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a *Grace Notes* course

## Old Testament History

by Alfred Edersheim

### **History 515**

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*Grace Notes*

Web Site: <http://www.gracenotes.info>

E-mail: [wdoud@gracenotes.info](mailto:wdoud@gracenotes.info)

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## by Alfred Edersheim

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### Contents

<b>Volume VI - The Reign of Ahab to the Decline of the Two Kingdoms.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Preface.....	3
VI_01 - AHAB, KING OF ISRAEL Three Years' Famine in Israel - Elijah meets Obadiah and Ahab - The Gathering on Mount Carmel - the Priests of Baal - Description of their Rites - Elijah prepares the Sacrifice - The Answer by Fire - Israel's Decision - Slaughter of the Priests of Baal - The Cloud not bigger than a Man's Hand - Elijah runs before Ahab to Jezreel .....	4
<b>1 Kings 18 .....</b>	<b>4</b>
VI_02 Different Standpoint of the Old and the New Testament - analogy between Elijah and John the Baptist - Jezebel threatens Elijah's Life - The Prophet's Flight - His Miraculous Provision - Analogy between Moses and Elijah - Elijah at Mount Horeb - The Divine Message and Assurance to Elijah - Call of Elisha. ....	10
<b>1 Kings 19 .....</b>	<b>10</b>
VI_03 General effect of Elijah's Mission - The Two Expeditions of Syria and the Twofold Victory of Israel - Ahab releases Ben-hadad - The Prophet's Denunciation. ....	15
<b>1 Kings 20 .....</b>	<b>15</b>
VI_04 The Vineyard of Naboth - Murder of Naboth - The Divine Message by Elijah - Ahab's Repentance.....	22
<b>1 Kings 21 .....</b>	<b>22</b>
VI_05 – Ahab and Ahaziah, (8 <sup>th</sup> AND 9th) Kings of Israel. Jehoshaphat, (4th) King of Judah. The Visit of Jehoshaphat to Ahab - The Projected Expedition against Ramoth-Gilead - Flattering Predictions - Micaiah - The Battle of Ramoth-Gilead - Death of Ahab. ....	26
<b>1 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 18 .....</b>	<b>26</b>

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## Volume VI - The Reign of Ahab to the Decline of the Two Kingdoms

### Preface

THE present Volume of this Bible History traces the period of the commencing decline alike in the kingdom of Israel and in that of Judah, although in the latter its progress was retarded by the gracious faithfulness of God in regard to the house of David, and by seasons of temporary repentance on the part of the people. The special interest of the period lies in this, that it was critical of the future of the nation. And of this its history also bears evidence in the more marked and direct - we had almost, said, realistic - interpositions, or, perhaps more correctly, self-manifestations on the part of the God of Israel: whether by more emphatic evidence of His constant Presence and claims, or in the more continuous mission and direct qualifications of the Prophets whom He commissioned.

This, as indicated in a previous Volume, accounts for the intensified miraculous character of that Biblical period - notably in connection with the history of Elijah and Elisha. For such prophetic mission was necessary, if in a crisis - when destruction, or at least severest judgment, was impending, or else national recovery, and with it great expansion of national influence - Israel was to be roused to a realization of the truth at issue, such as was, for example, presented by Elijah at the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. And not only as regarded that fundamental truth, but also its application to all the details of public and private life in Israel. In this, therefore, we find the rational vindication - we avoid the obnoxious designation, apologetic - of the otherwise strange, and certainly exceptional, manifestation of miraculous prophetic power in so many private as well as public affairs. In the state of Israel, and at that period, an Elijah and an Elisha were required, and, if required, their mission and their message must be thus evidenced: alike before all friends and against all gainsayers.

If, from this point of view, the application of the miraculous during this period, in private as well as in public concerns, is not, as some would have it, a retrogression, it marks in other and more important

aspects a great progression - and that towards the perfectness of the New Testament. We must explain what we mean by a seeming retrogression. Very markedly the Old Testament history differs from all others, which in their earliest stages are legendary, in this, that whereas in them the miraculous is introduced in what may be called the prehistoric period, then speedily, almost abruptly, to cease; it is otherwise in that of the Old Testament. The patriarchal history (notably that of Isaac and Jacob) has comparatively less of the miraculous. It appears in the desert-history of new-born Israel, and on their entrance in the land. It disappears again in great measure, to reappear once more in manner altogether unprecedented at the period of which this Volume treats - that is, at a comparatively advanced time, when the history of Israel runs parallel to the trustworthy records of that of other nations as perpetuated on their monuments. Assuredly, this has its various lessons in regard to the credibility of the miraculous in the Old Testament. Most notably this, which, as before stated, marks that, which to some seems a retrogression, as a real progression: that the miraculous now stands with increasing clearness in direct connection with moral relationship towards God. So to speak: the miraculous interpositions are now not so much for Israel as to Israel; not so much on behalf of Israel as such, but whether in judgment or in mercy, with direct reference and application to Israel's moral and spiritual condition. And this, as we have said, points to the perfectness of the New Testament, in which the relation of God to each soul, as well as to the Church, and the spiritual condition of the soul, or of the Church: the outward and the inward, are correlative.

Thus, in the wider application, these miraculous elements in the history of Israel are themselves prophecies, of which the fulfillment is in Christ. Thus much must for the present suffice - the more so, as in the next Volume (which will conclude the Old Testament History) the opportunity will necessarily present itself for larger retrospect and wider survey. It only remains to add that the treatment of the subject in this Volume will be found in accordance with the progressive plan of this work, repeatedly indicated in previous Volumes. Alike the critical and exegetical notes

will be found more frequent and more full, and the general treatment more detailed, and designed for more advanced readers. A new element in the present Volume is the light brought to bear on this period from the ancient monuments. We live in days when more attention than ever before is given to the critical study of the Old Testament; in days also when attacks are chiefly directed against the trustworthiness, the credibility, and, as it seems to us, the Divine Authority, in its true sense, of the Old Testament.

There are those, we will gladly believe, who can disjoint, and in logical connection with it, re-interpret the Old Testament, and yet retain their full faith in its direct Divine character, and in its preparation for the Christ. We must frankly confess that we are not of their number. There is, indeed, a general Divine character in the Old Testament, and a general preparation in it for the New, whatever historical views we may take of it, or whatever interpretations we may give of it. We would even advance beyond this, and say that Christ and Christianity have their absolute truth, quite irrespective of the Old Testament. But to us at least Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is the direct outcome of the Old Testament, as well as its higher fulfillment: not only "a light to lighten the Gentiles," but, and even in this very respect also: "the glory of Thy people Israel."

**VI\_01 - AHAB, KING OF ISRAEL Three Years' Famine in Israel - Elijah meets Obadiah and Ahab - The Gathering on Mount Carmel - the Priests of Baal - Description of their Rites - Elijah prepares the Sacrifice - The Answer by Fire - Israel's Decision - Slaughter of the Priests of Baal - The Cloud not bigger than a Man's Hand - Elijah runs before Ahab to Jezreel**

### 1 Kings 18

THREE and a half years had passed since the ban of Elijah had driven clouds and rain from the sky of Israel, and the dry air distilled no dew on the parched and barren ground (comp. Luke 4:25; James 5:17<sup>1</sup>). Probably one of these years had

been spent by the prophet in the retirement of Wadi Cherith; another may have passed before the widow's son was restored from death to life; while other eighteen months of quiet may have followed that event.

Surely, if ever, the terrible desolation which the prophet's word had brought upon the land must by this time have had its effect upon Israel. Yet we meet no trace of repentance in king or people: only the sullen silence of hopeless misery. What man could do, had been attempted, but had signally failed. As the want and misery among the people became more pressing, King Ahab had searched both the land and all neighboring countries for Elijah, but in vain (1 Kings 18:10), while Jezebel had wreaked her impotent vengeance on all the prophets of Jehovah on whom she could lay hands, as if they had been Elijah's accomplices, to be punished for what she regarded as his crime. If all the representatives of Jehovah were exterminated, His power could no longer be exercised in the land, and she would at the same time crush resistance to her imperious will, and finally uproot that hated religion which was alike the charter of Israel's spiritual allegiance and of civil liberty. Yet neither Ahab nor Jezebel succeeded. Though Elijah was near at hand, either in Ahab's dominions or in those of Jezebel's father, neither messenger nor king could discover his place of retreat. Nor could Jezebel carry out her bloody design. It affords most significant illustration of God's purpose in raising up "prophets," and also of the more wide sense in which we are here to understand that term, that such was their number, that, however many the queen may have succeeded in slaying, at least a hundred of them could still be hid, by fifties, in the limestone caverns with which the land is burrowed. And this, we infer, must have been in the immediate neighborhood of the capital, as otherwise Obadiah (the "servant of Jehovah"), the pious governor of Ahab's palace (comp. 1 Kings 4:6; 2 Kings 18:18; Isaiah 22:15), could scarcely have supplied their wants without being detected (1 Kings 18:4). Nor was Obadiah the only one in Israel who "feared

<sup>1</sup> Not only the New Testament writers (as above quoted), but the Rabbis fix the period of rainlessness at three years and a half, and every explanation which attempts to date this period as beginning before the appearance of Elijah is forced and

unnatural. Accordingly the expression "the third year" in 1 Kings 18:1 must refer to Elijah's stay at Sarepta - about two years and a half after his arrival there.

Jehovah," though his position may have been more trying than that of others. As we know, there were still thousands left in Israel who had not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19:18).

But there was at least one general effect throughout the land of this terrible period of drought. Every one must have learned that it had followed upon the announcement of Elijah; every one must have known what that announcement had been, with all concerning Jehovah and His prophet that it implied; and, lastly, if no general repentance had taken place, every one must at least have been prepared for the grand decisive trial between God and Baal, which was so soon to take place. And still the weary days crept on as before; the sun rose and sank on a cloudless sky over an arid land; and there was no sign of change, nor hope of relief. It was summer. Jezebel had left the palace of Samaria, and was in her delicious cool summer-residence at Jezreel, to which more full reference will be made in the sequel (comp. 1 Kings 18:45, 46; and the inference from 1 Kings 21:2). But Ahab was still in Samaria, busy with cares, caused by the state of the land. This temporary absence of Jezebel explains not only Ahab's conduct, but how he went to meet Elijah, attempted no violence, and even appeared in person on Mount Carmel. So great was the strait even in Samaria itself, that the king was in danger of losing every horse and mule, whether for the public or his own service. To discover if any fodder were left in the country, the king and Obadiah were each to make careful survey of part of the land. Obadiah had not proceeded far on his mission, when the sight least expected - perhaps least desired - presented itself to his view. It was none other than Elijah, who had been Divinely directed to leave Sarepta and meet Ahab. As there is not anything in Holy Scripture without meaning and teaching, we may here mark, that, when this is assigned by the Lord as the reason for Elijah's mission: "I will send rain upon the ground" (1 Kings 18:1), it is intended to teach that, although it was Jehovah Himself (and not Elijah, as the Rabbis imagine) who held "the keys of the rain," yet He would not do anything except through His chosen messenger.

Obadiah could have no difficulty in immediately recognizing Elijah, even if he had not, as seems most likely, met him before. With lowliest reverence he saluted the prophet, and then received command to announce his presence to Ahab. But timid and only partially enlightened, although God-fearing, as Obadiah was, this was no welcome message to him. Ahab had so long and so systematically sought for Elijah, that Obadiah could only imagine the prophet had been miraculously removed from shelter to shelter, just in time to save him from being detected by the messengers of Ahab. In point of fact, we know that such was not the case; but those who have lost the habit of seeing God in the ordinary Providence of everyday life - as is the case with all who are conformed to the world - are too often in the habit of looking for things strange, or for miracles, and thus become at the same time superstitious and unbelieving. What - so argued Obadiah - if, after he had intimated Elijah's presence to the king, the prophet were once more miraculously removed? Would he not have to pay with his life for Elijah's escape; would not suspicious Ahab or bloodthirsty Jezebel wreak their vengeance on him as an abettor of the prophet? Most groundless fears these, as all which are prompted by the faint-heartedness of partially enlightened piety; and so Elijah hastened to assure him, not, as it seems to us, without a touch of pitying reproof. The meeting which followed between the king of Israel and the representative of Jehovah was characteristic of each. It is a mistake to suppose, as interpreters generally do, that the words with which Ahab accosted Elijah, "Art thou the one <sup>2</sup> who troubleth Israel?" were intended to frighten the prophet by a display of authority.

Even Ahab could not have imagined that such would be their effect. It seems rather like an appeal. See what thou hast done; and what now? In truth, a man such as Ahab must have felt it difficult to know how to address the prophet. But Elijah was not, even momentarily, to be drawn into a personal controversy. With a sharp reproof, which pointed out that it was not he but the sin of

<sup>2</sup> I have given this the primary meaning of the Hebrew word ("this," "that one"), and not, as interpreters generally, the rare derivation "here."

Ahab and of his house which had brought trouble upon Israel, he directed the king to gather unto Mount Carmel the representatives of all Israel, as well as the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Astarte who enjoyed the special favor of the queen.

Putting aside for the moment the thought of the overruling guidance of God in the matter, it is not difficult to understand why Ahab complied with Elijah's direction. Naturally he could not have anticipated what turn matters would take. Certain it was that the land was in a terrible strait from which, if any one, Elijah alone could deliver it. Should he provoke him to fresh judgments by a refusal? What was there to fear from one unarmed man in presence of a hostile assembly? If Elijah could remove the curse, it was worth any temporary concession; if he refused or failed, the controversy with him would be easily settled, and that with popular approbation. Besides these, there may have been other secondary reasons for Ahab's compliance. As we have noticed, Jezebel was not then in Samaria; and Ahab may have felt that secret misgiving which is often the outcome of superstition rather than of partial belief. Lastly, he may at the moment have been under the influence of the overawing power of Elijah. It could scarcely have been otherwise in the circumstances.

That day Carmel witnessed one of the grandest scenes in the history of Israel. Three such scenes on mountain-tops stand out before the mind: the first on Mount Sinai, when the Covenant was made by the ministry of Moses; the second on Mount Carmel, when the Covenant was restored by the ministry of Elijah; the third on "the Mount of Transfiguration," when Moses and Elijah bare worshipful witness to the Christ in Whom and by Whom the Covenant was completed, transfigured, and transformed. In each case the scene on the Mount formed the high point in the life and mission of the agent employed, from which henceforth there was a descent, save in the history of Christ, where the descent to Gethsemane was in reality the commencement of the ascent to the Right Hand of God. Moses died and was buried at the Hand of God, Elijah went up with chariot of fire; Jesus died on the cross. Yet whereas from the mountain-top Moses and Elijah really descended,

so far as their work and mission were concerned, the seeming descent of Jesus was the real ascent to the topmost height of His work and glory.

No spot in Palestine is more beautiful, more bracing, or healthful than Carmel, "the Park-like." Up in the northwest, it juts as a promontory into the Mediterranean, rising to a height of five hundred feet. Thence it stretches about twelve miles to the S.S.E., rising into two other peaks. The first of these, about four miles from the promontory, is not less than 1740 feet high. Still further to the south-east is a third peak, 1687 feet high, which to this day bears the name of El-Mahrakah, or "place of burning" (sacrifice).

This, there can scarcely be a doubt, was the place of Elijah's sacrifice. Let us try to realize the scene. On whichever side the mountain be ascended, the scene is one of unsurpassed beauty. The rich red soil, where not cultivated, is covered by a thick brushwood of luxurious evergreens. Not only flowering trees and delicious fragrant herbs, but all the flora of the North of Palestine seems gathered in this favored spot. So early as November, the crocus, narcissus, pink cistus, and large daisy are in bloom, and the hawthorn in bud. In spring, wild tulips, dark red anemones, pink phlox, cyclamen, purple stocks, marigolds, geranium, and pink, yellow, and white rock-roses make it bright with gay coloring. For numerous springs trickle along the foot of the mountain and fertilize the soil. Ascending to El-Mahrakah we catch glimpses of cliffs, which in some places descend sheer down to the plain. At last we reach a plateau where at the edge of a steep slope there is a perennial well, filled with water even in the driest season. Yet a little higher rises another plateau of rich soil, shaded by olives; and finally we reach the topmost peak, a semi-isolated knoll. This was the place of the two altars; that of Baal, and that ruined one of Jehovah restored by Elijah, and dating from before the building of the Temple, when such worship was lawful. On the plateau beneath, under the shade of the olives, full in view of the highest altar-peak, were on the one side Elijah, and on the other King Ahab, the priests of Baal, and the people. Yet a little lower was the well whence the water for Elijah's sacrifice was drawn. Some 1400 feet beneath, where the rapid descent is close to

steep precipices and by sharp crags, rolls that "ancient river" Kishon, where the wild slaughter of the priests of Baal formed the closing scene in the drama of that day. But up on the topmost altar-height what an outlook! Westwards over Carmel and far to the sandhills around Caesarea; northwards, the Galilean hills, Lebanon and Hermon; eastwards, across the plain of Esdraelon, some six miles off, to Jezreel, - further away, to Shunem, Endor, Nain, Tabor, Nazareth, and even distant Gilead. A theater this truly befitting what was to be enacted on it.

Among those who on that day had gathered under the olives on that shady plateau just beneath the topmost peak, the four hundred priests of Astarte were not found. Whether they had shrunk from the encounter, or had deemed it inconsistent with the wishes of their spiritual patroness, the queen, to appear on such an occasion, certain it is that they were not with their four hundred and fifty colleagues of the priesthood of Baal. These must have been conspicuous amid king, courtiers, and the motley gathering from all parts of the land, by their white dresses and high pointed caps. Over against them, his upper garment of black camel-hair girt with a leathern girdle, stood the stern figure of the prophet; in the foreground was King Ahab. It was, indeed, a unique gathering, a wondrous array of forces, a day of tremendous import. To this Elijah had bidden king, priests, and people, and he left them not long in doubt of his object. First, he turned to the people with these words, which must have alike shown them their real condition and appealed to their judgment: "How long halt ye" (pass ye from one to the other <sup>3</sup>) "as to the two opinions" (divisions, parties <sup>4</sup>)? If Jehovah be the Elohim - go after Him; but if the Baal, go after him! To an appeal so trenchantly true there could in the then condition of the public mind be no answer. Their very appearance on Mount Carmel was an attestation of this mental

passing to and fro on the part of Israel - irrational, unsatisfactory, and self-condemnatory (Deuteronomy 6:4, etc.). But the question of Elijah also formed a most apt preparation for what was to follow. The two divided opinions were now to be brought to the test of truth; the two parties to measure their strength. Let Israel see and decide!

In the breathless silence that ensued upon this challenge Elijah now stood forward, and pointing to the white-robed crowd of priests over against him, he recalled to king and people that he and he only remained - that is, in active office and open profession <sup>5</sup> - a prophet of Jehovah. Single-handed, therefore, he would go to the contest, if contest of power it were against that multitude. Power! They worshipped as God the powers of nature: <sup>6</sup> let them then make trial on whose side the powers which are in nature were arrayed.

Let this be the test: the priests of Baal on their side, and he on his, would each choose a bullock and prepare it for sacrifice, but not kindle the fire beneath, "and it shall be the Elohim who shall answer by fire, He is the Elohim." A shout of universal assent greeted the proposal. In the circumstances it would be of the greatest practical importance that the futility of Baal-worship should be exhibited in the fullest manner. This explains the details of all that follows. Besides, after a whole day's vain appliance of every resource of their superstition, the grandeur of Jehovah's majestic interposition would also make the deeper impression. But although from Elijah's point of view it was important that the priests of Baal should first offer their sacrifice, the proposition was one to which no objection could be taken, since Elijah not only gave them the choice of the sacrificial animal, but they were many as against one. Nor could they complain so far as regarded

<sup>3</sup> The word is used in verse 26 of the wild dance or leaping of the priests of Baal.

<sup>4</sup> It is not easy to render the Hebrew word exactly. It occurs in Psalm 119:113 ("I hate divided thoughts"); Isaiah 2:21; 57:5 ("clefts"); Ezekiel 31:6 ("boughs," divided branches). The expression was probably proverbial.

<sup>5</sup> The others being hid in caves, were for all practical purposes for the present as non-existing.

<sup>6</sup> It deserves more than passing notice, that the modern denial of God may be reduced to the same ultimate principle as the worship of Baal. For, if the great First Cause - God as the Creator - be denied, then the only mode of accounting for the origin of all things is to trace it to the operation of forces in matter. And what really is this but a deification of Nature?



the test proposed by Elijah, since their Baal was also the god of fire, the very Sun-god.<sup>7</sup>

Now commenced a scene which baffles description. Ancient writers have left us accounts of the great Baal-festivals, and they closely agree with the narrative of the Bible, only furnishing further details. First rose a comparatively moderate, though already wild, cry to Baal; followed by a dance around the altar, beginning with a swinging motion to and fro.<sup>8</sup>

The howl then became louder and louder, and the dance more frantic. They whirled round and round, ran wildly through each other's ranks, always keeping up a circular motion, the head low bent, so that their long dishevelled hair swept the ground. Ordinarily the madness now became infectious, and the onlookers joined in the frenzied dance. But Elijah knew how to prevent this. It was noon - and for hours they had kept up their wild rites. With cutting taunts and bitter irony Elijah now reminded them that, since Baal was Elohim, the fault it must lie with them. He might be otherwise engaged, and they must cry louder. Stung to madness, they became more frantic than before, and what we know as the second and third acts in these feasts ensued. The wild howl passed into piercing demoniacal yells. In their madness the priests bit their arms and cut themselves with the two-edged swords which they carried and with lances.<sup>9</sup>

As blood began to flow the frenzy reached its highest pitch, when first one, then others, commenced to "prophesy," moaned and groaned, then burst into rhapsodic cries, accusing themselves, or speaking to Baal, or uttering incoherent broken sentences. All the while they beat themselves with heavy scourges, loaded or armed with sharp points, and cut themselves with

swords and lances - sometimes even mutilated themselves - since the blood of the priests was supposed to be specially propitiatory with Baal.

Two more hours had this terrible scene lasted - and their powers of endurance must have been all but exhausted. The sun had long passed its meridian, and the time of the regular evening-sacrifice in the Temple of Jehovah at Jerusalem had come. From the accounts of Temple-times left us we know that the evening sacrifice was offered "between the evenings," as it was termed - that is, between the downgoing of the sun and the evening.<sup>10</sup>

In point of fact the service commenced between two and three p.m. It must have been about the same time when Elijah began the simple yet solemn preparations for his sacrifice. Turning from the frantic priests to the astonished people, he bade them draw nigh. They must gather around him, not only in order to be convinced that no deception was practiced, but to take part with him, as it were, in the service. And once more Israel was to appear as the Israel of old in happier times, undivided in nationality as in allegiance to Jehovah. This was the meaning of his restoring the broken place of former pious worship by rolling to it twelve of the large pieces of rock that strewed the ground, according to the number of the tribes. And as he built the altar, he consecrated it by prayer: "in the name of Jehovah." Next, the soft crumbling calcareous soil around the altar was dug into a deep and wide trench. Then the wood, and upon it the pieces of the sacrifice were laid in due order. And now, at the prophet's bidding, willing hands filled the pitchers from the well close by.<sup>11</sup> Once, twice, thrice he poured the water over the sacrifices, till it ran down into the trench, which he also filled. This, as we suppose, not merely to show the more clearly that the fire, which consumed the sacrifice in such circumstances, was sent from heaven, but also for symbolic reasons, as

<sup>7</sup> As already stated, Baal was the real deity of Asia, worshipped under different forms (hence the plural: Baalim). Moloch was only Baal under another aspect, that of destruction, comp. Jeremiah 19:5; 32:35.

<sup>8</sup> In the original the word, as before noted, is the same as that rendered "halt" (in verse 21). The expression, no doubt, refers to the pantomimic dances around the altar.

<sup>9</sup> This is the correct rendering of verse 28, and not "knives and lancets," as in the Authorized Version.

<sup>10</sup> For a full description and explanation of the time of the Evening Sacrifice, see *The Temple, its Ministry and Services* at the time of Jesus Christ, p. 116.

<sup>11</sup> The Rabbis note that, each time, four pitchers of water were poured, or twelve in all, corresponding to the twelve stones of which the altar was built, and for the same symbolic reason.



if to indicate that Israel's penitent confession was poured upon the offering.

And now a solemn silence fell on the assembly. The sun was going down, a globe of fire, behind Carmel, and covered it with purple glow. It was the time of the evening sacrifice. But Jehovah, not Elijah, would do the miracle; the Hand of the living God Himself must be stretched out. Once more it was prayer which moved that Hand. Such prayer was not heard before - so calm, so earnest, so majestic, so assured, so strong. Elijah appeared in it as only the servant of Jehovah, and all that he had previously done as only at His Word: but Jehovah was the covenant-God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, manifesting Himself as of old as the Living and True, as Elohim in Israel: the conversion of Israel to Him as their God being the great object sought for. <sup>12</sup>

He had said it, and, as when first the Tabernacle was consecrated (Leviticus 9:24), or as when King Solomon (1 Chronicles 21:26; 2 Chronicles 7:1) brought the first offering in the Temple which he had reared to Jehovah, so now the fire of Jehovah leaped from heaven, consumed the sacrifice and the wood, enwrapped and burnt up the limestone rocks of which the altar was constructed, and with burning tongue licked up even the water that was in the trench. One moment of solemn silence, when all who had seen it fell in awe-stricken worship on their faces; then a shout which seemed to rend the very air, and found its echo far and wide in the glens and clefts of Carmel: "Jehovah, He the Elohim! Jehovah, He the Elohim!"

And so Israel was once more converted unto God. And now, in accordance with the Divine command in the Law (Deuteronomy 13:13; 17:2, etc.), stern judgment must be executed on the idolaters and seducers, the idol-priests. The victory that day must be complete; the renunciation of Baal-worship beyond recall. Not one of the priests of Baal must escape. Down the steep mountain sides they hurried them, cast them over precipices, those

fourteen hundred feet to the river Kishon, which was reddened with their blood. <sup>13</sup>

But up on the mountain-top lingered King Ahab, astonished, speechless, himself for the time a convert to Jehovah. He also was to share in the sacrifice; he was to eat the sacrificial meal. But it must be in haste, for already Elijah heard the sighing and low moaning of the wind in the forest of Carmel. Himself took no part in the feast. He had other bread to eat whereof they wot not. He had climbed the topmost height of Carmel out of sight of the king. None had accompanied him save his servant, whom tradition declares to have been that son of the widow of Sarepta who had been miraculously restored to life. Most fitting minister, indeed, he would have been in that hour. Once more it was agonizing prayer - not once, but seven times repeated.

At each break in it the faithful attendant climbed the highest knoll, and looked earnestly and anxiously over the broad expanse of the sea, there full in view. At last it had come - a cloud, as yet not bigger than a man's hand. But when God begins to hear prayer, He will hear it abundantly; when He gives the blessing, it will be without stint. Ahab must be up, and quick in his chariot, or the rain, which will descend in floods, will clog the hard ground, so that his chariot would find it difficult to traverse the six miles across the plain to the palace of Jezreel. And now as the foot of the mountain was reached, the heaven was black with clouds, the wind moaned fitfully, and the rain came in torrents. But the power of Jehovah was upon the Tishbite.

He girded up his loins and ran before the chariot of Ahab. On such a day he hesitated not to act as outrunner to the convert-king; nay, he would himself be the harbinger of the news to Jezreel. Up to the entrance of Jezreel he heralded them; to the very gate of Jezebel's palace he went before them, like the warning voice of God, ere Ahab again encountered his tempter. But there the two must part company, and the king of Israel must henceforth decide for himself to whom he will

<sup>12</sup> 1 Kings 18:37 indicates the final (moral) purpose not only of this but of every miracle. The last clause of the verse should be rendered in the present tense: "and that Thou turnest their heart back again."

<sup>13</sup> It is scarcely credible, in view of the words of our Lord, Luke 9:55, 56; and yet this scene has been adduced as a precedent for the persecution of so-called "heretics."

cleave, whether to Jehovah or to the god of Jezebel.

**VI\_02 Different Standpoint of the Old and the New Testament - analogy between Elijah and John the Baptist - Jezebel threatens Elijah's Life - The Prophet's Flight - His Miraculous Provision - Analogy between Moses and Elijah - Elijah at Mount Horeb - The Divine Message and Assurance to Elijah - Call of Elisha.**

### 1 Kings 19

UNSPEAKABLY grand as had been the scene on Mount Carmel, we instinctively feel that it was the outcome of the Old Testament. We cannot conceive it possible under the New dispensation. In so saying we do not so much refer to the ironical taunts which Elijah had addressed to the priests of Baal, when compassion, gentleness, and meekness might have seemed befitting, since it was necessary effectually to expose the folly as well as the sin of idolatry, and this was best done in such manner (comp. Isaiah 40:18, etc.; 41:7; 44:8-22; 46:5-11; Jeremiah 10:7, etc.). Nor do we allude only or mainly to the destruction of the priests of Baal. This was simply in obedience to the Old Testament Law, and was grounded alike on its economy <sup>14</sup> and on the circumstances of the time.

Taking the lowest view, it was an act of necessary self-preservation, since the two religions could not co-exist, as the conduct of Jezebel had recently proved. But there is a higher view than this of the event. For the fundamental object of Israel's calling and existence - the whole typical import and preparatory purpose of the nation - was incompatible with even the existence of idolatry among them. Finally, there is this essential difference between the Old and the New Testament dispensation - that under the latter, religion is of personal choice, heart-willingness being secured by the persuasion of the Holy Ghost; while under the Old Testament (from its nature) religion was of Law. Religious liberty is a principle which necessarily follows from a religion of free choice, where God no longer addresses

Himself to man merely, or mainly, with the authority of a general Law, but appeals to the individual conscience with the persuasion of a special invitation. Under the Old Testament, of which the fundamental principle was the sole Divine authority of Jehovah (Exodus 20:2, 3), idolatry was not only a crime, but a revolt against the Majesty of heaven, Israel's King, which involved the most fatal consequences to the nation. Yet even so, we repeat it, the scene on Mount Carmel could not have been enacted in New Testament times.

But while fully admitting this distinctive standpoint of the preparatory dispensation, it were a most serious mistake to forget that the Old Testament itself points to a higher and fuller manifestation of God, and never more distinctly than in this history of Elijah. Attention has already been called to the analogy between Elijah and John the Baptist. At this stage we specially recall three points in the history of the latter. It seems as if the Baptist had expected that his warning denunciations would be immediately followed either by visible reform, or else by visible judgment. But instead of this he was cast, at the instigation of Herod's wife, into a dungeon which he was never to leave; and yet judgment seemed to slumber, and the Christ made no movement either for the deliverance of His forerunner, or the vindication of his message. And, lastly, in consequence of this disappointment, spiritual darkness appears to have gathered around the soul of the Baptist. One almost feels as if it had been needful for such a messenger of judgment to become consciously weak, that so in the depression of the human the Divine element might appear the more clearly. And it was also good that it should be so, since it led to the inquiring embassy to Christ, and thus to a fuller revelation of the Divine character of the kingdom. The same expectation and the same disappointment are apparent in the history of Elijah on the morrow of the victory at Carmel. But they also led up to a fuller manifestation of the meaning and purpose of God. Thus we see how the Old Testament itself, even where its distinctive character most clearly appeared, pointed to that fuller and more glorious manifestation of God, symbolized, not by storm, earthquake, or fire, but by "the still small voice."

<sup>14</sup> I use the term "economy" here in its original meaning, as denoting the household arrangement, the household legislation and order.

If Elijah had lingered in Jezreel in the hope that the reformation proclaimed on Mount Carmel would be followed up by the king, he was soon to experience bitter disappointment. There is, however, good reason for inferring that the impression then made upon the mind of Ahab was never wholly effaced. This appears not only from the subsequent relations between the king and prophets of the LORD (1 Kings 20), but even from his tardy repentance after the commission of his great crime (1 Kings 21:27-29). Indeed, it might almost seem as if, but for the influence of Jezebel upon the weak king, matters might at least temporarily have taken a different turn in Israel. But if such was the effect produced upon Ahab by the scene on Mount Carmel, we can understand that Jezebel's first wish must have been as soon as possible to remove Elijah from all contact with the king. For this purpose she sent a message, threatening the prophet with death within twenty-four hours. It need scarcely be said, that, if she had been so bold as really to purpose his murder, she would not have given him warning of it, and that the reference to twenty-four hours as the limit of his life must rather have been intended to induce Elijah to immediate flight. And she succeeded in her purpose - not, indeed, from fear on the part of the prophet, but from deep disappointment and depression, for which we may in some measure find even a physical cause in the reaction that must have followed on the day after Carmel.

Strange as it may seem, these felt weaknesses of men like Elijah come upon us with almost a sense of relief. It is not only that we realize that these giants of faith are men of like passions with ourselves, but that the Divine in their work is thereby the more prominently brought out. It deserves special notice that Elijah proceeded on his hasty journey without any Divine direction to that effect. Attended only by his faithful servant, he passed without pausing to the farthest boundary of the neighboring kingdom of Judah. But even that was not his final destination, nor could he in his then mood brook any companionship. Leaving his servant behind, he went into the wilderness of Paran. In its awful solitude he felt himself for the first time free to rest. Utterly broken down in body and in spirit, he cast himself under one of those

wide-spreading brooms,<sup>15</sup> which seemed as if they indicated that even in the vast, howling wilderness, the hand of the Great Creator had provided shelter for His poor, hardly bestead wanderers.

There is something almost awful in the life-and-death conflicts of great souls. We witness them with a feeling akin to reverence. The deep despondency of Elijah's soul found utterance in the entreaty to be released from work and suffering. He was not better than his fathers; like them he had vainly toiled; like them he had failed; why should his painful mission be prolonged? But not so must he pass away. Like Moses of old, he must at least gain distant view of the sweet land of beauty and rest. As so often, God in His tender mercy gave His beloved the precious relief of sleep. And more than that - he was to have evidence that even there he was not forsaken. An angel awakened him to minister to his wants. God careth for the body; and precious in His sight is not only the death, but also the felt need of His people. The same great Jehovah, Whose manifestation on Carmel had been so awful in its grandeur, condescended to His servant in the hour of his utmost need, and with unspeakable tenderness, like a mother, tended His weary child. Once more a season of sleep, and again the former heaven-given provision for the journey which he was to make - now in the guidance of God.<sup>16</sup>

The analogy between Moses, as he through whom the Covenant was given, and Elijah, as he through whom the Covenant was restored, has already been indicated. There is, however, one great difference between the two. When Israel broke the Covenant which Moses was about to make, he pleaded for them with the most intense agony of soul (Exodus 33-34:9). When once more Israel broke the Covenant on the morrow of Carmel, Elijah fled in utter despondency of spirit. In both

<sup>15</sup> The Rothem is not a juniper-tree (as in the Authorized Version), but a species of large, wide-spreading broom, which generally grows near watercourses, and serves as protection alike from the sun and the wind.

<sup>16</sup> Kimchi marks that the second meal was not newly brought, but must have been the remainder of the old. He also points out how Elijah was led in the wilderness by a higher direction than his own.

cases God granted light to His servants by such manifestation of Himself as gave deepest insight into His purposes of grace and anticipation of the manner in which they would be ultimately realized in all their fullness through Jesus Christ. And hence it was in this respect also fitting that Moses and Elijah should be with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But Elijah had not been like Moses; rather had he been like the children of Israel. And therefore, like them, must he wander for symbolic forty days in the wilderness, before liberty and light were granted,<sup>17</sup> to learn the same lesson which God would have had Israel learn during their forty years of wandering. And so he came ultimately unto "the mount of God," to "the cave" - perhaps the very "cleft of the rock" where Moses had first been permitted to hear the glorious revelation of what Jehovah was and of what He purposed.

It was a wondrous place in which to spend the night,<sup>18</sup> and to hear amidst its silence the voice of Jehovah.<sup>19</sup> The one question - afterwards repeated in different circumstances - "What doest thou here, Elijah?"<sup>20</sup> was intended to bring his state of mind clearly to the consciousness of the prophet.

In tender mercy, no reproach was uttered, not even reproof of the rash request for release from seemingly hopeless, burdensome toil. But was it really hopeless? Did Elijah rightly apprehend God's final purpose in it; did he even know what in God's Providence would follow that seeming defeat of the prophet on the day after his great victory: how God would vindicate His cause, punish the rebellious, and take care of His own? What then had brought Elijah thither; what was his purpose in coming? Although the same question

was twice asked and the same answer twice returned, it seems in each case to bear a somewhat different meaning. For the words of Elijah (vv. 10, 14) imply two things: an accusation against the children of Israel and a vindication of his own conduct in fleeing into the wilderness. The first of these seems to have been the meaning of his reply before the special manifestation of God (Romans 11:2, 3); the second, that after that revelation of God which the vision conveyed. This manifestation, so deeply symbolical, appears to us to have also wrought an entire change in the prophet.

The first question came to Elijah while still in the cave. As already stated, it elicited from him an accusation of His people, as if to appeal for vengeance to the LORD (Romans 11:2, 3) - "It is time for Thee to work, O LORD, for men have made void Thy Law" (Psalms 119:126)! Upon this Elijah was bidden to go forth out of the dark, narrow cave, and behold, as Jehovah passed by.<sup>21</sup>

Not a word was spoken. But first burst "wind great and strong, rending mountains, shivering rocks before the face of Jehovah - not in storm Jehovah! And after the wind earthquake - not in earthquake Jehovah! And after the earthquake fire - not in fire Jehovah! And after the fire sound of soft silencing (audible gentle stilling)!"

Elijah could not but have understood the meaning of this. He knew it when, at the "sound of soft stilling," he wrapped his face in the mantle and came forth in most reverent attitude to stand before Jehovah (comp. Exodus 3:6; 33:20, 22; Isaiah 6:2). The storm which rends, the earthquake which shakes all to its foundations, the fire which consumes - these are but His messengers which at most precede His coming. But Jehovah Himself is not in them. When He cometh it is not in these, but in the gentle stilling of them. To learn this was a

<sup>17</sup> The journey straight to Mount Horeb would have taken scarcely more than a fourth of that time.

<sup>18</sup> This is the meaning of the word "lodge" in verse 9.

<sup>19</sup> Some commentators regard the first part of what is related as having been a vision. But there seems no indication of this in the text.

<sup>20</sup> The question bears manifold application. By recalling it, the children of God have not unfrequently been preserved from sin, from improper association, and from worldly conformity.

<sup>21</sup> The LXX. seem to have read more correctly the first clauses of verse 11. We translate: "And he said, Go forth and stand on the mount before Jehovah - and behold, Jehovah passing by (passeth by)." The narrative portion only begins after this: "And wind, great and strong," etc. It deserves notice that the expression "pass by" is only used here and in Exodus 33 and 34:6 of Jehovah. Generally the opposite - that of dwelling (whence Shechinah) - is connected with Him. Of these glorious manifestations only passing glimpses could be caught under the Old Testament.



real, though not an expressed, answer to Elijah's despondency and to his accusing appeal against Israel, the more touchingly conveyed that, being indirect, like the answer of Jesus to the inquiry of the Baptist, it carried instruction but not rebuke. The mood of both was the same, their doubts, and the reply given to them. It was in effect, See what the LORD really is, purposes, and doeth; and learn reverently to bow and to adore. God is greater, higher, better than appears only in judgment: do thy work, and leave the result to Him - He will make it plain. And so, we suppose that, when after this manifestation the same question again came to Elijah, his answer was no longer in the spirit of accusation, but rather a statement of fact in vindication or explanation of his own presence on Mount Horeb.

With reverence be it said that, in the mood in which Elijah had come, no more fitting answer could have been made to him than this awful and glorious self-manifestation of Jehovah. If the LORD Himself had not been in the desolating messengers of terror, why should Elijah have expected it in the judgments which he was commissioned to execute? Nay, if Elijah himself had come forth to worship not in the storm, the earthquake, nor the fire, but had waited for the Presence of the LORD in the soft, gentle, stilling sound, why should he wonder if the revival of Israel's worship awaited a similar manifestation? But God would in the meantime take care of His own cause. The storm must burst from without on an unrepentant people: Hazael was to be anointed king of Syria, and foreign wars, more desolating than any that had preceded, would sweep over Israel. The earthquake would shake the house of Ahab to its foundations: and Jehu was to be appointed the minister of vengeance. That fire which Elijah had kindled would burn more brightly and fiercely: the mission of Elijah was to be continued in Elisha. To prepare all <sup>22</sup> this was

<sup>22</sup> The expressions in 1 Kings 19:15-17 must, of course, not be pressed in a literal sense. As a matter of fact, only Jehu was anointed, and that neither by Elijah nor by Elisha. Similarly the expression about Elisha slaying those who had escaped the sword of Jehu must be taken in its obvious figurative meaning. But in the sight of God these three were from that moment "anointed to their work" (comp. 2 Kings 8:13, leaving out the words in italics, and 2 Kings 9:3).

now the only work left for the aged and weary prophet. And in each case he did prepare it.

Elisha was called by the prophet himself. The destruction of the house of Ahab, which involved the elevation of Jehu, through whom it was accomplished, was distinctly announced to Ahab by Elijah in the field of Naboth (1 Kings 21:19, 21, 22); while the future power of Syria over Israel, which involved the elevation of Hazael, was similarly prophetically intimated (1 Kings 20:42) - as we conjecture from the expression "a certain man of the sons of the prophets" (1 Kings 20:35) - by direction of Elijah.

Yet one precious assurance, or rather visible token that Jehovah was still in Israel, in the voice of soft stilling, was granted to the prophet. All unknown to him God had even in corrupt Israel His own, a "remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:2-5), a sacred covenant-number which could be counted by thousands <sup>23</sup> - "still ones" in the land, who had never bent the knee to Baal nor kissed in worship the abominable image. <sup>24</sup>

And yet further consolation was to be granted to the weary servant of the LORD. In each case the actual judgment was to be only intimated, not executed, through Elijah himself, or in his lifetime. But this comfort would he have, that, even in his lifetime, and while engaged in his mission, a yoke-fellow true in sympathy, ministry, and likeness of spirit, should attend him to make the burden seem easier to bear.

It was as had been told him. With a sense that his mission was well-nigh completed, and that what remained was chiefly to prepare Elisha for his work, the prophet turned again towards the land of Israel. As he proceeded on his way, nature itself must have seemed to reflect the gladsome revelation of stillness and peace which had been vouchsafed on Horeb. The abundant rain which had descended must have softened the long-

<sup>23</sup> The term 7000 must not be pressed literally, as if it were the exact number of the faithful. Seven is the well-known sacred and covenant-number.

<sup>24</sup> To kiss the idol - its feet, beard, etc. - was the common practice in heathen worship.

parched fields. The country was putting on the garb of a new spring. Everywhere the work of the husbandman was resumed; herds and flocks were browsing in the meadows; busy hands were rapidly putting in the seed. Upwards he traveled along the rich Jordan valley, till, past the borders of Judah, he reached the ancient possession of Issachar. No more happy scene than on the fields of Abed Meholah, the "meadow of the dance," of which the very name seems to suggest the joyous time of rich harvest and the merry dances of the reapers. These fields, far as the eye could reach, were the possession of one Shaphat, and he was of those seven thousand who had not bent to Baal, as we infer even from the name which he had given to his son: Elisha, "the God of salvation," or better, "my God salvation." And now twelve yoke of oxen were plowing up the land - eleven guided by the hands of servants, the twelfth, in good old Hebrew simple fashion, by the son of the owner of those lands.

With characteristic sparingness of detail the sacred text does not inform us whether Elijah had before known his successor, nor how he came now to recognize him. Suffice it, that he knew and called him, not in words, indeed, but by the unmistakable symbolic action of casting over him his prophet's mantle, as he passed. This was Elisha's first test. There was no absolute need for responding, nor yet for showing that he had understood an unspoken call, which could have offered so little to attract even one whose lot had been cast in circumstances much less happy than those of Elisha. But Elisha showed his inward and spiritual preparedness by at once responding to Elijah's call, with only this one request: to be allowed to take leave of his father and mother.<sup>25</sup>

It was not stern rebuke nor reproof which prompted the reply of Elijah: "Go back, for what have I done to thee?" Precisely because he understood the greatness of the sacrifice which immediate obedience implied, would he leave Elisha entirely unswayed and free, and his service the outcome of his own heart's conviction and

choice.<sup>26</sup> Thus only could he be fitted for a calling which required such entire self-denial and self-sacrifice.

This further test also, which reminds us how our LORD set before intending followers the difficulties of their choice (Matthew 8:20) and before His disciples the absolute necessity of willing self-denial (Luke 14:26), did Elisha endure, as must every one who is to do service for God. It seems almost symbolic that the oxen with which he had been working, the yoke which bound them, and the wooden ploughshare which they had drawn, were now used to prepare the farewell-feast of Elisha. To forsake and give up all for the service of the LORD is only one lesson, which must be complemented, not so much by abandoning all of the past, as by consecrating to our new life-work all that we formerly had or did. Nor let us forget two other considerations, suggested by the history of Elisha's call. All personal decision for God, and all work undertaken for Him, implies a leave-taking and a forsaking of the old, which must "pass away" when "all things become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). But this forsaking, though necessarily involving pain and loss, should not be sad - rather joyous, as leading through pain to real joy, and through seeming loss to real gain:<sup>27</sup> a "feast," such as was the parting of Elisha from his home, and that of St. Matthew from his calling and friends.

Thus the end of the old will at the same time be the beginning of the new; the giving up of the former calling the first act of the new ministry. And however humble that ministry, or however indirectly it may seem to bear upon the LORD, it is really ministry of Him. Then, and for many

<sup>25</sup> Matthew Henry quaintly remarks, "to take leave, not to ask leave of them."

<sup>26</sup> However reasonable and evident these details, we could scarcely conceive them possible in a narrative that was not based upon historical facts. Their invention would be almost inconceivable. Hence all these details furnish evidence of the reality of these events and of the truth of the Scriptural narrative.

<sup>27</sup> It is probably in this that the difference lies between the case of Elisha and that in which our LORD returned so different an answer to a request, which to a superficial reader might seem substantially the same as that of the son of Shaphat (comp. Luke 9:59-62).

years afterwards, Elisha did but "pour water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kings 3:11) - yet from the moment that "he arose and went after Elijah" he was really, and in the judgment of God, "anointed to be prophet;" nor had he, nor needed he, other earthly consecration.

### **VI\_03 General effect of Elijah's Mission - The Two Expeditions of Syria and the Twofold Victory of Israel - Ahab releases Ben-hadad - The Prophet's Denunciation.**

#### **1 Kings 20**

BUT the mission of Elijah must also have had other and, in some respects, even more deep-reaching results than those with which God had comforted His servant in his deep dejection of spirit. Thus the "seven thousand" who had never bent the knee to Baal, must have been greatly quickened and encouraged by what had taken place on Carmel. Nay, it could not but have made lasting impression on King Ahab himself. Too self-indulgent to decide for Jehovah, too weak to resist Jezebel, even when his conscience misgave him, or directed him to the better way, the impression of what he had witnessed could never have wholly passed from his mind. Even if, as in the case of Israel after the exile, it ultimately issued only in pride of nationality, yet this feeling must ever afterwards have been in his heart, that Jehovah He was God - "the God of Gods"<sup>28</sup> - and that Jehovah was in Israel, and the God of Israel.

It is this which explains the bearing of Ahab in the first wars with Ben-hadad of Syria.<sup>29</sup>

It need scarcely be said that this monarch was not the same, but the son of him who during the reigns of Baasha (1 Kings 15:20) and Omri had possessed himself of so many cities, both east and west of the Jordan, and whose sovereignty had, in a sense, been owned within the semi-independent Syrian bazaars and streets of Samaria itself (1 Kings 20:34). To judge from various notices, both

Biblical and on Assyrian monuments, this Ben-hadad had inherited the restless ambition, although not the sterner qualities of his father. The motives of his warfare against Ahab are not difficult to understand. It was the settled policy of Syria to isolate and weaken the neighboring kingdom of Israel. With this object in view, Ben-hadad IV. (the father of this king of Syria) had readily broken his league with Baasha, and combined with Asa against Israel.

But since the days of Omri the policy of both Israel and Judah had changed. Their former internecine wars had given place, first to peace, and then to actual alliance between the two kingdoms, cemented at last by the marriage of the son of Jehoshaphat with the daughter of Ahab (2 Chronicles 18:1; 2 Kings 8:18). To this cause for uneasiness to Syria must be added the close alliance between Israel and Tyre, indicated, if not brought about, by the marriage of Ahab with Jezebel. Thus the kingdom of Israel was secure both on its southern and western boundaries, and only threatened on that towards Syria. And the increasing prosperity and wealth of the land appear not only from the internal tranquillity that obtained during the thirty-six years of the reign of Ahab and his two descendants, but also from the circumstance that Ahab built so many cities, and adorned his capital by a magnificent palace made of ivory (1 Kings 22:39). Lastly, the jealousy and enmity of Ben-hadad must have been increased by his own relations to the great neighboring power of Assyria, which (as we shall see) were such as to make a dangerous alliance between the latter and Israel an event of political probability.

In these circumstances, Ben-hadad resolved to strike such a blow at Samaria as would reduce it to permanent impotence. At the head of all his army, and followed by thirty-two vassal kings, or probably rather chieftains, who ruled over towns with adjoining districts within the territory between the Euphrates and the northern boundary of Israel,<sup>30</sup> he invaded Samaria.

<sup>28</sup> Although this special Psalm (136) may not be David's, we must remember that a considerable portion of the Psalter must have been in existence, and, at least in part, known to Ahab.

<sup>29</sup> Ben-hadad, "the Son of the Sun." Hadad was the official title of the kings of Syria. On the monarchs of that name, see Vol. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus erroneously represents them as from "beyond the Euphrates." But from Assyrian inscriptions we know that at that period the country between the Euphrates and the northern border of Jordan, was parcelled out among a number of states, such as those of the Hittites, the Hamathites, and



He met with no opposition, for, as Josephus notes (Ant. 8. 14, 1), Ahab was not prepared for the attack. But even if it had been otherwise, sound policy would have dictated a retreat, and the concentration of the Israelitish forces behind the strong walls of the capital. This proved a serious check to the plans of Ben-hadad. The Syrian army laid, indeed, siege to Samaria, but the heat of the summer season,<sup>31</sup> the character and habits of his allies, and even the circumstance that his own country seems to have been divided among a number of semi-savage chiefs, must have proved unfavorable to a prolonged warfare.

Ben-hadad might have succeeded if at the first onset he could have crushed the small, hastily-raised forces of Ahab by sheer weight of numbers. But the slow systematic siege of a well-defended city, into which Ahab had evidently gathered all the leading personages in his realm and all their wealth,<sup>32</sup> must have appeared even to a boastful Oriental a doubtful undertaking, which might at any time be converted into a disaster by the sudden appearance of allies to Israel from Judah, Tyre, or perhaps even from Assyria.

It was probably shortly after the commencement of the siege of Samaria, that Ben-hadad sent envoys to demand in imperious terms the absolute submission of Ahab (1 Kings 20:2). At least so the latter seems to have understood it, when he declared his readiness to agree to his enemy's terms. But whether Ben-hadad had from the first meant more, or his insolence had grown with what he regarded as the necessities and fears of Ahab, the next day other heralds came from Ben-hadad, requiring in terms of extreme and wanton insult, not only the surrender of Ahab, but that of Samaria; and especially of the palaces of its

nobility, for the avowed purpose of plunder. It was evident that Ben-hadad intended, not the surrender of Ahab, but the destruction ("evil") of the capital, and the ruin of the whole land (ver. 7). Possibly the apparently strange demand of Ben-hadad (ver. 6) may indicate a deeper scheme. To oblige Ahab formally to submit, would be of comparatively small, at most, of only temporary use.

On the withdrawal of Ben-hadad the hostility of Israel would, as experience had shown, once more break forth under Ahab, or some new military leader, and threaten Syria with the same or even graver danger than before. But if the spirit of the leaders could be crushed by having their substance taken from them, then the chiefs of the people would not only be detached from their native monarchy, which had proved powerless to protect them, but in future rendered dependent on Syria, and hence led to seek the favor of Ben-hadad, instead of giving their allegiance to their own Israelitish rulers.

But the scheme was foiled by the clumsy frankness of its avowal. Ahab summoned to his council the elders of Israel. He told them how on the previous day he had expressed to Ben-hadad his willingness to make absolute personal submission and surrender of all that he possessed - as Josephus, no doubt, correctly puts into his mouth - for the sake of their preservation and peace. But the new terms which Ben-hadad proposed involved the leaders of the people as well as himself, and meant ruin equally to them all. In these circumstances, "the elders" counselled the absolute rejection of the terms demanded. Their advice was ratified by a popular assembly (ver. 8). These measures of Ahab were wise. Besides, the bearing of Ben-hadad must have indicated even to a ruler less astute than Ahab, the weakness and folly of his opponent. And, instead of attacking the city, on the refusal of his terms, as he would have done had he been sure of his army, Ben-hadad now only sent a message of ridiculously boastful threatening,<sup>33</sup> to which Ahab replied with calm dignity (vv. 10, 11).

others (comp. Schrader, d. Keilinschriften u. d. A. Test., 2nd ed., pp. 200-204). This affords undesigned, but most important, confirmation of the Biblical narrative. So does the mention of "the chariots." (ver. 1) which, according to the Assyrian inscriptions, formed a very important part of the Syrian forces (Comp. Schrader, u.s.).

<sup>31</sup> This seems implied in the term "booths" (sukkoth), ver. 12 - not "pavilions," as in the Authorized Version.

<sup>32</sup> The former seems implied by the presence in Samaria of "all the elders of the land," (ver. 7); the latter by the demand of Ben-hadad in ver. 6.

<sup>33</sup> The words of Ben-hadad (ver. 10) are generally regarded as meaning that "the dust of Samaria," about to be reduced to ashes and ruins, would not "suffice for the hollow hands" of all the people that were in his following. But it may have been

Thus, for a time at least, Ahab seems in the school of adversity to have learned some of the lessons which his contact with Elijah might have taught him. Besides, it is only reasonable to suppose that both the composition of the force outside the city, and the utter demoralization of its leaders, were known in Samaria. A summer campaign in Palestine would have tried even the best disciplined troops. But the Syrian host contained a motley following of thirty-two Eastern chiefs, who probably had little other interest in the campaign than the hope of plunder. It was an army incoherent in its composition, and unwieldy from its very numbers. Hitherto their advance had been unchecked, and its progress, no doubt, marked by the desolation of the country along their straggling line of march. Their easy success would make them not only more reckless, but also unwilling to engage in serious fighting, especially in those hot and enervating days, when their leaders lay in the cool shadow of their booths, indulging in drunken orgies. It was a dissipated rabble, rather than an army.

Ben-hadad and his allies were engaged in a midday bout when the reply of Ahab to the Syrian challenge arrived. Received under such circumstances, we scarcely wonder that it provoked the order of Ben-hadad to make immediate preparation for an assault on the city. But in whatever these preparations consisted, - whether in the advance of siege engines, or amassing of the troops, they could scarcely have been very effective, since all the Syrian chiefs continued at their orgies, so that the hour of battle surprised them while incapacitated by intoxication (ver. 16). Matters were very different within Samaria. There a prophet appeared, to announce not only deliverance from the LORD, but to point its lesson in the contrast between the great multitude of the enemy, and the small number of Israel's host, by which they were to be defeated.

This, with the view of showing to Ahab and to Israel that He was Jehovah, the living Covenant God, Who gave the victory. Thus the teaching of

Elijah on Mount Carmel was now to find its confirmation and application in national blessing. And that the influence of that scene had not been, as Elijah had feared, only temporary and transient, appears even from the presence of a prophet in Samaria,<sup>34</sup> and from the whole bearing of Ahab.

He is neither doubtful nor boastful, but, as having learned the prophetic lesson, anxious to receive plain Divine direction, and to follow it implicitly. Apparently the land was parceled out among "princes of the shires," either hereditary chieftains of districts, or governors appointed by the king: an arrangement which throws further light on Ben-Hades' previously expressed purpose permanently to break the power of these leaders of Israel. These "princes of the shires" seem to have been each surrounded by a small armed retinue: "the young men" (comp. 2 Samuel 18:15). By these, numbering in all only 232 men, the victory over the great Syrian host was to be achieved. It only remained for Ahab to inquire, "Who shall commence the warfare?"<sup>35</sup> For in such a victory the main condition would be exact conformity to all Divine directions, in order to show that all was of God, and to give evidence of the principle of faith on the part of the combatants.

Having received the direction that he was to begin the battle, Ahab lost no time. At midday - probably of the following day - when, as no doubt was well-known in Samaria, Ben-hadad and his thirty-two confederates were "drinking" themselves "drunk" in the booths, the 232 of the body-guard of the princes marched forth, followed by the 7000 men which formed the army of Israel. Although this number naturally reminds us of the 7000 who had not bent the knee to Baal, there is no need to regard it as referring to them, or (with the Rabbis) to "the true children of Israel." The precise number (232) of the body-guard points to an exact numeration, nor need we perhaps wonder if in the wonder-working Providence of God there

<sup>34</sup> This is the real meaning of the presence of the prophet in Samaria, and there is not, rightly understood, any inconsistency between this and 1 Kings 18:4, 22; 19:10, as negative critics assert.

<sup>35</sup> Or, "battle." This, and not "order the battle," as in the A.V. The same expression occurs in 2 Chronicles 13:3, and corresponds to the French *entammer*.

only a general boast as against the popular assembly in Samaria that had ratified the resistance to him, that if all Samaria were reduced to dust there were more people in his following than could fill their hands with it.

was a striking coincidence between the number of the faithful and that of Israel's victorious host.

The same wonder-working Providence appears in the manner in which victory was granted. As so often, we mark the accomplishment of a result, miraculous when viewed by itself, yet, as regards the means, brought about in the order of natural causation. And thus we ever learn anew that, although too frequently we do not perceive it, we are constantly surrounded by miracles, since Jehovah is the living God; and that hence ours should be the faith of a constant expectancy. It reads as we might have expected in the circumstances, that, when Ben-hadad was informed that men had come out from Samaria, he commanded in his drunken conceit and boastfulness, they should not be attacked, but made captives and brought to him. It may have been that those who were sent to execute this command went not fully armed. At any rate they seem to have been quite unprepared for resistance; and when these 232 Israelitish soldiers cut down each a man, no doubt following it up by further onslaught, the Syrians might naturally imagine that this was only an advanced guard, which was intended to precede a sortie of the whole garrison of Samaria. A panic, not uncommon among Orientals, seized the unprepared and unmarshalled masses, whose officers the while lay drunken in the booths. The very number of the Syrians would make a formation or rally more difficult, while it would afterwards increase the confusion of what soon became an indiscriminate flight. At this moment King Ahab issued from Samaria with his whole army. Whether, as our present Hebrew text bears, the king struck at the war-horses and war-chariots of the enemy, with the view of capturing them, or, as the ancient Greek translators (the LXX.) seem to have read, he "took" them, - implying that there had not been time to harness the war-chariots when the Israelitish host was among them - the result would be the same. Ben-hadad, followed by a few horsemen, escaped by hasty flight, as the word used in the original conveys, on a "chariot-horse," showing how sore was the stress when the king was obliged hastily to escape on the first horse to hand.

If it were necessary to demonstrate the compatibility of direct Divine help, and of reliance upon it, with the most diligent use of the best means, the narrative which follows would show it. After this great victory the king and people might have indulged in outward, or still worse, in professedly religious security, to the neglect of what was plain duty. But the same prophet who before had announced Divine deliverance, now warned Ahab to gather all his forces, and prepare, for that - "at the turn of the year," that is, in the spring (comp. 2 Samuel 11:1), he might expect another attack from Syria. And to make best preparation for the coming danger, in obedience to the Divine word, would not supersede but presuppose faith, even as we shall work best when we feel that we have the Divine direction in, and the Divine blessing on, our undertakings.

It was as the prophet had told. It seems quite natural that the courtiers of Ben-hadad should have ascribed the almost incredible defeat of such an army to supernatural causes, rather than to the dissipation and folly of their king. They suggested that the gods of Israel were mountain-deities, and that the rout of Syria around mountainous Samaria had been due to this cause. But the result would be far different if the battle were waged in the plains, man against man, and not gods against men, ("but, on the other hand, we shall fight with them in the plain [see,] if we shall not be stronger than they!") The grounds of this strange suggestion must be sought partly in the notions of the heathen world, but also partly in the sin of Israel. The ancient heathen world worshipped not only gods on the heights, but gods of the heights, and the sin of Israel in rearing altars and chapels on "the high places" must have led to the inference that the national worship was that of mountain-deities.

Thus did Israel's disobedience bring also its temporal punishment. But to their general advice the courtiers of Ben-hadad added certain practical suggestions, to avoid the secondary causes to which they attributed their late defeat. The tributary "kings" were to be dismissed, and their places filled by governors. This would give not only unity to the army (comp. 1 Kings 22:31), but these officers, appointed by Ben-hadad himself, would naturally take a more personal interest in

the cause of their king. And, instead of the former army, Ben-hadad was to raise one equal in numbers, but - as the text has it - "from those with thee" (thine own subjects).

In these well-conceived measures there was only one, but that a fatal, flaw. They proceeded on the supposition that the God of Israel was like one of the heathen deities. And this point was emphasized in the defeat of the Syrians, which was announced to Ahab by "a man of God," probably another than "the prophet" who had formerly been commissioned to him. But it deserves special notice that this message only came after the invasion of the Syrian host. Thus would the temptation be avoided of neglecting all ordinary preparations: faith would be tried, and also called forth; while, by this prediction, and from the disparity between Israel and the host of Syria, Israel would once more learn to recognize in this deliverance that Jehovah He was God.

The winter rains had ceased, and the spring wind and sun had dried the land. There was a fresh crispness in the air, and a bright light over the scene, when the immense Syrian host swarmed down into that historic battlefield of Israel, the great plain of Jezreel. We are carried back in imagination to the scene of Saul's last fatal defeat (1 Samuel 29:1),<sup>36</sup> and beyond it to that of Gideon's glorious victory.

Once more the foe lay at Aphek, with his back against the hill on which probably the fortified city of that name stood, and facing the plain where it is broadest. As in imagination we travel southwards to the highlands, and to those mountains among which Samaria lies embosomed, we feel how literally Ben-hadad had acted on the suggestion of his servants to avoid a contest with the mountain-deities of Israel. It was the very time and place for Jehovah to show forth that great lesson which underlies and sums up all revelation. Of the Israelitish host we know not the numbers - only

that, as they camped in two divisions on the opposite side of the valley, perhaps beneath the two spurs of the ridge that juts into the plain from the south-east, they seemed like two little flocks of kids - so small and weak, as compared with their enemies. For seven days the two armies lay observing each other. From the circumstance, specially mentioned in the text, that the Israelites had gone out "provisioned" (ver. 27, margin), and even from their camping in two divisions, we infer that the object of Ahab was to remain on the defensive, which, indeed, the inferiority of numbers rendered imperative. Besides, the Jewish position was most happily chosen. It barred the advance of the enemy, who could not move forward without first giving battle to Israel. The Syrians must have perceived the advantage of Ahab's position, with his back to the base of his operations, while the division of Israel into two camps might enable them to envelop their enemies if they attempted an advance, in which case the very size of the Syrian army would, from its unwieldiness, prove a serious difficulty. But the danger of idle delay in a hostile country, and in an Eastern warfare, was nearly as great. And so on the seventh day the attack was made - as we judge, by the Syrians. Their defeat was crushing. The great Syrian host of 100,000 was destroyed,<sup>37</sup> and the men who either made their way from the battle-field to Aphek, or who had been left there as a garrison, experienced another and even more terrible calamity. While crowding into the gates, or else while occupying the ramparts, which had probably been hastily thrown up or strengthened, a wall fell upon 27,000 of their number.<sup>38</sup>

Further defense being thus rendered impossible, the previous confidence of Ben-hadad gave place to abject fear. He fled from room to room - into the innermost chamber. His servants, who had formerly given such warlike counsel, now advised

<sup>36</sup> See the description of the scene in Vol. 4. of the Bible History. This Aphek - for the name is not an uncommon one - could not have been the Aphek at the foot of Lebanon, since the battle was to be in "the plain," nor yet the Aphek on the other side Jordan (as commentators generally suppose), since Ahab would not have marched across Jordan to meet the Syrians, nor they encamped there to subdue Samaria.

<sup>37</sup> The word, rendered in our A.V. (ver. 29) "slew," should rather be translated by the general term "smote." Certainly it does not imply the absolute killing of 100,000 men. Thus the same word is used in verses 35, 37, ("Smite me") in a sense which forbids the idea of killing.

<sup>38</sup> There is no need to ascribe it (with Keil) to a miraculous interposition, and still less (with Thenius) to the wall having been previously undermined (by whom?).

him to sue in most humble manner for his life, holding out the hope of the mercifulness of the kings of Israel of which they had heard. There is an ominous sound in this. The kings of Israel had never been distinguished for mercy. But they had only too often shown their sympathy with the heathen kingdoms around, and manifested a desire to make alliance with them, and to conform to their ways. Yet, even so, it is not easy to explain the conduct of Ahab when the Syrian envoys of Ben-hadad appeared before him, in true Eastern manner, with sackcloth on their loins and ropes round their necks, suing only for the life of him who now ostentatiously styled himself Ahab's "slave." It could scarcely have been due to weakness of character when Ahab broke into the almost joyous exclamation, "Is he yet alive?" Nor could it have been merely from kindness of disposition that he ostentatiously substituted: "he is my brother" for the designation, "thy slave Ben-hadad," used by the Syrian envoys. They were not slow to perceive the altered tone of the king. They favorably interpreted and laid hold on that which had come from him; and they said: "Thy brother Ben-hadad."

Presently, at Ahab's invitation, Ben-hadad himself was brought, and made to stand by the side of the king in his chariot - both in token of companionship and for more private conversation. In truth, nothing less than a treaty of alliance was in hand between them. Ben-hadad undertook to restore the towns which his father had taken from Ahab's father (in a warfare of which we have no other record) and to allow to Ahab the same rights and privileges as to having "streets," or rather "bazaars" - what in modern language would be called an Israelitish "factory" - in the Syrian capital, which Ben-Hadad's father had possessed in Samaria; and with this covenant Ahab dismissed the Syrian king.

We have said that it is not easy to understand what motives could have prompted an act which, even politically, was a grave mistake. Was it flattered vanity on the part of Ahab, or sympathy with the heathen king, or part of his statecraft to secure, not only an ally, but a vassal on the northern flank of his kingdom, or all these combined? In any case he must have looked upon the victory over the

Syrians in a manner far different from that in which it had been announced to him by the God who had wrought it. Ahab no longer thought of Jehovah; he inquired not as to His purpose or will. There was an ominous similarity between his conduct and that of Saul in regard to Agag (1 Samuel 15). Evidently, Ahab claimed to have himself gained the victory, and felt sure that in like circumstances - should Ben-hadad rebel - he would equally gain it once more. It was he, and not the LORD, who would shape and direct the destinies of Israel. Jehovah was only the national deity of that Israel of which Ahab was the king. And so the error of the Syrians was substantially repeated by Ahab, and the lesson which Jehovah would have taught by their defeat had to be learned anew by Israel and its king - this time in judgment.

This explains the commission with which God now charged one of "the sons of the prophets." We mark that the expression here occurs for the first time.<sup>39</sup> It referred to those associations<sup>40</sup> under the leadership of some prophet (hence sons of the prophets) which, in the decay of religious life in Israel, served such important purposes, alike for the preservation of religion, and in the execution of the Divine behests.

In fact, they would recall to Israel, what, as a nation, Israel had been destined to be, and ever keep it before them. Thus they represented, so to speak, ideal Israel in the midst of apostate Israel. To a member of this community it came "by the word of Jehovah" - that is, by direct command from Him - to confront Ahab with such a symbolic (or parabolic) presentation of his late conduct as would show it in its true light, and lead the king to pronounce sentence on himself. Thus only could a man like Ahab be convicted, if not convinced, of sin.

<sup>39</sup> In 1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20, they are designated simply as "prophets."

<sup>40</sup> Not necessarily of young or unmarried men. See 2 Kings 4:1.



In the execution of this commission the "son of the prophet" went to one of his colleagues,<sup>41</sup> and, telling him that it was "by the word of Jehovah," bade him "smite" him.

It was conduct not unlike that of Ahab when this behest was resisted by the prophet. Remembering these two things: that the person addressed was also a "son of the prophets," and that he had been informed that it was "by the word of Jehovah," we can understand the Divine judgment which so speedily overtook him when he was torn by a lion. For the fundamental idea, the very law, of prophetism was absolute, unquestioning obedience to the command of God. This was the lesson to be taught by these associations and their leaders, and it explains how sometimes exceeding strange things were given them to do in public, that so in the absoluteness of their obedience they might exhibit the absoluteness of God's authority. Hence not to have visited with signal judgment the disobedience of the prophet would have been not only to contravene the principle on which the whole prophetic institution rested, but also the very lesson and message which was to be conveyed to Ahab.

But what one "son of the prophets" had refused, another soon afterwards did. Then the "son of the prophets," now smitten till he was wounded, "disguised himself with a bandage upon his eyes," and waited for the king by the way.

The reason of his appearing as a wounded man was that he might appeal to the king with the more show of truth, and of claim upon his interference, as wounded in the fight. And a symbolism may also have been designed. For, as the prophet's conduct was intended to represent that of the king, it might be wished to anticipate this possible excuse of Ahab that the difficulty of his circumstances had rendered it not easy to retain Ben-hadad by the analogous case of a wounded man, who might have fair ground of excuse if he allowed his prisoner to escape.

The story which the wounded prophet told the king was to the effect that, while in the battle - and this is an important point, as intended to indicate

that Ahab was only like a soldier engaged in a warfare in which God, and not the king of Israel, was the commander - one had turned aside and bidden him have safe custody of a captive, with this injunction: "If he be missed [viz., when the prisoners are mustered], thy life shall be for his life, or else thou shalt pay a talent of silver."

From the language we infer that the person who handed over the prisoner was represented as a superior officer; that the battle itself was ended, and that the captive was a very valuable prisoner, since such a price was set upon him. But while the pretended soldier "was busy here and there" - or, as it has been proposed to be read: "looked here and there" - the prisoner escaped. In these circumstances he appealed to the king that he might not be punished as threatened by his leader. The king had no hesitation how to decide. He told him that in recounting his story he had already pronounced sentence upon himself. Then the prophet, having removed the bandage from his eyes, so that the king recognized him, announced the application of the Divine parable. The war had been Jehovah's, not Ahab's, and Ben-hadad had been the "banned" of the Lord. "Because thou hast let go forth out of thine hand (custody) the man of my ban (compare Leviticus 27:29), therefore thy life shall be for his life, and thy people for his people."

The judgment pronounced was not only righteous, but alike the necessary sequence of God's dealings throughout this history, and of Ahab's bearing in it. And in the judgment the people as a whole must also share. For even if theirs had not been the same spirit as that which had prompted the conduct of Ahab, yet the public acts of rulers are those of the nation, and national sins are followed by national judgments. Ahab had been on his triumphant return to Samaria, there to receive the popular applause for his achievements, when, in presence of all his retinue, he was thus publicly confronted by the prophet's message. He now "went to his house much excited and angry."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> The expression "neighbor" or "fellow" (ver. 35) means that he was also one of "the sons of the prophets."

<sup>42</sup> So literally; the first of the two terms is derived from a root which signifies "to rebel," and indicates heart-rebellion against God.

And this also casts further light both on what Ahab had done, and on what he was about to do.

#### **VI\_04 The Vineyard of Naboth - Murder of Naboth - The Divine Message by Elijah - Ahab's Repentance.**

##### **1 Kings 21**

It is significant that the words describing Ahab's state of mind on returning from Jezreel to Samaria after his unsuccessful negotiation with Naboth for his vineyard, are precisely the same as those formerly used in regard to the impression made on him by the prophet's message (1 Kings 20:43). On both occasions he "was much [and rebelliously] excited and angry." The identity of terms indicates identity of feelings. The same self-assertion, independence of God, and want of submissiveness which had led to his release of, and covenant with, Ben-hadad, and inspired feelings of rebellion and anger on hearing the Divine message, now prompted his resentment of Naboth's conduct.

The summer palace of Jezreel was the favorite retreat of King Ahab and Jezebel. The present somewhat marshy plain of Esdraelon, the almost bare mountains of Gilboa, and the miserable village which now occupies the site of Jezreel, and overlooks the ruins of Bethshan, can afford no adequate idea of what the place was in the days of Ahab and Jezebel and of their immediate successors. Then the mountains of Gilboa were richly wooded, and sweet springs brought freshness to the air and luxurious beauty to the vegetation of Jezreel, even as they carried fertility down into the great plain beneath, which in the summer light shimmered and trembled like a sea of golden corn. At the northern declivity of Gilboa, where it descends, steep and rocky, on a knoll about 500 feet high, stood Jezreel. Protected from the fierce southern sun by the delicious shade of Gilboa, that rises up behind, it looked - as suited to a summer-residence in the East - northwards, across the plain to the mountains of Galilee, to Tabor, and in the distance to snow-capped Hermon. The height descended into the valley of Jezreel, where a sweet spring rippled, and close by gathered into a pool. Eastwards, you would look down on Bethshan, and, across the deep depression of the Jordan valley, to the mountains on the other side, on which rested the

blue and purple light. To the west you might sweep those fifteen miles to Mount Carmel, and perchance the westerly breeze might carry up the plain the fresh scent of the sea. Such was the Jezreel of Ahab and Jezebel - the nearest, the safest, the sweetest summer-retreat from Samaria.

On the east and south-east, where the hot limestone rock shelves into the valley beneath, are to this day wine-presses. They mark the neighborhood of where the vineyards of Jezreel must have been, among them that of Naboth. Right above was the royal palace, narrowed and cramped within the city walls, of which indeed it seems to have formed part. Manifestly it would be object of desire to acquire the land nearest to the palace, with the view of converting it into a garden. What such a garden might bear, and what sweet outlook on it could be enjoyed from the windows of the palace, may be judged from the lemon-groves still existing in the near neighborhood. But Naboth, the owner of the coveted piece of land, could not be tempted to part with it by the king's offer of either a better vineyard or an equivalent in money. It was the ancestral possession of the family of Naboth, and piety towards God combined with reverence for the memory of his fathers to forbid the unholy bargain. It is a healthy sign to find such stern assertion of principle so fearlessly uttered. Israel could not be wholly sunken in corruption and idolatry, so long as it numbered among its peasant-proprietors men like Naboth, nor could the service of Jehovah have left its households when even in Jezreel a burgher could appeal from the demands of an Ahab to the authority and law of his God. And it affords happy evidence of what the legislation of the Pentateuch had secured for Israel, that even in the worst times an Ahab dared not, like a heathen monarch, lay hands on Naboth, nor force him to surrender the inheritance of his fathers.

It is another mark of that self-willed and uncontrolled frame of mind which had determined the bearing of Ahab towards Ben-hadad, and then towards the prophet sent to rebuke him, that he could not brook the refusal of Naboth. It was utter and childish petulance, as well as unbridled selfishness, to act as he did on his return to Samaria. He turned his face to the wall and refused



to eat bread. In Samaria at least all was submissive to his will - thanks to the strong hand of Jezebel. But, outside her sway, he was always encountered and opposed by Jehovah: now by His prophets, then by His worshippers. Here was a power which he dared not resist, yet to which he would not submit. But Jezebel shared neither the feelings nor the scruples of her husband. She dared what she would, and she would what she dared. She now spoke to the king as a strong unscrupulous woman to a weak and unprincipled man. She must have known what had prompted the refusal of Naboth - although it deserves notice that, in his account of what had passed, the king had studiously omitted all reference to it (ver. 6). Similarly, Ahab must have known that when Jezebel demanded the royal signet, with which official documents coming directly from the king were stamped, she must have had in view some scheme of violence. And often does it seem more convenient - certainly more easy - to remain in willful ignorance, than to learn what would call for our active resistance, or, in the absence of it, fill our conscience with uneasiness. And while remaining in willful ignorance, Ahab may have flattered himself that he had not incurred responsibility in the murder of Naboth.

The measures of Jezebel were at least plain and straightforward. The old Mosaic civil order still continued in Israel by which jurisdiction, even in matters of life and death, lay in the first instance with the "judges and officers" of a place (Deuteronomy 16:18). This local "senate," consisting partly of elected life-members, partly of what may be designated a hereditary aristocracy, might in times of corruption become subject to court influence, especially in a small royal borough such as Jezreel. Jezebel knew this only too well, and with a terrible frankness wrote to each member of that senate what would seem the king's directions. By these each recipient of the letter would become a fellow-conspirator, and each feel bound to keep the horrible secret. As if some great sin rested upon the city (comp. 1 Samuel 7:6), and, in consequence of it, some heavy judgment were to be averted, (2 Chronicles 20:2-4; Jeremiah 36:6, 9), the eldership of Israel gathered the people to a solemn fast. If it had been so, and some great sin had been committed or

were even suspected, it would have been the duty of the city thus to purge itself of guilt or complicity. For according to the deep and true idea which underlay all the institutions of the Old Testament, there is solidarity (as it is called in modern language) between those whom God has placed side by side. There is solidarity between all the members of the human family - solidarity of curse and of blessing, of judgment and of promise, because all have sprung from a common stock. There is solidarity also in a city, since ten righteous men might have preserved Sodom from destruction; solidarity in a nation, since the sins or the piety of its rulers were returned in blessing or in judgment on the people - a solidarity which as it pointed back to a common ancestry, also pointed forward to the full and final realization of its inmost meaning in that great brotherhood of believers which Christ came to found. And hence it was that, when blood had been shed and the doer of the crime remained unknown, the elders of the district had by a solemn act to clear themselves of the guilt (Leviticus 4:13, etc.; Deuteronomy 21:1-9), and that, as here, when a great crime was supposed to have been committed, all would humble themselves in fasting before they put away the evil-doer from among them.

In the assembly thus called Naboth was to be "set on high," not in order to assign him an honorable place, so as the more effectually to rouse public indignation when one so honored was convicted of such crime, nor yet to give the appearance of impartiality to the proceedings that were to follow. Evidently the fast had been appointed in humiliation for a sin as yet unknown to the people, and the assembly was called to set before them the nature of this crime. For this purpose Naboth was "set on high," as one incriminated before the elders, against whom witnesses were to rise, and on whom judgment was to be pronounced by the people of his own city. This explains (ver. 10) how these "two sons of Belial" <sup>43</sup> who were to bear false testimony against Naboth were "set before him."

The sacred text only informs us that the two witnesses (comp. Deuteronomy 17:6, etc.; 19:15;

Numbers 35:30) testified that Naboth had "blasphemed" - uttered blasphemous language against "God and the king." It is scarcely conceivable that Naboth should not have made some defense, nor that the people would have given so ready credence to such a charge against one so well known, if some colorable confirmation could not have been found for it. May it not have been that the refusal of the vineyard to Ahab had become known to the townsmen of Naboth, and that these two sons of Belial were suborned to say that Naboth had at the same time pronounced in their hearing a curse upon Ahab - perhaps also that he had uttered threats of resistance? Such a solemn curse would be regarded as an act of blasphemy, not only against the king, but primarily against God, Whose authorized representative the king was (comp. Exodus 22:28). But blasphemy against God was to be punished by stoning (Deuteronomy 13:10; 17:5).<sup>44</sup>

As in all such cases, the punishment was immediately carried out, and apparently in Naboth's own vineyard, (Compare 1 Kings 21:19; 2 Kings 9:25,26.) where the witnesses would, according to our suggestion, have located the "blasphemy" spoken in reply to the request of the king. It is not necessary to suppose (as some commentators have done) that the property of a man stoned for such a crime was treated like that of one on whom the ban was pronounced, since in that case it would have been laid waste, not given to the king (Deuteronomy 13:16). But it was quite natural that the property of one who had been found guilty of high treason should be forfeited to the Crown. And so, when the elders of Jezreel informed Jezebel that Naboth was stoned, she could tell her royal husband to go and take possession of the vineyard that had been refused him for purchase by "the Jezreelite," since Naboth was dead.

There was bitter as well as haughty irony in the words of Jezebel, as if she had felt herself a queen whose wishes and commands were above all law, human or Divine, and could not be resisted by God or man (ver. 15). The text gives no indication

that she had informed Ahab of the manner of Naboth's death; nor did the king make inquiry. But there was far more terrible irony of fact in what followed the words of Jezebel. On receiving the welcome tidings of Naboth's death, Ahab "rose up" to go and take possession of the coveted vineyard, - perhaps the very day after the judicial murder (comp. 2 Kings 9:26). But on that day Jehovah had bidden Elijah arise and meet Ahab with the Divine message, just as the king thought himself in secure possession of the fruit of his crime, as if there were no living God in Israel. We can picture to ourselves the scene. Ahab has come in his chariot from Samaria, apparently attended by his chief officers (2 Kings 9:25). Before entering his palace at Jezreel - on the way to it - he has reached the vineyard of Naboth. He is surveying with satisfaction his new possession, perhaps giving directions how it should be transformed into "a garden," when of a sudden there stands before him not one of the sons of the prophets, nor an ordinary seer, but the terrible figure of the Gileadite, with his burning eyes, clad in the rough cloak of black camel's hair, girt about with a leathern girdle. It must have recalled to Ahab his first apparition in the midst of Samaria, when the prophet had announced to his startled hearers the three years' drought, and then so suddenly and tracelessly vanished from sight.

And the last time he met the prophet had been on Mount Carmel; the last glimpse had been when through the blinding rain he saw the dark figure running before his chariot to the very gate of Jezreel, as if he had come to herald the triumph of Jehovah, and to bring back a new God-devoted king. That had been a weird sight of the prophet, through the storm; and it had been a short dim dream of Ahab's to make the scene on Mount Carmel a reality in Israel. With Jezebel came back to him the evil spirit of his "madness;" nay, it had even sought, or consented to, the destruction of him who but yesterday had visibly brought God's fire on the broken altar, and God's rain on the parched land.

And now he stood once more before him - Ahab knew only too well why. It was for briefest but unmistakable message. Its first sentence swept away all self-deception. It had not been Jezebel

<sup>44</sup> Blasphemy would come under the category of seducing to idolatry, or committing it.

but Ahab who had killed. And now he had taken possession, as if there were not Jehovah in heaven, nor yet the eternal reflection of His Being, and the permanent echo of His speaking, in right and truth upon earth. Having thus not only wakened the conscience of Ahab, but vindicated the authority of Him in Whose Name he spoke, the next sentence of Elijah's message announced stern, strict, even literal retribution. The retort of Ahab we regard as a childish lament to the effect that Elijah, who had always been his personal enemy, had now at last "found him" <sup>45</sup> in some actual sin, on which he might invoke Divine punishment.

It was an admission, indeed, in that moment of surprise, of his guilt and apprehension of the Divine punishment announced. But it conjoined with it this - if not in excuse, yet as a counter-charge - that Elijah was his personal enemy, and had lain in wait for the occasion to call down Divine judgment upon him. It was against this attempt to make it a merely personal controversy that Elijah's answer was directed (ver. 20). "I have found (not 'thee'), because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of Jehovah." What the prophet had spoken was not the outcome of personal enmity, nor was what had occurred the result of a sudden temptation or rash mood of the king, but of the whole direction of life which Ahab had deliberately chosen. And in this two elements were closely marked: that he had sold himself as a slave (Romans 7:14), so that he had no longer freedom of action, but had, as it were, to obey his master's behests; and that he had so sold himself, consciously or unconsciously, "to do the evil in the sight of Jehovah."

Accordingly, the judgment which Elijah announced was not merely personal to Ahab, as what he said about the dogs licking his blood; but it also struck his dynasty and doomed it to extermination for this twofold reason: "on account

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<sup>45</sup> The common interpretations of these words seem unsatisfactory. They are, "Hast thou ever found me thine enemy?" or, "Hast thou found this in me?" or, "Art thou again meeting me as my enemy?" Some see in the words only the surprise of Ahab at the sudden appearance of Elijah (Ewald), or else the language of defiance (Thenius).

of the wrath which thou hast caused to go forth, <sup>46</sup> and hast made Israel to sin." On the other hand, this general judgment should not take the place of personal punishment upon the doers of such a crime as the judicial murder <sup>47</sup> of Naboth.

The dogs would "eat Jezebel at the wall of Jezreel," while a similar fate would overtake all the posterity of Ahab in the city (viz., of Samaria) or in the field. These must be regarded as personal judgments denounced on personal sins. This is also indicated by the intercalated remarks of the writer of the narrative (in verses 25, 26). <sup>48</sup> But the actual punishment might be averted or modified by personal repentance, although not as regarded that pronounced on the national guilt in which the rule of Ahab had involved Israel.

If evidence of the truth of this narrative - and, as connected with it, of this whole history - were required, what is told in conclusion would furnish it. For a legendary story would not have represented Ahab as repenting and yet not renouncing his former courses. But this also is true to life. As formerly what he witnessed on Carmel, so now the words of Elijah went straight to Ahab's heart. He no longer disguised the truth from himself, nor sought to divert his mind by thoughts of personal animosity on the part of the prophet. It was against Jehovah that he had sinned, and before Jehovah he humbled himself. As a mourner he rent his clothes; as a penitent he wore sackcloth; as guilty he fasted; and as one staggering under a heavy load of grief and sin, he walked softly. <sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The words properly mean: "the wrath which thou hast caused to be wrathful."

<sup>47</sup> In the murder of Naboth the two elements of personal provocation and of causing Israel to sin were also combined.

<sup>48</sup> This intercalated notice of the writer is very interesting. It traces Ahab's slavish surrender to the service of sin to the incitement of Jezebel, and it likens the state of public idolatry then in the land to that of "the Amorites," that is, the Canaanites (comp. Genesis 15:16) whom God had destroyed. Surely no less punishment could follow the like abominations on the part of Israel.

<sup>49</sup> The word rendered "softly" might denote the gentle, noiseless step of sorrow or humiliation; but it has also been rendered by "barefooted," as in mourning.

And all this publicly - in the sight of all men. It was fitting, if we may venture on the expression, and in accordance with God's previous declaration of judgment, that the living God Who had seen and avenged the crime done in secret should also acknowledge the repentance shown in public. Accordingly the word of Jehovah came once more to Elijah to declare that the personal repentance of the personal sin had brought remission of the personal punishment, though not of that denounced on the dynasty. The visible judgment, by which all were to perceive the retribution of God's justice, was delayed to the time of his son, and would have been delayed still further had he shown like repentance. But only delayed - for retribution must follow such open sin. And so the remembrance of it was kept up; and even this, in merciful warning to Ahab's son. But when the dogs licked up the blood of Ahab, as they washed the chariot stained with his gore, they recalled the yet unfulfilled judgment that hung like a dark cloud over the house of Ahab (1 Kings 22:38). But this was in Samaria, not in Jezreel, nor in the portion of Naboth, for, as the prophet had foretold, God brought not "the evil" itself, only its warning remembrance, in the days of Ahab. But on Jezebel would it descend with the terrible reality of a literal fulfillment.<sup>50</sup>

**VI\_05 – Ahab and Ahaziah, (8<sup>th</sup> AND 9<sup>th</sup>) Kings of Israel. Jehoshaphat, (4<sup>th</sup>) King of Judah. The Visit of Jehoshaphat to Ahab - The Projected Expedition against Ramoth-Gilead - Flattering Predictions - Micaiah - The Battle of Ramoth-Gilead - Death of Ahab.**

#### **1 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 18**

THE events told in the previous chapter were followed by a period of rest. Religiously, it might be described as one of approximation to the worship of Jehovah. But it might prove only the more dangerous on that account, as being the outcome of an attempted compromise where

<sup>50</sup> The judgment on Jezebel was to be executed "by the wall of Jezreel" (21:23). The expression means properly: on the free space by the wall. And, as we remember that the window from which Jezebel looked down upon Jehu must have been in the city wall, since she addressed him as he entered in at the gate (2 Kings 9:30, 31), we can understand how literally the prediction was fulfilled.

compromise was impossible. Evidence of this occurs to us alike from the summons and the bearing of those four hundred prophets whom Ahab called together, when requested by Jehoshaphat to inquire at "the word of Jehovah" as to the projected expedition against Ramoth-Gilead. Those four hundred could not have been "prophets of Baal," since the latter had been destroyed on Mount Carmel. Their bearing also widely differs from that of the prophets of Baal. Nor could they have been the four hundred "prophets of Asherah" [Astarte] - specially supported by Jezebel - who had been summoned to (1 Kings 18:19), but did not appear at, the decisive contest on Carmel (vers. 22, 26, 40). For, first, they were now summoned as professedly bringing "the word of Jehovah," that is, as prophesying in His Name.

Further, although they spoke at first of, Adonai (the Lord, ver. 6), yet afterwards (vers. 11, 12) they professed to announce what "Jehovah" would do, while Zedekiah their leader expressly referred to "the Spirit of Jehovah" as having gone from himself to Micaiah (ver. 24).

On the other hand, they must not be regarded as either true "prophets of Jehovah," or as "sons of the prophets." For from the first Jehoshaphat appears unwilling to recognize their authority. They were evidently not those whose guiding message he had originally wished (ver. 5), and in contrast to them he continued to ask for "a prophet of Jehovah" (ver. 7), upon which Ahab mentioned Micaiah (not one of those four hundred prophets) as one by whom "to inquire of Jehovah." Lastly, the four hundred false prophets are afterwards expressly designated, first, by the evil spirit, and then by Micaiah, not as those of Jehovah, but as those of Ahab (vers. 22, 23).

These considerations lead us to characterize the religious condition prevailing at the time as a debasement of the worship of Jehovah. Apparently these prophets professed to bring the word of Jehovah: yet they were only the lying prophets of Ahab. It seems not unlikely that Ahab may have restored the ancient rites instituted by Jeroboam, when Jehovah was professedly worshipped under the symbol of the golden calf that had brought Israel out of Egypt. This transformation of the religion of Israel has been fully described in



another place. Such a form of worship would have the twofold recommendation, that, while it seemed a return from the service of Baal to that of Jehovah, it still left to Ahab, as king, the office and control of chief pontiff of the new religion (comp. 1 Kings 12:32, 33).

Indeed, it may have been in this sense also that the four hundred prophets were designated those of Ahab, just as they of Astarte may have been called those of Jezebel, because in her character as queen she was their high-priestess. And if these prophets were really priests of the worship originally instituted by Jeroboam, and now restored, it is only natural to suppose that they may have been formed into a prophetic association, after the mode and in imitation of the institution of the "sons of the prophets." Whether any connection between the two really existed at the time can scarcely be determined, although the angry speech of Zedekiah (ver. 24), the leader of the prophets of Ahab, seems to imply it.

And we can readily believe that in those degenerate days many of the "sons of the prophets" - perhaps even an association of them - may have lent themselves to this spurious worship of Jehovah. We can now realize the scene enacted before Ahab and Jehoshaphat. It is related in almost identical terms in the Books of Kings and of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 18:2-34). In the latter it is introduced, by an account of the circumstances which led up to the ill-fated expedition against Syria. We remember that eight or nine years previously, Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, then a youth of about fifteen or sixteen, had been married to Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

So far as we know, the two monarchs had not personally met after that event. But when Israel, after the defeat of Ben-hadad, enjoyed a long period of peace, while Judah was in an equally prosperous condition (2 Chronicles 18:1), it was both natural and easy for the two monarchs whose families and kingdoms were so closely connected to arrange a personal interview. We may conjecture that the proposal had come from Ahab, nor are we probably mistaken in supposing that in this the Israelitish king had the scheme of an alliance against Syria in his mind. At any rate this

would accord with that systematic intriguing and desire to form alliances which we have repeatedly noticed as characteristic of Ahab.

Jehoshaphat and his retinue were right royally received and entertained at Samaria. It was, surely, a strange thing to see a Davidic king of Judah on a visit to the capital of the rebel provinces, yet not more strange than that one of the decided religiousness of Jehoshaphat should consort with an Ahab. The consequences appeared only too soon. The Book of Chronicles uses the expression that Ahab "enticed" <sup>51</sup> Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 18:2), while the Book of Kings only relates the circumstances that led to the formal alliance between them. Similarly we are not quite sure whether this "enticement" had preceded or followed the appeal of Ahab to "his servants," recorded in the Book of Kings (22:3).

But in all likelihood Ahab, who may have planned everything with a view to the project he had at heart, may have availed himself of the presence of all his chieftains to do honor to the king of Judah, to bring before them on some public occasion - perhaps at a banquet - the great grievance which Israel had against Syria. If our conjecture be correct, it would account both for Jehoshaphat's immediate and strange consent, and then for his hesitation and desire to ascertain the will of God in the matter.

The appeal which Ahab made, in the first place to his own officers, was about Ramoth-Gilead. Situated on the eastern bank of the Jordan - perhaps represented by the modern Es-Salt, and in that case pitched on a mountain-spur which far overlooks the country - it was a threatening outpost for Syria to occupy, whence they might not only watch Israel, but swoop across Jordan and up the valley to Jezreel, before even certain information of their advance could be brought to Israelitish headquarters. This city Ben-hadad had, under one or another pretext, not given up to Ahab, as by his treaty he had bound himself to do (1 Kings 20:34). We cannot wonder that Ahab should have desired to regain a place so important,

<sup>51</sup> This, and not "persuaded," as in the A.V. The term is often used of inciting to evil (comp. Deuteronomy 13:6; Judges 3:14; Job 2:3; 1 Chronicles 21:1).

and which, while in the possession of Syria, was a constant menace to him. But he should have remembered not only that the real blame rested with himself, but what the prophet had predicted as the punishment of his guilty folly in allowing Ben-hadad to escape (1 Kings 20:42). Accordingly he should not have taken such an expedition in hand without some express warrant from God. We are not told how the appeal to their patriotism was received by the officers of Ahab, but it was responded to by Jehoshaphat, to whom Ahab next addressed himself, in terms which sound terribly ominous, as we recall the word of the LORD in regard to the fate of any expedition of Ahab against Syria.

But, as already noted, other thoughts soon came to the king of Judah. He must have felt that he himself would never have entered on such an undertaking without the sanction of Jehovah. And in the present instance this seemed doubly needful. Yet, except as the expression of Jehoshaphat's tardy repentance, the proposal which he made to Ahab to "inquire at the word of Jehovah," seemed singularly inconsistent. He had entered into an alliance as regarded this special campaign; perhaps his hearty concurrence had decided the officers of Ahab; at any rate, it was - as the event proved - too late now to withdraw, whatever the word of Jehovah might be. In truth, it was only what may always be expected when those who serve and love the LORD allow themselves to be entangled in alliances with ungodly men, where one step leads to another, and one inconsistency involves the next, till at last we recoil when it is too late to withdraw, and the only thing consistent is to be inconsistent in owning God where His will can no longer be obeyed. But even this is good, for it is the first step to repentance. And though we must suffer the punishment of our folly, yet God will hear a Jehoshaphat in the disastrous battle, when he crieth to Him, and give gracious deliverance (2 Chronicles 18:31).

We are "in the void place in the entrance of the gate of Samaria" (1 Kings 22:10) - that is, in the open square before the gate. Two thrones have been set for the two kings, who appear arrayed in

their royal robes.<sup>52</sup> Before them is gathered the motley multitude of prophets.

Ahab puts the question, whether or not he (in Chron. "we") should go up to Ramoth-Gilead. And now the prophets - concerning whom we must not forget that they knew what saying of theirs would be "good" in the king's ears (1 Kings 22:13) - sway about in frenzied excitement. Here, there, everywhere rises the cry, "Go up, for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king." It was not only the unanimity of these four hundred men, but, no doubt, their appearance and bearing which made Jehoshaphat inquire whether, besides all these, there was not a prophet of Jehovah to be found in Samaria. From the answer of Ahab when mentioning the name of Micaiah: "I hate him, for he does not prophecy concerning me good, but only evil," and from the later direction to "one of the chamberlains," it has been inferred that Micaiah had lately been "propheying" evil to the king - whether in answer to his inquiry, or directly commissioned of God - and that the prophet was at that moment a prisoner of Ahab. The latter point, indeed, seems quite established by verse 26, where Micaiah is ordered to be "taken back," or "returned" to custody.

Some points of interest for the understanding of this history may here be noted. It appears that the prophets of God delivered many more "prophecies" than are recorded in the Scriptures - and more especially, that Ahab was not left without warning. Further, it casts light on the true and the false prophets, that the latter were wont to declare what was pleasing to their employers ("good"); while the prophets of God faithfully delivered their message, whatever the consequences might be. And, lastly, it appears that the king regarded such message as the outcome of personal enmity towards himself. This is most instructive, as showing that men like Ahab took a purely heathen view of prophetism. As Balak had sought to influence Balaam, apparently in the belief that the soothsayer had power with God, and could at will direct or control His action, so Ahab

<sup>52</sup> The word "royal" is not in the original. The Hebrew offers some difficulties; but, as the issue is not of any practical importance, it is useless to burden these pages with the discussion.

imagined that what he called "good" or "evil" in the message was the result of either personal friendship or enmity. It was against this that Jehoshaphat protested (ver. 8, last clause), and not merely against the notion that Micaiah hated the king. Ahab yielded to Jehoshaphat,<sup>53</sup> but the view which he had in advance presented of the motives and conduct of Micaiah must have blunted the edge of his words, alike to Ahab and to the people.

This explains the otherwise strange fact that his emphatic warning remained so entirely unheeded. It was, as we imagine, during the interval while Micaiah was being brought from his prison, that the leader of the false prophets indulged in a symbolical action. We can scarcely be mistaken in supposing that when Zedekiah rushed forward holding against his forehead two pointed pieces of iron, and exclaiming: "With these shalt thou push the Syrians, until they be consumed," he referred to the Divine promise by Moses in regard to Joseph (Deuteronomy 33:17).

"His horns, the horns of buffaloes: with them shall he push down the nations."

Here was the kingdom of Ephraim - the son of Joseph - and Ahab was the representative of that promise which was now about to have its fulfillment. Deeply interesting as this reference is, as showing the mixture of Old Testament religion and acknowledgment of God which, as we have seen, was combined in these prophets with that which was false, and opposed to Jehovah, it is also instructive as implying that the Book of Deuteronomy was not only existent at the time this history was originally recorded, but that its sayings - specially so far as they referred to Israel - must have thoroughly permeated the people.

If, as seems likely, the object of Zedekiah's symbolic action had been to impress on all present the certainty of his prediction, the arrival of Micaiah speedily changed the aspect of things. On the way, the official charged with bringing him from the prison had told Micaiah of the unanimous prediction of success by the four hundred prophets, and asked him to confirm it. We do not

wonder at the emphatic reply which this elicited. If the prophetic office was to fulfill its Divine object, or, indeed, to be continued in Israel, it was needful to state distinctly that the prophet would, without fear or favor, simply deliver the message of Jehovah. And this, rather than irony, seems to have been also the reason why, in answer to Ahab's inquiry, Micaiah at first spoke in the same terms as the false prophets. Such a mechanical outward conformity to them could not have been misunderstood. It meant that Ahab did not really wish to have a message from Jehovah; that he had chosen his own path and his own guides in it. Ahab evidently understood him so, and, rendered bold by the scene which had been enacted, and by the apparent unwillingness, or, it might be, inability of Micaiah to interpose, he adjured him to speak only the truth in the name of Jehovah. Thus challenged, Micaiah could no longer hesitate. Indeed, after his first apparent confirmation of what the prophets had declared, as it were in chorus, his message would come with the more startling effect. We may also mark that it affords us yet further insight into the nature and origin of prophecy. When Micaiah said: "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd; and Jehovah said, These have no masters, let them return every man to his house in peace," - the words represent, evidently, a vision; and that, not of something literally real, but as we might term it a parabolic vision.

It is in the same manner that we regard the next part of Micaiah's message. It must not be understood as declaring what really took place in heaven, but as a vision in which the prophet saw before him, as in a parable,<sup>54</sup> the explanation and the higher Divine meaning of the scene that had just been enacted before the two kings, and the final sequence of it which he had just announced.

The points to be kept in view are: that the final judgment which would come to Ahab in his self-chosen campaign against Syria was of the LORD;

<sup>53</sup> The LXX. seem to have pointed the word "Hasten hither, Micaiah," otherwise than in our text, and to have read: "Quick! Micaiah!" which would be quite characteristic in Ahab.

<sup>54</sup> It was a real, external vision, God-directed, which the prophet describes; not a vision of what really occurred in heaven, but that which really occurred, the seduction of Ahab by his false prophets as the result of Divine judgment, was thus presented in a parable, as it were, from the heavenly point of view. In ver. 21, "a spirit" should be rendered "the spirit."



may, that the seductive influence of the prophets was part of the Divine judgment, and therefore of the Divine appointment - at least, in its permissive sense. Yet in all this Ahab's destruction would come through his own sin: being led to his ruin by those false prophets whom he had chosen, and by his unwillingness to hear the word of Jehovah, which he regarded as the outcome of personal hostility. Thus his destruction would be really due to his deliberate choice of a course in direct opposition to the Will of God. For these two elements are always combined in manner to us inexplicable, yet very really: the appointment of God and the free choice of man. And it was all the more necessary for Micaiah to state all this fully and fearlessly, since his first message had been interrupted by the peevish and false complaint of Ahab to Jehoshaphat, that it had happened as he had expected, since Micaiah would never prophesy aught but evil of him.

Thus viewed, there is a peculiar depth of meaning and a grandeur in the parabolic vision which Micaiah so vividly described. It would have carried conviction to all, if they had been open to it. The scene enacted in the open market-place of Samaria had its counterpart - its true spiritual reflex - in the great court of heaven. Instead of Ahab sitting on his throne surrounded by his own flattering prophets, and anticipating his victorious march upon Ramoth-Gilead, it was Jehovah, the God of truth, surrounded by all His host, who sat on His judgment-seat decreeing the destruction of the infatuated king. But as Ahab shall prepare his own destruction, so shall he also compass it. And this is quite in accordance with all God's dealings in mercy and judgment with Ahab. Ahab has disowned the LORD; he has now surrounded himself by these 400 prophets of falsehood to encourage himself and those with him in his undertaking. Be it, as he has chosen for himself; these prophets shall prophesy - yea, lies - and he will believe their smooth prophecy to the disregard of the Divine Will and warning, and so perish in his folly and rebellion. All this was so truthfully presented in the parabolic vision, and so pictorially set before those assembled, that at least Zedekiah, the leader of the false prophets, could have no doubt in the matter. However we may explain his ebullition of personal resentment in

striking Micaiah, whether as a punishment or to put upon him a public affront, we can have no difficulty in understanding his words (ver. 24). If they sounded like a satirical reproof of Micaiah's presumption in arrogating to himself that he alone had really the Spirit of Jehovah, while all the others had not that inspiration - as if the Spirit of Jehovah had gone from him to Micaiah - they also convey to us yet another meaning. Zedekiah must have known that he had not a message from Jehovah,<sup>55</sup> and he had imagined that Micaiah's prophecy would be as self-originated as had been his own.

But the words which he heard left on him no doubt that Micaiah had truly spoken from Jehovah, and the resentment at feeling that this was so, and that Micaiah, not himself, was the organ chosen by God, awakened within him feelings which found expression in angry words and still angrier deed. It was a spirit like that of Simon Magus - only intensified and manifested in manner congruous to Old Testament times. And this also explains the reply of Micaiah, which was directed against the words of Zedekiah. He should "see," quite perceive, the real difference between the true and the false prophet, when he would experience its results. Then, when his prediction would not only remain unfulfilled, but appear by the side of the warning of the true prophet, as having been false and misleading, would he in utter disgrace seek to hide himself from the sight of all men, and to escape that punishment of his crime which the survivors from the battle would no doubt inflict.

Not a few in that assembly must have understood the real meaning of the words of Zedekiah. But the majority would prefer to give them an interpretation more consonant with their mood, or at least more convenient. It might seem to them - to adopt the language of many among ourselves when inconvenient truth is in question - that the whole matter had now degenerated into a wrangle between opposing and rival theologians. At any

<sup>55</sup> Josephus has the curious idea that the blow was intended to test whether Micaiah was a true prophet, in accordance with 1 Kings 13:4. Thenius treats the question of Zedekiah as a sneer. Bahr regards it as implying that Zedekiah did not purposely and consciously prophesy falsely, and that it meant: How dare you say that the Spirit has gone from me to you?

rate, the time for all such talk had passed, and that for action come. Ramoth-Gilead was theirs; truly and fairly, by the law of God and of man, let theologians say what they pleased in exaltation of their respective schools and dogmas. And the two kings were united in an alliance against the Syrians that could not be unsuccessful: all was propitious, let them go up - make a sudden raid upon the stronghold, and take what was their own. And to mark how deeply he resented, and was able to punish what he regarded as an act of rebellion, Ahab ordered Micaiah to be taken back to the custody of Amon, the governor of the city. With him the name of Joash, the king's son, perhaps only a royal prince, was combined, probably in order to indicate that Micaiah was a state prisoner. And as such he was to be treated with special severity.

Thus far Ahab possessed the requisite power; but when he added: "Until I come in peace," he uttered a distinct challenge. To this, by whomsoever made - be he prince or private person, and howsoever made, whether in public or in private, or even in inward opposition to God's revealed truth, there is only this answer: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision." But Micaiah could not allow it to pass unnoticed. The honor of Jehovah, Whose prophet he was, required the reply: "If thou comest at all in peace, Jehovah hath not spoken by me." And then, turning to the multitude around, he summoned them as witnesses between himself and the king.

We are not told what impression the scene had made upon Jehoshaphat. But we cannot help feeling that, in spite of his boastful language, it must have had a deep effect even upon Ahab. The expedition against Ramoth-Gilead would naturally follow as soon as possible after the popular assembly in Samaria. From the circumstance, that Jehu the prophet of the LORD delivered the Divine reproof against the alliance of Jehoshaphat with Ahab only after the return of the former from the Syrian campaign (2 Chronicles 19), we are inclined to infer that the king of Judah had not gone back to his own dominions before the joint march upon Ramoth-Gilead.

With this accords another impression derived from the narrative. The whole account of the battle, the

apparently very subordinate part which Jehoshaphat played in it, as well as the absence of any reference to the army of Judah, and the solitary notice that Jehoshaphat returned to Jerusalem in peace (2 Chronicles 19:1), without any reference to his people - all convey the impression that Jehoshaphat had, without returning to Jerusalem, merely summoned a small Judaeen contingent, so that his presence and aid - if known at all to the Syrians - were regarded as a very secondary element in the campaign. And when we compare this with the language of Jehoshaphat on entering into alliance with Ahab (1 Kings 22:4), and before he had heard the words of Micaiah, we feel that the contrast between his promises and performance must have been due to the prophetic warning which he had heard.

And as regards Ahab and his people we have similar indications of inward misgivings.<sup>56</sup> It was the common practice for kings and leaders to go into battle in full array (comp. 2 Samuel 1:10).

When Ahab, therefore, made the strange proposal that Jehoshaphat alone should go in his royal robes, while he disguised himself, this must have been caused by apprehension of the Divinely threatened judgment, which after his usual manner he hoped to foil by astuteness. And if it be asked why in such case Jehoshaphat did not also disguise himself, the obvious answer is, that the Divine message had not threatened death to the king of Judah, and that, if both monarchs had so disguised themselves, it would have been virtually an announcement to their followers that they expected defeat, and the fulfillment of Micaiah's prophecy.

This is one side of the picture; the other is that presented from the Syrian camp. The military organization, introduced in the former campaign (1 Kings 20:24), now proved its efficiency. The "thirty and two captains" who commanded "the chariots" evidently formed the first line of attack. To them Ben-hadad gave special orders to direct

<sup>56</sup> Josephus states - though without support from the sacred text - that Ahab and the people had at first been afraid at the words of Micaiah, but that they took courage when Divine judgment did not immediately follow on the blow which Zedekiah gave to the prophet.

their movements exclusively against the king of Israel, <sup>57</sup> in the hope that, with his capture or death, alike the battle and the campaign would be ended.

The disguise of Ahab had almost defeated this plan. For when the Syrians pressed around the only chariot which bore one in royal apparel, in the belief that they fought with Ahab - and this also seems to imply that they were not aware of the presence of the king of Judah - Jehoshaphat "cried out," on which the Syrians, recognizing that it was not the voice of Ahab, desisted from the pursuit. <sup>58</sup> It is impossible to determine whether Jehoshaphat had appealed to his pursuers, or called for the support of his men.

But the fact itself is of sufficient importance to be recorded alike in the Book of Kings and in that of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 18:31) and in precisely the same terms. But the writer of the Book of Chronicles, who tells this history from the standpoint of Judah, as in the Book of Kings it is related from that of Israel, adds that the providential deliverance which Jehoshaphat experienced was from Jehovah. It is scarcely necessary to add that this reflection is not in any way inconsistent with the briefer Israelitish record, nor implies divergent sources of information.

But the disguise of Ahab, so far from frustrating the judgment predicted, only served the more clearly to show the Divine agency in his destruction. As the battle continued, a man, "drew a bow in his simplicity" - that is, without taking aim at any definite person - when the arrow struck the king of Israel "between the joints and the breastplate," that is, where the cuirass which covered the breast met the jointed armor that protected the lower part of the body. Such a wound would, of necessity, be mortal, and the king directed the driver of the chariot to take him away from the fight. But the Syrians were unaware that the king of Israel had received his fatal wound. Thicker and hotter grew the fight, and the command of Ahab could not be obeyed. And all

<sup>57</sup> There is no indication that this was known to Ahab, and that his disguise was due to it.

<sup>58</sup> Probably they thought some one had been arrayed as a king for the purpose of misleading them.

day long had he to be stayed in his chariot while his life was slowly ebbing away. It was a ghastly spectacle, the disguised king, mortally struck despite his disguise, now held up in his chariot, to continue against his will in the battle. Rarely has history so visibly and in every detail taught its Divine lessons. The sun was going down, and his slanting rays fell on the dying Ahab - more royal now than in his life. <sup>59</sup> Presently the sound of battle was stilled, and the rest of darkness fell on the combatants.

But as the tidings spread of the death of their king, the people must have recalled the prophecy of Micaiah. And the very remembrance of it led to its literal fulfillment. For through the host ran the proclamation which scattered them as sheep that have not a shepherd: "Every man to his city, and every man to his own country."

While one prophecy was thus translated into fact, the knell of yet another was sounding in the hearing of the house of Ahab, had they but had ears to hear it. Through the darkness speeded the chariot that bore the dead body of Ahab, lying on its bloody bed. They reached Samaria, and there they buried their king. But the chariot full of his gore they took outside, to wash in the pool by the city. And, horrible to behold, in the pale moonlight the wild masterless dogs, which in the East prowl at night about the city-walls, lapped up the water mingled with gore which flowed out of the blood-dyed chariot as they washed it. And stranger and still more horrible, the red flood in large eddying circles mingled with the waters of the pool - that pool where "the harlots washed," <sup>60</sup> - no doubt

<sup>59</sup> The Targum and some interpreters have regarded the "staying" as an act of Ahab's, that, in order to sustain the courage of his soldiers, and to continue the battle, he had borne his pain and hurt, and kept up in his chariot.

<sup>60</sup> The rendering in the A.V. (1 Kings 22:38), "and they washed his armor," is untenable. The words mean, "And the harlots bathed," and the terrible significance of the event lies in this: that the blood of Ahab, who had erected altars in Israel to Baal and Astarte (see Vol. 5.), was not only licked by dogs - which would remind of the prophecy of Elijah (1 Kings 21:19), and its threatened transference to his successor (ver. 29) - but that it also mingled with that pool which served for lustration to those abandoned women whose life of debauchery was part of the worship of Astarte, introduced by Ahab and Jezebel. And this fulfilled the prediction of Elijah upon Ahab's public sins (1 Kings 21:21-23).

where Jezebel's priestesses of Astarte, the ministers of the worship of debauchery, nightly performed their semi-religious ablutions in that sacred fishpond,<sup>61</sup> which here, as in all other places where the Syrian Astarte was worshipped, had been constructed and consecrated to the goddess.

What a coincidence, and how full of deepest significance! But did Ahab's successor not think of the blood of Naboth, and the curse which rested on Ahab, not only as the murderer of Naboth, but as he who had seduced Israel into idolatry and all sin? And did Jezebel not see in this red flood, in which her priestesses of the worship of impurity performed their sacred ablutions, a warning token of that judgment which was gathering, like a dark cloud, over her own head?

But as yet these judgments of the LORD slumbered. "So Ahab slept with his fathers, and Ahaziah his son reigned in his stead."

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<sup>61</sup> The existence of this "sacred fishpond" not only explains the narrative, but seems to me a remarkable confirmation of it. Such sacred "ponds," dedicated to Atergatis, Astarte, the Venus that rose from the sea, are found in all places where the goddess was adored according to ancient Hittite and Phoenician rites.

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