**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**2 KINGS-003. ELIJAH'S TRANSLATION AND ELISHA'S DEATHBED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof."*

*2 Kings 2:12*

*"... And Joash, the King of Israel, came down unto him, and wept over his face, and said. O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof."*

*2 Kings 13:14*

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet's teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof. Seen or unseen, these were present. The reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

**I We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.**

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof?

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to be taken as in apposition with the exclamation My father, my father; and that both the one phrase and the other mean--Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say the chariot of Israel? I think we take for granted too readily that Israel here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of the nation, but of its progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, the supplanter, whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and he called the name of the place Mahanaim. That means the two camps, the one, Jacob's defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha's lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof, the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them. And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God's messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that a body of flesh should he able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been changed. His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but in white apparel, the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

**II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.**

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash's repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.

Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet's home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event-- My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah's translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event--it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, Alas! my master, how shall we do? The prophet answered with superb calmness, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them .... Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. They had always been there, though no one saw them. They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the solemn forms stood bright-harnessed, and strong, in order serviceable, ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be--far more visible as they are far more real than any of these--the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of things seen and temporal, the mountain or the sick chamber will be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to heaven in a whirlwind, and another lady slowly away in old age, or fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die. Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may he the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same, the companions the same, the impelling--I was going to say the locomotive--power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, He was not, for God took him. Of Elijah we read, He went up in a whirlwind to heaven. Of Elisha we read, He died and they buried him. And of all three--the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us--it is equally true that God took them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God's angel, who does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God's word when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.