, "My father, my father" (2 Kgs. 2:12). Why did Elisha refer to Elijah as his "father"? Firstly, Elijah was the spiritual father of the school of the prophets. Secondly, this was an expression of respect, adopted by servants in addressing their masters (5:13), and younger people addressing their elders (6:21; 13:14). Evidently this feeling was very deep with Elisha; he firmly viewed Elijah as his spiritually adopted father. Indeed, he desired the "double portion" of the first-born (2:9) in order that he could be head and chief amongst Elijah's adopted 'sons'.

Elisha, astonished and awe-struck no doubt, watched his mentor and companion rise into the sky until "he saw him no more" (v. 12). Once Elijah had disappeared, he "took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces" (v. 12), clearly overwhelmed with sorrow and grief (cf. Gen. 37:29; 2 Sam. 13:19; Job 1:20; 2:12). He then picked up "the mantle of Elijah that fell from him", and returned back to where he had started, "by the bank of Jordan" (2 Kgs. 2:13). Observe that the

mantle fell to Elisha, and that he did not have to reach out for it. He patiently waited, and, because of his faithfulness, God providentially gave it to him. God had just approved Elijah's successor.

#### **The parting of the Jordan**

So, in this knowledge, Elisha gathered up the mantle, "smote the waters", and, as he smote them, said, "Where is the LORD God of Elijah?" (v. 14). We would suggest that this was not a question of doubt, but more an expression of hope and high expectation. He now desired that the power of God would appear immediately, that he would be approved before His people. And, just as before (v. 8), "the waters . . . parted hither and thither" (v. 14). He thus re-enacted the very action of his master.

Therefore, before the sons of the prophets (v. 15), Elisha ('God is salvation'), was approved and magnified by the Almighty. Remember that Joshua ('the LORD [Yahweh] will save') was magnified before Israel at the Jordan, and approved as the one chosen by God to lead the people into Israel (Josh. 3:7). To complete this connection, recall that Jesus ('Yahweh is salvation'), the greater than Joshua and Elisha, was also magnified before the people at the Jordan when his Father, the God of Israel, declared, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17).

How wonderful, then, that Elisha and Joshua, continuing the work of Elijah and Moses respectively, were each magnified at the Jordan, and in their names is found the message of salvation; and that Jesus, coming after John the Baptist, his cousin and fore-runner (Isa. 40:3; cf. Mt. 3:3), brought salvation to all those who follow him! He would "save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21).

#### **"The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha"**

So Elisha was approved, magnified and appointed. Once the sons of the prophets laid their eyes upon him they could say nothing other than, "The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha" (2 Kgs. 2:15). It is important to appreciate that they were at Jericho, roughly five miles away, and so they may not even have witnessed the ascension of Elijah, or the great miracle that Elisha had just performed at the Jordan. However, by just looking upon him they realised that he was the appointed one, and had been given "the spirit of Elijah".

The narrative now continues with the prophets searching hard for Elijah; but they found nothing (vv. 16-18), nor would they, because God had purposely removed him. Next the writer records

some of Elisha's miracles in the way that he continued the work of Elijah. But for Elijah, except for the brief episode mentioned above, his work with Israel was over. He had now retired from his ministrations, for the time being at least.

If we examine Elijah's life we observe that it was indeed hidden and masked in obscurity; it is as if there was no beginning (1 Kgs. 17:1), nor any end, for neither is recorded for us. Yet the fact that Moses and Elijah, whether in a vision or in person it matters not, talked with the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration concerning "his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:31), illustrates their dependence upon his sacrifice and great victory for the life of the age to come. We believe that Elijah now rests in the ground, with all the faithful of ages past, and awaits the "shout . . . the voice of the archangel, and . . . the trump of God" (1 Thess. 4:16).

#### In conclusion

So we have considered a prophet indeed; a man from Gilead, rough in both character and appearance, yet a pillar of faith and a man of action; a man who learnt courage when faced with King Ahab, patience when he hid at the brook Cherith, compassion during his time with the widow, God's power when on Carmel, Divine judgement when the prophets were slain, the Lord's love when under a juniper tree, and

finally, the importance of the "still small voice" when on Horeb.

Elijah, being "a man subject to like passions as we are" (Jas. 5:17), experienced tremendous highs (on Mount Carmel and running ahead of Ahab's chariot to Jezreel) and flattening lows (fleeing for his life from Jezebel and asking his God that he might die). But his education is now complete; he awaits the great summons from heaven.

As we conclude this series on the life of the prophet, we, as Elijah, long for our Master's coming and the Kingdom of God to be established. We look forward to the time of restitution and the important role that Elijah and the saints will undertake in bringing scattered Jewry back into the Land. In relation to this we would recommend now the reading of Isaiah 12, quite possibly a hymn which will be sung by the faithful Jews who, having passed through "the Egyptian sea" and "the river" (Isa. 11:15), been baptized into the saving name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and looked upon him "whom they have pierced" (Zech. 12:10), now behold in faith their Jewish brother, the Messiah, in the Land of Promise.

We pray that we will be there to behold and enjoy this marvellous scene together. "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with [us] all. Amen" (Rev. 22:20,21).

(Concluded)

## Your Letters



### The enigma of Isaiah 14:29-32

Further to the thoughts offered earlier on the latter-day Assyrian (Mar. 2006, p. 78), I have for some years puzzled over the rather obscure and enigmatic prophecy to be found in Isaiah 14:29-32, which is an 'Assyrian' passage with a strong latter-day content. I give below a summary of my own thoughts on the passage, but ask if you would be kind enough to offer us yours, and for readers to offer their views.

Verse 28 reads, "In the year that king Ahaz died was this burden". Opinions differ as to whether the words apply to the previous or to the following verses. For example, Brother H. A. Whittaker,

in *Isaiah*, favours the view that it applies to the previous verses (p. 212); Brother C. C. Walker, in *The Ministry of the Prophets: Isaiah*, thinks that it applies to the following verses (p. 285). The AV translators have opted for the former view, as shown by the paragraph mark at verse 29. This appears to be correct, because with the evil King Ahaz now announced as dead we find that verse 29 relates to an event occurring in the days of his son, King Hezekiah.

This good king had reigned but a short time when the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. Judah was now in serious trouble with the same invader who, according to the Assyrian records, seized forty-six of her cities. The Assyrians were