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

**2 KINGS-001. THE CHARIOT OF FIRE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. 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. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Beth-el. And Elisha said unto him, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. 80 they went down to Beth-el 3, And the sons of the prophets that were at Beth-el came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 4. And Elijah laid unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. 5. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and laid unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. 6. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here: for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. 7. And fifty men of the eons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. 8. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. 9. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. 10. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing; 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. 11. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven."*

*2 Kings 2:1-11*

Elijah's end is in keeping with his career. From his first abrupt appearance it had been fitly symbolised by the stormy wind and flaming fire which he heard and saw at Horeb, and now these were to be the vehicles which should sweep him into the heavens. He came like a whirlwind, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared. The story is wonderful in pathos and simplicity. Surely never was such a miracle told so quietly. The actual ascension is narrated in a sentence. Its preliminaries take up the rest of this narrative.

**I. This journey from Gilgal to the eastern side of Jordan is minutely described in its stages.**

Apparently this Gilgal is not the well-known place so called, which was down in the Jordan valley close to Jericho, else the road from it to Bethel could not have been called a going down (v. 2). It probably lay to the north of Bethel, which would then be between it and Jericho, where the Jordan was to be passed. Elijah was not sent on an aimless round of farewell visits, but by the direct road to his destination. Note that he and Elisha and the sons of the prophets all know that he is near his end. How this came about we are not told, and need not speculate; but though all knew, none seems to have known that the others knew. Elijah does not explain to Elisha why he wished him to stay behind, nor Elisha to Elijah why he was so resolved to keep by him. The knowledge and the silence would give peculiar solemnity and sweet bitterness to these last hours. How often a similar combination weighs on the hearts of a household, who all know that a dear one is soon to be taken away, and yet can only be silent about what is uppermost in their thoughts!

Why did Elijah wish Elisha to stay behind? Apparently to spare him the pain of seeing his master depart. With loving concealment, he tried to make Elisha suppose that his errand to Bethel and then to Jericho was but a common one, to be soon despatched. It was a little touch of tenderness in the strong, rough man. Note, too, the gradual disclosure to Elijah of the places to which he was to go. He is only bid to go to Bethel, and not till he gets there is he further sent on to Jericho, and, presumably, only when there is directed to cross Jordan. God does not show all the road at once, even if it lead to glory, but step by step, and a second stage only when we have obediently traversed the first. We get light as we go. Elisha's clinging to his master till the very last is but too intelligible to many of us who have gone through the same sorrow, and counted each moment of companionship with some dear one about to leave earth as priceless gain, to be treasured in the sacredest recesses of memory for evermore.

It has been thought that the object of the visits to Bethel and Jericho was to give parting directions to the schools of the prophets at each place; but that is read into the narrative, which gives no hint that Elijah had any communication with these. Rather the contrary is implied, both in the fact that the sons of the prophets came to the travellers, not the travellers to them, and in their addressing Elisha, as if some awe of the master kept them from speaking to him. An Elijah marching to his chariot of fire was not a man for raw youths to approach lightly. Their question is met by Elisha with curtness and scant courtesy, which indicates that it was asked in no sympathetic spirit, but from mere love of telling bad news, and of vulgar excitement. Even the gentle Elisha is stirred to rebuke the gossiping chatterers, who intrude their curiosity into that sacred hour. There are abundance of such busy-bodies always ready to buzz about any bleeding heart, and sorrow has often to be stern in order to be unmolested.

**II. The second stage is the passage of Jordan.**

The verbal repetition of the same dialogue at Jericho as at Bethel increases the impression of prolonged loving struggle between the two prophets. At last, they stand on the western bank of Jordan, at their feet the spot where the hurrying river had been stayed by the ark till the tribes had passed over, before them the mountains bordering Elijah's homeland of Gilead on the left, and away on the right the lone peak where Moses had died by the mouth of the Lord. The soil was redolent of the miracles of the Mosaic age, and the dividing of the waters by Elijah is meant to bring the present into vital connection with that past, and to designate him as parallel with the former leader. Note the vigour with which he twists his characteristic mantle into a kind of rod, and strikes the waters strongly. The repetition of the former miracle is a sign that the unexhausted Power which wrought it is with Elijah. The God of yesterday is the God of to-day, and nothing that was done in the past but will be repeated in essence, though not in form, in the present. As we have heard so have we seen. The former miracle had been done for a nation; this is performed for two men. It teaches the preciousness of His individual servants in God's eyes. The former had been done through the ark; this, by the prophet's mantle. Power is lodged in the faithful messenger. God's strength dwells in those who love Him. The former miracle had been the close of the desert wanderings and the gateway to Canaan. Though Elijah's face is turned in the opposite direction, does not its repetition suggest that for him, too, the impending translation was to be the end of wilderness weariness and toil, and the entrance on rest?

**III. Elisha's request is the next stage in the story. How far they two went on is not told.**

The Bible does not foster the craving to know the exact situation where sacred things happened, the gratification of which might feed superstition, but could not increase reverence. Possibly they had drawn near the eastern hills, and were out of sight of the fifty curious gazers on the other hank. Elijah at last spoke the truth which both knew. How true to nature is that reticence kept up till the last moment, and then broken so tenderly!--Ask what I shall do for thee, before. Probably he did not mean any supernatural gift, but simply some parting token of love; for he is startled at the response of Elisha. A true disciple can desire nothing more than a portion of his master's spirit. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master. They covet wisely and with a noble covetousness who most desire spiritual gifts to fit them for their vocation. It was an unworldly soul which asked but for such a legacy.

The double portion does not mean twice as much as Elijah's portion had been, but twice as much as other sons of the prophets would receive. Elisha reckoned himself Elijah's first-born spiritual son, and asked for the elder brother's share, because he had been designated as successor, and would require more than others for his work. The new sense of responsibility is coming on him, and teaching him his need. Well for us if higher positions make us lowlier, in the consciousness of our own unfitness without divine help! Elijah knows that his spirit was not his to give, and can only refer his successor to the Fountain from which he had drawn; for the sign which he gives is obviously not within his power to determine. If the Lord shows the ascending master to him who is left, He will give the servant his desire.

A portion of their spirit is the very thing which teachers and prophets cannot give. They may give their systems or their methods, their favourite ideas or cut-and-dry maxims and principles, and so leave a race of pygmies who give themselves airs as being their disciples, but their spirit they cannot impart. Contrast with this limitation of power confessed by Elijah, His consciousness who breathed on eleven poor men, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. No man could say that without absurdity or blasphemy. The gift impossible to man is the very characteristic gift of Jesus, who has power over the Spirit of holiness. Must He not thereby be declared to be the Son of God?

**IV. The climax of this lesson is that stupendous scene of the translation.**

Note how the Behold suggests the suddenness of the appearance of the fiery chariot, which came flaming between the two men eagerly talking, and drove them apart. The description of the departure, in its brevity and incompleteness, sounds like the report of the only eye-witness, who had the fiery chariot between him and Elijah, and was too bewildered to see precisely what happened. All he knew was the sudden appearance of the fiery equipage, and then that, suddenly, and apparently swiftly, a rushing mighty wind swept away chariot and prophet into the heavens. He saw it, as the next verse after this passage tells us, only long enough to break into one rapturous and yet lamenting cry, and then all vanished, and he stood alone with an apparently empty heaven above him, the whirlwind sunk to calm, and Elijah's mantle at his feet.

The teaching of the event is plain. As for the pre-Mosaic ages the translation of Enoch, and for the earlier Mosaic epoch the mysterious death of Moses, so for the prophetic period the carrying to heaven of Elijah, witnessed of a life beyond death, and of death as the wages of sin, which God could remit, if He willed, in the case of faithful service. Enoch and Elijah were led round the head of the valley on the heights, and reached the other side without having to go down into the cold waters flowing in the bottom; and though we cannot tread their path, the joy of their experience has not ceased to be a joy to us, if we walk with God. Death is still the coming of the chariot and horses of fire to bear the believer home. The same exclamation which fell from Elisha's lips, as he saw the chariot sweep up the sky, was spoken over him as he lay sick of the sickness whereof he should die.

But the most instructive view of Elijah's translation is its parallel and contrast with Christ's Ascension. The one was by outward means; the other by inward energy. Storm and fire bore Elijah up into a region strange to him. Christ ascended up where He was before, returning by the propriety of His nature to His eternal dwelling-place. The one is accomplished with significant disturbance, of whirlwind and flame; the other is gentle, like the life which it closed, and the last sight of Him was with extended hands of blessing. Each life closed in a manner corresponding to its character. The one was swift and sudden. The other was a slow, solemn motion, vividly described as being borne upwards and as going into heaven. The one bore a mortal into heaven. In the other, the Son of God, our great High Priest, hath passed through the heavens, and now, far above them all, He is Head over all things.