

Study Sixteen: Elijah The Prophet of Fire and Serenity

The Idea of a Prophets

Sometimes we have an institutional idea of a prophet. The prophet was appointed by God, not by Man, and he was to be the voice of God primarily to his own generation and the situations into which God spoke with exhortation, often linked with prediction. Often there was a 'school of the prophets', and it seems Elijah ('my God is Yahweh') was head of such, passing on his mantle to Elisha.

Elijah's Origins

These are virtually unknown. We know nothing of his age. He is called 'the Tishbite' 'Tishbe' seemingly in Gilead (cf. I Kings 17: 1. He appears suddenly at a time of crisis in Israel—the Northern Kingdom—when King Ahab, though a powerful monarch, had allowed his wife Jezebel to bring Canaanite idolatry fully to the land. She was the daughter of a the king-priest of Sidon who worshipped the Canaanite Baal and his consort Asherah/Astarte, and had 'slain all the prophets [of the Lord] with the sword' (I Kings 19: 1) and established her own 450 prophets of Baal and 400 of Asherah. The land was far departed from the pure worship of Yahweh.

Elijah's Training

Elijah suddenly appears To Ahab, telling him a drought will hit the land, and rain will not come except by his—Elijah's—prophetic word. Immediately Elijah is taken by God *outside of Israel* to the brook Cherith where he is fed by ravens (some think 'Arabs') and water comes from Cherith. This then dries up and Elijah is sent to Zarapeth, again outside of Israel, to a Sidonite town or village, where a widow hosts him, he through God helping the woman whose jar of meal and cruse of oil is continually filled. Drought in Israel ('the land of milk and honey') and in Phoenicia where Baal is supposed to make the weather and prosperity shows that God is judge in Israel and also in Phoenicia, Baal being helpless. With the healing of the dead son of the widow Elijah is seen by the mother truly to be 'a man of God' and that 'the word of the Lord is your mouth is truth.' We must not underestimate the power of training in the Cherith and Zarapeth situations.

Elijah's Ministry of Fire

Elijah returns to Israel, meets Obadiah who had hidden a 100 prophets of the Lord and fed them and tells him to notify Ahab of his—Elijah's—presence. Obadiah tells the king who meets him, calling him 'troubler of Israel' (a reverse conscience!). Elijah demands the gathering of the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 of Asherah to be gathered at Carmel. This happens, and in the events following, Elijah—one against hundreds—tells the multitude of people and prophets, 'You call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the god who answers by fire he is God'. The people say, 'It is well spoken. Then comes the happening when Baal cannot answer by fire but God does, consuming the water-soaked bull-offering when Elijah prays, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word.' When the fire falls on Elijah's sacrifice and consumes it then the people realise who is the true God and worship Him. Elijah commands that the prophets of Baal be killed and they are. This is an incredible victory over the Baal-Asherah cult. He then shows Ahab that God is about to send rain, and when this happens, Ahab rides towards Jezreel. Elijah, strengthened by some special power actually runs towards Jezreel in front of the king.

Elijah has proved that the deities of Baal and Asherah are futile. They could not give the rain: they were defunct.

Elijah Powerless: God Renews the Prophet

Jezebel's whole drive had been that of Canaanite idolatry, but with political purpose. She had been about dethroning Yahweh and giving Baal the precedence. She was livid at the news of Baal's and Asherah's defeat and threatened the prophet with death. Without any doubt Elijah became afraid and fled into the wilderness. He was afraid after so high a victory. He had needed much training at Cherith and Zarapeth to be prepared for it. He needed much more training to become the stable and serene prophet he was yet to be. Notice how God did it—by sending an angel who prepared food and drink. Elijah ate and slept and the angel urged him to eat again, so that he needed nothing more in 40 days as he travelled to Horeb 'the mount of God' or Mt. Sinai. He was, perhaps, in the same cave or 'cleft of a rock' where Moses caught his glimpse of God, Elijah had that experience of God which was to stabilise him.

The 'Still, Small Voice'

At Horeb Moses was for Israel. At Horeb Elijah seemed to be against that nation. The Lord's word to Elijah was a question, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' Elijah's answer was, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the god of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, and left and they seek my life to take it away.' Elijah had come back to the place of covenant and law seemingly to seek Israel's judgement. Israel's evil of course was strong but he had much to learn. Elijah was commanded to stand before 'the mount of the Lord'. 'Mere he saw an indescribable cyclone of wind, and earthquake and finally the fire—modes of action Yahweh often used—and uses. Not this time, for the 'still small voice' ('the sound of gentle quietness', or 'gentle silence') was Elijah's enriching revelation of God. It moved Elijah to wrap his face in his mantle. Again, being asked why he was here, in particular on Mt Horeb, he gave the same answer, but God showed him He would look after Israel, that He would have 7,000 who had never bowed the knee to Baal. The heart of Israel was good! Sinai still signified for the true people. For the rest, Elijah was given a commission to go to Hazael and Jehu for their specific anointings. Elisha was to be his assistant and ultimately to take his place. This new Moses was to have his Joshua!

The Steady Days of the Transformed Prophet

Jezebel shows her colours again in the matter of vineyard—this being against the laws of God. Elijah fearlessly—without dread of Jezebel—confronts Ahab and predicts the doom of the king and Jezebel. This time Ahab repents and God gives him breathing space. His son Ahaziah is the son of his mother and seeks to destroy Elijah whose answer lies in the fire that kills the king's emissaries. The last event is that of Elijah's translation—an amazing happening! A reward of the faithful prophet lies in the attachment of Elisha, and his commission for a further great work, but the greatest reward is that he is translated, as was Enoch. In a way he was a second Moses to Israel. He is later seen at the Mount of Transfiguration, Tabor, but he is spoken highly of in Malachi 4:5 as an eschatological figure of great importance, and John the Baptist appears to be equated with him by Jesus (Matt. 17:12), who used him as a principle (Luke 4:25-26) of himself. Like all the true prophets he learned of God, was faithful to the last and is a great witness to being the powerful voice of God in his days.