

Chapter 28

Elijah's Removal from the Earth

ELIJAH'S WORK, so far as the record goes, concluded with the fiery vindication of Yahweh's majesty against the insolence of idolatrous Ahaziah, who did not survive it many days. This was the last miracle of his life unless we consider his removal such. The time then drew near when "Yahweh would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind." Such a marvel had only occurred previously on earth once—in the case of Enoch. The reflections passed in review in connection with that case are all applicable to the case of Elijah, and need not now be re-entered upon. The occurrence was marvellous in the light of ordinary human experience, but in itself no more marvellous than the thousand marvels that are enacted before the eyes of unthinking myriads every day. The object of it we may not satisfactorily conceive, because the object was divine: and "the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God" ([1 Cor. 2:11](#)). What man can enter into the aims of the eternal universe-filling mind? This, however, we can see, that Elijah was a man of perfect zeal for Yahweh; and it is not altogether unintelligible that Yahweh should will the exemption of his faithful servant from the humiliation of the grave. Elijah had been long enough among the incorrigible ten tribes for the divine ends. If he was not to be allowed to die, what other alternative so reasonable as his removal? He might, of course, have been allowed to remain in the land of the living till the consummation of Yahweh's purpose in the manifestation of the Messiah in power and great glory; but there would have been an unfitness in this, in view of the nature of the times to pass over the world during the long interval—times, both of intense darkness and when faith was to be the necessary principle upon which the servants of Yahweh were to be developed. His removal seems the most natural event in all the circumstances.

Elijah's removal was an event that Elijah's attendant and coming successor—Elisha—foreboded. Elijah himself appears to have been quite aware of its imminence, and to have desired to get away from Elisha for its private and convenient accomplishment. Arrived together at Gilgal, "Elijah said to Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee, for Yahweh hath sent me to Bethel." Elisha's response was a very decided refusal. "As Yahweh liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." So they both journeyed to Bethel. There, the sons of the prophets (young men under the guidance of the prophets) came forth to meet them, and privately addressed Elisha on the subject of Elijah's impending removal. They had become aware of it, either from Elijah, or from a common brooding of the Spirit upon them all, imparting to them a common consciousness of the purpose of God about to be effected: "Knowest thou that Yahweh will take away thy master from thy head today?" and he said, "Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace." It was not a subject on which he cared to talk or think, still less to be addressed by others. There are subjects on which the mind is very tender, and can only grapple with in silence with any satisfaction. Elijah's impending removal was of this nature to Elisha. Under Elijah's headship, he felt safe and strong. He was, as it were, a covering of God to him. The idea of parting with him was most unwelcome. He knew the parting was at hand: but he refused to hasten it by a single minute. He resolved to stick by Elijah to the last available moment, and was therefore deaf to all hints from Elijah himself, and sore to all conversation on the subject. The

sons of the prophets doubtless “held their peace,” and the two stern men went on together to Jericho. The young men of Jericho came out to meet them in the way the young men of Bethel had done, making a like salutation, and receiving from Elisha a like rebuff. Here Elijah made another attempt to throw off Elisha, but with no better success, and the two went on to the Jordan. Their movements were watched by a band of “fifty men of the sons of the prophets,” who stood on the hill country, as the two men descended to the channel of the Jordan. Here they witnessed a marvel they may not have anticipated. The two evidently aimed at the other side of the Jordan, but how were they to get across without boat, bridge, or ford? They had not long to wait for a solution: they saw Elijah take off his mantle, and wrap it together, and strike the surface of the water with it. The effect was to cause a displacement of the element, which quivered and ran hither and thither until a passage was formed clear down to the bed of the river, through which the two prophets passed on dry ground. It was a miracle, yet simply the application of a cause adequate to produce the effect following. Water can be separated from water in various ways: but there is one way not available to ordinary men for want of possession of the instrumentality. Not only by wood or stone or wind, but by the Spirit of God volitionally applied, water can be displaced for any purpose in view. Elijah had possession of this power. He was full of it: his very clothes were charged with it, as were the clothes of Christ afterwards ([Mark 5:28–39](#)) and when he struck the water with his mantle, the water received a shock which it could not resist, and retired before the superior force applied to it, till the object of the disturbance was accomplished in the comfortable passage of the two prophets. It is an illustration of the control of nature that will be exercised by the saints in the glorified state, when they will not only have possession of the spirit, but be themselves that spirit corporealised in glorious and powerful bodies.

The two went over on dry ground, and the moment had now arrived when Elijah could no longer remain with Elisha. The moment had come for him to be “taken.” As was natural, Elijah, before parting, asked Elisha if there was anything he could do for him. Elisha showed his suitability for the successorship of Elijah by asking—not money, long life, influence with the king, or any temporal advantage, but—a large endowment of the Spirit that rested on Elijah—“a double portion.” Elijah said Elisha had asked a hard thing. He could not say whether his request would be granted; but he was able to say this (the Spirit enabled him to say this much and no more) that if he (Elijah) should be visible to him in the moment of separation, Elisha’s petition should be allowed. While they still walked on in mutual conference, “there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder.” Elisha, in the excitement of the moment, exclaimed, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof,” and rent his clothes, according to the common Oriental mode of giving vent to painful emotion. He saw Elijah as “he went up by a whirlwind into heaven.” This was the token to him of his accepted prayer.

In our entire lack of experience of things or creatures of higher nature than the dull animal organisations at present prevalent on the earth, it may strike us as strange to read of “horses and chariots of fire.” There may, however, be nothing intrinsically strange in these things themselves. The universe is of such vastness and illimitable power and diversity that there is nothing philosophically to exclude the possibility of interstellar space being occupied with creatures and objects of a kind as much higher than we are accustomed to on earth as the universal spirit is superior to our local atmosphere. All matter is but a “differentiation” and condensation of spirit in chemical combinations (modern philosophy calls it “force”). Why may not the spirit itself be susceptible of incorporation in higher and rarer forms adapted to life in free space—the spirit

itself being as easily traversable by such as water by the fishes of the sea? If we are accepted of the Lord at his coming, and transformed into spirit, we may find ourselves introduced to a sphere and a family as far transcending our imaginations as the height of heaven transcends the dimensions of our globe.

Elijah's mantle fell from him as he went up: and Elijah himself becoming quickly invisible, Elisha picked up the fallen mantle, and after a due interval of reflection, started on his return journey to Jericho. The Jordan lay an obstacle in his way: but it could be no obstacle to a man on whom a double portion of the Spirit that had endowed Elijah rested. Laying hold of Elijah's mantle in imitation of Elijah's own action, he smote the Jordan as Elijah had done, and the river divided under the concussion of the force that had riven it before. Elisha passed safely over. There must have been something in Elisha's appearance indicative of the fulfilment of his request that he might have a double portion of Elijah's spirit; for "when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him and bowed themselves to the ground before him." Elijah was gone, and they recognised in Elisha his appointed successor.

But it seems as if they could not be quite sure that Elijah was quite gone—or finally gone. They thought his removal might be temporary, and that he might return and be found for the search. "Behold," said they to Elisha, "there be with thy servants fifty strong men: let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: *lest peradventure the Spirit of Yahweh hath taken him up and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley.*" Elisha's knowledge was more perfect than theirs. He knew Elijah was gone for good, and that he would be no more seen upon earth, till he should be sent again for the work of restoration, "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" ([Mal. 4:5](#))—a work in which he was typified by John the Baptist, who went before Jesus to prepare his way "in the spirit and power of Elijah" ([Luke 1:17](#); [Matt. 17:12–13](#)). Elisha therefore forbade the sons of the prophets to search, but they were importunate, and urged him till shame led him to consent. "They sent, therefore, fifty men: and they sought three days and found him not." And he has not been found since.

A writing came from him to Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, who was king in Jerusalem for some time after his departure ([2 Chron. 21:12](#)). If this was written after his removal, then this letter was an act of participation in affairs on earth performed in the new state and place to which the "chariots and horses of fire" introduced him. There would be no difficulty in this; for Elijah would be more cognisant (and not less), of what was going on in Israel after his removal to a state of sustenance by the spirit than while he was yet among them as a man sustained in the natural ways of the flesh. And as for writing, it is more easy for a man with the power of the spirit to write a letter or do anything else, than a man having only the abilities and resources of mortal nature. But possibly (though it is scarcely likely, in view of the retrospective bearing of the writing on a reign which had scarce begun at the date of his removal), the writing was written before his departure.

Another recorded post-removal participation in mundane affairs was his appearance on the mount of transfiguration, where, with Moses, he "spake of the decease which Jesus should accomplish at Jerusalem" ([Luke 9:30–31](#)). Dr. Thomas has always believed that this appearance was actual, and that of Moses also. The term "vision" applied to the transaction has been held to exclude this view, since "vision" is defined in [Acts 11:9](#), as that which is in contrast with reality. This contention may be right as regards the common use of the term, and yet allow of the things seen in a case like the transfiguration—seen for visional purposes—having been real in themselves. Jesus was real: the glory was real: the voice was real: the overshadowing cloud was

real: and Moses and Elias may have been real. It is a matter about which positive ground cannot be taken; but it is interesting to think of the possibility of Elijah having been really there present in personal interview with the Lord, holding converse on the approaching climax of the Lord's work on earth—the Lord's death and resurrection. It would show Elijah in a state of personal interest in that part of the work of God to which we stand related. It would be natural that such should be the case. Elijah was alive: and if he sent a letter of reproof to an idolatrous King of Israel, it was equally in place that he should personally and encouragingly confer with "the Son of God, the King of Israel," on the approach of the great act of obedience—the laying down of his life for all the children of God—in which Elijah, though not permitted to see death, must have been as much interested as the least of those in need of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The presence of Moses would be no barrier to this view; because if Moses were really there, it would be by the exercise of that resurrection power which more than once was exercised before the days of Christ. The exercise of this power in the raising of Moses would not displace Christ from his position of "the first fruits"; since Moses might merely rise to renewed natural but miraculously prolonged life against the day of change to spirit-nature in the presence of Christ at his coming. Christ as the first to be glorified, and the dispenser of glory to all his brethren, would be in the position of the first fruits, however many God might see fit to sustain in natural being against that day.

The cases of Moses and Elias in no way lend countenance to the popular view of the death state, since Elias did not die, but was bodily removed, and Moses, if there, must have been bodily raised.

The reality of Elijah's participations, since his removal, in the divine work on earth, in the two recorded cases, is in harmony with the revealed fact, that he is destined to take an active part in the work of Israel's redemption, from the transgression and down-treading of the Gentile ages. To this Jesus refers, when he says, in answer to the enquiries of his disciples, "Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things" ([Matt. 17:11](#)). If he added, "But I say unto you that Elias is come already," it only shows that two co-ordinate truths are consistent, though in apparent conflict when viewed superficially. John the Baptist came in "the spirit and power of Elijah" ([Luke 1:17](#)); and therefore his coming was a coming of Elias (appropriate to the nature of the preparatory work to be done for the first appearing of Christ). This does not interfere with the fact that the personal Elias himself will come in his own spirit and power, to do a work of preparation of a different nature from that of John the Baptist, as the different situation of things connected with the second appearing of Christ requires.

These are details with which, of course, Elisha and his attendant "sons of the prophets" were not acquainted. Their work related to the state of things then existing in the midst of the tribes of Israel. For this work only were their qualifications suited. These qualifications involved the power of displaying in a large measure the visible hand of God, at the exhibition of which we shall look in the further contemplation of the life of Elisha.