

ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE

BIBLE HISTORY OLD TESTAMENT VOL. 6



ALFRED EDERSHEIM

Bible History Old Testament Vol.6

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Ellen G. White (1827-1915) is considered the most widely translated American author, her works having been published in more than 160 languages. She wrote more than 100,000 pages on a wide variety of spiritual and practical topics. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she exalted Jesus and pointed to the Scriptures as the basis of one's faith.

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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 inter-positions 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. [4]

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 [5] 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.”

ALFRED EDERSHEIM

8, Bradmore Road, Oxford:

1st November, 1885.

The History of Judah and Israel from the [6]
Sacrifice on Carmel

Chapter 1: 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—The Time of the Evening Sacrifice—Elijah Prepares the Sacrifice—Elijah’s Prayer—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](#)¹). 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

¹Not 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.

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 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](#)).

[8]

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

[9] 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 one² 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 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. [10]

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

²I have given this the primary meaning of the Hebrew word (“this,” “that one”), and not, as interpreters generally, the rare derivation “here.”

[11] 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 southeast is a third peak, 1687 feet high,³ which to this day bears the name of El-Maharakah, 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, 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-Maharakah 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

³For these measurements and other interesting notices I am indebted to Conder’s *Tent-work in Palestine*, vol. 1., pp. 168, etc. See also Dean Stanley’s description in his *Sinai and Palestine*, Mr. Grove’s article in *Smith’s Bible Dict.*, and other accounts.

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. [12]

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 ⁴) “as to the two opinions” (divisions, parties ⁵)?

[13] 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 ⁶—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: ⁷ 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

⁴The word is used in verse 26 of the wild dance or leaping of the priests of Baal.

⁵It 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.

⁶The others being hid in caves, were for all practical purposes for the present as non-existing.

⁷It 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?

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 [14] 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 the test proposed by Elijah, since their Baal was also the god of fire, the very Sun-god.⁸

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

As blood began to flow the frenzy reached its highest pitch, when first one, then others, commenced to "prophecy," moaned and groaned, then burst into rhapsodic cries, accusing themselves, or

⁸As 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](#).

⁹In 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.

¹⁰This is the correct rendering of [verse 28](#), and not "knives and lancets," as in the Authorized Version.

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.

[15] 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. ¹¹

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. ¹² 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

¹¹For 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.

¹²The 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.

symbolic reasons, as 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. ¹³

[16]

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. ¹⁴

¹³[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."

¹⁴It 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."

[17] 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. ¹⁵

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 ¹⁶ 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 cleave, whether to Jehovah or to the god of Jezebel.

¹⁵Seven - the number of the Covenant.

¹⁶The Targum renders: "And the spirit of strength from before Jehovah."

Chapter 2

[18]

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—What doest thou here, Elijah?—The Wind, the Earthquake, the Fire, and the Still Small Voice—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 ¹ 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

¹I use the term “economy” here in its original meaning, as denoting the household arrangement, the household legislation and order.

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 manifesta-

tion of God, symbolized, not by storm, earthquake, or fire, but by “the still small voice.”

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,² 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.

[20]

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

²The LXX. (and some Codd.) by a slight change after the word “saw” (1 Kings 19:3) into one which means “feared:” it need scarcely be said, erroneously.

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 [21] himself under one of those wide-spreading brooms,³ 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.⁴

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 33-349](#)). When once more Israel broke the Covenant on the morrow of Carmel, Elijah fled in utter despondency

³The *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.

⁴Kimchi 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.

of spirit. In both 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,⁵ 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”⁶ —perhaps the very “clift of the rock” where Moses had first been permitted to hear the glorious revelation of what Jehovah was and of what He purposed.

[22]

It was a wondrous place in which to spend the night,⁷ and to hear amidst its silence the voice of Jehovah.⁸ The one question—afterwards repeated in different circumstances—“What doest thou here, Elijah?”⁹ 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

⁵The journey straight to Mount Horeb would have taken scarcely more than a fourth of that time.

⁶The Hebrew has the definite article, to mark a special, well-known cave.

⁷This is the meaning of the word “lodge” in [verse 9](#).

⁸Some commentators regard the first part of what is related as having been a vision. But there seems no indication of this in the text.

⁹The 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.

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.

[23] 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" ([Psalm 119:126](#))! Upon this Elijah was bidden to go forth out of the dark, narrow cave, and behold, as Jehovah passed by.¹⁰

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)!"¹¹

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 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

¹⁰The 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.

¹¹So literally.

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. [24]

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 ¹² this was now the only work left for the aged and weary prophet. And in each case he did prepare it. ¹³

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

¹²The 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](#)).

¹³It is strange that commentators should so generally have failed to see this.

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.

[25] 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 thousands¹⁴ —“still ones” in the land, who had never bent the knee to Baal nor kissed in worship the abominable image.¹⁵

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 or 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 just 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-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

¹⁴The 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.

¹⁵To kiss the idol - its feet, beard, etc. - was the common practice in heathen worship.

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 ploughing 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 or 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. ¹⁶ [26]

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. ¹⁷ Thus only could he be fitted or 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

¹⁶Matthew Henry quaintly remarks, “to take leave, not to ask leave of them.”

¹⁷However 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.

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: ¹⁸ 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 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.

¹⁸It 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](#)).

*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 and Message*

(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”¹—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.²

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

¹Although 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.

²Ben-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.

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. ³

[29] 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, ⁴ he invaded Samaria.

³Compare Vol. 5.

⁴Josephus 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 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

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,⁵ 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.

[30]

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,⁶ 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

to the Assyrian inscriptions, formed a very important part of the Syrian forces (Comp. Schrader, u.s.).

⁵This seems implied in the term "booths" (sukkoth), ver. 12 - not "pavilions," as in the Authorized Version.

⁶The 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.

submit, would be of comparatively small, at most, of only temporary use.

[31] 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,⁷ to which Ahab replied with calm dignity ([vv. 10, 11](#)).

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

⁷The 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 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.

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. [32]

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,⁸ 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,⁹ 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

⁸The former seems the more likely meaning of *verse* 12.

⁹According to the Rabbis, Micaiah, the son of Imlah (22. 8; see Rashi and Kimchi ad loc.) But this seems a mere guess.

transient, appears even from the presence of a prophet in Samaria,¹⁰ and from the whole bearing of Ahab.

[33] 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?”¹¹ 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 was a striking coincidence between the number of the faithful and that of—Israel’s victorious host.¹²

The same wonder-working Providence appears in the manner in which victory was granted. As so often, we mark the accomplish-

¹⁰This 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.

¹¹Or, “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.

¹²On the other hand, the 7000 may represent only what is called a “round number.”

ment 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.

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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.

[35] 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,¹³ 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”¹⁴ (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

¹³The curious reader may find the whole subject fully treated of in Sam Deyling’s *Observ. Sacr. Pars. 3*, (ed. 1726) pp. 123-127.

¹⁴Our English version does not express this.

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),¹⁵ and beyond it to that of Gideon's glorious victory.

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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

¹⁵See 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.

[37] 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,¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 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-

¹⁶The 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.

¹⁷There 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?).

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.”¹⁸ [38]

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-Hadesfather 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.

¹⁸This represents the true meaning of the original.

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.¹⁹ It referred to those associations²⁰ [39] 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.

In the execution of this commission the “son of the prophet” went to one of his colleagues,²¹ 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.

¹⁹In 1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20, they are designated simply as “prophets.”

²⁰Not necessarily of young or unmarried men. See 2 Kings 4:1.

²¹The expression “neighbor” or “fellow” (ver. 35) means that he was also one of “the sons of the prophets.”

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,”²² 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. [40]

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.”²³

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

²²So, and not as in the A.V.

²³Nearly 400 pounds of our money.

(compare [Leviticus 27:29](#)), therefore thy life shall be for his life, and thy people for his people.”

[41] 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.”²⁴ And this also casts further light both on what Ahab had done, and on what he was about to do.

²⁴So literally; the first of the two terms is derived from a root which signifies “to rebel,” and indicates heart-rebellion against God.

Chapter 4

[42]

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.

[43] 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.

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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

[45] 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”¹ 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

¹The derivation of the word “Beliyaal” has been differently explained, but all are agreed that its primary meaning is equivalent to wickedness.

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](#)).²

[46]

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

²Blasphemy would come under the category of seducing to idolatry, or committing it.

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 yearsdrought, and then so suddenly and tracelessly vanished from sight. ³

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 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

³See Vol. 5. of this Bible History.

to the effect that Elijah, who had always been his personal enemy, had now at last “found him”⁴ 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.”

[48]

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 of the wrath which thou hast caused to go forth,⁵ 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 murder⁶ 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

⁴The 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).

⁵The words properly mean: “the wrath which thou hast caused to be wrathful.”

⁶In the murder of Naboth the two elements of personal provocation and of causing Israel to sin were also combined.

intercalated remarks of the writer of the narrative (in [verses 25, 26](#)).
7

[49] 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. ⁸

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

⁷This 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 likeabominations on the part of Israel.

⁸The word rendered "softly" might denote the gentle, noiseless step of sorrow or humiliation; but it has also been rendered by "barefooted," as in mourning.

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. ⁹ [50]

⁹The 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.

[51] **Chapter 5: Ahab and Ahaziah, (Eighth and Ninth)
Kings of Israel—Jehoshaphat, (Fourth) King of
Judah**

*The Visit of Jehoshaphat to Ahab—The Projected Expedition
Against Ramoth-Gilead—Flattering Predictions of False
Prophets—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 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. 6¹), 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).

¹At the same time all the ancient Versions and many Codd. read Jehovah.

—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](#)).²

[52]

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

²Comp. Volume 5 of this History.

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 ³ 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.

[53] 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” ⁴ 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

³Comp. Volume 5.

⁴This, 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](#)).

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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, 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. [54]

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).

[55] 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. ⁵ 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 “prophesying” 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

⁵The 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.

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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 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,⁶ 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. [56]

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.

⁶The 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.

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,⁷ the explanation and the higher Divine meaning of

⁷It 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."

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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; nay, 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.

[58]

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 marketplace 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 [59] 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,⁸ 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 rate, the time for all such talk had

⁸Josephus 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?

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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. [60]

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

[61] 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.⁹ 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 their movements exclusively against the king of Israel,¹⁰ 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

⁹Josephus 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.

¹⁰There is no indication that this was known to Ahab, and that his disguise was due to it.

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.¹¹ 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.

[62]

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 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

¹¹Probably they thought some one had been arrayed as a king for the purpose of misleading them.

Ahab—more royal now than in his life. ¹² 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.”

[63] 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,” ¹³—no doubt where Jezebel’s priestesses of Astarte, the ministers of the worship of debauchery, nightly performed their semi-religious ablutions in that sacred fishpond, ¹⁴ which here, as in all other places where the Syrian Astarte was worshipped, had been constructed and consecrated to the goddess.

¹²The 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.

¹³The 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).

¹⁴The 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 (comp. Conder, Heth and Moab, p. 64).

Ahad and Ahaziah, (Eighth and Ninth) Kings of Israel—Jehoshaphat, (Fourth)

—~~What a coincidence, and how full of deepest significance!~~ ^{King of Judah} ^{lxv} 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? [64]

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

Chapter 6: Jehoshaphat, (Fourth) King of Judah

The Reproof and Prophecy of Jehu—Resumption of the Reformation in Judah—Institution of Judges and of a Supreme Court in Jerusalem—Incursion of the Moabites and their Confederates—National Fast and the Prayer of the King—Prophecy of Victory—The March to Tekoa—Destruction of the Enemy—The Valley of Berakhah—Return to Jerusalem and to the Temple

(2 Chronicles 19, 201-34)

BEFORE continuing the history of Israel, we turn aside to complete that of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. It will be remembered ¹ that he had succeeded his father Asa in the fourth year of King Ahab's reign.

At that time Jehoshaphat was thirty-five years old; and as his reign lasted for twenty-five years (1 Kings 22:42; 2 Chronicles 20:31), it follows that he died at the age of sixty, which, when we consider the annals of the royal houses of Judah and Israel, must be considered a protracted life. A few other particulars are given us connected with Jehoshaphat's accession. Thus we learn that his mother's name was Azubhah, ² the daughter of Shilchi. Again, we gather how energetically he took in hand at the beginning of his reign the religious reformation commenced by his father Asa. ³

But the want of true sympathy on the part of his subjects prevented the full success of his measures. The idol-groves and heights, dedicated to Baal and Astarte, were indeed destroyed (2 Chronicles 17:6), but it was found impossible to abolish the corrupt worship of Jehovah celebrated on "the high places" (1 Kings 22:43; 2 Chronicles 20:33). Beyond these brief notices, the narrative in the Book of Kings only indicates that at that period there was no king in Edom,

¹See Vol. 5.

²Thenius renders the name by "the liberated" - our Francisca.

³See Vol. 5.

but that the country was ruled by a governor. This is manifestly stated in order to explain how the maritime expedition to Ophir could have been undertaken without provoking resistance on the part of Edom, in whose territory Ezion-Geber was situate. But the sacred text affords no information to account for this state of matters in Edom. ⁴

The scanty details about the reign of Jehoshaphat furnished in the Book of Kings—which deals mainly with the history of the northern kingdom—are supplemented in the Book of Chronicles. The compilers of the latter had evidently before them, amongst other sources of information, a prophetic history of that reign: “The Chronicles [or, the words] of Jehu, the son of Hanani, which are inserted in the book of the Kings of Israel” ⁵ of the kings of Israel” (2 [Chronicles 33:18](#)) The term Israel in the last two cases is taken in the wider sense as embracing Judah and Israel. All these names represent one work, into which, among others, “the words” or “chronicles” of Jehu, the son of Hanani, were incorporated.] (2 [Chronicles 20:34](#), comp. 1 [Kings 22:45](#)).

[66]

It was this Jehu, who, on the return of Jehoshaphat from the expedition against Ramoth-Gilead, announced to the king the Divine displeasure. Better than any other would he be acquainted with the spiritual declension in the northern kingdom, since it was he who had been sent to pronounce on Baasha, king of Israel, the judgment that should overtake him and his people for their apostasy (1 [Kings 16:1](#), etc.). And who so fit to speak fearlessly to Jehoshaphat as the son of him who had formerly suffered imprisonment at the hands of Asa, the father of Jehoshaphat, for faithfully delivering his commission from God (2 [Chronicles 16:7-10](#))? The message which he now brought was intended to point out the incongruity of Jehoshaphat’s alliance with Ahab.

⁴Keil and Ewald suggest that the Edomites had taken part in the expedition of Ammon and Moab against Judah (2 [Chronicles 20](#)); Thenius supposes that the reigning family of Edom had died out, and that Jehoshaphat had taken advantage of the disputes for the succession, to re-assert the supremacy of Judah. But all these are mere conjectures.

⁵Thus correctly, and not as in our A.V. There seems to have been “a book” or “chronicles” “of the kings of Judah and Israel,” which is frequently referred to either by that name (2 [Chronicles 16:11](#); 25:26; 28:26), or as “the book of the kings of Israel and Judah” (2 [Chronicles 27:7](#); 35:27; 36:8), or as “the book of the kings of Israel” (2 [Chronicles 20:34](#)) or “the words [“acts”]”

The punishment which the prophet announced as its sequence, came when the king experienced the effects of that other unholy alliance, in which Ammon and Moab combined against Judah ([2 Chronicles 20](#)). Again had Jehoshaphat to learn in the destruction of his fleet at Ezion-Geber ([2 Chronicles 20:37](#)) that undertakings, however well-planned and apparently unattended by outward danger, can only end in disappointment and failure, when they who are the children of God combine with those who walk in the ways of sin.

[67] But in Jehoshaphat the warning of the prophet wrought that godly repentance which has not to be repented of Jehu had declared how God, in His condescension, acknowledged that “nevertheless there are good things found in thee”—and this, not merely as regarded his public acts in the abolition of open idolatry in his country, but also that personal piety which showed itself in preparing his own heart to seek after God. And now the sense of his late inconsistency led him all the more earnestly to show that he did not regard the religious condition of his late allies as a light matter. Once again he took in hand the religious reformation begun at the commencement of his reign. ([2 Chronicles 17:7-10](#))⁶

The account of the present movement is the more interesting that it furnishes proof of the existence of the Book of Deuteronomy at that time, long before the memoirs were written on which the Books of Chronicles are based. For, as we shall presently see, there are here constant references to the legislation in the Book of Deuteronomy, and that not pointedly and with a show of emphasis—such as we would have expected if Deuteronomy had been only lately invented or introduced—but in a manner which indicates a long admitted authority, so that its legislation had permeated the people, and its principles required only to be alluded to as something universally acknowledged,—not vindicated as something recently introduced. This line of argument, bringing out the undesigned evidences of the antiquity of the Mosaic legislation, seems to us to possess far more convincing force than much of the specious reasoning on the other side, which has of late been so confidently advanced. And while on this ground the reader should be warned against hastily adopting conclusions inconsistent with the assured truth of the Divine Word,

⁶See Vol. 5.

he should also be encouraged to mark, in careful study, the many passages containing undesigned references, which are only intelligible on the supposition, not only of the existence, but of the long and generally acknowledged authority of the Mosaic legislation.

The reformation initiated by Jehoshaphat was carried out by him personally. For this purpose he traversed the country from its southern boundary (Beer-sheba) to its northern (Mount Ephraim). His main object was to “bring back” the people “to Jehovah, the God of their fathers.” Partly in attainment of this, and partly to render the reformation permanent, he revised the judicial arrangements of the country, in strict accordance with the Deuteronomic Law. For, according to the Divine appointment, the judges in Israel were not only intended to pronounce sentences and to decide cases, but to guide and direct the people on all questions, civil and religious, and so to prevent the commission of sin or crime. The account given of the work of Jehoshaphat embraces these three points: the appointment of Judges; the principle underlying their authority; and the rule for its exercise.

[68]

As regards the first of these, we remember that the appointment of judges had been first proposed by Jethro ([Exodus 18:21, 22](#)), and then carried out by Moses ([Deuteronomy 1:13](#), etc.)⁷ Such judges were now appointed for every “fenced city.” This, not only because these places were the most important in the land, but in order to protect the administration of justice,⁸ and in accordance with the fundamental law in [Deuteronomy 16:18](#).

As regards the principle on which their authority rested, the judges were to bear in mind that they were the representatives of the Great Judge, Whose aid was accordingly promised them ([2 Chronicles 19:6](#))—and this also in accordance with the Deuteronomic statement: “for the judgment is God’s” ([Deuteronomy 1:17](#)). From this it follows, as the practical rule, that in the administration of justice they were to be influenced by the fear of Jehovah, and not

⁷We mark here the organic connection of the Deuteronomic legislation with the Book of Exodus

⁸Rabbinic Law has always made a distinction between these “walled cities” - dating, it was supposed, from the original occupation of the land - and other towns.

by fear of, nor favor for, man. And here we mark once more the implied reference to [Deuteronomy 1:16, 17; 16:18-20](#).⁹

[69] Besides these provincial judges, Jehoshaphat appointed in Jerusalem a tribunal of appeal consisting of priests, Levites, and the chiefs of clans. With this mixed tribunal rested the final decision in all matters concerning religion and worship ([2 Chronicles 19:8](#): “for the judgment of Jehovah;” and [ver. 11](#): “in all matters of Jehovah”), as well as in civil and criminal cases ([ver. 8](#): “in strifes;” [ver. 11](#): “all the king’s matters”). Moreover, it was their duty to warn,¹⁰ advise, and instruct in all doubtful cases, whether criminal, civil, or ecclesiastical, in which they were applied to either by the inferior judges or the people. As president of this mixed commission, Amariah, the high-priest,¹¹ was appointed for ecclesiastical, and Zebadiah, the chief of the tribe of Judah, for civil cases.

And now that came to pass which had been predicted by the prophet in punishment of the alliance with Ahab. Happily, it found the people prepared by the religious revival which had passed over the land. As we infer from the tenor of the whole narrative, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and “with them certain of the Meunites,”¹² made an unexpected raid “from beyond the Sea”—that is, the Dead Sea “from Edom.”¹³

They could come swooping round the southern end of the Dead Sea, or passing over by the southern ford, just opposite Engedi, the ancient Hazazon-tamar—probably the oldest city in the world. The name Engedi, “the spring of the goat,” is derived from the manner in which its fertilizing spring seems to leap in its descent. The older name, Hazazon-tamar—either “rows of palms,” or “the cutting of

⁹There is nothing in any way inconsistent either with the Mosaic legislation or this later institution of Jehoshaphat in the appointment by David of Levites to be judges ([1 Chronicles 23:4; 26:29](#)). For it is not anywhere said that the Levites were the only judges.

¹⁰The expression here is peculiar, and recalls [Exodus 18:20](#), where the word is rendered (in the A.V.) “teach.”

¹¹Perhaps the same as he who is mentioned in [1 Chronicles 6:11](#).

¹²This is the correct reading, and not “the Ammonites,” as in the A.V. nor yet, as has sometimes been suggested: “the Edomites.” The Meunites were probably a tribe inhabiting Arabia Petraea; no doubt the same as those called Meunim in [1 Chronicles 4:41](#) (rendered in our A.V. by “habitations”). Comp. [2 Chronicles 26:7](#).

¹³By a copyist’s error the Hebrew text has sra (Syria) instead of sda (Edom). It could not have been from “Syria,” and the d of the one would be easily misread as r.

the palm-trees”—originated from the palms which once grew there in great luxuriance. But the site is now desolate, and where once palms flourished, and the most precious wine of Judaea was grown, only naked terraces shelve up the mountain-side. The plain or rather slope is described ¹⁴ as extending about a mile and a half from north to south, being bounded on either side by a Wady with perennial water. Engedi touches the outrunners of the mountains of Judah.

Several hundred feet up the slope, about a mile and a half from the shore of the Dead Sea, the little streamlet which has given the place its name, dashes down in thin but high cataracts. Below these falls, and in the center of the plain, are the ruins which mark the site of the ancient city. As in the time of Abraham the Assyrian hordes ([Genesis 14](#)), so now these marauding invaders, had swarmed across—scarcely an army, rather a multitude of wild nomads. Along the plain, up the slope to the crest of the mountain, through the wadys, they crowded. It seemed a countless host, as their wild war-shouts resounded from hill-top and valley, or their dark forms covered the heights, whence they gazed across the wilderness towards the rich and coveted cities of Judah. So it seemed to the terrified fugitives, who brought exaggerated tidings of their numbers to Jehoshaphat. And only a distance of fifteen hours separated these plundering tribes from Jerusalem. Not a moment was to be lost. The first measure was to invoke the aid of the LORD. A fast was proclaimed throughout Judah—a day of humiliation for national sins and of prayer in the time of their great need (comp. [Judges 20:26](#); [1 Samuel 7:6](#); [Joel 2:15](#)). Jehoshaphat himself took his place in the most prominent part of the temple, “before the new court”—either one newly constructed, or else renovated, and probably intermediate between “the great” or outer court, and “the court of the priests” (comp. [2 Chronicles 4:9](#)). If so, it probably represented what at a later period was known as “the court of the women,” and Jehoshaphat stood on the height afterwards covered by the steps leading up to the court of the priests, where the Levites who conducted the musical part of the temple-services were stationed. There, within sight and hearing of all, like Solomon of old, and as a true king, he represented and guided his people in their act of national humiliation and prayer.

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¹⁴Canon Tristram, *Land of Palestine*, pp. 284, 285.

[71] Ordinarily prayer did not form part of the symbolical temple-services. The latter could only be performed by the God-appointed priesthood. This, even on the lower ground ¹⁵ that had others been allowed to intrude into these services, it would soon have led to the introduction of heathen rites. And of this there were only too many instances in the history of Israel. Never, except on such solemn occasions, was the voice of public prayer heard in the Temple, and the king did not intrude, but acted right kingly, when he now spake in name and on behalf of his people.

There could not have been a prayer of more earnest or realizing faith than that of Jehoshaphat. It began by the acknowledgment of Jehovah as the true and living God (v. 6), and as the Covenant-God, Who in fulfillment of His promises had given them the land (v. 7). In virtue of this twofold fact, Israel had reared the sanctuary (v. 8), and consecrated alike the Temple and themselves by solemnly placing themselves in the keeping of God, to the disowning of all other help or deliverance (v. 9). To this invocation at the dedication of the Temple (2 Chronicles 6:28-30) a visible response had been made when the fire came from heaven to consume the sacrifice, and the glory of Jehovah filled the house (2 Chronicles 7:1). On this threefold ground the prayer of Jehoshaphat now proceeded. A season of sore strait had now come, and they made their solemn appeal to God. Israel was in the right as against their enemies, who had neither pretext in the past for their attack, nor yet justification for it in the present. Nay, they had come against the possession of God which He had given to His people. It was His cause; they had no might of their own, but their eyes were upon the LORD (vers. 10-12).

When the Church, or individual members of it, can so believe and so pray, deliverance is at hand. But yet another act of faith was necessary. Theirs had been the faith of expectancy and of worship; it must now be that of work. As Israel stood in prayer before Jehovah, His Spirit came upon one of the ministering Levites, Jahaziel, a descendant of Mattaniah, perhaps the same as Nethaniah, a son of Asaph (1 Chronicles 25:2, 12). The message which he delivered

¹⁵There were other and much deeper grounds for confining the sacrificial services to the Aaronic priesthood. But this lower consideration should also be noticed as of interest and importance.

from the LORD corresponded to every part of the prayer which had been offered. It bade them dismiss all fears—not because there was not real danger, but because the battle was Jehovah’s. On the morrow were they to go forth to meet the enemy. But “it is not for you [it is not yours=ye need not] to fight in this [battle]: place yourselves, stand still, and see the salvation of Jehovah with you” (vers. 15-17). And humbly, reverently, did king and people bend before the LORD in the worship of praise and believing expectancy.

Early next morning they prepared to obey the Divine direction. It was to be a battle such as had never been witnessed since Jericho had fallen at the blast of the trumpets of the LORD when His Ark compassed its walls. And they prepared for it in such manner as host going to battle had never done. In the morning, as Judah marched out of the gate of Jerusalem, the king addressed to his people only this one command: to have faith—faith in their God, and in the word sent by His prophets. Thus should they be established. Then “he advised the people,”¹⁶ and with one accord they appointed for their avant-guard the sacred Temple-singers,¹⁷ robed in their “holy array,”¹⁸ who were to chant, as if marching in triumphal procession, the well-known words of worship: “Praise Jehovah, for His mercy endureth forever” (comp. [2 Chronicles 7:3, 6](#)).

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If never before an army had so marched to battle, never, even in the marvelous history of Israel, had such results been experienced. Above Engedi the chalk cliffs rise 2000 feet above the Dead Sea, although even that height is still 2000 feet below the watershed. We have now reached the barren and desolate wilderness, known as that of Judah, which stretches southward to the mountains of Hebron, and northward to Tekoa. Innumerable wadys and broad valleys stretch between mountain crests, often of fantastic shape. It is a pathless wilderness, seamed by rocky clefts and caves. There, just past the cave where David had been in hiding from Saul, up the cliff

¹⁶Gave them counsel. The expression indicates a preponderance or lead on the part of the king. Compare the same expression in [2 Kings 6:8](#). This, rather than as in the A.V., or even the R.V. (ver. 21.)

¹⁷It seems to me most likely that these were the ordinary Levite-singers and priests, although a different inference has been drawn from the absence of the article before “singers.”

¹⁸The expression, [2 Chronicles 20:21](#), rendered “beauty of holiness” in our A.V., means “holy array,” and probably refers to the full Temple-dress of the priests and Levites.

Hazziz—perhaps the modern El Husasah—had the foe swarmed, and then deployed through the broad wady which leads towards Tekoa. Here, “at the end of the gully,” ¹⁹ would Israel descry them, see their defeat, yet not have to do battle for the victory.

[73] And as on that bright day the host of Israel looked towards the ascent from Engedi, they caught sight of the enemy. At that moment as by a preconcerted signal they began to sing and to praise the LORD. Then a strange scene ensued. It were an entire misunderstanding of what Scripture designates as the agency of God, to apply to angelic combatants the words: “Jehovah set liers in wait [ambushments] against the children of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir.”

For God Himself does that which happens in His all-overruling Providence, even though it come to pass in the orderly succession of natural events. There was no need of summoning angel-hosts. It is not only quite conceivable, but best explains the after-event, that a tribe of Edomites, kindred but hostile to that which had joined Ammon and Moab in their raid, should have lain in ambush in one of the wadys, waiting till the main body of the combatants had passed, to fall on the rear-guard, or probably on the camp followers, the women and children, and the baggage. They would calculate that long before the men in advance could turn upon them in those narrow defiles, they would have escaped beyond the reach of pursuit. And it is equally conceivable that when the attack was made the main body of the Ammonites and Moabites may have regarded it as a piece of treachery preconcerted between the clan of Edomites who were with them, and the kindred clan that lay in ambush. All this is quite in accordance with what might still take place among the Bedouins of those regions. But, in such circumstances, the Ammonites and Moabites would naturally turn to attack their treacherous allies, and thus the first scene in the strange drama of this internecine battle would be enacted. Mutual distrust once awakened, and passions kindled, we can easily understand how “every one helped to destroy another”—the havoc being probably increased by the peculiar character of the country, which here abounds in steep precipices and sudden rocky heights and descents.

¹⁹A.V.: “the end of the brook” (ver. 16). For the scenery generally comp. Robinson’s Researches, Vol. 1. pp. 486 to 488, and 508.

While this strange battle was proceeding, Judah had advanced, to the sound of hymns of praise, beyond Tekoa, far as the last watch-tower, where usually an outlook was kept over the wilderness, so that timely tidings might be brought of any sudden raid by the wild tribes of the East. As “they looked unto the multitude,” which they had erst descried in the dim distance, there was “not an escaping,” no hasty flight, as in such circumstances might have been expected, and it seemed as if only dead bodies were left strewing the ground. Possibly the Judaeans had, on reaching the height of Tekoa, caught sight of the host, and then lost it again when descending into the wady. ²⁰

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When, on ascending once more, they stood at the watch-tower, they would see what formerly had been “a. multitude,” now only dead bodies, nor could they, from the conformation of the district, discern any fugitives. It now only remained for Judah to seize the spoil ²¹, dead bodies [probably of animals], and precious vessels.”] of the battle in which Jehovah had gained the victory.

For three days the removal of the spoil continued. On the fourth, the host of Judah gathered in a valley, to the north-west of Tekoa, which from the solemn thanksgiving there made received the name of “Berakhah,” “blessing,” in the sense of praise and thanksgiving. It is deeply interesting to find that after the lapse of so many centuries this memorial of Jehovah’s deliverance and of Jehoshaphat’s and Judah’s solemn thanksgiving still continues. Many masters have since held possession of the land: Assyrian, Roman, Moslem, Christian, and Turk: but the old name of the valley of blessing remains in the modern name Bereikut. ²²

²⁰The reader who will take the trouble of examining the interesting account of the district in Robinson’s *Biblical Researches*, Vol. 1. pp. 486-508 (passim), will see how our suggestions are borne out by the description of the great American traveller.

²¹The word “dead bodies” has been supposed to be a misreading or miswriting for, “raiments.” But I see no need for this hypothesis, and would propose translating: “accoutrement [substance, all belonging to an army - the Hebrew word as in [Daniel 11:13](#)

²²See Robinson, u.s., pp. 490, 491; Vol. 3., p. 275. It has been supposed by some (Thenius, Hitzig) that the valley of Berakhah was just outside the walls of Jerusalem, being, indeed, that part of the Kidron Valley known as the Valley of Jehoshaphat ([Joel 3:2, 12](#)), where in the future the judgment on the heathen enemies of God and of His Israel would take place. But the text does not admit of this identification (see [vers. 27, 28](#)). Accordingly, most critics have suggested that “the valley of Jehoshaphat” derived

[75] And from “the valley of blessing” Jehoshaphat and his people returned, as in procession, to the Temple, there again to praise the LORD, Who had, as ever, been faithful to His promise. And this gratitude of a believing people is one of the most true and beautiful results of the religious revival which Judah had experienced. It almost sounds like heaven’s antiphon to Jerusalem’s praise, when we read that “the terror of Elo-him” was upon all the kingdoms of the lands round about Judah, and that “his God” gave Jehoshaphat “rest round about.” ²³

its name from the expectation that the future judgment would resemble in character the victory which God had given to Jehoshaphat. But may it not have been that Jehoshaphat had there addressed to the people, when going out to battle, the words recorded in [verses 20 and 21](#), and that this gave its name to the valley?

²³Zoekler has aptly noted a number of circumstances tending to confirm the historical accuracy of this narrative. Among these he reckons (1) that the dark sides in Jehoshaphat’s character and reign are not withheld. (2) The mention of definite names, such as that of the high-priest Amariah, and of Zebadiah, the chief of the tribe of Judah ([2 Chronicles 19:11](#)). (3) The detailed references to localities such as to “the new court” in the Temple (20:5), or to circumstances, such as the inspiration of the Levite Jahaziel ([ver. 14](#)). (4) That the prophet Joel must have known and treated this account as historical when he spoke of “the valley of Jehoshaphat.” (5) The reference to other historical documents ([ver. 34](#)). (6) Lastly, we must here include the evidence afforded by the so-called “Moabite Stone,” to which further reference will be made in the sequel.

Chapter 7: Jehoshaphat, (Fourth) King of Judah, Ahaziah and Jehoram) Joram, (Ninth and Tenth) Kings of Israel

[76]

*The Joint Maritime Expedition to Ophir—Ahaziah’s Reign and
Illness—The Proposed Inquiry of Baal-zebub—The Divine Message
by Elijah—Attempts to Capture the Prophet, and their
Result—Elijah Appears before the King—Death of
Ahaziah—Accession of Joram—The Ascent of Elijah—Elisha takes
up his Mantle*

(1 Kings 22:48-2 Kings 2:14; 2 Chronicles 20:35-27).

JEHOSHAPHAT saw two sons of Ahab ascend the throne of Israel. Of these Ahaziah immediately succeeded Ahab. Of his brief reign, which lasted two years, only two events are known: the first connected probably with the beginning, the second with the close of it. We judge that the attempted maritime expedition in conjunction with Jehoshaphat took place at the beginning of Ahaziah’s reign—first, because the fitting out and the destruction of that fleet, and then the proposal for another expedition must have occupied two summers, during which alone such undertakings could be attempted; secondly, because it seems unlikely that Jehoshaphat would have entered into any alliance with an Ahaziah, except at the beginning of his reign. There was that connected with the death of Ahab which might readily influence a weak character like Jehoshaphat to think with hopefulness of the son of his old ally, since his accession had been marked by such striking judgments. Even the circumstance that Jezebel no longer reigned might seem promising of good. And, in this respect, it is significant that, with the death of Ahab, the ministry of Elijah passed into a more public stage, and was followed by the even more prominent activity of Elisha.

We remember the notice (1 Kings 22:47) that “there was then no king in Edom.” However we may account for this state of matters, it

[77] was favorable for the resumption of that maritime trade which had brought such wealth to Israel in the reign of King Solomon (1 Kings 9:26-28). And there were not a few things in the time of Jehoshaphat that might recall to a Judaeen the early part of Solomon's reign. Perhaps such thoughts also contributed to the idea of a joint expedition on the part of Judah and Israel. But it was a mode of reunion as crude and ill-conceived as that which had led to the alliance by marriage between the two dynasties, the state visit of Jehoshaphat to Ahab, and its political outcome in the expedition against Ramoth-Gilead. The story is briefly told in the book of Kings (1 Kings 22:48, 49), and one part of it more circumstantially in the Second Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 20:35-37). In the Book of Kings two expeditions are spoken of—the one actually undertaken, the other only proposed. Accordingly, only the first of these is recorded in Chronicles. It consisted of so-called Tarshish ships,¹ which were to fetch gold from Ophir, setting sail from the harbor of Ezion-Geber, on the Red Sea, a port probably on the coast of South-eastern Arabia, although the exact locality is in dispute.²

The ill-success of such an alliance with the wicked son of Ahab as announced (2 Chronicles 20:37) by Eliezer, the son of Dodavah—

¹Tarshish is, no doubt, the ancient Tartessus on the western coast of Spain, between the two mouths of the Guadalquivir. Its situation is indicated in Genesis 10:4, comp. Psalm 72:10; its commerce in Ezekiel 38:13; its export of silver, iron, tin, and lead in Jeremiah 10:9; Ezekiel 27:12, 25. The Palestinian harbor for Tarshish was Joppa (Jonah 1:3; 4:2). All this shows that the expedition from Ezion-Geber could not have been to Tarshish. But it was in "Tarshish ships," - a name which also otherwise occurs for a class of large merchantmen (like our "East Indiaman," or "ocean liner"), see Isaiah 2:16; 23:1, 14; 60:9. We can only suggest that the origin of the name "Tarshish ships" for these large vessels may have been that the first expedition to Ophir - indeed, the first maritime expedition of the Jews - was undertaken under the direction of Hiram, king of Tyre. But we know both from Scripture (comp. also Isaiah 23:1, 6, 10) and from classical writers that the trade to Tarshish was wholly in the hands of Tyre. Hiram would probably construct for the expedition to Ophir the same class of ships as those that traded to Tarshish - "Tarshish ships;" - and from and after that solitary expedition in the time of Solomon, all large merchant vessels may have borne in Judaea that name. The writer of the Book of Chronicles - or else some copyist - evidently knew nothing of a Jewish or Phoenician trade to Ophir, but very much of that to Tarshish, and so finding in the source from which he drew a reference to Tarshish ships and Ophir, he omitted the latter, and spoke of ships going to Tarshish.

²The other sites suggested are a port in India, or else one on the eastern coast of Africa.

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a prophet not otherwise mentioned. His prediction was verified

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when the allied fleet either suffered shipwreck or was destroyed in a storm. Jehoshaphat took the warning. When Ahaziah invited him to undertake a second expedition, in which (as seems implied in [1 Kings 22:49](#)) Israelitish mariners were to take a leading part—perhaps because the former failure was ascribed in the north to the unskillfulness of the Judaeans—the proposal was declined.³

The brief and inglorious reign of Ahaziah, the son and successor of Ahab, is said to have begun in the seventeenth year of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, and to have lasted two years ([1 Kings 22:51](#)). There is apparently here a slight chronological difficulty (comp. [2 Kings 3:1](#)), which is, however, explained by the circumstance that, according to a well-known Jewish principle, the years of reign were reckoned from the month Nisan—the Passover-month, with which the ecclesiastical year began—so that a reign which extended beyond that month, for however brief a period, would be computed as one of two years. Thus we conclude that the reign of Ahaziah in reality lasted little more than one year. The one great political event of that period is very briefly indicated, although fraught with grave consequences. From the opening words of [2 Kings](#)—which, as a book, should not have been separated from [1 Kings](#)⁴—we learn that the Moabites, who, since the time of David, had been tributary ([2 Samuel 8:2](#)), rebelled against Israel—after the death of Ahab.

It was probably due to the ill-health of Ahaziah that an attempt was not made to reduce them to obedience. For the king of Israel had fallen through “the lattice,” or between the grating, probably that which protected the opening of the window, in the upper chamber.⁵

In any case it seems unlikely that the fall was into the court beneath, but probably on to the covered gallery which ran round the court, like our modern verandahs. The consequences of the fall were most serious, although not immediately fatal. We cannot fail

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³A candid examination of [2 Chronicles 20:35-37](#) and of [1 Kings 22:49](#) conveys to my mind this conclusion. The two passages are supplementary, and not contradictory of each other.

⁴This was first done in the (Greek) rendering of the LXX. (there 3 and 4 Kings).

⁵The Jewish interpreters think of a grating in the floor by which light was admitted into the apartments beneath, or else of a winding stair which he had fallen down (see Mikraoth gedol. on the passage).

to recognize the paramount influence of the queen-mother Jezebel, when we find Ahaziah applying to the oracle of Baal-zebub in Ekron to know whether he would recover of his disease. Baal, “lord,” was the common name given by the Canaanites, the Phoenicians, the Syrians (Aramaeans), and Assyrians to their supreme deity. Markedly it is never applied to God in the Old Testament, or by believing Israelites. Among the Canaanites (in Palestine) and the Phoenicians the name was pronounced Ba’al (originally Ba’l); ⁶ in Aramaean it was Be’el; in Babylono-Assyrian Bel (comp. [Isaiah 46:1](#); [Jeremiah 50:2](#)).

The Baal-zebub, worshipped in Ekron ⁷ —the modern Akir ⁸ — and the most north-eastern of the five cities of the Philistines, E.N.E. from Jerusalem, was the Fly God, ⁹ who was supposed to send or to avert the plague of flies. ¹⁰ Like the great Apollos, who similarly sent and removed diseases, he was also consulted as an oracle.

[80] We should be greatly mistaken if we were to regard the proposed inquiry on the part of Ahaziah as only a personal, or even as an ordinary national sin. The whole course of this history has taught us that the reign of Ahab formed a decisive epoch in the development of Israel. The period between the murder of Nadab, the son of Jeroboam, and the accession of Omri, the father of Ahab, was merely intermediate and preparatory, the throne being occupied by a succession of adventurers, whose rule was only transitory. With

⁶Hence the names Hanniba’l, “the favor of Baal,” Esdruba’l, “the help of Baal,” and others.

⁷The reader who wishes to study the history of Ekron is directed to the following passages, which refer either to its geographical situation, its history, or its future: [Joshua 13:3](#); [15:11](#), [45](#), [46](#); [19:43](#); [Judges 1:18](#); [1 Samuel 5:10](#); [6:1-18](#); [7:14](#); [17:52](#); [Jeremiah 25:20](#); [Amos 1:8](#); [Zephaniah 2:4](#); but especially [Zechariah 9:5](#), [7](#). For its later history see [1 Maccabees 10:89](#).

⁸The reader who wishes to study the history of Ekron is directed to the following passages, which refer either to its geographical situation, its history, or its future: [Joshua 13:3](#); [15:11](#), [45](#), [46](#); [19:43](#); [Judges 1:18](#); [1 Samuel 5:10](#); [6:1-18](#); [7:14](#); [17:52](#); [Jeremiah 25:20](#); [Amos 1:8](#); [Zephaniah 2:4](#); but especially [Zechariah 9:5](#), [7](#). For its later history see [1 Maccabees 10:89](#).

⁹It is a mistake to identify Baal-zebub with the Beel-zebub (for this is the correct reading) of [Matthew 10:25](#). For the explanation of that term see *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 1., p. 648

¹⁰The same deity was worshipped by the Greeks as Zeus apomyios, and in Rome as Myiagros.

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Omri, or rather with his son Ahab, a new period of firm and stable government began, and politically it was characterized by reconciliation and alliance with the neighboring kingdom of Judah, and with such foreign enterprises as have been noticed in the course of this narrative. But even more important was the religious crisis which marked the reign of Ahab. Although Jeroboam had separated himself and his people from the Divinely ordered service of Jehovah, as practiced in Jerusalem, he had, at least in profession, not renounced the national religion, but only worshipped the God of Israel under the symbol of the golden calf, and in places where worship was not lawful. But Ahab had introduced the service of Baal and of Astarte as the religion of the State. True, this progress in apostasy was in reality only the logical sequence of the sin of Jeroboam, and hence is frequently mentioned in connection with it in the sacred narrative. Nevertheless, the difference between the two is marked, and with Ahab began that apostasy which led to the final destruction of the northern kingdom, and to the trackless dispersion of the ten tribes. In this light we can understand such exceptional mission and ministry as those of Elijah and Elisha, such a scene as the call to decision on Mount Carmel, and such an event as that about to be related.

Viewed in this manner, the royal embassy sent to Ekron to consult “the fly god,” was really a challenge to Jehovah, whose prophet Elijah was in the land, and as such it must bring sharpest punishment to all involved in it. It was fitting, so to speak, that, in contrast to the messengers of the earthly king, Jehovah should commission His angel,¹¹ and through him bid His prophet defeat the object of Ahaziah’s mission.

As directed, Elijah went to meet the king’s messengers. His first words exposed—not for the sake of Ahaziah, but for that of Israel the real character of the act. Was it because there was no God in Israel—that they went to inquire of the “fly god” of Ekron? But the authority of Jehovah would be vindicated. Guilty messengers of an apostate king, they were to bring back to him Jehovah’s sentence of death. Whether or not they recognized the stern prophet of Jehovah, the impression which his sudden, startling appearance and his words

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¹¹The word “messenger” in Hebrew is the same as that for “angel.”

made on them was such that they at once returned to Samaria, and bore to the astonished king the message they had received.

It is as difficult to believe that the king did not guess, as that his messengers had not recognized him who had spoken such words. The man with the (black) hairy garment, girt about with a leathern girdle, must have been a figure familiar to the memory, or at least to the imagination, of every one in Israel, although it may not have suited these messengers—true Orientals in this also—to name him to the king, just as by slightly altering the words of the prophet ¹² they now sought to cast the whole responsibility of the mission on Ahaziah. But when in answer to the king's further inquiry, ¹³ they gave him the well-known description of the Tishbite, Ahaziah at once recognized the prophet, and prepared such measures as in his short-sightedness he supposed would meet what he regarded as the challenge of Elijah, or as would at least enable him to punish the daring prophet.

We repeat, it was to be a contest, and that a public one, between the power of Israel's king and the might of Jehovah. The first measure of the king was to send to Elijah "a captain of fifty with his fifty." There cannot be any reasonable doubt that this was with hostile intent. This appears not only from the words of the angel in [verse 15](#), but from the simple facts of the case. For what other reason could Ahaziah have sent a military detachment of fifty under a captain, if not either to defeat some hostile force and constrain obedience, or else to execute some hostile act? The latter is indeed the most probable view, and it seems implied in the reassuring words which the angel afterwards spoke to Elijah ([v. 15](#)).

[82] The military expedition had no difficulty in finding the prophet. He neither boastfully challenged, nor yet did he fearfully shrink from the approach of the armed men, but awaited them in his well-known place of abode on Mount Carmel. There is in one sense an almost ludicrous, and yet in another a most majestic contrast between the fifty soldiers and their captain, and the one unarmed man whom they had come to capture. Presently this contrast was, so

¹²"Thou sendest to inquire" ([ver. 6](#)), instead of Elijah's "ye go to inquire" ([ver. 3](#)).

¹³Literally "the judgment." If I mistake not, there is in our northern dialect also such an expression as "the right" of a man - in the sense of not only his bearing, but that which is behind it.

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to speak, reversed when, in answer to the royal command to Elijah, as delivered by the captain, the prophet appealed to his King, and thus clearly stated the terms of the challenge between the two, whose commission the captain and he respectively bore. “And if a man of God I, ¹⁴ let fire come down from heaven.”

Terrible as this answer was, we can perceive its suitableness, nay, its necessity, since it was to decide, and that publicly and by way of judgment (and no other decision would have been suitable in a contest between man and God), whose was the power and the kingdom—and this at the great critical epoch of Israel’s history. It is not necessary here to emphasize the difference between the Old and the New Testament - although rather in mode of manifestation than in substance—as we recall the warning words of our LORD, when two of His disciples would have commanded fire from heaven to consume those Samaritans who would not receive them ([Luke 9:54](#)). The two cases are not in any sense parallel, as our previous remarks must have shown; nor can we suppose the possibility of any parallel case in a dispensation where “the kingdom of God cometh not with observation” ([Luke 17:20](#)), “but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” ([1 Corinthians 2:4](#)).

At the same time we must not overlook that the “captain and his fifty” ¹⁵ were not merely unsympathetic instruments to carry out their master’s behest, but, as the language seems to imply, shared his spirit.

Perhaps we may conjecture that if Elijah had come with them, he would, if unyielding, never have reached Samaria alive (comp. [ver. 15](#)). This hostile and at the same time contemptuous spirit appears still more clearly when, after the destruction of the first captain and his fifty by fire from heaven, not only a second similar expedition was dispatched, but with language even more imperious: “Quickly come down!” It could not be otherwise than that the same fate would

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¹⁴The original has here some noteworthy peculiarities. First: the captain addresses Elijah as “man of the Elohim” (with the definite article) - that is, of the national Deity of Israel - not Jehovah. Secondly: Elijah in taking up the challenge does not use the term Jehovah - which would have been unfitting in this connection, but in repeating the words of the captain he omits the definite article before Elohim: “And if man of Elohim I.”

¹⁵According to ancient arrangement the host was divided into companies of 1000, of 100, and of 50, each with its leader (comp. [Numbers 31:14, 48](#); [1 Samuel 8:12](#)).

overtake the second as the first expedition. The significance, we had almost said the inward necessity, of the judgment consisted in this, that it was a public manifestation of Jehovah as the living and true God, even as the king's had been a public denial thereof. It seems not easy to understand how Ahaziah dispatched a third—nay, even how he had sent a second company. ¹⁶

Some have seen in it the petulance of a sick man, or else of an Eastern despot, who would not brook being thwarted. Probably in some manner he imputed the failure to the bearing of the captains. And on the third occasion, the tone of the commander of the expedition was certainly different from that of his predecessors, although not in the direction which the king would have wished. It would almost seem as if the third captain had gone up alone—without his fifty (v. 13). In contrast to the imperious language of the other two, he approached the representative of God with lowliest gesture of a suppliant, ¹⁷ while his words of entreaty that his life and that of his men should be spared ¹⁸ indicated that, so far from attempting a conflict, he fully owned the power of Jehovah. Accordingly the prophet was directed to go with him, as he had nothing to fear from him. ¹⁹ Arrived in the presence of the king, Elijah neither softened nor retracted anything in his former message. Ahaziah had appealed to the “fly-god” of Ekron, and he would experience, and all Israel would learn, the vanity and folly of such trust. “So he died according to the word of Jehovah which Elijah had spoken.”

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Ahaziah did not leave a son. He was succeeded by his brother Jehoram, ²⁰ or Joram, as we shall prefer to call him, to distinguish him from the king of Judah of the same name. Before entering on

¹⁶It is surely a foolish as well as an idle question, how the king had learned the destruction of these companies. Is it supposed that Elijah was quite alone on Mount Carmel, without any disciples or followers - or that such expeditions would not attract sufficient notice to lead any one to inquire into the fate of those who went to Carmel, but never returned?

¹⁷Canon Rawlinson remarks on the words, “fell on his knees:” “Not as a worshipper, but as a suppliant.” (Speaker’s Commentary, ad loc.)

¹⁸Canon Rawlinson (u.s.) aptly remarks that the phrase: “Let my life... be precious,” “is exactly the converse of our common expression, ‘to hold life cheap.’”

¹⁹The reference here seems to the captain, not to King Ahaziah.

²⁰The expression (1:17): “in the second year of Jehoram” marks some corruption in the text, which we have not now the means of clearing up. The same corruption - or rather probably the attempt of the copyist to remove it - appears in the chronological notice of 1

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the history of his reign we must consider, however briefly, the history of Elijah and of Elisha, which is so closely intertwined with that of Israel. ²¹

The record opens with the narrative of Elijah's translation—and this not merely as introductory to Elisha's ministry, but as forming, especially at that crisis, an integral part of such a "prophetic" history of Israel as that before us. The circumstances attending the removal of Elijah are as unique as those connected with the first appearance and mission of the prophet. We mark in both the same suddenness, the same miraculousness, the same symbolic meaning. Evidently the event was intended to stand forth in the sky of Israel as a fiery sign not only for that period, but for all that were to follow. And that this history was so understood of old, appears even from this opening sentence in what we cannot help regarding as a very unspiritual, or at least inadequate, sketch of Elijah's ministry in the apocryphal book of Jesus the Son of Sirach ([Ecclesiastes 48:1](#)): "Then stood up Elias the prophet as fire, and his word burned like a lamp." But while we feel that the circumstances attending his translation were in strict accordance with the symbolical aspect of all that is recorded in Scripture of his life and mission, we must beware of regarding these circumstances as representing merely symbols without outward reality in historic fact. Here the narrative will best speak for itself.

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The rule of Ahaziah had closed with the judgment of the LORD pronounced through Elijah, and another reign not less wicked—that [Kings 22:51](#), as compared with [2 Kings 8:16](#). It has been sought to remove the difficulty by assuming a coregency of either five or two years of Jehoram, king of Judah, with his father Jehoshaphat, and this suggestion has been indicated in the chronological table appended to Vol. 5. of this History. But there really is no evidence of such coregency, and much against the assumption of it - while it would still leave some difficulties unremoved. Under these circumstances it is critically more honest and better to regard these notices as the outcome and sequence of some corruption in the text.

²¹Their history may be the more briefly treated in this volume, as a special book on "Elisha the Prophet," by the present writer, has been published by the Religious Tract Society.

of Joram ²²—had begun when the summons to glory came to the prophet of fire.

This latter was known, not only to Elijah himself, and to Elisha, but even to “the sons of the prophets.” We do not suppose that Elisha, or still less “the sons of the prophets,” knew that “Jehovah would cause Elijah to ascend in a storm-wind to heaven”—nay, perhaps Elijah himself may not have been aware of the special circumstances that would attend his removal. But the text ([vers. 3, 5, 9](#)) clearly shows that the immediate departure of Elijah was expected, while the language also implies that some extraordinary phenomenon was to be connected with it. At the same time we are not warranted to infer, either that there had been a special Divine revelation to inform all of the impending removal of Elijah, nor, on the other hand, that Elijah had gone on that day to each of the places where “the sons of the prophets” dwelt in common, in order to inform and prepare them for what was to happen. ²³

[86] As Holy Scripture tells it, the day began by Elijah and Elisha leaving Gilgal—not the place of that name between the Jordan and Jericho, so sacred in Jewish history ([Joshua 4:19; 5:10](#)), but another previously referred to ([Deuteronomy 11:30](#)) as the great trysting-place for the final consecration of the tribes after their entrance into the land of promise. We remember that Saul had gathered Israel there before the great defeat of the Philistines, when by his rash presumption the king of Israel had shown his moral unfitness for the kingdom ([1 Samuel 13:12-15](#)). ²⁴

The town lay in the mountains to the south-west of Shiloh, within the territory of Ephraim. The site is now occupied by the modern village Filjilieh. A walk of eight or nine miles due south would bring them “down” to the lower-lying Bethel, whither, as Elijah said, God had sent him. Alike Gilgal and Bethel were seats of the sons of the

²²Probably it was in the beginning of the reign of Joram. We repeat that we prefer calling him so for distinction from the contemporary king of Judah of the same name. The two names Joram and Jehoram are interchangeably used. In [2 Kings 1:17](#), and [2 Chronicles 22:6](#), alike the kings of Israel and of Judah are called Jehoram; in [2 Kings 9:15, 17, 21-24](#) (in the Hebrew text), the king of Israel is called Jehoram; in [2 Kings 8:21, 23, 24](#) the king of Judah is called Joram; while on comparing [2 Kings 8:16](#) with 29 we find that the two names are inverted.

²³Obvious reasons against either of these views will occur to every thoughtful reader,

²⁴Some have, however, localized this scene in the Gilgal near Jericho.

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prophets, and the two are also conjoined as centers of idolatry in prophetic denunciation ([Hosea 4:15](#); [Amos 4:4](#); [5:5](#)).

Perhaps on that very ground the two were chosen for the residence of the prophets. The motive which induced Elijah to ask Elisha to leave him has been variously explained. We cannot persuade ourselves that it was from humility, or else because he doubted whether the company of Elisha was in accordance with the will of God—since in either case he would not have yielded to the mere importunity of his disciple. As in analogous cases, we regard it rather ([Ruth 1:8, 11, 12](#); [Luke 9:57-62](#); [John 21:15-17](#)), as a means of testing fidelity. There are occasions when all seems to indicate that modest and obedient retirement from the scene of prominent action and witness, perhaps even from the dangers that may be connected with it, is our duty. But he who would do work for the LORD must not stand afar off, but be determined and bold in taking his place, nor must he be deterred from abiding at his post by what may seem cross-Providences. Again, we cannot help feeling that the visit of Elijah to the schools of the prophets at Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho, must have been intended as a test to them; while at the same time it was somehow connected with his approaching departure. This the sons of the prophets evidently perceived, in what manner we know not. But any formal leave-taking would seem entirely incongruous with Elijah's whole bearing—especially on that day; and it is inconsistent with the question to Elisha: "Knowest thou that Jehovah will take away thy master from thy head today?" The word "today" may, indeed, be taken in a more general sense, as equivalent to "at this time,"²⁵ but even so the question would have had no meaning if Elijah had come to say "farewell."

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At each of these places, when Elijah and Elisha left it in company—in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho—the testing suggestion that Elisha should tarry behind, was repeated; on each occasion it was answered by the determined assertion that he would not leave his master. On each occasion also Elisha was met by the same question of those whose morbid curiosity, rather than intelligent interest, had

²⁵So in [1 Samuel 12:17](#); [2 Kings 4:8](#); [Job 1:6](#) - in the last two instances, rendered "a day" in our Authorised Version.

been stirred, and on each he answered ²⁶ in manner to show how little inward sympathy there was between him and those who would have intruded themselves into the sanctuary of his soul. At last fifty of their number followed to view afar off—not to see how the two would cross the Jordan, but to observe what should happen. It need scarcely be added that, as in all similar attempts to see the Divine, they could not succeed in their purpose.

[88] And now the two had gone down the bank of the Jordan, and stood by the edge of its waters. Elijah took off his loose upper garment, the symbol of his prophetic office, and wrapping it together as if to make it a staff (comp. [Exodus 14:16](#)), smote with it the waters. And lo, as when the Ark of God had preceded Israel ([Joshua 4:23](#)), the waters divided, and they passed over dry shod. Surely there could not have been more apt teaching for Elisha and for all future times, that the power of wonder-working rested not with the prophet individually, but was attached to his office, of which this rough raiment was the badge. The same truth was conveyed by what passed on the other side. There the reward—or, perhaps we should rather say, the result of his spiritual perseverance awaited Elisha. But although Elijah asked him to say what he should do for him before their parting, it was not his to grant the request. No one would imagine that Elisha's entreaty for a double measure of his master's spirit was prompted by the desire that his ministry should greatly surpass that of Elijah, although even in that case it would not be warrantable to attribute such a wish to anything like ambition. "Earnestly covet the best gifts," is a sound and spiritual principle; and Elisha might, without any thought of himself, seek a double portion of his master's spirit, in view of the great work before him. But perhaps it may be safer, although we make no assertion on the point, to think here of the right of the firstborn, to whom the law assigned a twofold portion ([Deuteronomy 21:17](#)). In that case Elisha would, in asking a double portion of his spirit, have intended to entreat the right of succession. And with this the reply of Elijah

²⁶Bahr thinks that the question meant: "What shall become of us, but especially of thee when thy master is taken from thee?" and the reply of Elisha: "I know and consider it as well as you - only, submit to the will of God, and do not make my heart heavy." I cannot take this view of it, any more than that Elisha wished to enjoin silence because Elijah in his humility would not have his translation spoken of (Keil).

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accords. Elisha had asked a hard thing, which it was not in any man's power to grant. But Elijah could give him a sign by which to know whether God designated and would qualify him to be his successor. If he saw it all, when Elijah was taken from him, then—but only then—would it be as he had asked.

Viewing Elisha's request in that light, we can have no difficulty in understanding this reply. And in general, spiritual perception is ever the condition of spiritual work. We do not suppose that if all the fifty sons of the prophets, who had followed afar off, had gathered around, they would have perceived any of the circumstances attending the "taking away" of Elijah, any more than the prophet's servant at Dothan saw the heavenly hosts that surrounded and defended Elisha (2 Kings 6:14-17), till his eyes had been miraculously opened; or than the companions of St. Paul saw the Person or heard the words of Him Who arrested the apostle on the way to Damascus.

And as we think of it, there was special fitness in the sign given to Elisha. It is not stated anywhere in Holy Scripture that Elijah ascended in a fiery chariot to which fiery horses were attached—but that this miraculous manifestation parted between them two, as it were, enwrapping Elijah; and that the prophet went up in a storm-wind (2 Kings 2:11). The fiery chariot and the horses were the emblem of Jehovah of Hosts.²⁷ To behold this emblem was pledge of perceiving the manifestation of God, unseen by the world, and of being its herald and messenger, as Elijah had been. Beyond the fact that Elijah so went up to heaven,²⁸ and that the symbolic manifestation of Jehovah of Hosts was visible [89]

²⁷The same symbolic presentation of the Lord in His manifestation appears in Psalm 104:3, 4; Isaiah 66:15; Habakkuk 3:8.

²⁸The Greek rendering of the LXX. is (...), "as it were," or "like" unto heaven. Whether this rendering was from an honest understanding of the text or due to rationalistic attempts, cannot now be decided. It must, however, be admitted that the Hebrew will bear the rendering: "towards heaven," as much as that of the A.V.: "into heaven" (comp. Judges 20:40; Psalm 107:26; Jeremiah 51:53). The Book of Sirach, though it says nothing about the ascent into heaven, seems to us to imply this view (Ecclesiasticus 48:9). On the other hand, Josephus sets forth that he disappeared like Enoch, and that nobody knew that they died (Antiq. 9. 2, 2). The ancient Rabbis mostly held that Elijah did not taste death, but went alive into heaven (Moed K. 26a; Ber. R. 21; Bemid R. 12), while according to others (perhaps by way of controversy against the Christian doctrine of the Ascension), Elijah did not at once ascend into heaven (Sukk. 5a, beginning - expressly, and Ber. R. 25

to Elisha—Holy Scripture does not tell us anything.

And it seems both wiser and more reverent not to speculate further on questions connected with the removal of Elijah, the place whither, and in what state he was “translated.” If we put aside such inquiries, since we possess not the means of pursuing them to their conclusions—there is nothing in the simple Scriptural narrative, however miraculous, which transcends the general sphere of the miraculous, or that would mark this as so exceptional an instance that the ordinary principles for viewing the miracles of Scripture would not apply to it.

[90] And Elisha saw it. As if to render doubt of its symbolic meaning impossible, the mantle, which was the prophet’s badge, had fallen from Elijah, and was left as an heirloom to his successor. His first impulse was to give way to his natural feelings, caused alike by his bereavement and by veneration for his departed master, “My father, my father!” His next, to realize the great lesson of faith, that, though the prophet had departed, the prophet’s God forever remained: “The chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!” We would suggest that the words, “And he saw him no more” ([ver. 12](#)), imply that he gave one upward look where Elijah had been parted from him, and where the fiery glow had now died out in the sky. Then, in token of mourning, he rent his clothes in two pieces, that is, completely, from above downwards. But while thus lamenting the loss of his loved master, he immediately entered on the mission to which he had succeeded, and that with an energy of faith, combined with a reverent acknowledgment of the work of his predecessor, which ought for all time to serve as a lesson to the Church. Bereavement and sorrow should not make us forget, rather recall to us, that Jehovah our God liveth; regret and a sense of loss should not dull, rather quicken us for work, in the name of God. Nor yet should the feeling that we have a call to work, dim our remembrance of those who have gone before us. We are all only servants successively taking up and continuing the task of those who have passed into glory; but he is our Master, Whose is the work, and Who liveth and reigneth forever.

- as it seems to me by implication). Our remarks are certainly not intended to cast any doubt on the Scripture narrative, but to enforce the caution not to enter into speculation beyond its express statements.

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—And so Elisha took up the mantle that had fallen from Elijah. It was not a badge of distinction, but of work and of office. With this mantle he retraced his steps to the bank of Jordan. One upward glance: “Where is Jehovah, the God of Elijah—even He?” ²⁹ spoken not in doubt nor hesitation, but, on the contrary, in assurance of his own commission from heaven, with all that it implied—and, as he smote the waters with the mantle of Elijah, they once more parted, and Elisha went over. [91]

So shall the waters of difficulty, nay, the cold flood of death itself, part, if we smite in faith with the heaven-given garment; so shall the promise of God ever stand sure, and God be true to His Word; and so may we go forward undauntedly, though humbly and prayerfully, to whatever work He gives us to do.

²⁹Let us first be quite clear that the words do not imply any doubt on the part of Elisha as to the result. Had he doubted, he would certainly have failed, then and ever afterwards. Next, let us dismiss, as worthy only of Rabbinic exegesis, the idea that the twofold mention of Elisha’s smiting the waters implies a twofold smiting, of which the second alone was successful. But the wording of the Hebrew is not quite plain. The A.V. represents an attempt to reproduce the Massoretic punctuation which connects the closing words, “Even He,” with the next clause, “and he smote the waters.” The Massorah represents the traditional mode of vocalizing the Hebrew text, punctuating it, and fixing the proper readings. Its immense importance for the understanding of the text can scarcely be overstated.

Chapter 8: Elisha the Prophet

Return to Jericho—Acknowledgment by the Sons of the Prophets—Healing of the Waters of Jericho—Judgment on the Young Men at Bethel—Settlement in Samaria

(2 Kings 2:15-25)

THE history which now follows reads almost like a chronicle of Elisha. More correctly it may be described as the prophetic history of that period. With the removal of Elijah, Elisha had begun his ministry, the test of its reality having been the parting of the waters of Jordan. The next three incidents must be considered as preparatory to his prophetic activity; the first, as regarded his public acknowledgment by the sons of the prophets (2 Kings 2:15-18); the second and third that by the people, when Elisha publicly appeared as the instrument of God—in the one case, for mercy (vv. 19-22), in the other, for judgment (vv. 23, 24). Having thus established his authority, Elisha immediately afterwards assumed the place of God's representative in the affairs of Israel.

1. As we look more closely into it, a special significance attached to each of the three preliminary events just referred to. In the first it was seen that Elisha occupied precisely the same position of superiority as Elijah over the ordinary "sons of the prophets," as also the folly of their attempted interference in his work. Henceforth they would be unquestioning, obedient instruments of his behests, and this was the rightful position alike for them and as regarded the work of Elisha. According to our modern notions the circumstances may seem strange, but they are in agreement with the condition of the times and with the degree of spiritual understanding possessed even by the sons of the prophets. As Elisha returned alone, the "sons of the prophets," judging that the spirit of Elijah rested upon him, perhaps because they had watched as the waters of Jordan parted when he smote them—went to meet the prophet and to do him

homage. And yet they began by urging a strange request—perhaps because notions such as they expressed were popularly entertained (as by Obadiah [1 Kings 18:12](#)) in regard to the influence of the Spirit on the prophets generally, or it may be only on the great prophet of fire. Or perhaps they imagined that Elijah might be in a trance or dead in some valley or on some mountain-height; or it may have been only from morbid curiosity to learn something more of what had happened. In any case their proposal marked an entire lack of spiritual understanding and sympathy.

There were fifty strong men among them, capable of enduring any fatigue, and equal to any work or burden. Might these not go to search whether peradventure the Spirit of Jehovah had not uplifted and then cast Elijah into some remote corner of that desolate and rocky region near Jericho? ¹

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To men who entertained such notions, it would have been impossible to communicate even what Elisha had witnessed, still less its predicted import to himself. Accordingly he contented himself with a simple negative to their request. And this should have taught them what was the first duty as well as qualification alike of a prophet and of the sons of the prophet: simple, unquestioning obedience. But, like many of us, in the process of our personal sanctification, they had to learn it by painful experience. Their insistence at last made him “ashamed,” ² since it might seem as if he felt less concern for his master than they, and he yielded to their importunity.

When after three days unavailing search they returned to Jericho, he reminded them of his first refusal—although for reasons which need not be repeated, he did not even then communicate to them what he had witnessed. But ever afterwards a spirit of willing submission to Elisha prevailed among the sons of the prophets.

¹It will be remembered that Christian legend has placed the scene of the temptation in that neighborhood - it need scarcely be said, contrary not only to the requirements of the Gospel narratives, but to the facts recorded about our Lord's ministry in Galilee immediately after His baptism.

²Bahr would render the Hebrew expression by “till he was disappointed,” viz., in his hope of dissuading them. But all the passages in the Psalms to which he refers mean “to be ashamed,” although in consequence of being disappointed in hope. In the other passages quoted by that critic ([Judges 3:25](#); [2 Kings 8:11](#)), the term could not possibly mean, disappointed in hope.

2. The next requisite seemed to make such public manifestation of his prophetic authority as would secure for his message the faith and submission of the people. Besides, this was necessary in the contest with Baal, whose worship, if it had been finally established, would, so to speak, have denationalized Israel, even as it ultimately led to that banishment which has not yet been recalled. It was of [94] absolute importance that the presence of Jehovah should appear, as it were, in a concrete form, through a living representative, who should be quick to bring blessing or judgment, and so to demonstrate what he proclaimed, in the only manner which the men of that time could understand. This may also in part explain why the mission of Elijah and Elisha differed in so many respects from that of the other prophets. And, as we farther consider it, we have evidence that it accomplished its purpose. We remember how once and again Ahab himself was arrested through the influence of Elijah. At first the reign of Ahaziah had seemed a return to the worst days of Ahab. But Elijah's announcement of his doom, together with the symbolic judgment on those two captains of fifty who had gone to capture the prophet, had had their effect.

Although Joram "wrought evil in the sight of Jehovah," it was "not like his father, and like his mother;" and we are expressly told that "he removed the pillar of Baal which his father had made" ([2 Kings 3:2](#)). This does not mean that he either destroyed the Temple of Baal, or even that pillar—perhaps we should rather call it a column or block. Probably all that was done was to remove this great memorial-pillar of Baal from the public position which it had occupied in the square, or in front, or in the gardens, of the palace, or else before the Temple of Baal, and to place it within the precincts of the latter ([2 Kings 10:27](#)). But even this implied that the worship of Baal was no longer the national religion—although the alternative was only between it and the worship instituted by Jeroboam. From this general estimate of the public influence exercised by the prophet, we turn to consider more fully the first miracle by which he established his prophetic authority - very significantly in an act of blessing. The men of----Jericho---interceded with Elisha—probably through their representatives—on behalf of their city. Every one might see how pleasant was its site: the very Paradise of Palestine, its rich soil basking under a tropical sun, yet shaded by palm, mulberry, and fig-trees,

while the air was refreshed by perennial springs of bright water, and perfumed by the precious balsam-plants, the scent of which the wind would sometimes carry as far as out to sea. But all this luxuriance was marred by the character of the water. At a distance of about a mile from the ancient site of Jericho (not from the modern village which represents the ancient town), “there is a large and beautiful fountain of sweet and pleasant water;”³ the so-called Ain-es-Sultan.

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From its situation this must have furnished the water-supply for ancient Jericho, and hence have been the spring which Elisha healed, of which there is this farther confirmation that the other springs in the neighborhood are to this day mostly brackish. To this character of the water the inhabitants ascribed, and as it appears not without reason, the circumstance of the frequent miscarriages which alike diminished the population and the flocks.⁴

Remembering the symbolic import of the mission of Elisha, as before explained, we should expect the prophet to give heed to so humble a complaint—for such it was, rather than a request. The means used were in accordance with the symbolic character of all else. The healing of the waters, although performed through the prophet, was the direct act of Jehovah (v. 21). Accordingly, as everything connected with the service of the LORD, the cruse to be used must be “new” ([Numbers 19:2](#)), dedicated to God alone. And the direct means of the “healing” was “salt,” borne in this new cruse. Salt was added to everything offered, as being the emblem of incorruption, and hence of purification. And so they went up to the very spring of the waters, and there, not as of himself, but in the name of the LORD, Elisha “healed” the waters by a symbolic action, resembling that of Moses of old ([Exodus 15:25](#)).

Many lessons of deep significance are suggested by this miracle: most notably, how the salt borne in the new cruse when applied to the spring of the waters healed them—hence-forth, completely, and forever; and again, how in the healing three things were combined—the use of means (in themselves ineffectual), the word of the prophet, and the power of Jehovah. But most of all, does it help us to realize

³Compare Robinson’s Researches, Vol. 2, pp. 283, 284.

⁴This is the meaning of vv. 19 and 21, and not as in our A.V. The R.V. is misleading, as conveying that it was the ground that miscarried.

how God is a present help in time of trouble—if only we seek Him in the manner which He appoints.

3. Yet another attestation of Elisha's prophetic authority was needed. This time not in blessing, but in judgment—stern,

[96] quick, unrelenting. Those who despised his commission, or rather defied the power that was behind it, must learn in terrible experience its reality. And that this judgment at the beginning of Elisha's ministry was so understood, appears from this circumstance that his ministry never afterwards seems to have encountered active opposition.

Once more the prophet was pursuing his lonely way where last he had walked in company with his master. For it will be remembered, that the last station at which Elijah and Elisha tarried on their way to Jericho and the Jordan was Bethel. And this also is significant. As regards Elisha, because it must have called up most solemn thoughts, especially now when he was entering upon his work; and not less so as regarded the Bethelites who had last seen Elisha in company with Elijah just before his ascent. It did recall to them the last appearance among them of the two, but only to make mockery of the event connected with it. But this was to scoff alike at the dead and at the living prophet, and also at the great power of Jehovah. Thus it was really open defiance of God, all the more inexcusable that it was entirely unprovoked, and that it offended against the law of man almost as much as against that of God. For it was not only a breach of hospitality, but it discarded that reverence for authority specially of a religious kind, which has at all times been a characteristic feature in Eastern life.

Slowly had Elisha ascended those 3000 feet which lead up from the low plain of Jericho to the highlands where Bethel lies.⁵

⁵Although we do not agree with Captain Conder (*Tent-work in Palestine*, Vol. 2, pp. 106-108), that the Bethel of the worship of Jeroboam was, as mediaeval tradition represents it, on Mount Gerizim, we cannot help transferring to our pages some lines of his very graphic description of our Bethel: "Bethel at the present day is one of the most desolate-looking places in Palestine; not from lack of water.... All the neighborhood is of grey, bare stone, or white chalk. The miserable fields are fenced in with stone walls, the hovels are rudely built of stone, the hill to the east is of hard rock, with only a few scattered fig-gardens... The place seems as it were turned to stone."

He was climbing the last height—probably up the defile of Wady Suweinit, where the hills above still bear marks of the extensive forest that once covered them—when he encountered a band of “young men,” who, as the text seems to imply, had gone forth to meet him. They were not “little children” (according to our A.V.), but young men, as we infer from the use of the same expression in the case of Solomon ([1 Kings 3:7](#)), when he was about twenty years old, and the application of a similar, even stronger, designation to the youthful advisers of Rehoboam. ⁶

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And their presence there meant a deliberate purpose. We have no means of ascertaining how they may have learned the approach of Elisha, or come to know that the great prophet, whom the fifty strong men had sought in vain, had “gone up,” even although they may have attached to this only the vaguest notions. But as the taunt, “Baldhead,” was undoubtedly a term of reproach, in whatever sense they may have used it, ⁷ so the cry “Go up, go up!” with which they followed him, seems to us a mocking allusion to the ascent of Elijah. ⁸

In the spirit that prompted the words of Moses and Aaron ([Exodus 16:6-8](#)), and of Peter ([Acts 5:3, 4](#)), not, we feel assured, in that of personal revenge, Elisha turned round and pronounced on them that doom which soon afterwards ⁹ overtook them in a manner so strange that it seems to have been specially intended to attract

⁶In the present instance, the expression would be equivalent to what in similar circumstances an older man might contemptuously use: a set of boys.

⁷It is used in different application in the following passages: [Leviticus 13:43; 21:5; Numbers 6:5; Isaiah 3:17; 15:2](#).

⁸It has been contended that the expression refers only to Elisha’s “going up” to Bethel; but it is exactly that which is used of the ascent of Elijah, and it explains alike the temper of those young men, and the judgment that overtook them.

⁹It is impossible to decide whether the calamity happened at once or a little while afterwards. But it should be noticed that it was not Elisha who slew those forty-two youths, but the LORD in His Providence, just as it had been Jehovah, not the prophet, who had healed the waters of Jericho.

public attention. ¹⁰ For although the exceeding danger from bears, especially when irritated, is frequently referred to in Scripture, ¹¹ [98] and the large number (forty-two) slain, not eaten, by the two she-bears, indicates how many youths had combined to go forth for the purpose of mocking Elisha, yet so extensive a calamity from such a cause was so unusual and must have spread such wide mourning as to draw universal attention to the ministry of Elisha.

We can scarcely suppose that Elisha tarried in Bethel. In pursuance of his object publicly to declare himself the successor of Elijah, he passed on to Mount Carmel, where Elijah had been during the latter part of his ministry, and thence returned to Samaria to be in readiness for his work.

¹⁰It may here be noticed that, if the event had not really taken place, the inventor would have ascribed the destruction of the mocking youths to some less startling cause, say to pestilence, or the sword, or else to a sudden and direct interposition from heaven.

¹¹Compare here such passages as [1 Samuel 17:34](#); [2 Samuel 17:8](#); [Proverbs 17:12](#); [28:15](#); [Daniel 7:5](#); [Hosea 13:8](#); [Amos 5:19](#).

Chapter 9: Jehoshaphat, (Fourth) King of Judah—Joram, (Tenth) King of Israel

[99]

The Allied Expedition against Moab—Recent Discovery of “the Moabite Stone”—Lessons of its Inscription—The March through the Wilderness of Edom—Want of Water—Interview with Elisha—Divine Deliverance—Defeat of Moab and Advance of the Allies—The Siege of Kir-haraseth—Mesha offers up his Son—Withdrawal of the Allies

(2 Kings 3:5-27.)

THE first public act of Elisha’s wider ministry is connected with an event of which the most strange and unlooked-for confirmation has been brought to light within the last few years. When in August, 1868, the Rev. F. Klein, of the Church Missionary Society, was traveling in Moab, his attention was directed by a friendly Sheik to a black basalt stone, about three feet ten inches in height, two feet in width, and fourteen and a half inches in thickness. The stone bore an inscription of thirty-four straight lines (about one and a quarter inches apart), which on learned investigation was found to be in the ancient Phoenician characters. The place where this memorial-stone, or column, was found was Diban, the ancient Dibon, the northern capital of Moab, north of the river Arnon. So far as can be judged from the shapeless mass of ruins (comp. [Jeremiah 48:18](#)) that cover the twin hills on which the ancient city had stood, surrounded by a wall, “it was quite within the old city walls; near what, we presume, was the gateway, close to where the road has crossed it.”¹ Whether it had originally stood there, is another and not easily answered question.²

Before referring to the important evidence derived from this discovery, we shall in a few sentences, give the melancholy history of

¹Canon Tristram, *The Land of Moab*, p. 134.

²Tristram, *u.s.*

this stone. It may teach us a lesson about “our unhappy divisions.” The unexpected discovery of this stone led, in the first place, to jealousies for its coveted possession among the European communities in Jerusalem. In the end, in their eagerness to make as much profit as was possible out of these contentions, the Arabs quarreled among themselves - and broke up the stone. Happily, most of the fragments have been secured, and some “squeezes” on paper had previously been taken, so that all the important parts of the inscription can be read, and have—with but slight variations—been interpreted by

[100] critics of different countries.³

Perhaps it may be convenient here to put down such parts of the inscription as are of importance to our present purpose, adding afterwards brief comments in explanation. The inscription begins as follows (we mark the original lines):—

1. I Mesha am son of Chemoshgad, King of Moab, the
2. Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab thirty years and I reign-
3. ed after my father. And I erected this stone to Chemosh at Kirkha [a stone of]
4. [sa] lvation, for he saved me from all despoilers, and made me see my desire upon all my enemies, upon Om-
5. [r] i, king of Israel. He afflicted Moab many days, for Chemosh was angry with his count-
6. [r] y. His son succeeded him, and he also said, I will afflict Moab. In my days he said [Let us go]
7. And I will see my desire on him and his house. And Israel [said], I will destroy with an everlasting destruction. Now Omri took (had taken) the land
8. Medeba and....⁴ where I have adopted those supplemented by previous writers. Comp. Sayce, *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, pp. 91-93.] occupied it.... the days of his son, forty years. And Chemosh [had mercy]

³The first to give it in English version was Dr. Neubauer, of the Bodleian Library.

⁴The dots mark where I have not filled in the words missing in the inscription; the words within square brackets [

9. on it in my days, and I built Baal Meon, and made therein the tank, and I [built]

We cannot here continue this quotation, interesting as are the issues involved. What follows describes the reconquest by Mesha of various towns in the north of Moab, formerly occupied by Israel, their reconstruction and the dedication of captive women to “Ashtar-Chemosh” (Astarte-Chemosh), and of what are described as “vessels of Jehovah,” to Chemosh—both at the taking of Nebo, in the northernmost part of Moab.

In lines 1-9, first clause of the inscription, Mesha relates the subjugation of Moab by Omri, the father of Ahab, and the deliverance of that country, which he ascribes to Chemosh. This we suppose to have been connected with the retreat of the allied armies from Kir-haraseth, and their evacuation of the country ([2 Kings 3:25](#)).⁵

From all this we infer that the land of Moab, which had apparently recovered its independence during, or immediately after, the reign of Solomon, was, at least in part, reconquered by the warlike Omri. And from the list of towns which in other parts of the inscription Mesha mentions as having been retaken, we conclude that Omri had invaded Moab from the north, while afterwards the allied armies entered it from the south. Accordingly a number of places are named as such which the king of Israel had fortified and Mesha recaptured. All these towns are north of the Arnon. The deep gorge, and the rapid current of that river, would render its passage by a hostile army extremely difficult. Hence the invading army of Omri seems to have been arrested by that obstacle, and Jahaz, which

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⁵The common view is that the “Inscription” refers to the rebellion of Mesha in the time of Ahaziah, and (in the lines not copied by us) to a supposed later occupation of Jahaz (which some even locate south of the Arnon) either by Ahaziah or Joram, who was afterwards driven from it by Mesha (Comp. Sayce, u.s. p. 95; Schlottmann in Riehm’s *Bibl. Hand-W.*II). But: 1. There is not a trace of any such supposed invasion of Moab either by Ahaziah, or, still less, by Joram before his allied expedition with Jehoshaphat and Edom. 2. Joram could not have penetrated to Jahaz, which assuredly was not south but north of the Arnon, in the territory of Reuben ([Joshua 13:18](#)), without having taken the whole north of Moab - of which there is not a trace in the Bible - while the contrary is indicated in the “Inscription.” 3. The reprisals upon Edom, also referred to in the “Inscription,” must have taken place after the allied expedition, since before that Edom was in league with Moab ([2 Chronicles 20:2, 22, 23](#)). All these difficulties are avoided in the view taken in the text.

lay north of the Arnon, is the most southern point mentioned in the inscription, as held and fortified by the king of Israel.

But while Northern Moab was thus occupied by Israel, the southern part of the country seems to have preserved its independence during the reign both of Omri and of Ahab. After the death of the latter, “Moab rebelled” (2 Kings 3:5), under the leadership of their brave king Mesha—a name which is connected with the word “deliverance.” He styles his father Chemosh-Gad, which is a compound of the names of the two gods, Chemosh and Gad (the latter the god of fortune). The first intimation of the movement for the recovery of their independence seems to have been the sudden invasion of [102] Judaea by Moab, in alliance with the Ammonites and a tribe of Edomites (2 Chronicles 20). Probably the Moabites had not yet felt themselves sufficiently strong for an attack on the Israelitish stronghold in Northern Moab, and accordingly resolved on making a raid across the undefended boundary of Judah, while at the same time they sought to combine into an anti-Israelitish alliance all the tribes along the eastern line of Palestine. We know that through the Divine help to Jehoshaphat, this expedition signally failed, while in the mutual slaughter which ensued the Edomite allies of Moab were the first to suffer. Hence, the projected anti-Israelitish league was not only broken up, but Edom was drawn into what seems to have been a Palestinian counter league, the pathetic story of which is connected with the so-called “Moabite stone.” It is impossible to find words for the varied feelings which rise as we realize that after the lapse of 2,500 years a monumental stone should in such unexpected manner have been found to bear testimony to Holy Scripture, and especially to its record of that event from which Mesha dates the recovery of the independence of Moab, ⁶—all the more that he ascribes the glory of it to Chemosh, his god. ⁷

⁶As I understand it, the Inscription traces in the first six lines the state of Moab under Omri and Ahab. For reasons easily understood, reference is not made to the straits to which Kir-haraseth was reduced, while at the same time, and very significantly, emphasis is laid on the help given by Chemosh. Similarly the withdrawal of the Jewish expedition is passed over, and the Inscription goes on to record how (after their withdrawal) Mesha gradually recovered, town by town, all Northern Moab, how he rebuilt the various towns, and finally also made reprisals on Edom.

⁷The language of the Inscription illustrates, perhaps better than anything else, the heathen notion of national deities, how Moab regarded Chemosh as the rival god of that of

When from the Moabite inscription we turn to the Biblical narrative, we learn that Mesha, like his predecessors, had been under heavy annual tribute to Israel, which was paid in kind. We read that he “was a sheepmaster.” The extensive downs of Moab were covered by numberless flocks, and the tribute which he had to pay consisted of “a hundred thousand lambs, and a hundred thousand wethers—the wool.” The wording in the original is not very clear, but as the term used for “lambs” generally designates “fed lambs,” we conclude that if it is intended to convey that the wool formed the tribute, it must have been that of “the wethers,” and that to this the hundred thousand fed lambs were added. It need scarcely be said that this tribute ceased when Mesha cast off the yoke of Israel.

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The events previously related will sufficiently account for the anxiety of Jehoshaphat that the growing power of Moab should be checked, and a counter league formed effectually to oppose the common enemies of Palestine. As regards any religious scruples to an alliance with Israel, he may have argued that Joram was not like Ahaziah, nor even like Ahab ([2 Kings 3:2](#)), and that since God Himself had given such signal victory over Moab, a common invasion of their land might even be pleasing in His sight. We rarely fail to find a satisfactory or even a religious reason for doing that on which we set our hearts. But it does seem strange, that the answer which Jehoshaphat returned to the invitation of Joram to join him in the campaign against Moab should have been precisely the same as that which he had given on the disastrous occasion when Ahab asked him to go up against Ramoth-gilead ([1 Kings 22:4](#)). Perhaps, however, it was a common mode of expression in such circumstances, or else the sacred historian may have wished to emphasize the folly and wrong of Jehoshaphat’s conduct by using the same terms as formerly in the unhappy alliance with Ahab. The plan agreed upon by the two monarchs was to make invasion of Moab from the south. This, not only in order to ensure the co-operation of the king of Edom, who had now joined the anti-Moabite league, and to protect their rear and their communications, but also for important

Israel, and how true even to national thought are those expressions in the Old Testament which represent national calamity or deliverance as clue to the anger or favor of God. In using such expressions the prophets and sacred historians appealed to what were, so to speak, admitted facts in popular consciousness.

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strategic reasons. Northern Moab was, indeed, subject to Israel, but the Arnon marked the boundary, and no prudent commander would attempt to force such a position as the line of the Arnon in the face of a general like Mesha. On the other hand, by fetching “a seven days compass,” and advancing front the south and through Edom, alike their retreat was covered and supplies would be secured. And if Mesha could be drawn into the wilderness which separated Edom from Southern Moab, and belonged partly to the one, partly to the other country, the whole of Moab might be overrun, and the invading army from the south join hands with the Israelitish garrisons north of the Arnon.

But once more the incapacity, if not the treachery, of Edom defeated the plans of the allies. Mesha refused to be drawn into the wilderness of Edom. As we understand it, his army was posted on the Moabite side of the boundary, which is here formed by the Wady ‘el Ahsa,⁸ while higher up it passes into the Wady Tufileh.

We suppose that it was here, or in some other dried-up wady close by, that the allies, who were now suffering from want of water, suddenly found themselves in presence of an enemy that swarmed the tangled brushwood and thicket around. Unable to cross the Wady and engage the enemy, who seemed ubiquitous, or to retreat into the wilderness, the position of the allies seemed, humanly speaking, hopeless.

It was in these circumstances that the grand difference in principle between the king of Israel and pious Jehoshaphat appeared, as it always does in seasons of trial and decision between the servants of the LORD and those of “strange gods.” Joram could descry nothing but impending ruin, and his only thought concerning Jehovah was that He had brought the three kings together for their destruction. Jehoshaphat, though often and sadly failing through weakness of character, was yet true in the inmost direction of his heart. In his distress he instinctively turned to the LORD for guidance. His inquiry for a “prophet of Jehovah” brought out two facts of infinite comfort:

⁸It has been objected that Wady ‘el Ahsa is a permanent watercourse. But this has not been ascertained in regard to all seasons of the year. Besides it may have been some branch or side wady of ‘el Ahsa. At any rate the narrative implies that the allied armies had expected to find water, and were disappointed.

that Elisha, known as the attendant of Elijah,⁹ was—no doubt by Divine direction—present in the camp; and that there was one in the following of the king of Israel—probably one of the superior officers—who knew of it, being evidently in sympathy with that which the prophet represented, as Obadiah had been in the days of Ahab (1 Kings 18:3).

We read that the three kings went to the tent of Elisha. This not merely from apprehension that he might refuse to come to them, nor yet from humility; but probably because they may have dreaded the effect upon the host of such words as formerly Micaiah had spoken in similar circumstances (1 Kings 22:17-28). The reception which this incongruous company of kings met at the hands of the prophet was certainly not encouraging. On the other hand, an appeal for help addressed to the prophet of Jehovah by the heathen king of Edom and the son of Ahab seemed to treat the prophetic office as if it had involved heathen magic and divination, just as Balak of old had sought to employ Balaam against Israel. To an appeal of such a character Elisha could not have listened; it should—as he told the king of Israel be addressed to the prophets of Baal. How truly Elisha had judged Joram appears from his answer, when with almost incredible dullness, he once more urged—presumably as the reason for his coming—that Jehovah, the God of the prophet, and the old enemy of the house of Ahab, had brought these kings together for their destruction. With such an one it was impossible to argue, and the prophet turned from him to the king of Judah, for whose sake alone he would consent to continue the interview, or would seek the guidance and help of the LORD.

It has been assumed by a certain school of critics that when Elisha next called for a minstrel, it was to rouse in himself the prophetic faculty, or else that such was the common mode of producing prophetic inspiration. But for the latter assertion there is not a tittle of evidence,¹⁰ while, as regards the former, alike Biblical (1

⁹He who “poured water” on his hands.

¹⁰Assuredly, 1 Samuel 10:5 does not afford such; it only records the fact that such prophetic communities employed music, not that they incited themselves thereby to prophesy - if indeed, the term prophesy in that connection means the same as in our passage.

[Samuel 16:16](#)) and heathen testimony ¹¹ go to prove that the purpose for which music was employed was to soothe, not to excite the mind.

[106] It was not otherwise in the present instance. From the agitation of his interview with Joram Elisha was restored by the minstrel to quietness, and thus prepared for receiving the Divine communication. This was twofold: it gave promise of deliverance from the present straits and of complete victory over Moab. The people were directed to make the Wady full of pits—and then, without sound of wind, or sight of rain, would the Wady be filled with water, and the host set free from their present straits. But this was only preparatory. A complete victory would be granted to them, and in their victorious progress they would destroy all fenced cities and absolutely lay waste the enemy's country. It is not ours to vindicate the work of warfare here indicated, although not prescribed ([v. 19](#)). ¹²

It seems to be opposed to the express Divine direction in [Deuteronomy 20:19, 20](#). In judging of it some considerations must, however, be kept in view. First and foremost we have to remember the spirit of the times. Nor is the time so far distant when a mode of warfare not very unlike this was common in an enemy's country. As a matter of fact, this mode of laying waste a hostile country seems to have been general at that time among all nations. Accordingly it is frequently represented on the Assyrian monuments, ¹³ and referred to in classical writings. ¹⁴

It may be of interest here to recall two points which might otherwise be overlooked. It will be remembered that the inscription on the "Moabite stone" makes the following special reference to this mode of warfare: "In my days he said, [Let us go,] and I will see my desire on him and his house. And Israel (said), I will destroy with an everlasting destruction." Thus the Moabite stone to a certain extent

¹¹Bochart has collated many passages to that effect (Hieroz. 1. 2, 44) from which Bahr selects the following (from Cicero): "They" (the Pythagoreans) "were wont to recall their minds from strain of thought to quietness by means of singing and flutes."

¹²Some critics have regarded [ver. 19](#) as only a prediction of what they would do. But in such a case it seems difficult to distinguish between a prediction of certain acts and at least an implied sanction of them.

¹³Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon*, p. 588; *Monuments*, 1st Ser. pl. 73; 2nd Ser. pl. 40.

¹⁴As Canon Rawlinson reminds us, in the *Speaker's Commentary*, by Herodotus and Polybius. Even [Deuteronomy 20:19, 20](#) seems to imply this was the common mode of warfare.

bears testimony to the very words which Elisha had used. Again, it may be doubted whether, if Israel

had not adopted this mode of warfare, the retreat of the allied army from Kir-haraseth would not have been followed by a most formidable Moabite invasion into Palestine. As it was, the repair of the havoc wrought in his country must have engaged all the energies of Mesha. And to this work of necessary restoration and recuperation the closing part of the Moabite inscription bears testimony. [107]

We return to the narrative of what happened on the morrow of the interview with Elisha. As directed by the prophet, pits had been dug—as we imagine, either in the rear or along the sides of the camp of Israel—, although we know too little of the actual circumstances to venture on any more detailed statement. However it may have been, the Divine prediction by Elisha was literally fulfilled. Once more it all happened in the orderly succession of events, while, if viewed by itself, the issue would seem, as in the highest sense it was, miraculous. And this indeed holds true of the record of most Biblical miracles, that they are the statement of effects, without the assignment or explanation of the causes that led up to them. In the present instance, it was no doubt a sudden storm that had burst in the mountains of Moab which sent a rush of water down the Wady by which Israel was camped. The prophetic historian, who loves to connect Jehovah's deliverance with the loved services of the sanctuary, reminds us that it was "when the meat-offering was offered," that "there came water by the way of Edom,"—to disappear as suddenly as it had come, when the object had been served.

The Israelites in their camp had seen it, and hastened to quench their thirst. The Moabites also saw it, but to them it seemed as the eastern sun shone on the water in the pits, reddened as it was by the color of the soil, that they were gazing on pools of blood. Their late expedition into Judah suggested a ready explanation of the strange sight. Perhaps their superstition might lead them to imagine that Chemosh, of whose help we read so much in the Moabite inscription, had now granted to Moab a success precisely similar to that of Judah. The kings were destroyed—they had smitten one another: now, therefore, Moab to the spoil!

Meantime, the commanders of the allied army would naturally keep their men within their camp, so as to allow the disorderly rush

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of Bedawin, intent on spoil, to cross the Wady and approach them quite closely, before suddenly sallying forth to inflict indiscriminate slaughter. Mesha was too wary to risk another defeat of the same kind. He retreated before Israel, evacuating every fortified town, till he reached the stronghold of Kir-haraseth, where he resolved to make a final stand. The Jewish army slowly followed the retreating enemy, destroying every town and laying waste the country around. Their progress was arrested at the walls of Kir-haraseth. As we consider the situation of that fortress, we scarcely wonder that the allies found themselves unable to do more than harass the garrison by posting sharpshooters on the hills around (“the slingers went about it”), and attempt to reduce it by hunger. The position of Kir-Moab, “the fortress of Moab,” ([Isaiah 15:1](#)),¹⁵ Kir-hareseth ([Isaiah 16:7](#)), Kir-haresh ([Isaiah 16:7](#)), or Kir-haraseth - for it bears all these names, which seem to mean “fortress of brickwork,”—has been ascertained beyond reasonable doubt.

The Chaldee paraphrast designates it ([Isaiah 15:1](#)) Keraka de-Moabh, which exactly answers to the modern name Kerak. A continuous ascent from the south, amidst Alpine scenery, leads up to Kerak, which lies 3,720 feet above the Mediterranean. From the last crest, whence there is a magnificent prospect far away, we look down into the “Wady of Kerak, some 1800 feet of nearly sheer precipice on the opposite side.”¹⁶

Along that Wady winds among rocks the road, so narrow that a few resolute men could hold it against an army. As the Wady widens, the ground is cultivated “with olives, figs, pomegranates, and a few vineyards and patches of corn.” Soon Kerak itself is seen, towering high aloft. To reach it, we must first descend into the valley. Then an hour’s climb up the opposite cliff brings the traveler to an arched tunnel of about eighty yards in length, through which he emerges into the city of Kerak.

The plateau on which the town stands is almost level, and measures from 800 to 1000 yards on each face of the triangle which the city forms, and of which the north-eastern side is the longest. Here, and to a less degree at the south-west angle, the plateau is

¹⁵[Isaiah 15 and 16](#), should be studied in connection with the history of Moab.

¹⁶Canon Tristram, u.s. p. 67. But in our description use has also been made of the account of Badeker-Socin in Riehm’s Hand-worterb.

connected with the heights which surround Kerak on every side. But everywhere else the town is cut off from the encircling range by “Wadies (in part) from 1000 to 1500 feet deep, with steeply scarped or else rugged sides.”¹⁷

If we imagine this isthmus of rock, jutting into and rising above a sea of deep Wadies, itself surrounded by a broad wall with towers and other defenses, and crowned by a city to which there were only two entrances, each through a tunnel in the side of the cliff—we can form a picture of Kir-haraseth, as it appeared to the Jewish host that gazed on it from the heights around. [109]

But although the allied army could not reduce the city, “the slingers” posted on the overlooking heights might inflict serious losses on the garrison. In fact, the place would soon have become untenable. In these circumstances Mesha endeavored, at the head of 700 swordsmen, to cut his way through the besieging army in the direction where the king of Edom was posted—either because this was the weakest point in the camp of the allies, or probably because he may have expected less resistance in that quarter. Driven back into the city, the frenzy of despair seized him. The idea underlying sacrifice was in heathen worship also that of substitution, though not as provided by the mercy of God, but in order to appease His wrath. It was not the infinite compassion and love of God which provided a ransom, but the despair of mercy and goodness that suggested such means as the last hope of expiation. Hence that which was nearest and dearest to a man was offered up to propitiate, if possible, a god who was not known to be full of compassion. And so the king of Moab now took his eldest son, who should have succeeded him on the throne, and in sight of besiegers and besieged offered him on the wall as a burnt offering. Thus would he conciliate Chemosh; thus also would he show his devotion to his country. It was a horrible, sickening spectacle, which made deepest impression on all onlookers friend as well as foe. The undertaking on which Israel—had engaged its allies became hateful to all—and the allied army retired from before Kir-haraseth. So ended the campaign against Moab.

¹⁷Comp. Tristram, u.s.

Chapter 10: The Ministry of Elisha as the Personal Representative of the Living God in Israel

The Prophet's Widow and her Miraculous Deliverance - The Shunammite and Elisha—The God-given Child—His Death and Restoration to Life—Elisha at Gilgal with the “Sons of the Prophets” —“Death in the Pot” and Removal of the Harm—The Man from Baal-Shalisha—God's Sufficient and Unfailing Provision for His Own

(2 Kings 4)

THERE is something grand and truly characteristic of “prophetic history” when the Biblical narrative abruptly turns from the expedition against Moab, which, although so simply told, was of such deep and lasting political importance, to tell what reads like a summary of the prophetic activity of Elisha. It shows, on the one hand, how all events are regarded from the Divine point of view, while on the other hand, it helps us to understand the real meaning and purpose of the miraculous element in the ministry of Elisha, as designed to recall Israel to a realizing sense of the presence and power of Jehovah, and by such religious revival to avert imminent national judgment. Accidentally we obtain in the course of the narrative, interesting side-glimpses into private and public life in Israel, which generally confirm our confidence in the historic truth of what is related.

At the outset we may say that the impression which this history as a whole makes on us, is that it seems transferred or perhaps rather summarized, from some special narrative or work descriptive of the activity of Elisha. The incidents do not seem arranged in their strict chronological succession, but grouped according to their internal connection, so that an account of the more private activity of the prophet, as regards individuals, families, and communities, is followed by that of his public activity, in its bearing on Israel and Syria. Again, it is reasonable to suppose that all which is here

recorded had not occurred exclusively during the reign of Joram, which lasted only twelve years ([2 Kings 3:1](#)). For as Elisha died during the reign of Joash ([2 Kings 13:14](#)), his ministry must have extended over four reigns, and lasted altogether about fifty-five or fifty-seven years. Hence there would be a blank of forty-five years in the narrative if all that is recorded of Elisha had taken place in the time of Joram. But the deepest lesson which the life and ministry of Elisha were intended to teach was to set forth, as against the dark background of coming judgment upon Israel's apostasy, the tender care, the sufficient provision, the ever-present help which the LORD would extend to His own servants and people.

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The first narrative¹ in this biographical sketch—as for want of better name we may term it—has somewhat inaptly been compared with the account of Elijah's miraculous provision for the widow of Sarepta ([1 Kings 17:9-16](#)).

On carefully comparing the two narratives, they will be seen to differ in every detail, except this, that in both instances the recipient of the benefit was a widow. But besides, the great object and meaning of the miracle at Sarepta was to be a prefigurement of the mercy and help to be extended to the Gentile world, with all of warning and teaching to Israel which this implied. Its counterpart, in the history of Elisha, would be the healing of Naaman, rather than this narrative of Divine help granted to the impoverished widow of one of the sons of the prophets.

Josephus and some of the Rabbis have suggested that this widow had been the wife of that Obadiah who had provided shelter and food for the persecuted prophets in the reign of Ahab ([1 Kings 18](#)). But here also the only point of similarity between the two narratives is that the widow of the prophet pleads, in the words of Obadiah ([1 Kings 18:12](#)), that her husband "did fear Jehovah." The narrative bears that on the death of her husband, who had been one of the sons of the prophets, and (what is even more important) apparently well known to Elisha as one that feared Jehovah, the creditor had come to take her two sons as bondsmen. We know not through what adverse circumstances the family had been so far reduced; but we can readily believe that in those days faithfulness to Jehovah

¹ And the latter part of the second narrative, [2 Kings 4:32-37](#).

might lead to outward reverses, not to prosperity. And when he was removed who had been the support of his family by that daily labor, which evidently was not regarded as incompatible with his vocation as one of the “sons of the prophets,” then “the creditor” seized on the sons of the widow. In so doing he availed himself of his legal right in the matter ([Leviticus 25:39](#); comp. [Matthew 18:25](#)),²

[112] although his action was unjustifiably harsh and selfish.

If in these circumstances the prophet had not given heed to the appeal of the widow, it would have implied either that he was not the living medium between God and His people, which he professed, or else that Jehovah was not the living and the true God in the sense in which Elisha had preached Him. With reverence be it said, the appeal to the prophet could no more have remained unanswered than a cry for help addressed to Christ in the days of His flesh.

A similar conclusion would be reached if, somewhat realistically, we were to transport this history into our own days. If a widow were, in like circumstances, to seek guidance and comfort, she would be pointed to the living God, and to His sure promise of help in all straits. But what is this when translated into concrete fact other than the miracle wrought at the intercession, or, if you please, at the instance, though not by the hands, of Elisha? And may we not say that, as regards the result, the same miracle is still daily enacted, though not in the same manner as regards the succession of events? In truth, the two worlds of the seen and unseen are not so wide apart as some imagine. To many of us the answer to the “Give us this day our daily bread,” comes directly from heaven, and more than the daily bread, or the like of it, is assured to us in the realization of His daily and indirect help. And if in this history all this was exhibited in a concrete manner, it was required in the circumstances of the time and for the purposes of the mission of Elisha, although its lesson is to all time and to all men.

We mark, that in order to put aside any idea of direct agency in the matter on the part of the prophet, the miraculous help was not sent by the hands of Elisha, but connected so far as possible with some visible and ordinary means. It is in this manner that we explain

²The Athenian and Roman law equally sanctioned servitude for debt, - in fact, this seems to have been the universal practice in the ancient world, and the law of Moses only softened it by special injunctions and provisions, and modified it by the law of the Jubilee.

the question of the prophet, what the widow had in her house. And when she replied, “Anointing oil,”³ the promised help was connected with the use of it as a means. [113]

The widow was directed to borrow empty vessels from all her neighbors, then to shut the door behind her and her sons, and to pour from what she had into those empty vessels, when the multiplying blessing of God would fill them. It would be difficult to imagine any symbol more full of meaning and instruction, alike in its general direction and in its details. It showed that God was a present help. His special blessing, given when needed directly and miraculously, would increase our scanty provision. Nor can we be mistaken in supposing that the direction to shut the door behind her and her sons was intended to enjoin not only reverent acknowledgment, but silent worship of God. And truly so ought we also, when seeking help from Him, ever to feel ourselves alone with Him, combining, like her of old, absolute trust in the promise of His Word with active obedience to His direction: doing what lies in us while praying; and praying while doing it. Lastly, it seems quite in accordance with what had passed that when all the borrowed vessels were full, and the oil had stayed, the widow should, before disposing of anything, have gone to the prophet for his direction, and, we may add, equally so that Elisha should have told her first to pay her creditor, and then to employ the rest towards the sustenance of herself and her sons.

The second narrative⁴ in this series of “the acts” of the prophet, transports us to the quiet of the village of Shunem, and the retirement of a pious Israelitish home. We know Shunem from our former history,⁵ but then it was associated with battle or else with scenes far different from those to which we are about to be introduced.

³Not “a pot of oil.” The expression occurs only in this passage. It unquestionably means oil for anointing, which, it is well known, is in universal use in the East. But it must be left undetermined whether, as the LXX. and the Vulgate imply, there was only left sufficient for anointing once, and whether the answer indicates that this had formerly furnished the means of livelihood to the family. The latter view seems suggested by [verse 7](#).

⁴Here also there are peculiar expressions, confirming the view that the whole section is derived from some special work on the subject.

⁵We think of it in connection with such battles as those of Gideon, of Saul at Gilboa, and generally with those fought on or by the plain of Esdraelon, as well as with the near palace of Jezreel.

The modern Sulem is a wretched collection of mud-hovels. Except from its situation, it scarcely recalls the thriving, healthy, happy, agricultural village of old, as it seemed to look in sunny contentment over the rich plain of Esdraelon. It was in close contiguity to the summer palace of Jezreel, which was perched on the hill above, occupying a position equally beautiful and commanding. And despite its nearness to a corrupt court, there was quite another moral atmosphere about its homes. Shunem seems to have preserved something of the old Israelitish spirit, some of that purity, earnestness, impulsiveness, and we had almost said intensesness, which even long afterwards characterized Northern Palestine and the people of Galilee. A sturdy sense of independence (2 Kings 4:13), combined with reverent simplicity (verses 9, 10), warm home-affections (verses 16, 18, 20), earnest religiousness, and an unwavering spiritual faith (verses 23, 24, 28)—such are the ideas which we have learned to associate with Shunem. And the very physique of this population seems to have corresponded with this moral healthiness. Apparently Shunem was not only the home of wealthy men, but also of fair women, such as of the beautiful Abishag, King David's maiden wife (1 Kings 1:3), or the lovely Shulamite⁶ [114] who ravished Solomon's heart (Cant. 6:13, etc.), and of the Shunammite of our present narrative.

We infer that at this time Elisha had been frequently passing between Samaria⁷ and what was probably his ordinary place of abode on Carmel.

The direct road from the one to the other place does not lead by Shunem, which lies somewhat farther to the east, at the south-western slope of "little Hermon," and on the opposite side of Esdraelon from Carmel, at a distance of about fifteen or twenty miles across the plain. But it so happened that on a certain occasion Elisha, "passed over [thus literally] to Shunem." According to good Israelitish custom, hospitality would be offered to him; but it was only what was

⁶Shunem and Shulem evidently represent the same name, and the Shulamite (Shulamith) of Canticles is rendered in the LXX Sunamitis (with an n).

⁷There could have been no occasion for his resorting to Jezreel.

becoming that such should have been extended to the prophet by the mistress of what seems to have been the “great” house⁸ at Shunem.

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We infer that Elisha was at first unwilling to accept the invitation to the “great” house. Probably there were few such in the land where the prophet could have felt himself at home. But when he yielded to the urgent yet modest importunity of the Shunammite, he must soon have perceived that this was not only a pleasant place of rest on the journey, but one to which he might safely resort for refreshment of body and mind. We are too apt to apply our modern habits of thought and expression to the relationships of ancient times. Yet this may here be pointed out, that the manner in which the Shunammite marked Elisha as a “holy” man of God, indicates enlightened piety; the care with which she received him, affectionate regard; the provision which she made for his absolute privacy, unselfishness and reverence; and the circumstance (later alluded to) of her attendance on Elisha’s religious instruction (v. 23), a certain spiritual relationship between them. And so it came that, after this first visit, “as oft” as Elisha “passed across” the plain of Esdraelon, “he turned aside” [and this also literally, since Shunem was not in the direct road] to enjoy the hospitality of the pious mistress of the “great” house at Shunem.

But the frequency of his visits, so far from inducing familiarity, only led to increased reverence on the part of the Shunammite. Her observation had led her to regard Elisha as not only far different from those who at that period may sometimes have passed as prophets, but even from ordinary sons of the prophets—even as a man of God distinguished by holiness. All this she urged on her husband as she proposed to make provision not only for his more proper entertainment, but for his complete privacy. In Palestine an outside stair led up from the road to the roof of the house, so that it was not necessary to pass through the interior of a dwelling. Part of the

⁸It matters little whether we regard the expression “great” as referring to wealth, or, which from the after history seems more likely, to standing and family (comp. [1 Samuel 25:2](#); [2 Samuel 19:32](#)). The further question, why the mistress, not the master, of the house is named, may be answered by the suggestion that the property had originally been hers, or else that her piety made her take the lead in all good works, to which her husband was more the consenting than the proposing party.

[116] roof of the house she would now surround with walls, so making an “upper chamber” of it. This would give to the prophet at all times undisturbed, and, if he wished it, unobserved access to, and egress from, his lodging. This was indeed thoughtful, unselfish, and withal, respectful kindness and hospitality. The chamber thus provided, as well as the scanty furnishing of it, may seem to our modern notions very simple. Yet it implied the surrender by the family of the part of the house most appreciated in the East, while the furniture, however scanty according to our ideas, included not only more but better than was ordinarily found in the very simple sleeping apartments of Orientals.⁹ Evidently the object was to provide for a prolonged stay on the part of the prophet, and for his complete privacy, and, as appears from the context (v. 13), it included not only the prophet, but also his servant.

There was such delicacy about all this “trouble” with which the Shunammite had been “troubled”¹⁰ for him and his servant, that Elisha, who had at first been reluctant to accept any hospitality, now regularly availed himself of the provision for his comfort and retirement. It was only natural that he should have thought of some return to his hostess. Accordingly on one occasion he directed his servant Gehazi,¹¹ whom we here meet for the first time, to inquire of the Shunammite what service he could render to her.

The suggestion: “Is there [ought] to be spoken for thee [is there occasion for it] to the king or the captain of the host?” indicates a somewhat insecure state of things, as well as a somewhat despotic order in the State when “the captain of the host” stands ominously near to the king. At the same time it also implies the existence of better relations between the monarch and the prophet, and so confirms the view formerly expressed that the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, attested at almost every stage by direct Divine manifestations, tended at least to arrest the progress of apostasy in Israel.

⁹“A table” was not ordinarily placed in a mere sleeping-room, while the expression “chair,” not “stool,” as in the A.V., indicates a seat of honor. Comp. here [1 Kings 10:19](#); [1 Samuel 1:9, 413](#); [Psalm 122:5](#); [Nehemiah 3:7](#). The conceit of the Rabbis that the Shunammite was a sister of Abishag ([1 Kings 1](#)) needs not refutation. If the latter had lived, she would at that time have probably been about 140 years old.

¹⁰The word means unrest and trouble, rather than care.

¹¹Probably “Valley of Vision.” The name is perhaps derived from his birth-place, which may have been so called from the sojourn there, or near it, of a prophet.

The answer of the Shunammite to Gehazi: ¹² “I dwell among my own people,” manifests not only a true Israelitish spirit of frank independence, but reflects a favorable light on that district, which (as all other parts of the country) would be primarily under the rule of its own eldership.

What followed is most pictorially set forth. To the question of Elisha, what there was to be done for her, Gehazi, who certainly had keen worldly insight, replied: “Surely, she has no son, and her husband is old.” It was only a suggestion, and in this respect also characteristic of Gehazi. But now, when it was not to be a favor asked of man, but wondrous mercy to be granted by God, Elisha spake to the Shunammite not through Gehazi but directly, ¹³ giving her the promise of what under the Old Testament was regarded as bringing far deeper than merely a mother’s joy.

And there is about her answer such air of genuineness, a mingling of hope with a not daring to expect, and withal such absence of any legendary embellishment, that we can almost imagine ourselves hearing her speak it, as she respectfully stands within the shadow of the door.

It was as Elisha had said, and the Shunammite became the joyous mother of a son. Since then years had passed, during which we have no record of Elisha’s continued visits to the “great” house, now gladdened by the voice of a child. Perhaps he no longer, or at least, not so often, passed by; more probably Scripture, after its wont, is silent on that which is purely personal in the history. But the child had passed through five of the stages which Jewish affection, watching with special fondness the opening life, has successively marked by no less than nine designations. ¹⁴ They are so interesting that we shall here put them down. The yeled (“born,” “babe” ¹⁵)

¹²From [ver. 13](#), we infer that the subject in the last sentence of [ver. 12](#) is Gehazi, not Elisha.

¹³Our Rabbis have it that of three treasures God reserves to Himself the key: of rain, of children, and of raising the dead.

¹⁴Comp. *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, pp. 103,

¹⁵So also in [Isaiah 9:6](#). For an enumeration of the passages in which the different designations are used, see *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*.

had successively become a yonek, or suckling, and an olel, who, no longer satisfied with only this nourishment, asks for bread,¹⁶

[118] then a gamel, or weaned one, and next a taph, one who clings to his mother.

And he had passed through this stage also, and was just entering on the stage designated by elem, becoming firm and strong. It was the time of harvest, and the child was going out to his father to the reapers, when the hot Eastern sun struck his head. At his cry of pain the father bade one of the servants carry the child back to his mother. All that long morning she pressed his aching head to her bosom, till when the mid-day sun shot down its arrows he lay still and dead in her arms. Not a cry of lament escaped that brave mother to tell them in the house of the terrible desolation that had swept over it. Her resolve was taken with the rapidity and unfailing certitude that comes of faith. To Elisha, or rather to Elisha's God! He had given; He could restore the child. In any case she would go with her complaint, not to man, but to the God of almighty help, and not rest satisfied with anything unless it came directly from Him.

It was quite in accordance with all this, and very significant, that in silence she carried her dead child to the prophet's chamber, and there laid him on the bed. Here let him rest, as it were, in keeping of the prophet's God, whose promise had first brought him, till, if ever, the prophet's God would again waken him. And so, like the prophet's widow when she received the Divine help, she shut the door. For, what had man to do with it? her appeal lay directly to God. But she must have been a strong as well as a good woman, strong also in faith, when she could so well keep her feelings under control that her husband had not even suspicion of aught amiss when she preferred the unusual request that one of the servants and one of the beasts of burden should be sent back from the field, that she might at once resort to the man of God. For it was neither New Moon nor Sabbath, when, as we are led to infer, the prophet was wont to give

¹⁶Lamentations 4:4: "The tongue of the yonek cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst: the olalim asks bread."

religious instruction, and people gathered around him, and perhaps came to Carmel from a considerable distance.¹⁷

With a deprecating “Peace”—as it were, Pray let it be so - she waved aside the inquiry of the busy man. And, once her home behind her, she fully gave herself to what was before her. It was no longer a weak woman on whom the greatest earthly sorrow had descended, but one strong, resolute, bent on a great purpose, and wholly self-forgetful. As she had herself, no doubt for speed, seen to the saddling of the ass (v. 24), so she now bade the servant: “drive on,¹⁸ go; delay me not in my riding [hinder me not, keep me not back], unless I bid thee.”

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The sun must have been declining towards the west, when, after that ride of fifteen or twenty miles, she was nearing Carmel. From a bluff of the mountain the prophet had been watching the rider speeding in such haste across the plain, and recognized the Shunammite. Although not Divinely informed, and therefore not Divinely assured of a happy issue, he must have known that only some great trouble to herself, her husband, or her child, would have brought her on that afternoon and in such manner. And so he sent Gehazi to meet her with an inquiry meant to reassure her, at least so far as his own interest and sympathy were concerned. But all the more that she so understood it, would she be neither detained by Gehazi, nor could she have opened her heart to him. Indeed, to have attempted telling her sorrow or her need to any man would have been to unfit her, in every sense, for telling it to the prophet. At sight of Elisha the strong woman for the first time gave way. She had reached the goal, and now in an agony of passion she threw herself at his feet and laid hold on them, as if in her despair she could not let him go without helping her. It was, as in Jacob’s wrestling with the Angel, the mode of agonizing prayer suited to Old Testament times, when God and His help, and, indeed, most spiritual realities were presented in a concrete manner. From a spurious zeal for his master’s honor, from false notions of what became, or did not become—the consequences of his utter want of spiritual insight and sympathy—Gehazi would

¹⁷The inference does not, indeed, seem absolutely certain, but it appears implied that in the time when this narrative is laid the interpretation of the fourth commandment was not so rigidly literal as to forbid the use of an ass for such purposes as that in the text.

¹⁸The word is the same as in reference to Jehu: “for he driveth madly” (2 Kings 9:20).

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have thrust her away. So would the multitude have silenced blind Bartimaeus, and even the disciples sent away the importunate Syrophenician woman ([Matthew 15:23](#)); and so do we in our mistaken notions of what is becoming or unbecoming too often hinder souls from personal contact with our LORD. But Elisha would not suffer Gehazi, for he knew that her soul was in anguish, although as God had not made him to know its cause, he was ignorant of what its issue would be.

It is this, we feel persuaded, which explains much in the conduct of Elisha—such as his first mission of Gehazi, which otherwise would seem strange, if not unintelligible. But surely never was Elisha more humbled than on the eve of the greatest miracle wrought by his hands; never did the poverty of his humanity, as merely an instrument in the hand of God, appear in more clear light than by the side of the help which Jehovah was about to send. And Elisha himself gave vent to these feelings when he spoke with such sorrow of Jehovah having hidden it from him, and not revealed it. ¹⁹

But this we may say, that never was legend so constructed. To every thoughtful reader such purely human traits of felt weakness and of ignorance not only of the future, but of the present and the past, must carry instructive conviction of the truth of this narrative, full of the miraculous though it be.

The first words which the Shunammite spoke to Elisha revealed the state of the case. They were not an entreaty of help; they contained not even a suggestion of it. And yet they were the strongest appeal that could have been made, since they laid hold on the faithfulness of God to His word and promise. The commission of the prophet to Gehazi to hasten on and lay Elisha's staff upon the face of the dead child seems at first difficult to understand. It is quite true that this was not an ordinary staff, but, as it were, the symbol of prophetic authority and rule, with all that this implied, like the staff of Moses (comp. here [Exodus 4:17](#); [17:5, 9](#); [Numbers 20:8, 9](#)). But it is impossible to believe that Elisha expected either that the staff would restore life to the dead, or that Gehazi would be able to perform such a miracle; or, on the other hand, that Elisha acted

¹⁹It seems well nigh the extreme of critical misunderstanding when these words of Elisha are regarded as meaning that, if Elisha had known it, he would have hastened to Shunem. Comp. the opposite conduct of our Lord in the case of Lazarus ([John 11:6](#)).

under misapprehension, as Nathan had spoken to David when still uninstructed as to the will of God (2 Samuel 7:3, etc.); or else that the prophet could have imagined that the child was not really dead. Nor can we accept the suggestion sometimes made that Elisha had full well known Gehazi would not succeed, but had still sent him, in order to show—either to Gehazi, or to the Shunammite, or to Israel—generally - that miracles were not magic, and that neither a Gehazi nor even a prophet's staff could produce them. It is difficult to use moderate language in rejecting suggestions which imply that Elisha had purposely employed what he knew to be useless measures in order to teach some abstract lesson, or that he could have done so at a moment of such agony and suspense. Kindred views in regard to God's dealings with us when under severe affliction are, indeed, too often entertained by Christians. They should give place to more enlightened conceptions of the character of God, and to a more simple and childlike faith in Him, Who afflicteth not willingly, but for our profit.

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We feel convinced that the explanation of Gehazi's commission must be sought within the narrative itself. When Elisha dispatched his servant with his staff, it was with the intention that he should take his master's place. What afterwards determined him to go personally was the expressed resolve of the woman: "As Jehovah liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee [viz., behind; I will not go, nor yet go without thee]. Then he arose and went after her." All this seems in accordance with what has been previously stated. If, as Elisha expressed it with sorrow, Jehovah had not communicated to His servant what had happened in the house of the Shunammite, then the prophet was not only ignorant of the final issue, but left without any Divine commission in the matter. In these circumstances he would wait for such direction as might be indicated to him in the course of events. And he received it, clearly and unmistakably, through the expressed resolution of the Shunammite. Accordingly he immediately followed her. The previous mission of Gehazi may have been tentative and preparatory; and the laying of the prophet's staff on the face of the child perhaps symbolic of the arrestment of the progress of decay. Nor can there be difficulty in understanding the prophet's direction to Gehazi not to salute any one by the way, nor to return any salutation. It was intended not only to indicate

[122] the necessity of speed on what brooked no delay, and of avoiding any worldly distraction when on such an errand, but also to prevent all such publicity as to the matter in hand, as would have been the natural sequence of conversation, especially on the part of one like Gehazi (comp. here also [Luke 10:4](#)).

The narrative passes in silence over the long ride across Esdraelon to Shunem. Evening must have gathered on the deep blue summer sky, when the two at length neared the desolate home. Ere they came to it, Gehazi had met them with the report: “The lad is not awaked,”—and this also is significant of Gehazi’s thoughts about the matter. He had literally obeyed his master’s behest, and laid the staff upon the face of the child, “but there was neither voice nor attending [on the part of the dead child].” But by this time, we dare not doubt it, Elisha knew what he had to do. Even if the Lord had been silent to him, he had already received sufficient direction (comp. here [Exodus 14:15](#)). What follows in the narrative (v. 32) is chiefly intended to set more clearly before us the reality of what now took place. Arrived in his chamber, the prophet shut the door upon himself and the dead child that lay on his bed. We have learned to understand the meaning of this act, which symbolically set forth being alone with God. As regards his prayer to Jehovah and the close personal contact with the dead child, Elisha followed, as from every point of view we would have expected, the example of his master, Elijah, when he recalled to life the widow’s son at Sarepta ²⁰ ([1 Kings 17:17, 24](#)).

Differences in detail there are between the two narratives, such as will readily be noticed. But these are best accounted for by the difference both in the circumstances and character and mission of the two prophets. In any case they are not of importance. But alike the symbolism and the lessons of this history must be apparent to all.

First, as regards the Shunammite. We see in her a true and faithful Israelitish woman, who, in a time of general apostasy, owned Jehovah alike in her life and her home. Receiving a prophet, because of Him Who had sent him, because he was a holy man of God—and

²⁰The attempts at natural explanation of this miracle - such as by animal magnetism, by the administration of something to smell, or of some drug - are so utterly childish as not to deserve discussion.

with humility and entire self-forgetfulness—she received a prophet’s reward in the gift most precious to a Jewish mother, which she had not dared to hope for, even when announced to her. Then, when severely tried, she still held fast to her trust in the promise—strong even when weakest - once more self-forgetful, and following deepest spiritual impulse. And, in the end, her faith appears victorious—crowned by Divine mercy, and shining out the more brightly from its contrast to the felt weakness of the prophet. As we think of this, it seems as if a fuller light were shed on the history of the trials of an Abraham, an Isaac, or a Jacob; on the inner life of those heroes of faith to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews points us for example and learning ([Hebrews 11](#)), and on such Scripture-sayings as these: “Jehovah killeth, and maketh alive: He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up” ([1 Samuel 2:6](#)); “Know that Jehovah hath set apart him that is godly for Himself: Jehovah will hear when I call unto Him” ([Psalm 4:3](#)); or this: “All the paths of Jehovah are mercy and truth unto such as keep His covenant and His testimonies” ([Psalm 25:10](#)).

The last glimpse we have of the Shunammite in this narrative is when called by Elisha to receive back her living son, she bends in lowly reverence, and then silently retires ([2 Kings 4:36, 37](#)). When next we meet her, it is in circumstances of trial almost as great as that through which she had formerly passed. Once more she proves true, trustful, and brave; and once more is her faith crowned by mercy and deliverance.

Secondly, we think of the symbolical and typical teaching of this history. ²¹ The Rabbis discuss the question, whether the dead child of the Shunammite could have Levitically defiled those who touched him.

This Pharisaic scruple deserves record for the significant answer it elicits: “The dead defileth, but the living does not defile.” To us all this includes a meaning deeper than they could attach to it. The story speaks to us of Him through Whom “death is swallowed up

²¹From the time of Origen a somewhat fanciful allegorical view of this history has been presented. The dead lad represented the human race dead in sin; the staff of Gehazi, the law of Moses, which could not set free from sin and death; while Elisha was the type of the Son of God, Who, by His Incarnation, had entered into fellowship with our flesh, and imparted a new life to our race.

[124] in victory.” As we think of Him Who, as God Incarnate, and as the Sent of the Father, is to us the Representative and the Prophet of God in a unique sense, we recall that it was not, as by Elijah or Elisha, through prayer and personal contact, but by the Word of His power that He raised the dead ([Mark 5:39-42](#); [Luke 7:13-15](#); [John 11:43, 44](#)). And beyond this we remember that “the hour... now is, when the dead shall hear the Voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live”; and that “whosoever liveth and believeth” in Christ “shall never die” ([John 5:25](#); [11:26](#)).

Lastly, as regards the supernatural in this history, we fully admit that, as previously indicated, the history of Elijah and Elisha marks, so to speak, the high-point in the miraculous attestation of the mission of the prophets. But, by the side of it, there are so many elements of purely human interest, so many indications of human weakness, and so many details which would not have found a place in a legendary account (such as the fruitless mission of Gehazi), while, on the other hand, there is such unadorned simplicity about the whole narrative, and so much spiritual and typical teaching in it as to carry home almost instinctive conviction of the truth and reality of what is recorded.

Yet another, we might almost call it twofold, narrative taken from the history of Elisha’s more private ministry claims our attention ([2 Kings 4:38-44](#)). It is instructive, as confirming the view that this whole section about Elisha’s ministry is taken from a special work on the subject, that the scene is now laid at a considerable interval from the previous history, and at a time of famine ([v. 38](#)), which is only long afterwards described in connection with Elisha’s prophecy ([2 Kings 8:1](#)). The prophet is once more at Gilgal—not that near Jericho, but another Gilgal, close to Ebal and Gerizim, south-west of Shilo, and situated on a commanding plateau, 3,000 feet above the sea. Here a community of “the sons of the prophets” seems to have been settled (comp. [2 Kings 2:1](#)). It is impossible to say whether Elisha was in the habit of visiting these settlements occasionally or at regular intervals, or else had come on purpose to share the poverty of the community at a time of exceptional distress. The former seems, however, the more likely, since we are told of “the sons of the prophets sitting before him,” which, according to well-known

Hebrew usage, means that Elisha was giving them instruction (comp. [2 Kings 6:1](#); [Ezekiel 8:1](#); [14:1](#); [33:31](#); [Zechariah 3:8](#); [Acts 22:3](#)).

While thus engaged the prophet directed that the usual humble meal should be prepared for the wants of his hearers. Even although it was a time of famine, yet the fare provided was so poor—and this, so far as the text informs us, not merely exceptionally, owing to the dearth—that our former impressions, derived from the straitened circumstances of the prophet’s widow (4:1, 2), are fully confirmed. In truth, “the sons of the prophets” seem not only to have supported themselves by manual labor, but to have lived in the humblest manner. This willing submission to poverty and want from devotion to their work reflects the most favorable light on the institution to which they belonged. In the present instance one of their number was sent to gather “green esculents”²² to be seethed for pottage in the great pot in which their common meals were prepared. By some misadventure the person so sent brought among other herbage a very noxious fruit—probably the wild, or so-called “squirting” cucumber,²³ which he had mistaken for the ordinary cucumber, one of the most common and favorite articles of food in the East.

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The dangerous error was discovered after the meal had begun. An appeal to Elisha as the “man of God” brought speedy help. The symbolic meaning of casting “meal” into the pot was, that this was the ordinary and healthy food by which that which had been bitter and dangerous was now to be changed into palatable and nourishing diet. While the help Divinely brought by the prophet as the “man of God” was miraculous, it had, as we readily perceive, also a symbolic significance, the more so, that “the sons of the prophets” had, as disciples, been learning from Elisha. And thus did it become true in every sense: “Pour out for the people, that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot.”

Closely connected with this is the next event recorded. If the former showed how easily God could remove from the provision of His people that which was hurtful by the addition of that which in

²²This, rather than “herbs.” It evidently refers to such “green” stuff as was boiled and eaten.

²³The cucumis agrestis or asininus. Others understand by the Hebrew expression the cucumis colocynthi, or colocynth plant. But, from the Hebrew etymology of the word, the former explanation seems the more likely.

[126] itself is nutritious and wholesome, the next event affords another instance how readily He can send unexpected provision to supply the wants of His servants. The lesson which it teaches is as old as that of Isaac's reaping an hundredfold of what he had sowed in Gerar at a time of famine ([Genesis 26:12](#)), and as true to all time, and to all God's servants, as it had been to the patriarch. In the present case, much needed help in their straits came to Elisha and to his companions from Baal-Shalisha, or Beth-Shalisha. We remember the district as connected with the history of Saul ([1 Samuel 9:4](#)): "the land of Shalisha," perhaps the "three valleys" land. It lay north of Lydda, in the plain of Sharon, and was not far distant from that Gilgal which we have described, and the location of which it confirms. ²⁴

We know that the Lord directed the first-fruits to be given to the Priests and Levites ([Numbers 18:13](#); [Deuteronomy 18:4](#)). This ordinance could not any longer be obeyed in the kingdom of Israel, since the Aaronic priesthood, for whose support it was destined, was not in office there. But the pious in Israel, to whom such contributions were not merely matter of obligation nor only of law, but who willingly offered to Jehovah, in acknowledgment of His sovereignty and proprietary over the land, knew to observe the spirit, if they could no longer obey the letter, of the law. Accordingly this unnamed man from Baal-Shalisha brought, as is expressly stated, to the "man of God" "bread of the first-fruits, twenty loaves of barley and bruised ears of corn ²⁵ in his sack." ²⁶

[127] The provision supplied by the piety of this unnamed giver Elisha would, in the same spirit of devotion, have shared with those around him. But such conduct ill accorded with the spirit of Elisha's servant. Indeed, it may have been that this history was recorded to mark the character of Gehazi. In any case it was not in him at a time of dearth to dismiss the cares of the morrow by unselfish care for others. He would scarcely venture to state his views explicitly, but, adopting

²⁴Suffice it that it would have been impossible for a man to have carried such a load of bread and corn "in a sack" from Beth-Shalisha to the Gilgal near Jericho.

²⁵So, according to the Rabbis, who regard the expression as referring to green ears of corn, of which, in some parts, soup is made. Others understand it as meaning fresh and tender ears of corn roasted over the fire. The former explanation seems the more likely, and in that case the scene would be laid about the end of April.

²⁶So, and not "in the husk," as in the A.V.

the more prudent course, contented himself with pointing out the apparent insufficiency of such provision for so large a company. It might, according to the pious intention of the donor, have supplied for some time the wants of the prophet, but to set it “before an hundred men”—probably a round number for the whole community—was to lose the real good that might be obtained, without an equivalent benefit to others. It needed the direct command of Elisha to secure his obedience. But Elisha did more. For the teaching not only of Gehazi, but of all, he added the promise, of which, indeed, this unexpected provision was an earnest, that, scanty as it might seem, this provision would not only suffice, but that there should be left over from it. And this, as we understand it, in the widest sense of constant and sufficient supply for all the wants of God’s servants. For although this narrative is generally, and in a sense correctly, regarded as prefiguring the miraculous multiplication of the scanty provision with which our Lord fed the multitude ([Matthew 14:19-21](#); [John 6:9-13](#)), yet the text does not here indicate any such miraculous increase of the food. But it does most emphatically indicate that Elisha was truly the prophet and servant of Jehovah; that his trust in his God was absolute and unwavering; and that, true to His promise, the Lord will always provide for His servants who look up unto Him. And this is the final lesson of this history to all time and to all men.

Chapter 11

Illustration and Confirmation of Biblical History from the Assyrian Monuments—The Deliverance of Syria through Naaman—Naaman's Leprosy and Journey to Samaria—Elisha's Message to Joram and to Naaman—Naaman's Healing and Twofold Request—Gehazi's Deceit and Conviction—Gehazi is Struck with the Leprosy of Naaman

(2 Kings 5.)

FROM the more private ministry of the prophet the Biblical narrative next passes to an account of his public activity. ¹ Very significantly, it was the means of bringing Israel once more into direct contact with their great enemy, Syria - this time, not in war, but in peace. And the bloodless victory which was achieved might have taught king and people how easily the LORD could turn the hearts of their adversaries, and by the manifestation of His goodness make them fellow-believers and fellow-worshippers with—Israel—. In this respect, the present history, as others in this section, is specially prefigurative of New Testament times.

As the narrative proceeds on the supposition of close relations between Israel and Syria—not otherwise mentioned in the Bible—and involves, at least indirectly, certain points of general interest, this seems a fitting opportunity for a brief summary of what recent discoveries of ancient monuments has taught us, not only confirmatory, but illustrative and explanatory of this period of Biblical history. ²

¹This, with the exception of 2 Kings 6:1-7. But that narrative is altogether so exceptional in several respects, that we feel as if we were not in possession of all the details of it.

²We have here availed ourselves of the classical work of Professor Schrader (Die Keilinschriften und d. Alte Testament. Second Edition. Giessen, 1885), and also of that able and most useful tractate by Professor Sayce: Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments. (London: Religious Tract Society).

But in so doing we must keep some considerations in view by way of caution. For first, our knowledge of what may be called monumental history is as yet initial and fragmentary. Secondly, in any seeming discrepancy or slight divergence in details between the inscriptions on the monuments and the records of Jewish history, it seems neither reasonable nor safe to give absolute preference to the former. Jewish writers must have known their own history best, while, in their slight differences from the records on the monuments, we fail to discover any adequate motives on the part of the Jewish historians that could account for their falsifying facts. And, we need scarcely add, the same facts will assume different aspects when viewed from opposite sides. Again, it is admitted on all hands that there are manifest errors on the Assyrian monuments, and this on points where error is difficult, to account for. Thus, to mention one instance—on the Assyrian monuments, Jehu is designated as “the son of Omri,” and that by the very monarch to whom he is both represented and described as bringing tribute. Further, we have to bear in mind that our knowledge of Jewish history is also fragmentary. The Old Testament does not profess to be a handbook of Jewish history. It furnishes prophetic or sacred history, which does not recount all events as they happened, nor yet always in their exact succession of time, but presents them in their bearing on the kingdom of God, of which it tells the history. Hence it records or emphasizes only that which is of importance in connection with it. Lastly, we must remember that the chronology of the Bible is in some parts involved in considerable difficulties, partly for the reasons just stated, partly from the different modes of calculating time, and partly also from errors of transcription which would easily creep into the copying of Hebrew numerals, which are marked by letters. Keeping in view these cautions, the neglect of which has led to many false inferences, we have no hesitation in saying, that hitherto all modern historical discoveries have only tended to confirm the Scripture narrative.

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Turning to these extraneous sources for information on the earlier history of Judah and Israel under the Kings, we have here, first, the Egyptian monuments, especially those on the walls of the Temple of Karnak, which record the invasion of Judah and Jerusalem by Shishak, described in [1 Kings 14:25, 26](#), and [2 Chronicles 12](#). Pic-

torial representations of this campaign are accompanied by mention of the very names of the conquered Jewish cities.³

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But with the death of Shishak, the power of Egypt for a time decayed. In its stead that of Assyria reasserted itself. From that time onwards its monuments more or less continuously cast light on the history of Israel. Just as in the Biblical narrative, so in the Assyrian records of that time, Syria occupies a most important place. It will be remembered that that country had recovered its independence in the reign of Solomon, having been wrested by Rezon from the sovereignty of Judah (1 Kings 11:23-25). Thus far we perceive a general parallelism in the outlines of this history. But the Assyrian record leaves a strange impression on the mind, as we recall the importance of Omri, as having been the second if not the real founder of the Israelitish kingdom, the builder of its capital, and the monarch who gave its permanent direction alike to the political and the religious history of Israel. For the common designation for the land of Israel is “the land of Omri,” “the land Omri,” or “the land of the house of Omri.” We regard it as a further indication of the political importance attached to that king when Jehu is designated as “the son of Omri.” This could not have been from ignorance of the actual history, since the name of Ahab occurs on the monuments of Assyria, although (if correctly read) in a connection which does not quite agree with our ordinary chronology. Further illustration comes to us from the Assyrian monuments, both of certain phases in the Biblical history of Ahab, and of the explanatory words with which the account of Naaman’s healing is introduced: “Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honorable, because by him Jehovah had given deliverance unto Syria” (2 Kings 5:1).

Each of these statements requires some further explanation. As regards the history of Ahab, we note incidentally that the name Ethbaal (1 Kings 16:31) as that of a Sidonian king, occurs also on the Assyrian monuments, just as does Sarepta (1 Kings 17:9, 10), as being a Phoenician town, situate between Tyre and Sidon. But of greatest interest is it to learn from these monuments the political motives which prompted the strange and sudden alliance proposed

³Full details of this are given in Vol. 5. of this History.

by Ahab to Ben-hadad (a name amply confirmed by the monuments), after the battle of Aphek (1 Kings 20:26-34). In passing we may notice that in a fragmentary inscription of Asarhaddon, this Aphek, situated east of the lake of Galilee, and a little aside from the great road between Damascus and Samaria, is named as the border-city of Samaria.

Similarly, the mention of thirty-two kings allied with Ben-hadad in his campaign against Israel (1 Kings 20:1), is so far borne out by the Assyrian monuments, that in the campaigns of Assyria against Syria Ben-hadad is always described as fighting in conjunction with a number of allied Syrian princes.⁴

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From these inscriptions we also learn that the growing power of Assyria threatened to overwhelm—as it afterwards did - both—Syria—and the smaller principalities connected with it. A politician like Ahab must have felt the danger threatening his—kingdom—of—Samaria—from the advancing power of—Assyria—. If Ben-hadad had endeavored to strengthen himself by the subjugation of—Samaria—, Ahab, in the hour of his triumph, desired, by an alliance with the now humbled Ben-hadad, to place—Syria- as a kind of bulwark between himself and the king of—Assyria—. This explains the motive of Ahab, who had no real trust in the might and deliverance of Jehovah, but looked to political combinations for safety, in allowing to go out of his hand the man whom Jehovah “appointed to utter destruction” (1 Kings 20:42).

Another circumstance connected with the treaty of Aphek, not recorded in the Bible, and only known from the Assyrian monuments, casts light on this prophetic announcement of judgment to Ahab: “Therefore thy life shall be for his life, and thy people for his people.” From the monuments we learn, in illustration of the alliance between Ben-hadad and Ahab, and of the punishment threatened upon it, that in the battle of Karkar, or Aroer, in which the Assyrian monarch Shalmaneser II. So completely defeated Syria, the forces of Ahab, to the number of not fewer than 2000 chariots and 10,000

⁴In one inscription 12, in another 11 of these are specially mentioned. A similar discrepancy also obtains in regard to the number of troops employed, and in that of the slain in battle. But, as Schrader rightly remarks, the Assyrians, no doubt, mention only the more important of Ben-hadad’s allies - not all of them. (See Keilinschr. u. d. A. Test., p. 204.)

[132] men, had fought on the side of Ben-hadad. As we read of 14,000 or, in another inscription,⁵ of 20,500 of the allies as having been slain in this battle, otemark2711936 we perceive the fulfillment of the Divine threatening upon that alliance ([1 Kings 20:42](#)).

At the same time we may also learn that many things mentioned in Scripture which, with our present means of knowledge, seem strange and inexplicable, may become plain, and be fully confirmed, by further information derived from independent sources.

The battle of Karkar was not the only engagement in which the forces of Syria met, and were defeated by, those of Assyria. It was fought in the sixth year of the reign of Shalmaneser. Another successful campaign is chronicled as having been undertaken in the eleventh year of the same reign, when Shalmaneser records that for the ninth time he crossed the Euphrates; and yet another, in the fourteenth year of his reign, when at the head of 120,000 men he crossed the river at its high flood. Two inferences may, for our present purpose, be made from these notices. The defeat of Ahab's forces, when fighting in conjunction with Ben-hadad, will account for the cessation of the alliance entered into after the battle of Aphek. Again, the repeated defeat of Ben-hadad by Assyria will explain how Ahab took heart of grace, and in company with Jehoshaphat undertook that fatal expedition against Ramoth-Gilead ([1 Kings 22](#)), in which literally the "life" of Ahab went for that of him whom, from short-sighted political motives, he had spared ([1 Kings 20:42](#)). Lastly, these repeated wars between Assyria and Syria, of which the Assyrian monarch would naturally only record the successful engagements, help us to understand the phrase by which Naaman, captain⁷ of the host of Syria, is introduced as he "by whom the

⁵There is a manifest discrepancy between these two numbers - the one recorded is an inscription of Shalmaneser, discovered on the banks of the Tigris, the other on an obelisk at Nimrud, in which that monarch describes the acts of his reign.

⁶The large number of the slain, and of the forces led on either side to battle, throws light on what are sometimes described as the "exaggerated" figures introduced in the accounts of wars and battles in the Old Testament.

⁷This, rather than "the" captain, as in the A.V.

LORD had given deliverance [perhaps “victory”] unto Syria”⁸ (2 Kings 5:1).

The expression just quoted seems to forbid the application of the words to the victory of Ben-hadad over Ahab,⁹ although the Rabbis imagine that the fatal arrow by which Ahab was smitten came from the bow of Naaman.

Accordingly we cannot (as most commentators do) mark this antithesis: that the conqueror of Israel had to come to Israel for healing. But the fact is in itself sufficiently remarkable, especially when we think of it in connection with his disease, which would have placed even an Israelite, so to speak, outside the pale of Israel. In striking contrast to the mention of the strength and bravery of Naaman, and of his exalted position, Scripture abruptly, without pause or copula of conjunction, records the fact: “a leper.”¹⁰ [133]

We need not pause to consider the moral of this contrast, with all of teaching which it should convey to us. Quite another lesson comes to us from an opposite direction. For we also learn from this history how, when our need is greatest, help may be nearest, and that, in proportion as we feel the hopelessness of our case, God may prepare a way for our deliverance. It was certainly so in this instance. Once more we mark the wonder-working Providence of God, Who, without any abrupt or even visibly direct interference, brings about results which, if viewed by themselves, must seem absolutely miraculous. And this, by means which at the time may have appeared most unpromising.

It must have been a crushing sorrow that came upon that Israelitish household, when the Syrian bands carried from it the little maiden whom we find afterwards waiting on Naaman’s wife. Yet this was the first link in the chain of events which not only brought healing of body and soul to the Syrian captain, but anew proved alike to Jew and Gentile that there was a living God in Israel, who had placed there His accredited representative. Assuredly the most

⁸For, evidently, the conquest of Syria could not have been either permanent or even complete, since Shalmaneser required again and again to undertake fresh expeditions. Besides, Syria was evidently free when Shalmaneser’s successor ascended the throne.

⁹So most commentators.

¹⁰It will be noted that the words “but he was” in our A.V. are in italics, i.e., they have no equivalent in the Hebrew.

devoted affection could not have desired for a child a place of greater honor or usefulness than that which this Jewish maiden occupied in the household of the Syrian captain. What follows is told with utmost simplicity, and bears the impress of truth. For, it was only natural that this child should tell her mistress of the prophet in Samaria, or express the full confidence in his ability to recover her master of his leprosy. ¹¹

[134] Similarly, it was only what we should have expected when her mistress repeated to her husband what the child had said, and perhaps equally natural on the part of Naaman to repeat this to his king, ¹² went in and told his lord” [viz. the king of Syria.] alike to obtain his leave for going to Samaria, and in such a manner as would be most likely to secure the desired result.

As heathens, and especially as Syrians, neither Naaman nor Ben-hadad would see anything strange in the possession of such magical powers by a prophet of Israel. Similarly, it was quite in accordance with heathen notions to expect that the king of Israel could obtain from his own prophet any result which he might desire. A heathen king was always the religious as well as the political chief of his people, and to command the services and obedience of his own prophet would seem almost a matter of course. It was for this reason that Ben-hadad furnished Naaman with a letter to the king of Israel. Hence also, imperious as the tone of the letter seems, it scarcely warranted the interpretation which the king of Israel—probably Joram - put upon it. What is reported of it in the sacred text ([2 Kings 5:6](#)) must, of necessity be regarded as only forming a part of the letter, stating its main object. On the other hand, we can quite understand that, from the Jewish point of view, Joram would speak of what he regarded as a demand that he himself should heal Naaman of his leprosy, as equivalent to requiring of him what God alone could do. His only it was to kill or to make alive ([Deuteronomy 32:39](#); [1 Samuel 2:6](#)), and leprosy was considered a living death ([Numbers 12:12](#)). As he communicated this strange behest to his attendants and advisers - presumably not in the presence

¹¹ Assuredly no legend would have been so conceived. There would have been miracles or visions to bring a Naaman to Elisha, not a poor little slave, naively telling the story of her country and her faith.

¹² The proper rendering of [verse 4](#) is: “And he [viz. Naaman

of Naaman—it was not unnatural that Joram should regard it as a desire to find occasion of quarrel. The craven king of Israel rent his clothes, in token of deepest mourning—as if he had already seen his own and his people’s destruction.

Some of the lessons suggested by the conduct of Joram may be of practical use. We mark first the cowardice of the man who gives way to despair before any danger has actually arisen. Yet there are not a few who tremble not before that which is real, but before fears which, after all, prove wholly groundless. It need scarcely be said how much good work, whether on the part of individuals or of the Church, has been hindered by apprehensions of this kind. The source of all lies, perhaps, not so much in disbelief as in non-belief, which is by far the commonest form of unbelief. Joram knew better and believed worse than the king of Syria—just as is sometimes the case with the children of God and the men of the world. He knew, as the Syrian did not, that God alone could give help; but he did not look for Divine help, as the Syrian, although in mistaken manner, had done. He had religion, but it stood him in no good stead; it was laid aside precisely when it was needed. He did not call to mind that there was a prophet in Israel—, but in helpless terror rent his clothes. So we also, instead of immediately and almost instinctively resorting to God, too often forget Him till every other means has been exhausted, when we apply to Him rather from despair than from faith. [135]

Reverently speaking, it would have been impossible for Elisha as “the man of God” to have been silent on this occasion. His message of reproof to the king: “Wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes?” and of confidence: “Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel,” is not one of self-assertion, but of assertion of God. It was a testimony and, let us add, a test alike for Israel and for the heathen world¹³ of the presence of the living and true God. Yet while viewing it in this grander application, we ought not to forget what confirmation it gave to the simple faith of that “little one” in the service of Naaman’s wife. For God’s dealings are most

¹³The bearing of the mission of Elijah and of Elisha on the heathen world is both distinctive and most important. It also casts light on the peculiarity of the ministry of these two prophets.

wide-reaching: they extend up to heaven, and yet embrace also the poorest of His people upon earth.

[136] In accordance with the direction of the king, Naaman now betook himself “with his horses and his chariot” to the humble dwelling of Elisha, which, as we infer from [verse 3](#), was in Samaria. Greater or more instructive contrast could scarcely be imagined. We know that Naaman had come to Samaria not only armed with a royal letter, almost imperious in its tone, and at the head of a great retinue, but bringing with him, as princely gifts for his expected healing, a sum of not less than ten talents of silver (computed at from 3000 pounds to about 3750 pounds), and six thousand pieces of gold (computed at from about 7500 pounds to about 9000 pounds), together with “ten changes of raiment,” that is, of those festive suits which were so costly and so much valued in the East. Between this display and pomp and the humble waiting outside the lowly home of the prophet there was sufficient contrast. But it was unspeakably intensified when the prophet, without even seeing the Syrian captain, sent him this message: “Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, ¹⁴ and thou shalt be clean.” We may at once say that the conduct of Elisha was not prompted by fear of defilement by leprosy, nor by a desire to mark the more clearly the miracle about to be performed, least of all by spiritual pride. ¹⁵

The spiritual pride of a Jew would have found other expression, and, in general, those who cherish spiritual pride are scarcely proof against such visits as this of Naaman. We cannot doubt that the bearing of Elisha was Divinely directed. One has said that it was dictated by the inner state of Naaman, as evinced by the manner in which he received the prophet’s direction ([ver. 11](#)). Perhaps we should add (with another old writer), that Elisha would thus teach Naaman that neither his pomp nor his wealth was the cause of his healing, and also that help did not come from the prophet, as if such power were inherent in the prophet. The latter, indeed, would seem of chief importance in the teaching required by a heathen.

We can readily perceive how alike the manner and the matter of Elisha’s direction would stir the indignation of Naaman. As Syrias

¹⁴In leprosy the flesh was supposed to be consumed - hence its healing would be the coming again of the flesh.

¹⁵These views have been taken by some commentators.

captain he would naturally expect a different reception from the Israelitish prophet, and as a heathen, that Elisha would have used some magical means, such as to “move his hand up and down over the place,”¹⁶ calling the while upon the name of Jehovah¹⁷ his God, and so heal him of his leprosy. And Naaman spoke both as a heathen and as a Syrian when he contemptuously compared the limpid waters of “Abana and Pharpar,”¹⁸ a which transformed the wilderness around Damascus into a very paradise of beauty and riches, with the turbid flood of Jordan, if, indeed, healing were to be obtained by such means.

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“So he turned, and went away in a rage.” The reasoning by which Naaman had so nearly deprived himself of a benefit which would be to him as life from the dead, is substantially the same as that which leads so many to turn from the one remedy to which God directs them. The simple command of the Gospel to “Wash, and be clean,” like the words of the prophet which had prefigured it, is still to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness. The difficulty felt by Naaman is the same as that of so many in our days: the need of humiliation, and of faith in a remedy which seems so inadequate to the end. If washing be required, let it be in the Abana and Pharpar of our own waters, not in the turbid stream of Israel! But it is ever this humiliation of heart and simple faith in God’s provision which are required for our healing.

“Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” ([Matthew 18:3](#)). And so Naaman had to learn it. It was well that the relation between himself and his servants was so simple and affectionate (“my father”), that they could address him in terms of respectful expostulation, and so turn him from his rash purpose. For, often those around can see the true bearing of things far better than we. At the same time, we may also learn from the relation between Naaman and his servants how

¹⁶So literally, as in the margin.

¹⁷The name Jehovah as that of the God of Israel occurs on the Moabite Stone. It was, therefore, known to the neighboring nations.

¹⁸The “Abana” is, no doubt, the modern Barada or Barady, “the cold river” which divides into seven arms, and flows through the city of Damascus. The Pharpar is probably the modern Awaaj, to the south of Damascus.

the faithful performance of ordinary duties may prepare the way for the reception of a higher blessing. ¹⁹

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So it came to pass that instead of returning “in a rage” to Damascus, a leper, Naaman went down to Jordan. And as, obedient to “the saying of the man of God,” he “dipped himself seven times in Jordan,” “his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.” We can scarcely be mistaken in regarding the number seven as symbolic of the covenant (comp. also [1 Kings 18:43](#)), and as also implying a trial of faith, since presumably the healing did not come till after the seventh washing. And now it appeared, by the effect produced, that Elisha had throughout sought the restoration not only of bodily health, but also the spiritual recovery of Naaman. Although not so bidden by the prophet, yet following the promptings of a renewed heart, like the grateful Samaritan in the Gospel ([Luke 17:15](#)), he returned to Elisha, and made such full acknowledgment of God—both negatively and positively—that it might have been said of it at that time: “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel” ([Matthew 8:10](#)). ²⁰ And he also showed, in such manner as he could, the evangelical fruits of gratitude, and of a new life direction. Of the first he gave evidence in his desire to offer a gift; ²¹ of the second, in his request for “two mulesburden of earth.” This, for the purpose of constructing an altar to Jehovah, as we infer from the expression of his resolve henceforth only to bring offerings unto the LORD.

Only very brief explanation seems necessary of Elisha’s refusal to accept any gift from Naaman. For the prophets seem not unfrequently to have accepted such offerings ([1 Samuel 9:7, 8](#); [1 Kings 14:3](#)), and Elisha himself had only lately done so ([2 Kings 4:42](#)). But in the present instance it was of the utmost importance to show—in contradistinction to heathen soothsayers—that, as the prophet of

¹⁹Comp. here also some instructive lessons from the history of Cornelius, [Acts 10:7-27](#).

²⁰For instances of similar confession see [Daniel 2:47](#); [3:29](#); [6:26, 27](#). Those who object to what they call “sudden conversions” might here learn how rapid, and often more decided and thorough-going is the change of feeling and of life in those who have had no previous religious preparation.

²¹“A blessing” in the sense of a gift. Comp. [Genesis 33:10, 11](#); [Judges 1:15](#); [1 Samuel 25:27](#); [30:26](#), and other passages. We may remark how much more suitable in such circumstances seems the Biblical expression, “a blessing,” than the modern Western, “a gift.”

God did not work miracles in his own power, nor by his own will, so he did it not for reward, and that the gift of God could not be purchased with money. Indeed, we can scarcely exaggerate the impression which the refusal of Elisha must have made both on the followers of Naaman and generally in Israel—. One of the Fathers has here marked in the prophet's conduct the same principle which underlay the direction of our LORD when He sent out His disciples with this injunction: "Freely ye have received, freely give" ([Matthew 10:8](#)). Nor could Elisha be in doubt about the other request of Naaman. If in making his altar of earth according to the Divine direction ²² ([Exodus 20:24](#)), he wished to use that of the land of Israel, it could not have been with the thought that the God of Israel could only be worshipped on Israelitish soil.

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Any idea of Jehovah as a national Deity, bound to the soil of Israel, would have been in contradiction to his expressed conviction that there was "no God in all the earth but in Israel:" no national deities, but the One living and true God, Whose knowledge and manifestation were only in Israel. Nor would Elisha have given his sanction to what rested on so serious a mistake. But we can easily understand the feelings which prompted a desire to rear an Israelitish altar, not only in loving remembrance ²³ of the benefit received, but as congruous to the worship of Israel, to which his new faith had led him. It would be an outward expression of his inward faith, and would at the same time constantly proclaim throughout Syria that there was no other God than He of Israel, and no other worship than His.

And yet wider thoughts come to us. The Old Testament dispensation seems to enlarge as it has touch of the heathen world: it seems to break through its temporary bounds; it becomes universal in its application, and in its wide-hearted toleration loses its exclusiveness. Thus this incident also is prefigurative of New Testament

²²This, we can scarcely doubt, in contradistinction to the heathen altars, which were of stone, and the rites of which, among the nations inhabiting Palestine and the neighboring countries, represented and embodied all that was most vile.

²³Somewhat similar feelings prompted the construction (according to the account of Benjamin of Tudela) of the synagogue at Nahardea of stones and earth brought from Palestine; and they may explain the campo santo of Pisa, where the dead are buried in Palestinian earth.

times. For the implied sanction of Naaman's sacrifices—though probably only burnt and thank-offerings,²⁴ —seems to carry us beyond the preparatory dispensation. On the other hand, it is evidence of this toleration when Elisha does not return a negative answer to the plea of Naaman—in which, however, an important alteration in the reading should be noted: “When my master goeth into the house of Rimmon²⁵ to bow down there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon when he²⁶

[140] into a w. The amended reading is that of the LXX.] boweth down in the house of Rimmon—oh, let Jehovah forgive thy servant in this matter.”

It will be noticed that according to this reading a sharp distinction is drawn—even although the terms used are the same—between the “bowing down” of Naaman, simply because his royal master leant on his arm, and the “bowing down” of the king of Syria for the purpose of worship. The very mention of this scruple by Naaman proved not only the tenderness of his enlightened conscience, but that he was not in any danger of conformity to heathen worship. And so, without specially entering on the matter, Elisha could bid him “go in peace.”²⁷

²⁴This seems implied in the terms used. The argument is, however, only one of inference. We infer from the mention of sacrifices which follows, and from the circumstance that the request is addressed to Elisha, that Naaman asked the two burdens of Israelitish earth for an altar, which in turn could only have been intended for sacrifices. If so, this would exactly represent an adaptation of the religion of Israel to the circumstances of pious Gentiles. It is strange that this point is not discussed either in the Talmud or by Jewish commentators, although the latter regard the two mules' burden of earth as destined for an altar. The Talmud regards Naaman as a proselyte, though not in the complete sense of one who had become a Jew by circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice (Gitt. 57 b, line 18 from top).

²⁵Rimmon - or rather Raman and Rammanu - occurs on the Assyrian monuments as the name of the god of thunder, lightning, and flood (see also the cuneiform account of the Flood, col. ii., line 42, apud Schrader p. 62, and the note on p. 72, also pp. 205, 206). The Assyrians regarded Rimmon as identical with Hadad, the god of the sky. But the introduction of Rimmon in the worship of Damascus casts light on the historical relations between Syria and Assyria formerly referred to.

²⁶The alteration in the text implied in this reading only changes a [?

²⁷We cannot sympathize with the views of those commentators who either blame Elisha's compliance, or regard him as not referring to Naaman's words, - in fact, ignoring them - when he bade him “go in peace.” On the other hand, we are keenly alive to the dangers which may beset an indiscriminate application of what we have called the

But there was yet another and a sad sequel to this history. We [141] have already had repeated occasion to notice the essential difference in spirit between the prophet and his servant. It now appeared in such manner as, if left unpunished, to have marred the work of Elisha. It seems difficult to understand how, with full knowledge of the great work just wrought, and of all that had passed, Gehazi could have taken up a position so different from that of his master. But, alas, there have been too many similar instances to make it appear quite strange. The character of Gehazi was in every respect the exact opposite of Elisha's. He was covetous, selfish, and narrow-minded. There is a striking contrast between the "As Jehovah liveth," with which Elisha prefaced his persistent refusal to receive aught of Naaman ([ver. 16](#)), and the same phrase in the mouth of Gehazi, as he resolved to "take somewhat" of "this Syrian" ([ver. 20](#)). To Gehazi it seemed that his master "had spared this Syrian" very needlessly and very foolishly, "in not receiving at his hands that which he brought." He could not see in what had passed anything higher than a transaction between man and man. It had been an act of romantic generosity, an unpractical display of mistaken principle, where every consideration—even nationality and religion—pointed in the other direction. At any rate, there was no reason why he should not act differently.

Naaman had pursued his journey a little distance, when he saw the servant of the prophet hastening after him. Showing to the servant honor similar to that which he would have paid to his master, the Syrian captain descended from his chariot to meet him. In answer to Naaman's anxious inquiry, Gehazi pretended a message from Elisha to the effect that two of the sons of the prophets had just come to him from Mount Ephraim, on which both Bethel and Gilgal [142] were situated, and that he requested for them a talent of silver and two changes of garments. Probably we are to understand that these imaginary "sons of the prophets" were represented as having come in name of their respective communities, to crave help from Elisha.

principle of wide-hearted toleration. The character and limits of it must be learned from Holy Scripture (see especially [Romans 14:1; 15:7; 1 Corinthians 8; 9:20-23; Philipians 3:15](#)). And this seems a safe practical principle, that we cannot be too strict as regards our own conduct, nor yet too charitable (consistently with truth) in interpreting the motives and actions of others.

This would explain why Naaman should have urged Gehazi to “be pleased” to “consent” to take two talents (each from 300 pounds to 375 pounds—). But for the hardening effect of sin, especially of lying and covetousness, Gehazi must have been touched by the evident simplicity of Naaman, and by that respectful courtesy which now would not allow the servant of the prophet, who had come on such a charitable errand, to be burdened with carrying the silver, but detailed two of his attendants for the purpose. Gehazi allowed them to come as far as “the hill,”²⁸ and then dismissed them, to prevent possible detection.

Having secreted the money in the house, Gehazi made his appearance before his master. To what he might have felt as a searching inquiry, “Whence, Gehazi?” he replied by a bold denial of having been absent from the house. Evidently Gehazi did not realize that the Jehovah Whom he had erst invoked, and before Whom Elisha stood, was the living and the true God. Taking up the very words of Gehazi, “Thy servant did not go,” Elisha put it, “Did not my heart go?”²⁹ and then set before him the whole scene as it had been present to his inward spiritual vision.

Then, setting forth the incongruity of such mean lying and self-seeking on such an occasion—when the glory of God should have been the sole thought and aim of a true Israelite, he pronounced upon him what must be felt a sentence of meet retribution. The Syrian had become an Israelite in heart and spirit, and he was healed of his leprosy in Israel’s waters. The Israelite had become heathen in heart and spirit, and he and his were struck with the leprosy of the Syrian, whose money he had coveted for himself and his family. What each had sown, that did he reap. And this also was not only for just judgment, but for a testimony to God and to His servant.

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²⁸This, and not “tower” as in the A.V. (ver. 24). Probably the hill on which Samaria was built, and not a hill on which, as some have supposed, the house of Elisha stood.

²⁹Except that “mine heart” (ver. 26) stands for “thy servant” (cf. ver. 25), the words in the Hebrew are exactly the same.

³⁰It affords painful evidence of the absence of spiritual understanding, when the Talmud (Sot. 47 a) blames the conduct of Elisha towards Gehazi, as it does the destruction of the young men at Bethel by the she-bears. Another point which it selects for blame is Elisha’s bearing towards Joram 2 Kings 3:13-16 (Pes. 66 b, line 15 from bottom). According to the Talmud, Elisha was visited by sickness, on account of the two first

Chapter 12

[144]

Two Wonderful Manifestations of God's Presence with His Prophet: The Interposition on behalf of "the Sons of the Prophets" by the Banks of Jordan, and that in the deliverance of Elisha at Dothan—Influence of Elisha's Ministry—God, the Ever-present Help and Deliverer in Times of Danger—The Syrians led Blinded into Samaria—The Conduct of the King and of the Prophet

(2 Kings 6:1-23.)

FOR a brief space the narrative turns again to the more private and personal ministry of Elisha. Or perhaps it may be more correct to say that the history which now follows is inserted in this connection, immediately after that of Gehazi, to show that as the unfaithful servant who did not realize the presence and help of Jehovah, received meet punishment, so would they who clung to the prophet in faith and with faithfulness experience the deliverance of God, and this, even in seemingly small matters, and, if need be, by extraordinary interposition. Thus the history of the miraculously restored ax would supplement and complement that of Gehazi's punishment—both teaching substantially the same lessons: only the one in their negative, the other in their positive aspect.

We have repeatedly noticed that the ministry of Elisha had its deep influence upon Israel, despite the corruption in Church and State. Perhaps one of the most pleasing evidences of this appears in the growing number of "the sons of the prophets." On a previous occasion (2 Kings 4:43) we found at Gilgal about one hundred assembled to listen to the instruction of Elisha. This would represent

mentioned occurrences. The same authority would also have us believe that when Elisha went to Damascus (2 Kings 8:7), it was to lead Gehazi to repentance, but that this was not effected, according to the principle that no such return is offered to those whose sin has a general or public effect. If these references disclose the unspiritual character of the study of Scripture by the Talmudists, we must in fairness quote this beautiful saying of theirs, which occurs in the same connection: "Ever let the left hand repel [the sinner

a large number in proportion to the small and, in parts, semi-heathen population of the northern kingdom—especially when we remember that there were similar communities at Bethel and at Jericho. It is probably among the latter that the present narrative is laid, and it shows that this community was so prosperous that their meeting-place ¹ no longer sufficed for their growing numbers.

[145] It was this which led to the proposal of constructing another and larger place for their use by the banks of the Jordan. From the abundance of timber in the district it would be easy to provide accommodation sufficient for their simple wants. And the manner in which their proposal was worded ([ver. 2](#)) is peculiarly and graphically Eastern. Elisha not only assented to their project, but at their request consented to accompany and remain with them while engaged in their work. It need scarcely be said that this was not asked in order that the prophet might superintend their labors, but to have in their midst the loved master, whose very presence seemed to imply the Divine blessing, and whose words of instruction would secure it. In any case the whole narrative shows, on the one hand, the simplicity and earnestness of their faith, and, on the other, the poverty and humbleness of their outward circumstances.

Evidence of both was soon to appear. As they were engaged in felling the timber the ax-head of one of the workers became suddenly detached and fell into the water. His exclamation of distress addressed to Elisha, with this significant addition, that the ax had been “asked” or “entreated for,” constituted an appeal to the prophet. It is of comparatively secondary importance, whether it had been so asked as a gift, or as a loan—though the former seems to us the meaning of the word. ²

¹In [v. 1](#), the proper rendering is “where we sit before thee,” in the sense of sitting to receive instruction and direction; though it may well have been that simple huts were reared around for the accommodation of “the sons of the prophets” - not, however, in the monastic manner, since there were married men in these communities ([comp. 2 Kings 4:1](#)).

²Commentators are very keen in discussing this point. In any case the primary meaning of the verb is “to ask,” nor do I know any passage in which the secondary meaning, “to ask in loan,” can be established. It certainly does not mean “to ask in loan,” in the two passages which are generally quoted, viz., [Exodus 12:35, 36](#), and [1 Samuel 1:28](#).

What followed had best be recorded in a rigorously literal translation of the sacred text. “And the man of God said: Where has it fallen? And he showed him the place, and he [Elisha] cut off wood [a stick, piece of a tree], and put it in there [sent it], and he caused the iron to flow”—on which, the man, as directed by the prophet, “put in [“sent,” the same word as before] his hand and took it.” The first, but also the most superficial, impression on reading these words is that they do not necessarily imply anything miraculous.

Accordingly, both some of the Rabbis and certain modern interpreters have argued, either that the stick which had been cut off struck right into the hole of the ax-head and so brought it up, or else that the stick thrust under the ax had rendered it possible to drag it to land. But, to speak plainly, both these suggestions involve such manifest impossibilities, as hardly to require serious discussion. It is scarcely necessary to add that every such explanation is opposed equally to the wording and the spirit of the sacred text, which assuredly would not have recorded among the marvelous doings of the heaven-sent prophet a device, which, if it had been possible, could have been accomplished by any clever-handed person. There cannot be any doubt in the mind of every impartial man that Scripture here intends to record a notable miracle. On the other hand, there is nothing in the sacred text which obliges us to believe that the iron “did swim.” In fact, the Hebrew word is never used in that sense.³ The impression left on our minds is that the iron which had sunk to the bottom was set in motion, made to float, probably, by some sudden rush of water. Beyond this we cannot go in our attempts to explain the manner in which this miraculous result may have been brought about.

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But in another direction we can go much further. We recall what has previously been stated about the extraordinary character of the mission of Elijah and of Elisha, which accounts for a series of miracles in their history, unparalleled in the Old Testament, and, indeed, quite exceptional, being connected with what may be described as the decisive crisis in the religious history of the kingdom of Israel. If there was to be direct Divine interposition in order to recall Israel to their allegiance to Jehovah, it is evident that the religious state

³Besides this passage, it only occurs in [Deuteronomy 11:4](#), and [Lamentations 3:54](#).

of the people, ripening for a judgment which history has shown to be irrevocable, would render necessary means that were extraordinary, even in the miraculous history of the Old Testament. And if the mission of the prophets was in itself an extraordinary means, chiefly necessitated by the condition of the people, these means now required to be intensified. Accordingly Elijah and Elisha were to be prophets of the prophets—if we may use the expression—in order that this great truth, which alone could have saved the people, might be presented in a concrete and most vivid manner; that Jehovah was the living and the true God, ever-present with His own, whether for blessing or in judgment. And this must be always kept in view when [147] studying this history. Nay, is it not the great truth which should always be present to our minds, alike as the outcome of all history, the lesson of our experience, and the guide in our acting? ⁴

From this point of view much additional light is thrown on this particular event. Elisha, summoned to be among these poor, simple-hearted workers for God, could not have been deaf to their appeal, nor appeared helpless in presence of their felt need, however humble. Its very humbleness was only an additional reason for the Divine help. It would have been a contradiction in this special history, nay, in the history of Elisha generally, who seemed to embody the eternal presence of the living God among them. And as the man received back the lost ax-head—really to him a new ax-head, now to be used with a new ax-handle, it would teach him many lessons, not the least of them the constant care and provision of the God Whose messenger and representative the prophet was, and which extended as far as our need, however small and humble it might be.

Of this very truth, both Israel, as a nation, and their enemies, were presently to receive evidence, and that on a much larger scale. And this explains the next recorded event, without requiring us to regard it as having followed in strict chronological order on that just commented upon. The sacred text informs us that “the king of Syria was warring against Israel”—indicating rather a state of chronic warfare and marauding expeditions, such as are common

⁴It is curious, and probably in part due to the rationalizing tendency of Josephus, that, while professing to give a particular account of the “illustrious acts” of Elisha (Ant. 9:4, 1), he studiously omits all notice of the events recorded in [2 Kings 4:8](#) to [6:7](#), although there may be some reference to the healing of Naaman in Ant. 3:2, 4.

in the East, than a regular campaign. In his consultation with his “servants” what place to occupy, there seems to have been a scheme to lay an ambush for the capture of the king of—Israel. whether, as Josephus suggests (*Ant* 9:4, 3), when Joram was on a hunting expedition, or else when he passed from one palace to another. But each time the prophet sent timely warning, and the king was wise enough to avoid the locality indicated, and, instead of passing that way, to send and obtain confirmation of what had been foretold him.⁵

As this happened repeatedly, the king of Syria suspected a traitor among his counselors, probably the more readily, that information of the king of Israel’s projected movements must in every case have come to the Syrians from some confederate at the Israelitish court.

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This explains how one of the servants of Ben-hadad—probably, one of those by whom these secret communications were carried on—could so readily point out that the information was conveyed by Elisha, whose prophetic knowledge compassed the inmost secrets of Syrias council-chamber.⁶

It also explains how the residence of Elisha could be so readily ascertained, and an expedition planned and hastily carried out with the view of making him a prisoner. We have no difficulty in identifying the Dothan which was now the temporary residence of Elisha, and the object of Ben-Hadesattack. The spot still bears the old designation of Tell (hill) Dothan. The “twin wells” which gave it that name, are north and east of it. The place itself—about twelve miles north of Samaria, and a little to the south-west of Engannim—stands on a green hill, or enclosed upland basin,⁷ overlooking (to the north) one of the richest pasture-lands, the oblong plain of Dothan.

Here Joseph’s brethren could find sufficient sustenance for their flocks when they had exhausted for a time the wider plain of Shechem ([Genesis 37:17](#)). Just below it, to the south, is the great caravan-route from Gilead to Sharon, and thence to Egypt, where

⁵The text sufficiently vindicates our interpretation of the words in the Hebrew, without entering here on the critical grounds for our rendering.

⁶There is absolutely no reason for supposing that this servant was Naaman; but much to the contrary.

⁷See Picturesque Palestine (Vol. 2. p. 21), and Canon Tristram’s *Land of Israel*, p. 134.

those Midianites passed to whom Joseph was sold by his brethren. Dothan is surrounded by an amphitheater of hills; but northwards it looks out over the plain towards those defiles through which the Syrian host advanced that was to capture Elisha.

So far from being surprised at the array of “horses, and chariots, and a strong power,”⁸ which Ben-hadad dispatched on this expedition, we feel that it is thoroughly in accordance with the heathen notions of power.

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In the course of this narrative we have repeatedly met instances of this, and even the proposal to send fifty strong men for the rescue of Elijah ([2 Kings 2:16](#)) may be regarded as representing the influence of similar ideas in Israel. Besides, it might have been that the people would rise in defense of their prophet. Elisha knew all these preparations on the part of Ben-hadad; knew also, that during the night the city had been surrounded by the Syrians, so that, to the eye of man, there seemed no way of escape. But he rested quietly, for he also knew that “He that keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.” Nay, does it not seem as if the language of [Psalm 121](#) quite specially described his experience, and as if he had been looking up to those “mountains” from whence his help was to come? And is it not often so in the experience of God’s people, as if the wording of the Psalms were almost literally portraying alike what they feel and hope, and what happens to them?

It was early morning, and the servant of the prophet - not Gehazi now, but perhaps one of “the sons of the prophets” - went forth, it may be to make preparation for the return of his master⁹ from Dothan to his permanent home at Samaria ([2 Kings 6:32](#)).

This would throw light on the language which Elisha afterwards held to the Syrians ([2 Kings 6:19](#)). But when Elisha’s servant saw the town surrounded by the Syrian host, his heart failed him, and he

⁸The expression is difficult. From the after-narrative it cannot mean “a great host” (see [vv. 22, 23](#)), and it is even difficult to suppose that it can refer to a large division of footmen, who would be unsuited to such an expedition. The same expression occurs in [1 Kings 10:2](#).

⁹Such peculiarly early rising and forthgoing - that is, for a special purpose - seems also implied in the circumstance that apparently none of the townsmen was up to see the Syrian host. Such “early” rising is very frequently mentioned in the Old Testament as in preparation for a journey (comp. [Genesis 19:2, 27; 21:14; 22:3; 28:18; 31:55; Joshua 3:1; Judges 7:3; 19:9](#), and in other places).

turned to his master with the despairing inquiry what they were to do. If our previous suggestion that they had intended leaving Dothan that morning be well founded, it is not necessary to suppose that the servant knew the expedition to have been especially destined against Elisha; but he would naturally feel that not only was their projected journey now impossible, but that his master and himself were in imminent danger from which there seemed no possibility of escape. What follows is both historically and symbolically of deepest importance. In answer to the prayer of Elisha the eyes of the young man were opened, and he beheld the height which overlooked Dothan—or else that on which it stood—full of horses and chariots of fire. Truly had Elisha said: “Fear not, for more they with us than they with them.” It was not only the Divine answer to the Syrian challenge, and the manifestation of the Divine triumphant supremacy over the power of the enemy, but the revelation of the ever-present, watchful help of Him Whose angel “encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them” ([Psalm 34:7](#); [55:18](#); [91:11](#)). But although the vision was vouchsafed to the prophet’s servant when his “eyes” were “opened” ([Genesis 21:19](#); [Numbers 22:31](#))—that is, a sight of objects granted him, which, in our present state, is preternatural—we regard it as none the less real. And this, though the appearance of “fire,” which was the well-known symbol of the Divine manifestation ([Exodus 24:17](#); [2 Kings 2:11](#); [Psalm 1:3](#); [Isaiah 29:6](#); [Ezekiel 1:4, 27](#)), and even the form of “chariots and horses” might be the human mode of presentation familiar to the Jewish mind (comp. also [Psalm 104:3](#); [Isaiah 66:15](#); [Habakkuk 3:8](#)). But we entertain no doubt of the real and constant, though by us unseen, presence of those angel-hosts, which alike the Old and the New Testament teach us to believe are the messengers of God’s behests and ministering spirits to His saints. And this adds both solemnity and comfort to all our doing.

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In view of this heavenly guard there could be no hesitation on the part of Elisha and his servant in carrying out what we have supposed to have been their original intention of returning to Samaria. And so the two went down to the Syrian host. ¹⁰

¹⁰In going down from the hill on which Dothan was built, in order to journey to Samaria, they would necessarily come into the Syrian host which surrounded the place.

At the prayer of Elisha they were smitten, not with blindness but with blinding, so that, in the words of the Rabbis, ¹¹ “they saw, but they knew not.” ¹²

[151] It was not, therefore, “a lawful stratagem” ¹³ on his part, but literally true, when Elisha said to the Syrians who were about to make their way into Dothan: “This is not the way, and this is not the city; come after me, and I will bring you to the man whom you are seeking.”

For Elisha was then on his way to his home at Samaria, nor could he who had just pointed his servant to the heavenly defense around them have been tempted to tell a lie in order to escape the threatened danger. His object was to show the Syrians that the God Whose prophet he was could not be contended with in such manner as they thought, nor His purposes frustrated. And not the Syrians only, but Israel also, would have practical proof that He was the living God when Elisha brought his blinded pursuers as his willing captives into Samaria.

It must have been a wonderful sight, alike to Syrians and Israelites, when, in answer to the prophet’s prayer, the LORD once more “opened the eyes of the enemy,” and they found themselves in the midst of Samaria. We can only indulge in conjecture, how, perhaps, Elisha had hurried on with the swiftest; how the watchman on the tower would have announced the approach of the strange band; how, although no marauding expedition would have been expected to make a raid upon Samaria, yet the royal troops would have mustered under the command of the king himself—and perhaps, as Josephus puts it, in his somewhat rationalistic account of the event, have surrounded the Syrians at the prophet’s bidding; and, lastly, what terrible surprise followed when they discovered where they were. It is more important to mark how once more all acted in char-

Our A.V. puts it as if the Syrians had come down to Elisha, which, from the position of the host, would have been simply impossible. It is true, that, in the Hebrew, the pronoun is in the singular (“to him” in the A.V.), but this only means “to it,” viz. the host. Indeed, according to the A.V. there would be no mention of Elisha and his servant having left the city.

¹¹Rashi ad loc.

¹²The Hebrew word used does not mean actual blindness, but blinding in the sense that one does not see the actual object, but an imaginary one. Besides the present passage it is only used in [Genesis 19:11](#).

¹³So even Keil characterizes it.

acter. With an eagerness ¹⁴ and a spiritual dullness characteristic of him, Joram would fain have slaughtered these captives of the LORD.

And with characteristic uprightness and large-hearted generosity, the prophet almost indignantly rebuked the spurious zeal and courage of the king: “Thou shalt not smite! Them whom thou hast made captives with thy sword and thy bow thou smitest.” ¹⁵

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It would have been unmanly to have done otherwise; Jehovah had not brought these blinded men there as His own captives to give the king of Israel an easy and a cruel triumph; nay, the whole moral purpose of this event, its very character, would have been changed, if the proposal of Joram had been carried out. And it was right royal treatment on the part of the Heavenly Conqueror’s ambassador, when, at his bidding, they gave them a great meal, and then dismissed them to their master, to report how Jehovah made captives of the captors of His representative, and how He entertained and released His captives.

And what is right is also wise. We do not wonder to read that after this marauding bands of Syrians no longer made incursions into the land. But to us all there are many lessons here: not only of the unseen, but certain presence of our God and of His help; of rebuke to our groundless fears, and encouragement to go forward; but also as concerning the enemies of the people of God and our dealing with them. How often when they have surrounded Dothan, and deemed themselves certain of achieving their purpose, have they seemed blinded, and found themselves in the midst of Samaria. How many times have arguments and measures, which were thought certain of success against the truth or the people of God, ended in quite the opposite result. And lastly, should we not learn to deal with those whom not our own power, but God, has made helpless captives, not as if they were our personal enemies, but generously, while faithfully, although in meekness, instructing those who oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the

¹⁴This appears even from the repetition: “Shall I smite? Shall I smite?” and the very addition, “My father,” is instructive in the circumstances.

¹⁵For linguistic reasons interpreters have generally translated: “Dost thou smite,” etc. in the sense, that Joram did not even kill his lawful captives, how much less these! But this would give a very inapt and unlikely meaning. Our view of the text is that taken in Josephus’ account of the event.

acknowledging of the truth ([2 Timothy 2:25](#))? For, as harsh or self-asserting bearing on the part of those who may defend the truth of God would tend to injure that cause, probably more than anything else, so assuredly would it be palpably and painfully incongruous. And yet—the LORD reigneth, and He will take care of His own work.

Siege of Samaria by the Syrians—Terrible Straits and Tragedy in the City—The King sends to slay Elisha, but Arrests his Messenger—Announced Deliverance and Judgment on the Unbelieving “Lord”—The Discovery by the Four Lepers - Flight of the Syrians—Relief of Samaria—The Unbelieving Trodden to Death in the Gate

(2 Kings 6:24-720.)

THE sacred narrative now resumes the record of public events in Israel, although still in close connection with the ministry of Elisha, which at this crisis appears the primal factor in the history of the northern kingdom. Remembering that it is written from the prophetic standpoint, we do not here look for a strictly chronological arrangement of events, but rather expect to find them grouped according to the one grand idea which underlies this history.

It is impossible to determine what time may have intervened between the attempts and the expedition described in the last chapter and the open warfare against Samaria, the incidents of which we are about to relate. According to Josephus (Ant. 9:4, 4), it followed immediately—the narrative of those who had returned from Samaria having convinced Ben-hadad that any secret attempts upon the king of Israel were hopeless, and determined him to resort to open warfare, for which he deemed his army sufficient. ¹

However that may be, he was soon to experience how vain were all such attempts when God was in defense of His people. And here the question naturally arises why such Divine interpositions should have been made on behalf of Israel. The answer is not difficult, and it will throw light upon the course of this history. Evidently, it was

¹This, however, would scarcely seem to us the likely outcome of the events just recorded. We would rather suggest that some time must have elapsed during which the impression made by the miraculous help to Israel had gradually passed away.

[154] a period of comparative indecision, before the final attitude of the nation towards Jehovah was taken, and with it the ultimate fate of Israel decided. Active hostility to the prophet as God's representative and to the worship of Jehovah had ceased, and there were even tokens for good and of seeming return to the LORD. But, as events soon showed, there was not any real repentance, and what to a superficial observer might seem the beginning of a calm was only a lull before the storm. This interval of indecision, or token of pending decision, must be taken into account. The presence of the prophet in Israel meant the final call of God to Israel, and the possibility of national repentance and forgiveness. Every special interposition, such as those we have described, was an emphatic attestation of Elisha's mission, and hence of his message; and every deliverance indicated how truly and easily God could help and deliver His people, if only that were in them towards which the presence of the prophet pointed. And the more minute and apparently unimportant the occasions for such interposition and deliverance were, the more strikingly would all this appear. It is with such thoughts in our minds that we must study the history of the siege and miraculous relief of Samaria.

Ben-hadad was once more laying siege to Samaria (comp. [1 Kings 20](#)). And to such straits was the city reduced that not only levitically unclean but the most repulsive kind of meat fetched a price which in ordinary times would have been extravagant for the most abundant supply of daintiest food, while the coarsest material for cooking it sold at a proportionally high rate. It must have been from want of provender for them that such beasts of burden as asses, so common and useful in the East, were killed. Even their number must have been terribly diminished (Comp. [2 Kings 7:13](#)) when an ass's head would sell for eighty pieces of silver (variously computed at from 5 poundsto 8 pounds'), and a "cab² of dovesdung"³ —used

²"A cab," the sixth part of a seah, and computed by the Rabbis as of the capacity of twenty-four eggs.

³This seems the undoubted meaning of the term, although some writers have regarded it as the designation for some kind of vegetable or coarse peas (comp. Bochart, *Hieroicoicon*, II., pp. 45, 46). Some of the Rabbis also regard the "doves' dung" as used for firing, since the city was so shut in that wood could not be got.

when dried as material for firing—for five pieces of silver (computed at from 6/to 10/⁴).

If such were the straits to which the wealthier were reduced, we can imagine the sufferings of the poor. But only the evidence of those who themselves were actors in it could have made any one believe in the possibility of such a tragedy as that to the tale of which King Joram was to listen. While making the round of the broad city wall (the glacis), probably to encourage as well as to inspect the defenders of the city, and to observe the movements of the enemy, he was arrested by the cry for help of a frenzied woman. Probably too much accustomed to the state of famine and misery, the king uttered an ejaculation, indicative not only of the general distress prevailing in the city, but of his own state of mind. His words seem to imply that he felt Jehovah alone could give help,⁵ perhaps that he had some dim expectation of it, but that the LORD withheld from sending it for some reason for which neither king nor people were to blame.

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As we view it in the light of his after-conduct (comp. vv. 31-33), King Joram connected the straits of Samaria with the prophet Elisha,—either they were due to his direct agency, or else to his failure to make intercession for Israel—. Such ignorance of the spiritual aspect of God’s dealings, even when they are recognized, together with an unhumbled state of heart, unwillingness to return to God, and the ascription of the evils befalling us to the opposite of their true cause, are only too common in that sorrow which Holy Scripture characterizes as “of the world,” and working “death.”

The horrible story which the woman told to the king was that she and another had made the agreement that each of them was successively to kill her son for a meal in which they two were to share; that

⁴Classical writers record similar straits. Thus, Plutarch tells that in a famine an ass’s head was sold for sixty drachms, while at ordinary times an ass was sold at from twenty-five to thirty drachms, and Pliny that at the siege of Casalimum by Hannibal, a mouse was sold for 200 denars. A tale of even sorer distress comes to us from the last siege of Jerusalem, when the excrements of men and animals were searched for and eaten (Jos. War, 5. 13, 7).

⁵It is scarcely necessary to say that we regard the rendering: “If Jehovah do not help thee, whence shall I help thee?” as correctly giving the meaning of the original. To regard the words as an imprecation, is evidently incongruous, although Josephus takes that view of them. A similar remark applies to other interpretations of the words.

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the one had fulfilled her part of the bargain, but that, after partaking of the dreadful feast, the other had hidden her son. Whether or not the feelings of motherhood had thus tardily asserted themselves in the second mother, or whether, in the avarice of her hunger, she wished to reserve for herself alone the unnatural meal, matters not for our present purpose. But we recall that such horrors had been in warning foretold in connection with Israel's apostasy ([Leviticus 26:29](#); [Deuteronomy 28:53](#)); that they seem to have been enacted during the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar ([Lamentations 4:10](#)); and lastly, that we have historical evidence of their occurrence during the last siege of Jerusalem by Titus (Jos. War, 6., 3, 4). Even if it had not reminded the king of the predicted Divine curse, such a tale could not have fallen on his ear, especially in existing circumstances, without exciting the deepest and strongest feelings. The story itself was sufficiently harrowing; but that a mother should, even in the madness of self-reproach, make public appeal to the king, that her neighbor should be kept to her part of the compact, revealed a state of matters and of public feeling which called for that universal mourning which the king, as head of the state, inaugurated, when almost instinctively "he rent his clothes." And so, too often, they that will not mourn for sin have to mourn for its consequences.

But as the people watched their king as, with rent clothes, he passed on his way, they took notice that he wore other token of mourning—that "he had sackcloth within upon his flesh." And yet, strange as it may seem, there is not any inconsistency between this and what immediately follows in the sacred narrative. There is no reason to doubt his outward penitence, of which this was the token—perhaps, alas, the main part. Nor do we require to suppose, as has been suggested, either that he had put on sackcloth in obedience to a general command of Elisha, or else that his anger against the prophet was due to the advice of the latter that Samaria should hold out in expectation of Divine deliverance, and that he (the king) had put on sackcloth in the belief that thereby he would secure the promised help. For similar conduct may still be witnessed as regards its spirit, although the outward form of it may be different. A man experiences the bitter consequences of his sinful ways, and he makes sincere, though only outward, repentance of them. But the evils consequent upon his past do not cease; perhaps, on the

contrary, almost seem to increase, and he turns not within himself, for humiliation, but without, to what he supposes to be the causes of his misfortunes, perhaps often those very things which are intended ultimately to bring spiritual blessing to him. The sudden outburst of the king's anger against Elisha indicates that he somehow connected the present misery of Samaria with the prophet; and the similarity of his rash vow of Elisha's death with that of his mother Jezebel in regard to Elijah (1 Kings 19:2) would lead to the inference that Joram imagined there was a kind of hereditary quarrel between the prophets and his house. This, although he had but lately experienced personal deliverances through Elisha (2 Kings 6:9, 10). Perhaps, indeed, we may hazard the suggestion that one of the reasons for them may have been to show that the controversy was not with the members of the house of Ahab as such, but with them as alike the cause and the representatives of Israel's apostasy. [157]

But the king's mood was fitful. The command to slay Elisha was immediately succeeded by another resolve, whether springing from fear or from better motives. He hastily followed the messenger whom he had sent, in order to arrest the execution of the sentence on which he had gone. Meanwhile the prophet himself had been in his house with the elders of the city we can scarcely doubt, making very different application of the state of matters in Samaria than the king had done. We do not wonder that all that was happening should have been Divinely communicated to Elisha, nor yet that he should have described in such language the purposed judicial murder by Joram as characteristic of the son of Ahab and Jezebel. Plain and fearless as the words were, they would also remind the elders of the pending judgment against the house of Ahab. By direction of the prophet they who were with him now prevented the entrance of the king's messenger, who was so soon to be followed by the monarch himself. The words (ver. 33): "And he said, Behold this the evil is from Jehovah, why should I wait [hope] any longer?" were spoken by the king as he entered the presence of Elisha. They are characteristic of his state of mind. It was perhaps for this reason that the prophet apparently gave no heed of any kind to them. They only served to bring into more startling contrast the abrupt announcement which the prophet was commissioned to make. Alike in itself and in the circumstances of the city, it seemed to imply not only a miracle but

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an absolute impossibility. Yet the message was not only definite but solemnly introduced as “the word of Jehovah.” It was to this effect, that about that time on the morrow, a seah (about a peck and a half of fine flour would be sold in the gate of Samaria, where the public market was held, for a shekel (about 2s. 7d.), and two seahs (about three pecks) of barley for the same price.

Such abundance as this would imply could not have been expected even in the most fruitful seasons. The words must have come with such surprise upon all, that only absolute faith in the prophet, or rather in the presence of Jehovah with him, could have secured credence for them. And is it not always so, whenever any real need of ours is brought face to face with a promise of God,—and are we not always tempted, in the weakness of our faith, either to minimize and rationalize God’s promises, or else not to realize nor lay hold on them? Thus every promise is a twofold test: of His faithfulness—although only if we believe; and of our faith. And in that assembly there was at least one who did not hesitate to speak out his disbelief, even though the announcement had been solemnly made in the name of Jehovah, by one who had previously often earned a claim to credence, however incredible his predictions might have seemed. But this is the very test of faith—that the past never seems to afford a quite sufficient basis for it, but that it must always stretch beyond our former experience, just because it is always a present act, the outcome of a present life. And apart from the sneer which it conveyed, there was certainly reason in the retort of the adjutant,⁶ on whose hand the king leaned: (Comp. [2 Kings 5:18](#)) “If Jehovah made windows in heaven, would this thing be?”⁷ But it needed not the direct sending of corn through windows made in the heavens. To the lessons of God’s faithfulness to His promise there was now to be added, as counterpart, another of His faithfulness as regarded the threatened judgments upon unbelief. The officer who had disbelieved the announcement should see but not share in the good of its fulfillment.

⁶No really satisfactory explanation of the Hebrew term has been given. But the rendering, “adjutant,” gives at least the true, even if it should not be the literal, meaning.

⁷Other renderings have also been proposed, but it seems to me that this most truly gives the meaning of the original.

As we transport ourselves into the circumstances, it must have been impossible to imagine any fulfillment of the prediction without the most direct Divine interposition. And yet it was only because they were ignorant of what would evolve that any miracle, in the sense in which we use that expression, seemed necessary. As they were so soon to learn, and as we understand it, all happened in the orderly and reasonable succession of events. But the miracle lies in the Divinely arranged concurrence of natural events, with a definite view to a Divine and pre-arranged purpose. And so—if we would only learn it—miracles are such, because we view God’s doings from earth, and in the light of the present and the seen; miracles are the sudden manifestation of the ever-present rule of God; and, if we had but eyes to see and ears to hear, we are still and ever surrounded by miracles. [159]

The means employed in the promised deliverance were as unexpected and strange as the deliverance itself. There were four lepers⁸ who, according to the law ([Leviticus 13:46](#); [Numbers 5:2](#)), were kept outside the city, at the entrance to the gate.

In the straits to which Samaria was reduced, they could no longer expect even the scantiest provision which charity within the city might supply, or careful search without its walls might discover. In the alternative of certain starvation if they remained where they were, or possible death if they fell into the hands of the Syrians, they naturally chose the latter. As the twilight deepened into gloom, they started to carry out their purpose. As we understand it, they made a long circuit to approach the Syrian camp at its “uttermost part,”⁹ that is, the part furthest from Samaria.

This would naturally be their best policy, as they would neither be observed from the city, nor by those in the camp of the enemy, who, as nearest to Samaria, might be expected to be most on the watch, while at the same time it might enable the lepers to present themselves as if they were not connected with the beleaguered. And this also allows sufficient time for the flight of the Syrians having

⁸According to Jewish tradition these were Gehazi and his sons.

⁹Generally the expression, “the uttermost part of the camp of Syria,” is understood to refer to the part nearest the city. But this would not be the obvious meaning of the expression, and, for the reasons mentioned in the text, we have adhered to the primary sense of the words.

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taken place without being observed by the lepers, who probably had made a wide detour around the hills. For while they crept about the camp there was a strange movement within it. It is not necessary to suppose that the “noises of chariots,” “of horses,” and “of a great host,” which the Syrians seemed to hear in the falling darkness, depended on a supernaturally caused illusion of their senses (comp. [2 Kings 6:19, 20](#)); nor yet that the noise itself was supernaturally caused. Such noises are said to be occasionally heard in valleys shut in by mountains, and to have been popularly regarded as portending war.¹⁰

The Syrians, at any rate, thought they heard the approach of relieving armies. Tribes from the great Hittite nation in the north, and bands, if not the armies of Egypt, had been hired against them by Joram, and were now simultaneously advancing on them from the north and the south. This would seem to explain how Samaria had held out amid such terrible straits. They had been looking for this succor all along. Terror peopled the night with the forms as well as the sounds of the dreaded host. We imagine that the panic began at the extremity of the camp. Presently they were in full flight, abandoning their horses, their asses, their tents, with all the provisions and treasures which they contained, and hastening to put Jordan between them and their imaginary pursuers.

When the four lepers reached the extremity of the Syrian camp, the fugitives were already far away. They listened, but heard not a sound of living men. Cautiously they looked into one tent, and finding it deserted, sat down to the untasted meal which lay spread, ate and drank, and then carried away, and hid what treasures they found. They entered the next tent, and found it similarly deserted. By the time they had carried away and hid its treasures also, it became quite evident to them that, for some unknown reason, the enemy had left the camp. It was, however, not so much the thought that this was a day of good tidings to Samaria, in which they must not hold their peace, as the fear that if they tarried till the morning without telling it, guilt would attach to them, that induced them hastily to communicate with the guard at the gate, who instantly reported the strange tidings. But so far from receiving the news as an indication

¹⁰See Bahr on the passage.

that the prediction of Elisha was in the course of fulfillment, the king does not even seem to have remembered it. He would have treated the report as a device of the Syrians, to lure the people in the frenzy of their hunger outside the city gates. Foolish as the seeming wisdom of Joram was, there are only too many occasions in which neglect or forgetfulness of God's promise threatens to rob us of the liberty and blessing in store for us. In the present instance there were, happily, those among the king's servants who would put the matter to the test of experiment. From the few remaining troops, five ¹¹ horsemen and two ¹² chariots were to be dispatched to report on the real state of matters.

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The rest is soon told. They found it as the lepers had informed them. Not only was the Syrian camp deserted, but all along the way to Jordan the track of the fugitives was marked by the garments and vessels which they had cast away in their haste to escape. And as the messengers came back with the tidings, the stream of people that had been pent up in the city gate poured forth. They "spoiled the tents of the Syrians." Presently there was abundance and more than that within Samaria. Once more market was held within the gate, where they sold for one shekel two sacks of barley, or else one sack of fine flour. And around those that sold and bought surged and swayed the populace. Presumably to keep order among them, the king had sent his own adjutant, the same "on whose hand" he had "leaned" when Elisha had made his prophetic announcement; the same who had sneered at its apparent impossibility. But it was in vain to seek to stem the torrent of the people. Whether accidentally or of purpose they bore down the king's adjutant, and trod him under foot in the gate. "And he died, as the man of God had said."

We mark at the close of this narrative the emphatic repetition of the circumstances connected with this event. For, assuredly, as it was intended to show the faithfulness of God in the fulfillment of His promise for good, so also that of the certain and marked punishment of unbelief. And both for the teaching of Israel, and, let us add, for that of all men, and in all ages.

¹¹Five: half of ten, which is the number of completeness.

¹²Two chariots - probably in order that if one were attacked, the other might make its way back into the city.

[162] **Chapter 14: Close of Elisha's Public Ministry: The Beginning of Judgment**

The Shunammite on her Return from Philistia restored to her Property—Elisha's Visit to Damascus—The Embassy of Hazael—Prediction of Future Judgment through him—The Murder of Ben-hadad and Accession of Hazael

(2 Kings 8:1-15.)

THE two narratives which follow that of the siege of Samaria may be characterized as in some sense supplementary to it. On the one hand, they mark the relations between Elisha and Joram; and on the other, those between the prophet and Syria. They also close what seems the more personal account of Elisha's activity. After that we have only an account of his death and burial ([chap. 13.](#)), drawn, as we suppose, from the same "memoirs" to which the whole of this series is due; the reference to Elisha's activity in the anointing of Jehu ([chap. 9.](#)) forming part of the more general history. Accordingly we again remind ourselves that what is about to be described must not be regarded as following in strict chronological succession what had preceded, but rather as in internal connection with it.

The first narrative introduces once more the Shunammite and her heaven-given, heaven restored son, although in circumstances far different from those in which we first knew them. Indirectly we learn and mark that the relations between the prophet and the family of Shunem had not ceased with the restoration of the child to life, although Holy Scripture has not preserved any record of such intercourse. And this also is instructive as regards Bible history. Further, we mark the affectionate interest of Elisha, and his care for the outward well-being of this family. Among the other dealings of God with Israel we learn that He "called for a famine"—a most emphatic expression (comp. [Psalm 105:16](#); [Haggai 1:11](#)). This dearth was to

last for seven out of the twelve years of Joram's reign. Before its commencement the prophet "had spoken" to the Shunammite, warning her to betake herself to any place outside the land of Israel where she might be able to secure a temporary home; and "the woman had arisen and done ¹ after the saying of the man of God." Although we have evidence that this famine pressed severely on the people (comp. 4:38), yet the advice of the prophet must have been determined by special circumstances. From the absence of any reference to him, it is probable that the Shunammite had lost her husband, and with him her mainstay in times of trouble and difficulty. [163]

We are told that she went to the land of the Philistines—probably as that nearest to her home, and at the same time least likely to suffer, both on account of its fertility and its easy communication with grain producing Egypt. When the predicted seven years of famine ended, the woman who, as the original expressly marks, had only gone "to sojourn as a stranger," returned to her home at Shunem. But here her faith, which had led her so literally to obey the words of the prophet, was to receive a rude shock. "Her house," to which so many loving and sacred memories attached, and "her land"—her own and her child's property—were occupied by strangers.

We remember the proud feeling of independence with which she had on a former occasion declined Elisha's offer to speak for her to the king (2 Kings 4:13), since she dwelt among her own people. But since then, and in the troubles connected with famine and Syrian invasion, times had sadly changed. And in the circumstances it seems scarcely less indicative of the Shunammite's independence of character, that she now appealed directly to the king, not for favor, but for justice. It was surely in the good providing of God, Who ordereth all things wisely and well, that the Shunammite addressed her appeal to the king just as he was talking with Gehazi, and the latter at his request was telling all the great things that Elisha had done. But we cannot infer from this conversation that their meeting occurred before the healing of Naaman, after which Gehazi was smitten with life-long leprosy, since, although lepers were banished from the cities, all intercourse with them was not prohibited, especially under such peculiar circumstances. On the other hand, it

¹The verbs in [vers. 1:2](#) must be given in the pluperfect, not the imperfect tense.

was evidently the period when the authority of the prophet with the king was at its highest, and hence either after the capture of the Syrians in Samaria(2 Kings 6:21), or, as we think, after the fulfillment of Elisha's prediction of the relief of Samaria, and the death of the disbelieving "lord." This would best accord with the present narrative. In any case, the appearance of the woman with her son during Gehazi's conversation would not only confirm its truth, but naturally augment the interest of the king in her complaint. And so he immediately ordered not only the restoration of her property, but a return, probably from the royal treasury, of the value of the produce of the land during the previous years. But to us and to all time this history is chiefly interesting as showing how the obedience of faith will, despite trials or appearances to the contrary, be met by the faithful care of the God of promise—and still further, how God will not allow the day of His people to set in trouble, but cause the light to break forth at eventide.

The second narrative in this history shows how the name and work of Elisha were known, not only in Israel, but beyond it, even in hostile Syria. This, after what we have already learned, cannot surprise us. Although there is not any express statement to that effect, we cannot but connect the journey of Elisha "towards Damascus,"² with the commission formerly given to Elijah to anoint Hazael king over Syria (1 Kings 19:15).

This may help us to understand that the Word of God has a wider than the barely literal application which so often tends to perplex the superficial reader. It also shows that its fulfillment may be delayed, and when made, come in other manner than was expected; and, lastly, that the prophets may for many years have borne about the painful secret of some trouble to come—forbearing to take any part till the moment for action, or rather for their obedience, was indicated to them from above.

It was, surely, not an accidental circumstance that when Elisha arrived in Syria Ben-hadad was on that sick-bed from which his treacherous servant intended he should never rise. For the prophet was not to come until all was ready and prepared for the deed by which Hazael would ascend the throne of Syria, that while in its

²Ver. 8 shows that it could not have been "to Damascus."

sequences necessarily connected with the judgments foretold upon Israel, yet no part of the incentive to the crime could be imputed to the agency of the Divine messenger. Evidently, if Hazael had not intended to murder his master, and to pretend that he had died of his disease, the words of Elisha would have had no meaning, nor could they have suggested to him his crime.

On hearing of the near approach of the great prophet of Israel, Ben-hadad charged Hazael, probably his vizier or chief general, to meet Elisha, and inquire through him of Jehovah, whether he would recover from his sickness. After the manner of the time, Hazael went to meet the prophet with a present. We are not to understand that those forty camels which bore "of every good thing of Damascus," were literally fully laden. This magnifying of a present by distributing and laying it on a great many bearers or beasts of burden, is characteristic of the East, and is not uncommonly witnessed in our own days. Hazael delivered his master's message with unblushing hypocrisy. But Elisha had read his purpose, and replied in language which, while it unmasked, could never have suggested his murderous scheme: "Go, say to him, [viz. as thou intendest to do] Thou shalt surely live; howbeit Jehovah has shown me that he shall surely die." And as we recall the hypocritical words by which Hazael had tried to disguise his purpose and deceive the prophet, we feel that this was the most fitting answer to his pretended humility and care.

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Yet this was only the beginning of what Elisha had to say to Hazael. "And he [Elisha] steadied his face, and set it till he [Hazael] was ashamed," when reading not only his inmost thoughts, but his future history also, the prophet burst into weeping. When Hazael inquired as to the reason of his tears, Elisha told the terrible cruelties which he knew the Syrian would perpetrate upon Israel. The mock humility of Hazael's answer: "But what is thy servant, the dog, that he should do this great thing?" reveals at least the spirit in which he contemplated such deeds against Israel. If Hazael had still thought to deceive Elisha, the announcement that God had shown to his prophet Hazael as king of Syria, must have convinced him that disguise was useless. Little more requires to be told. Hazael returned to his master, and gave him the lying assurance of recovery, as Elisha had foretold. Then as in his sore sickness Ben-hadad lay prostrate

and helpless, Hazael laid upon his face a coverlet which had been soaked and made heavy with water. And so Ben-hadad died, and his murderer, whose crime remained probably unknown, ascended the throne.

[166] The accession of Hazael was only part of the burden of judgment upon Israel which had been announced to Elijah. The other part was the usurpation of the throne of Israel by Jehu. With this twofold accession began the decay of the northern kingdom of Israel. Presently we shall read (10:32). “In those days Jehovah began to cut Israel short; and Hazael smote them in all the coasts of Israel,”—a smiting which included the loss of the entire territory east of the Jordan. And we believe that it was to declare, perhaps to warn of, this judgment upon—Israel. that Elisha was sent to Damascus, and made to have this interview with Hazael.

For Divine judgment cannot be arrested, though it may be deferred, and what Israel had sown when on the morrow of the decisive contest on Carmel it cast out Elijah, that would it reap, when, notwithstanding all mercies shown, the son of Ahab and Jezebel could order, though he dared not carry out, the execution of Elisha. They would have none of His prophets, however clearly their mission was attested of God; nay, rather, they would have none of that God Whose prophets Elijah and Elisha had been. And yet in faithfulness God would reveal the coming judgment to His servants, and through them to Israel.

But quite a peculiar feeling comes over us in these far-off islands of the West, when now, thousands of years after these events, we stand before the black obelisk on which this part of the history of ancient Assyria is recorded,³ and there read the names of Ben-hadad and of Hazael of Damascus—the former in connection with “Ahab of Jezreel,” who was at one time his ally against Assyria; the latter, as humbly offering rich tribute to the king of Assyria, as also does Jehu, who is styled “the son of Omri” (the founder of the dynasty succeeding that of Omri). And here these histories commingle, and the records of the one will be found to throw welcome light upon those of the other.

³At present in the British Museum.

Chapter 15: Jehoram and Ahaziah, (Fifth and Sixth) Kings of Judah. Joram, (Tenth) King of Israel

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Accession of Jehoram—Murder of the Royal Princes—Introduction of the Service of Baal in Judah—Revolt of Edom and of Libnah—The Writing from Elijah—Inursion of the Philistines and of Arab tribes—Sickness, Death, and Burial of Jehoram—State of public feeling

(2 Kings 8:16-24; 2 Chronicles 21.)

THE tangled skein of Judaeon and Israelitish history is now once more taken up. ¹ It is a period of fast-hastening judgment, luridly lit up by the horrors attending Diehard's accession to the throne of Israel', though retarded in Judah by the mercy of God towards the house of David, and the temporary repentance and return to Jehovah in the land.

The account in 2 Kings 8:16 introduces almost abruptly the accession of Jehoram to the throne of Judah, after the death of his father Jehoshaphat. It was probably for this reason, and because of the long gap between this and the previous historical notice about Judah (1 Kings 22:51), that the somewhat difficult explanatory clause (supposing it to be genuine) may have been inserted in 2 Kings 8:16: "And Jehoshaphat had been king of Judah." ² In 2 Kings 8 (vers. 16-24) the history of Judah and of the reign of Jehoram is given only in briefest outline. For details we must, as in other cases, turn to the Book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 21.), whose narrative we now follow.

The historical notices with which the reign of Jehoram is introduced are almost identical in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Both

¹On the somewhat complicated and difficult chronology of this period, comp. the Appendix at the end of this Volume.

²Supposing this clause to be genuine, as to which we have doubts, it must be translated as in the text, and not as in the A.V. "Jehoshaphat being then king of Judah"; for which the original offers no warrant.

state that Jehoram was thirty-two years old at his accession, and that his reign lasted eight years. The Book of Chronicles connects, as usually, this accession with the death and burial at Jerusalem of the former king, while the Book of Kings marks that Jehoram ascended the throne of Judah “in the fifth year of Joram, the son of Ahab, king of Israel.” And since the reign of the latter extended over twelve years ³

[168] (comp. [2 Kings 8:25](#)), their rule must for seven years have been contemporaneous—that is, to within one year of the death of Joram of Israel.

Even more important is the notice given in the same words in the two narratives—quite prominently in the Book of Kings—to the effect that Jehoram “walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as did the house of Ahab: for the daughter of Ahab [Athaliah] was his wife: and he did the evil in the sight of Jehovah” (comp. [2 Chronicles 21:6](#)). That notice explains alike the history of the reign of Jehoram and the hastening ruin of Judah. Nor can it have been without evil influence even upon Joram and Israel.

The fatal combination of political devices with earnest religion, which constituted the weakness of Jehoshaphat’s reign, and led to his alliance with the house of Ahab, appeared also in his disposition regarding his children. Besides Jehoram, who as the eldest succeeded to the throne, he had left six sons. ⁴

For these he had—apparently during his lifetime—made not only ample provision in treasure, but assigned to them certain “fenced cities in Judah.” This was to imitate the policy of Rehoboam (11:23), and, no doubt, with the same purpose of securing, in troublous times, the allegiance of the country districts and of their aristocracy, by assigning these “fenced cities” as residences to the royal princes. But in the present instance the device proved fatal to them. Jehoram

³But in all these notices the well-known rule must always be kept in mind that as regards the reigns of kings the year was counted from the month Nisan to Nisan. Thus a reign of two years might really represent only one of fourteen months.

⁴We must here call attention to the remarkable use of the term “Israel,” not Judah, as applied to the southern kingdom, [2 Chronicles 21:2](#), and also [ver. 4](#). The same expression occurs in [2 Chronicles 12:1, 6](#); again in [15:17](#), and in [28:19, 27](#). In all these passages the name seems used with some reference to the law of God - as that which gave to Israel its name, and made it the people of Israel. It is almost an anticipation of the New Testament use of that name.

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had nothing to fear from his brother-in-law Joram—as Rehoboam had from Jeroboam.

But the semi-royal position of his brothers, supported—as it would almost seem—by intrigues of the chiefs of the local aristocracy, roused his fears. With the same unscrupulousness that characterized the house of Ahab and Jezebel, he rid himself of any possible rivals by the murder of all his brothers, and of their adherents among “the princes.” And throughout, Jehoram’s reign was in accordance with its beginning. Following closely in the steps of the house of Ahab, he not only abolished all the pious ordinances and arrangements of his father, but actually rebuilt “the high places,” which his grandfather Asa (17:3), and his father Jehoshaphat (17:6), had destroyed, and introduced the worship of Baal with all its abominations. [169]

We cannot be mistaken in attributing a large share in these evil doings to Athaliah, although her name is not expressly mentioned. For, besides the repeated reference to the house of Ahab, we have the statement that his “brethren” of his “father’s house were better” than Jehoram, which seems to imply that his special circumstances had made him different from the other members of Jehoshaphat’s family, and also this—in our view, very significantly—that there came to him a writing from Elijah the prophet.

For, as there is not any other reference to Elijah throughout the Books of Chronicles, we infer that his activity had been confined to the northern kingdom, and that this solitary prophecy in regard to the kingdom of Judah must have been due to the connection of Jehoram with the house of Ahab,—or, to be more particular, to his marriage with Athaliah and her influence upon him. And we would date the composition of this “writing,” or it may be its commission, shortly after that ill-fated union. ⁵

⁵It is needless to discuss at length the various views propounded in regard to this writing from Elijah the prophet. There cannot be any reasonable doubt that Elijah the Tishbite is meant by that designation. Nor yet can we believe that his life extended beyond the marriage of Jehoram with Athaliah. The history as hitherto traced seems incompatible with any other view of the chronology. This idea that this letter came from heaven deserves as little serious consideration as the opposite notion of its spurious insertion from some other document by a later writer, who thought Elijah must also have been connected with the affairs of the southern kingdom of Judah. But in that case we would have expected

[170] For it seems of quite secondary importance whether Elijah himself wrote this letter, with direction to have it delivered at the proper time to the husband of Athaliah, or else commissioned one of his disciples to write it in his name, when the circumstances of the case indicated it. And as regards this latter view, we remember that the direction to Elijah to anoint Hazael king of Syria, was executed six or seven years after the death of Ahab, that to anoint Jehu fourteen years after Ahab: in both cases, therefore, many years after the commission had been given ([1 Kings 19:15, 16](#)); in both cases also, not by Elijah himself, nor yet with precisely literal fulfillment of the commission given.

The “writing from Elijah” announced, for the public and personal sins of Jehoram, public and personal judgments. But even before that warning came from the dead prophet, with all the solemnity of a message straight from heaven, the judgment upon Judah had begun. Indeed, as the sacred writer remarks, ⁶ it would have extended to the destruction of the whole family of Jehoram - and with it of the commonwealth of Israel—but for the gracious promise to David of the continuance of his house till his rule should merge in that of “David’s greater Son” ⁷ promised him to give him [David] a light as regards his sons always [all the days].” In [2 Chronicles 21:7](#) the words, “and to his sons” must be paraphrased in the same sense, “and that to his sons.”] ([2 Samuel 7:12, 13](#); [1 Kings 11:36](#)).

Still most serious calamities befell the country, both in the east and in the west. In the south-east, Edom had for one hundred and fifty years been subject to Judah. It now rebelled. Josephus reports that the governor, whom Jehoshaphat had appointed, was murdered; while, from the prophecies of [Joel 3:19](#), we infer that the rebellion was attended by a massacre of the Judæan settlers in Edom. From the account of the expedition against Edom—given with only slight variations in the Books of Kings and Chronicles—we learn that

more frequent and prominent introduction of Elijah, and the solitariness of the mention of his name is evidence of the genuineness of the notice.

⁶This is the more noteworthy, and the more clearly points to the expected Messianic fulfillment of the promise, that at the time when the Book of Chronicles appeared no scion of the house of David occupied the throne, nor was there any human prospect of the restoration of that rule.

⁷The expression “to give a light” is sufficiently explained by the passages quoted. In [2 Kings 8:19](#) the words are: “as He [the LORD

Jehoram and Ahaziah, (Fifth and Sixth) Kings of Judah. Joram, (Tenth) King of Israel. clxxi
Jehoram started from Jerusalem with the host, and notably war-
chariots; ⁸

that he was surrounded by the Edomites, but that he and the captains of his chariots—representing the standing army—fought their way through the Edomites, while the people - that is, the probably undisciplined multitude that had followed Jehoram, fled to their homes. [171]

Thus ended the brief campaign, with the permanent loss of Edom, which, except temporarily and for a short period (comp. [2 Kings 14:7, 22](#)), did not again become subject to Judaea, till its subdual under the Maccabean prince Hyrcan, about a century before Christ. It afterwards returned to Palestine the terrible gift of a Herod.

Nor was Edom the only loss which the southern kingdom sustained. In the west, not far from the borders of Philistia, Libnah, ⁹ the ancient Canaanitish royal, and afterwards a priest city, revolted (comp. [Joshua 15:42; 12:15; 21:13](#)).

Its site has not been localized with certainty, though it has, with some probability, been suggested that it is represented by the modern Tell-es-Safieh, somewhat to the south-east of Ascalon, and on the edge of the great Philistine plain. The hill on which the site stands was known in crusading times as “bright hill” (*collis clarus*), and the fort built upon it as “white garde” (*Blanche Garde, alba specula* or *alba custodia*). The name not only corresponds to the ancient Libnah, “whiteness,” “sheen,” but to the description of the place, ¹⁰ as in its white sheen visible in all directions. If Libnah was at the time inhabited by priests, it may have been that Diehard’s apostasy from the faith led to its revolt from his rule. This may have been prompted by the success of the rising in Edom, and the movement itself have been encouraged by the Philistines.

This view is supported by the account in the Book of Chronicles, that the Philistines, aided by certain Arab tribes from the neighborhood of Ethiopia—probably hired for the purpose - made an

⁸In [2 Kings 8:21](#) we read that “Joram went over to Zair.” This is probably a copyist’s error for “Seir” (*hr;y[ix; for, hr;y [ic e)*, and similarly the strange expression in that connection in [2 Chronicles 21:9](#): “with his princes” (*wyr;c;*), may originally depend on a similar misreading and an attempt at a gloss.

⁹Comp. Robinson, *Bible Researches*, II., pp. 27-30.

¹⁰Comp. Robinson, *Bible Researches*, II., pp. 27-30.

[172] incursion into Judaea, and literally “clave it.” We know sufficient of the fierceness of these Arabs “by the side of the Cushites,” when their spirit is roused, to understand that Judah, divided and enfeebled, and under the rule of a Jehoram, could not withstand their onset. The invading host seems to have taken, if not Jerusalem ¹¹ itself, yet the place where the king and his household were; and they carried away with them what of the royal property they found, as well as the wives and sons of Jehoram, and indeed killed all the latter except the youngest, Jehoahaz, who, from some reason unknown, escaped death.

This was the beginning of that “great stroke” with which, as foretold in the writing from Elijah, Jehovah would smite Jehoram in his people, his children, his wives, and all his substance. For even this more public calamity had a personal character, since, as we read, “Jehovah stirred up against Jehoram the spirit” of these enemies; and very markedly their plunder was confined to the royal property. And when the second part of the threatened judgment befell the king, and that incurable internal disease ¹² attacked him of which he ultimately died, it seems difficult to understand how those who witnessed all this, and still more, they who succeeded him, could have maintained the same attitude as he towards Jehovah.

We can only account for it by the rooted belief that Jehovah was only a national deity, who was angry with those who forsook His service; but that the new deity, Baal, who had proved so mighty a god to the surrounding nations, would by and by take them under his protection. And as between the stern demands and the purity of the service of Jehovah, Who claimed of royalty absolute submission and simple stewardship and Who elevated all His people into a royal priesthood, and the voluptuous luxuriousness of the worship of Baal, who placed king and people in so very different a relationship to

¹¹ It is generally supposed that Jerusalem was taken. But of this there is no mention in the text, and the non-mention of the plunder of the Temple as well as the reference to “the camp” in [2 Chronicles 22:1](#) seems inconsistent with it.

¹² As regards the special disease of which Jehoram died, the curious reader may consult Trusen, Sitten, Gebr., u. Krankh. d. allen [Hebrews 212, 213](#), where the author notes a similar case in his experience from the indiscriminate use of a well-known English quack-medicine.

Jehoram and Ahaziah, (Fifth and Sixth) Kings of Judah. Joram, (Tenth) King of
each other and to himself, rulers of the character of Jehoram or
Israel clxxxiii
Ahaziah would not hesitate in their choice. ¹³

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We have evidence that the ungodly rule of Jehoram was not popular in Judah. “He departed without being desired” by his people, nor did they make any burning of precious spices at his funeral, such as was customary at the obsequies of kings (comp. [2 Chronicles 16:14](#); [Jeremiah 34:5](#)). And although “they buried him in the city of David,” yet “not in the sepulchers of the kings.” ¹⁴ If these notices seem to indicate a hostile popular feeling, the same inference comes to us from the unusual statement that “the inhabitants of Jerusalem made Ahaziah, his youngest son, king in his stead” ([2 Chronicles 22:1](#)).

It would probably be too much to conclude that there was opposition to the accession of one who must have been known to be like-minded with his father on the part of the Levite and Priest party, although the revolt of the priest city Libnah and the later activity of the high priest Jehoiada and of the Levites on behalf of Joash ([22:11](#); [23](#)) seem to point in that direction. But we cannot be mistaken in concluding that Ahaziah was placed on the throne by a faction in Jerusalem favorable to the new order of things. And it needs no elaborate argument to convince us that, alike religiously and politically, a regime must have been profoundly unpopular which had reversed the whole former order of things, was associated with the permanent loss of Edom, the defection of so important a center as Libnah, and the victorious incursions of Philistines and Arab bands. To these outward calamities must be added the paramount sway of a woman, such as the daughter of Ahab, and the remodeling of Judah after the pattern of Israel, which even mere patriots must have felt to be a most humiliating abdication of supremacy in favor of the northern kingdom. And in the history of the brief reign of Ahaziah, as well as in the later rising which resulted in the death of Athaliah,

¹³We mark, as significant synchronisms with the reign of Jehoram, the building of Carthage, and that the throne of Tyre was occupied by the brother of Dido, Pygmalion: scelere ante alios immanior omnes. What a conjunction in Tyre, Israel, and Judah; and what light it casts upon what some persons call the exclusiveness of the Old Testament ordinances!

¹⁴Only a hypercriticism can see any real difference between this statement and that in [2 Kings 8:24](#).

[174] the existence of two parties in Judah must be kept in view; the one representing the corrupt court faction, the other the growing popular feeling in favor of return to the old order of things.

Chapter 16: Joram and Jehu, (Tenth and Eleventh) [175] Kings of Israel Ahaziah, (Sixth) King of Judath

Accession of Ahaziah—Character of his Reign—Expedition of Joram and Ahaziah Against Hazael and taking of Ramoth-Gilead—Joram Returns Wounded to Jezreel—Visit of Ahaziah - Jehu Anointed King—Rapid March on Jezreel—Joram Killed - Pursuit and Death of Ahaziah—Jezebel Killed—Fulfillment of the Divine Sentence by Elijah

([2 Kings 8:25-937](#); [2 Chronicles 22:1-9.](#))

THE brief reign of Ahaziah, or Jehoahaz ([2 Chronicles 21:17](#))—for the names are precisely the same, the two words of which they are compounded being only reversed ¹)—may be regarded as marking the crisis in the history alike of the northern and the southern kingdom. The young prince was twenty-two years old ² when he ascended the throne ([2 Kings 8:26](#)). ³

To say that he followed the evil example set by his father, would not express the whole truth. Holy Scripture designates his course as a walking “in the ways of the house of Ahab,” explaining that his mother Athaliah was his counselor, and that he was also influenced by the other members of that family. It was by their advice that he united with his uncle Joram in that expedition which ended in the

¹Jeho-achaz, “Jehovah seizes” or “holds,” Achaz-jah, “seizes” or “holds Jehovah.” We are unwilling to hazard any speculation why the name should have been thus transposed at the accession of the young king.

²The number “forty and two” in [2 Chronicles 22:2](#) is evidently the mistake of a copyist (m 40 for k 20). It must be remembered that Jehoram, his father, died at the age of forty ([2 Chronicles 21:5](#)). This implies that he was a father at the age of eighteen. Even so, we know that Jehoram had sons older than Ahaziah ([2 Chronicles 22:1](#)), although, no doubt, from different wives. But we know that marriages of princes in the East were very early - probably at the age of thirteen.

³In [2 Kings 8:26](#) she is called “the daughter of Omri,” either granddaughter, or perhaps with intentional reference to Omri as the wicked founder of the wicked dynasty of Ahab.

death of the two kings, although there is no evidence that a Judaeen army was actually joined to the forces of Israel. ⁴

[176] We remember that fourteen years before, Jehoshaphat, the grandfather of Ahaziah, had joined Ahab in a similar undertaking, which had proved unsuccessful, and in which Ahab lost his life. We might wonder at the renewal of an attempt upon Ramoth-Gilead, when a man like Hazael occupied the throne of Syria; but the Assyrian monuments explain alike the expedition and its opening success. From these we learn that there was repeated war between Assyria and Hazael, in which, to judge from the number of Syrian war chariots captured (1121), the whole force of the country must have been engaged and exhausted. On another occasion we read of a war in which after a great victory ⁵ an Assyrian monarch pursued his enemy from city to city, and even into the mountains, burning and destroying everything before him. ⁶

We may therefore conjecture that if Joram was not actually in league with Assyria—as Jehu afterwards was—the Israelitish king availed himself of the opportunity for an attack upon Ramoth-Gilead. In this he seems to have been successful ([2 Kings 9:14](#)), although he was wounded by the Syrians—as Josephus has it, by an arrow during the siege ([Ant 9:6, 1](#)). Leaving Ramoth-Gilead, which he had taken, in the keeping of Jehu, his chief captain, Joram went back to the summer palace of Jezreel, to be healed of his wounds, both as nearer to the field of action, and because the court was there at the time.

It was to Jezreel that Ahaziah went to see his uncle, and during this fatal visit the “destruction” overtook him, which, as the writer of the Book of Chronicles notes, “was of God.” It came together with that of Joram and the whole house of Ahab. The judgment which more than fourteen years before had been pronounced upon Ahab ([1 Kings 21:21-24](#)) had only been deferred till the measure of the

⁴There is at least no express reference to a Judaeen army, and the circumstances of Jehu’s advance and of Ahaziah’s attempted flight seem most consistent with the idea that there was no Judaeen contingent.

⁵For the sake of any who may have wondered at the large numbers recorded in the Bible as slain in battle, it may be stated that they are quit as large on the Assyrian monuments.

⁶Comp. Schrader, *d. Keilinschr. u. d. A. Test.* pp. 206-210.

Joram and Jehu, (Tenth and Eleventh) Kings of Israel Ahaziah, (Sixth) King of

guilt of his house was filled. ^{Judath} And now the hour had come. ^{clxxvii} In that awful vision on Mount Horeb, Elijah had received the commission to “anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi... to be king over Israel” ([1 Kings 19:16](#)), with special view to the work of punishment which he was to execute. The commission, which Elijah himself could not discharge, had devolved on Elisha; and, the proper time for its execution having arrived, the prophet now sent one of the “sons of the prophets”—a young man (9:4), possibly his personal attendant. As no doubt he literally obeyed the injunctions of his master, we shall best learn what these were by following the detailed account of what he actually said and did. [177]

As directed by Elisha, he went to Ramoth-Gilead, carrying with him a vial, probably of holy oil, which the prophet had given him. Even this is significant. On his arrival he found, as so often in this history, all apparently arranged so as to carry out the special purpose of God. He had been told to “look out” Jehu, and here were all the captains of the host sitting together, probably in deliberation. Remembering that the chief command devolved on Jehu, it would not be difficult to single out the object of the young man’s mission. He had only to say, “I have a word to thee, O captain,” and Jehu as president would naturally answer. It was so; and on Jehu’s inquiry to which of them the message was, the young prophet replied: “To thee, O captain.”

The captains had been sitting in the great court, and Jehu now took his strange visitor “into the house,” no doubt, as Elisha had directed, into “an inner chamber,” one that opened out of another, where what passed between them could not be observed from the court. Here, without further explanation - for abruptness of delivery was part of the object in view, and indeed characteristic of the direct Divine message—the young man poured the oil on the head of Jehu, and stated the terms of his commission. It was in the name of “Jehovah, God of Israel,” and on behalf of Israel—, viewed as “the people of Jehovah” ([2 Kings 9:6](#)). This emphatic introduction of Jehovah marked the character of the work to which Jehu was called. He was now Divinely anointed king, to execute judgment on the house of Ahab, and to avenge at the hand of Jezebel the blood of the prophets, and of all the servants of Jehovah. And the whole house of Ahab was to perish like that of Jeroboam ([1 Kings](#)

14:10), and that of Baasha (1 Kings 16:3). But upon Jezebel would special personal judgment descend, commensurate to the terrible crime against Naboth, which she had planned and executed (1 Kings 21.). Thus would all men see that Jehovah was the living and true God; thus also would the loudest but also the last call to national repentance come to Israel, ere the storm of judgment burst over the land.

[178] It is in this light that what seem from our point of view the horrible events of the beginning of Jehu's reign must be regarded. But then our point of view was not that of Israel at that time, and if the commencing judgment on national apostasy, and the final call to repentance which it implied, were to be effective, they must be suited to their, not to our, standpoint. Let it be remembered that the long ministry of Elijah and Elisha, with all the exceptionally direct and striking Divine interpositions connected with them, had passed without producing any appreciable effect on the people. The years of sudden famine, and its equally sudden cessation; the scene at the sacrifice on Carmel, as well as the prolonged public and private activity of Elisha, had apparently only wrought this result: that the great prophets came to be regarded as possessing some absolute power to influence the God of Israel (comp. 2 Kings 6:31; 8:4). A very different kind of ambassador was now to do God's behest and to execute His judgments, although perhaps just because he would do that for which he was called in his own wild Eastern manner, and in accordance with the spirit of the time.

It is in this sense that we can understand the Divine approbation conveyed to Jehu (2 Kings 10:30), even while feeling that the man himself and his modes of acting were contrary to God. And, indeed, this fact is distinctly brought out in the verse which follows the expression of the Divine approbation (ver. 31).

We have said that Jehu did his work as a Jehu, not as an Elisha, and in accordance with the spirit of his times. We may add that, as the experience of the past showed, no other mode would have been understood by Israel. It was a very dark night, and only the flashes of lightning and the flames of burning palaces which they had kindled could show what tempest of judgment had gathered in the sky. Yet

Joram and Jehu, (Tenth and Eleventh) Kings of Israel Ahaziah, (Sixth) King of
even so might men have learned the possibility of brightness and ^{Judath} ^{clxxix}
calm with the sunrise of the morrow. ⁷

Returning to our history, we follow Elisha's messenger as, obedient to his directions, after having executed his commission, he opens the door and literally flees through the court where the assembled captains are in waiting for Jehu. He must not give explanations to any man; he must not be arrested nor questioned by any. His business was with Jehu—that done, alike in character with the Divine message, and even for the sake of its success, he must withdraw. And, although so widely differing in character, there is in this also a practical lesson for those who have some work to do for God. Let us avoid all mere talking, and, if we can, all explanation. [179]

God's work will best explain itself, we cannot explain it. We must withdraw our personality as soon and as completely as may be; do the commission which we feel to be of God, and eschew in it saluting any man by the way ([Luke 10:4](#)). And so the young prophet would be outside the walls of Ramoth-Gilead, and on his way back to Samaria, when Jehu rejoined the "servants of his lord." ⁸

They must all have recognized the garb and appearance of one of "the sons of the prophets," and inferred that something of supreme importance was about to take place. For the proper understanding of this history it is necessary to bear in mind that it was possible to be opposed to the worship of Baal, and in favor of that of the God of Israel, without any personal or true religion. In point of fact, Jehu exterminated for the time alike the service and the servants of Baal, although he "took no heed to walk in the way of Jehovah, God of Israel, with all his heart; he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin" ([2 Kings 10:31](#)).

It was the service of Baal which Ahab had initiated, while Jeroboam's worship of God under the symbol of the golden calf might be represented as the ancient Israelitish (in opposition to the Judaean and Levitic) service of the God of Israel. We can readily

⁷It may possibly be with reference to this, that the young "son of the prophets" was really a messenger of near judgment upon Israel, together with the dim outlook on possible repentance, that some of the Rabbis have regarded the messenger of Elisha as the prophet Jonah.

⁸The peculiar expression here, and the similar allusion in [ver. 7](#), seems to me designedly chosen to bring out the work of Jehu as the sentence of the higher Master.

believe that there might be a large and influential national party in the northern kingdom, intensely opposed to the anti-Israelitish and foreign policy and ways in State and Church of the house of Ahab. And both from his antecedents (comp. [2 Kings 9:25, 26](#)), and his subsequent conduct, we infer that Jehu was a leader—perhaps the leader—of this national party, which naturally would have many adherents throughout the country.

[180] Quite consistent with this view is the deep interest taken by the captains in the mission of the young prophet to Jehu, and their readiness to take up his cause, even while at the same time the messenger was slightly spoken of—just as men of the world might characterize such an one as a “mad” enthusiast. It is difficult to decide the reason of what seems the evasive answer first made by Jehu. But when perceiving by their interest the likelihood of their joining the national cause, he told them at least that part of the message which appointed him king over Israel. ⁹

If Jehu possessed the ferocity, he evidently had also the cunning of an Eastern. Perhaps he could scarcely have been prepared for the rapidity with which the military revolution was accomplished. The assembled captains took off their upper garments, and spread them, in token of homage, as a carpet “on the platform of the steps,” ¹⁰ that is, the steps which led up to a platform or balcony, and then, amidst the blast of trumpets, the usual signal at a coronation ([1 Kings 1:39](#); [2 Kings 11:14](#)), Jehu was proclaimed king.

The formal conspiracy against Joram, now hastily made, was immediately carried out. At the proposal of Jehu, the city gates were watched, lest any fugitive might bring tidings to Jezreel. Jehu himself, with Bidkar as his chief captain, in his chariot ([ver. 25](#)), and attended by a “multitude” ([ver. 17](#))—no doubt, of horsemen—rapidly made his way to Jezreel. From incidental notices in the account ([vers. 17, 30, 31](#)) we gather that the royal palace formed part of the fortifications of the town,—perhaps, as in other places,

⁹Mark the omission of the words, “over the people of Jehovah,” in [ver. 6](#).

¹⁰But the expression is difficult, and is generally translated, “the very stairs,” or “the stairs themselves.”

that the palace was the only ^{Judath} fortified part of Jezreel, ^{clxxxii} ¹¹ the town straggling beyond, and lying, as it were, in the shelter of the palace fort, which would occupy the height. Thus the “watchman on the tower of Jezreel” would really hold that place of observation in the palace, and when “Jehu came to Jezreel,” Jezebel could address him from a window above, as he “entered in at the gate.”

From the knoll about 500 feet high, forming a low spur of Mount Gilboa on which Jezreel stands, two roads diverge, keeping close to Mount Gilboa. The one turns east and south, and then sharply round the corner at Beth-Shean; the other crosses the plain of Esdraelon, almost straight south to En-gannim (“the fount of the gardens,” the modern Jenin), where the direct road leads to Samaria, but whence also we might turn off eastwards to Beth-Shean and the Jordan. It is almost needless to say that it was along the former of these roads that the watchman on the tower of Jezreel saw Jehu and his company advancing at “mad” haste. For miles they must have been visible on the road that led up to Beth-Shean. When the watchman announced their approach to the king, Joram, in his false security, directed that a single horseman should be sent to inquire what tidings they brought. As he reached Jehu, the rebel general imperiously bade him to join his troop. This movement also the watchman observed and reported to Joram. If the dispatch of the first horseman may be understood, that of a second one seems in the circumstances little short of fatuity.

By the time the second messenger from Jezreel had obeyed the orders of Jehu and joined his companion, the troop was sufficiently near for the experienced eye of the watchman to recognize, not indeed the face of Jehu, but that the driving of the foremost chariot was like none other’s than that of the bold, reckless chief captain of Israel’s host. When the watchman reported it to the king, this would probably coincide with what had been his own idea from the first. A troop advancing from that direction could only have come from the army in Ramoth-Gilead—probably to bring tidings of some victory, or of the final retreat of the Syrians, or of proposals of peace. The announcement that it was Jehu himself would tend to confirm such

¹¹Canon Tristram remarks that “not a vestige of it remains,” although he found sarcophagi “with the figure of the crescent moon, the symbol of Ashtaroth” (Land of Israel, pp. 131; comp. Conder, Tent-Work in Palestine, 1. p. 125).

anticipations. Accordingly Joram had his war chariot and that of Ahaziah hastily made ready, and the two kings went to meet Jehu.

As we descend from Jezreel on the road to Beth-Shean there are on the east and south-east of the city “rock-cut wine-presses on the rugged hills,” marking no doubt where “the portion of Naboth” and his vineyard had been. It was here that the royal party encountered Jehu and his troop. To the light-hearted question of Joram, “Is it peace, Jehu?”¹²

[182] such answer came as must at once and rudely have dispelled any illusions. “What! ‘is it peace?(until) so long as the whoredoms of Jezebel thy mother, and her witchcrafts, the many?’” the former expression referring, as frequently, to idolatry (comp. [Jeremiah 3:2, 3](#); [Ezekiel 23:27](#)); the latter to the enchantments and heathen rites practiced in connection with it.¹³ From which words we also learn that in popular opinion Jezebel exercised paramount influence over her son, and that the un-Israelitish rites prevalent were attributed to her.

With the short cry, “Deceit, Ahaziah!” Joram turned his horse-heads to flee into Jezreel, when Jehu, drawing his bow, sent the arrow with such strength between the shoulders of Joram that it passed out at his heart, and the king fell dead in his chariot. Then reminding his “adjutant” Bidkar of the burden or punitive sentence which Jehovah had in their presence laid upon Ahab, on the day they two had ridden behind the king as his attendants, when he had gone to take possession of the property of murdered Naboth, he commanded the body of Joram to be cast into that very plat of ground, “according to the word of Jehovah.”

Meanwhile Ahaziah, perceiving the turn of matters, sought safety in flight. Leaving Jezreel aside, he turned sharp round the shoulder of Gilboa, and struck the direct road southwards: “fled the way of the Beth-Gan,” which we regard as another name for En-gannim, the modern Jenin, at the southern end of the plain of Jezreel.¹⁴

¹²Here probably equivalent to, What news? or rather, What good news?

¹³As to this comp. [Exodus 22:18](#); [Deuteronomy 18:10](#).

¹⁴It need scarcely be said that the whole passage is very difficult as compared with the account in [2 Chronicles 22:9](#). Although we are nowise concerned to conciliate trifling differences of detail which may depend on different records of the same event, or perhaps only seem such from our ignorance of some of the circumstances, we have endeavored

Joram and Jehu, (Tenth and Eleventh) Kings of Israel Ahaziah, (Sixth) King of
~~Unwilling to allow his escape, Jehu, while himself preparing to~~
^{Judath} ^{clxxxiii}
 enter Jezreel, gave rapid directions to pursue Ahaziah. “Him also smite—in the going up to Gur! which is by Ibleam.” ¹⁵ We can at least thus far identify “the going up to Gur,” that the neighboring town of Ibleam has been localized in the modern Bir el Belemeh, south of En-gannim. It is here then that we must place the “ascent to Gur,” where Jehu had expected, although mistakenly, that the pursuers might overtake the chariot of Ahaziah.

[183]

As we infer, the object of Ahaziah was to reach Megiddo in safety. That place has generally been located, but, as recently shown, erroneously, at the western edge of the plain of Jezreel, under Mount Carmel. In truth Megiddo lay in the opposite direction—south and east from Jezreel—being “the large ruin between Jezreel and Beth-shean, which still bears the name Mujedd’a.” ¹⁶ This location of Megiddo greatly helps the understanding of our narrative. As already stated, Ahaziah’s hope was that in reaching Megiddo he would have not only out-distanced, but out-wearied his pursuers. And his purpose may have been to make his way to the Jordan, ¹⁷ and along its eastern banks till he could cross into Judaea.

But in this hope, as we imagine, he was disappointed. Pursued to Megiddo, he fled to Samaria ([2 Chronicles 22:9](#)). The knowledge that the sons of Ahab were brought up in the houses of the principal men of the city ([2 Kings 10:1](#)) led him to expect that he might be able to hide for a time among the adherents of his grandfather. We know how little the loyalty of the nobles of Samaria was to be depended upon ([2 Kings 10:1-7](#)), and we do not wonder to read that Ahaziah was “caught” in Samaria, brought back to Megiddo, and there slain by order of Jehu. Nor does it seem strange that his body was given up to his servants to be taken to Jerusalem and buried there, as being a descendant of that Jehoshaphat “who sought Jehovah with all his heart.” For the whole movement of Jehu was ostensibly for

to give in the text an account of the event which will harmonize the narrative in 2 Kings with the notice in 2 Chronicles.

¹⁵The punctuation is of course ours: but intended to indicate the meaning which we attach to the words.

¹⁶Conder u.s. pp. 128-130.

¹⁷He might deem himself the more safe that Jehu - and presumably those who might follow him from Ramoth-Gilead - had taken the road on the other (the eastern) side of Gilboa.

the purpose of abolishing the worship of Baal, and restoring that of Jehovah, the God of Israel.

We return to sketch, as briefly as we may, the closing hours of that day in Jezreel. Tidings of all that was passing had rapidly reached Jezebel. Her course was soon chosen. She knew she must die; and she would die as a princess of her race, and a queen. After the Oriental fashion, she put paint on her eyes,¹⁸

[184] “and tired her head.” Thus arrayed as a queen,¹⁹ she took her place at the window, awaiting the arrival of Jehu.

As he appeared, she called to him from above—taking up and adapting the word with which the messengers of Joram, and then the unfortunate king himself, had unsuspectingly greeted Jehu: “Is it peace? Zimri, murderer of his master!” The words were intended to remind Jehu of the fate of Zimri, whose reign lasted only seven days (1 Kings 16:9-19), perhaps to stir up feelings which would lead to a similar counter-revolution. Even if no other motive had been actuating him, self-preservation dictated quick and decisive action on the part of Jehu. Looking up, he exclaimed in his impatient way: “Who is on my side? Who?” and when some of the eunuchs immediately responded, Jezebel was, at his command, thrown from the window. Her blood bespattered the wall and the horses, and the chariot of Jehu, as he passed through the gate, crushed her mangled body.

And now King Jehu is at his royal banquet within the palace of the murdered princes. Was it statecraft, dictating regard for the Tyrian princess; or some pity for the fallen greatness of one who had died a proud queen; or a rising feeling that, for his own sake, a descendant of royalty should not be exposed to the extreme of popular contempt, which prompted him to give orders for the burial of Jezebel? But whatever his motives, the command came too late. Only the skull, the hands, and the feet of Jezebel were found; the

¹⁸A mixture of antimony and zinc, prepared with oil, with which the eyebrows and lashes were painted black, and which, according to Pliny, had the effect of making the eyes appear larger (comp. also [Jeremiah 4:30](#); [Ezekiel 23:40](#), besides references to the custom in profane writers).

¹⁹Her adornment could not have been intended to attract Jehu, since, having a grandson twenty-three years old ([2 Kings 8:26](#)), she was of an age when no adornment could have given charms to an Eastern woman.

Joram and Jehu, (Tenth and Eleventh) Kings of Israel Ahaziah, (Sixth) King of
rest had been food for those ~~wild dogs~~ ^{*Judath*} ^{clxxxv} which prowled about Jezreel.
And if Jehu did not in his heart recognize the meaning and lessons
of the terrible judgment which had fallen with such literality on the
wretched queen, he at least declared and owned: “This is the word
of Jehovah, which He spake by His servant Elijah the Tishbite.”
And so there was testimony in Israel for Jehovah and His Word in
the judgments upon Ahab and his house—even as many centuries [185]
afterwards there was testimony of judgment for the Christ in the
flames which consumed Jerusalem and its Temple. ²⁰

²⁰According to the Rabbis both Jeroboam and Jehu were of the tribe of Manasseh,
and became kings in fulfillment of [Genesis 48:19](#) (Ber. R. 82).

Chapter 17: Jehu, (Eleventh) King of Israel—Athaliah, (Seventh) Queen of Judah

Murder of the “Sons” of Ahab and of Joram—Destruction of the Adherents of Ahab in Jezreel—March on Samaria—Slaughter of the “Brethren” of Ahaziah—Jehonadab the Son of Rechab—Meaning of the Rechabite movement—The Feast of Baal at Samaria—Destruction of the Worshippers—Character of the Reign of Jehu—Decline of the Northern Kingdom—Commencing Decline of the Southern Kingdom

(2 Kings 10:2; 2 Chronicles 21:10; 24:17-26.)

WE have learned enough of this history to understand the seeming inconsistencies in the conduct of Jehu. Absolutely speaking, he was the instrument selected for executing the Divine punishment on the house of Ahab; and also in whose reign the national judgment upon Israel was to begin. Jehu himself clearly understood his mission as regarded the house of Ahab and the worship of Baal. But he accepted it as a national and, if the term may be used, a Jehovistic movement, without implying the necessity of true fear of the LORD, or of return to Him; and he carried it out as a Jehu. Alike as regarded his feelings and his methods, he was the instrument, not the servant of the LORD.

To such an one as Jehu even common prudence would have dictated to do what work he had, quickly, sharply, and completely. A dynasty that had extended over four reigns must have numbered many adherents, while on the other hand the demoralizing influence of the worship of Baal must have widely spread in the land. There was more than merely a mocking taunt in the reminder of Jezebel about the fate of Zimri. The mission as well as the rule of Jehu depended upon a rapid succession of measures which would alike anticipate the possibility of a counter-revolution, and render a return to the former state of things impossible. This explains the measures

taken by the new king. Samaria was not only the capital, but a fortified city, where the main body of the standing army¹ lay. Here, as we know, had been placed the “seventy sons of Ahab”—understanding the term²

in its wider sense, common in Hebrew, which included, besides the sons of Ahab, his grandsons, the children of Joram (comp. [2 Kings 10:3](#)). [187]

These royal princes of the house of Ahab were entrusted, some (in the Eastern fashion) for supervision, the younger for education to the “princes,”³ —that is, the governor of the palace and the governor of the city (10:1, comp. 10:5)—to the “elders,” and to certain prominent persons who had charge of them.

These officials in Samaria would embody the possibility of a counter-revolution, and to them Jehu addressed on the morrow of his entry into Jezreel what really amounted to a challenge, to declare themselves for the house of Ahab, or else to make submission to his rule. The motives which decided their choice ([ver. 4](#)) show that their inclination was in favor of the old regime, while their fears dictated submission to the usurper. So Jehu had judged wisely in forcing an immediate decision, without exposing himself by marching with his small troop against Samaria.

But this was not all. Neither their allegiance nor his rule was safe so long as any of the royal princes lived; and, indeed, their destruction was part of his work and mission. To have killed them himself would have been a doubtful expedient, which, even if successful, might have given rise to popular reaction, and at all events brought him ill-will, while it would have left free the hands of the adherents of Ahab. It was therefore, from his point of view, the wisest policy on receiving the submission of the leaders of Samaria to order them

¹We imagine that there was always the nucleus of a standing army, consisting of the king’s body-guard, war-chariots, and horses (horsemen), as well as an arsenal, and that the rest of the host consisted of levies hastily made, and only partially drilled and disciplined.

²Similarly we must take the term “brethren” in a wider sense. The elder “brethren” of Ahaziah had all been killed in the invasion of the Philistines and Arabs; and yet they were “brethren” of Ahaziah - in the wider sense - who went to salute the children of the king ([ver. 13](#)), and who were slain by Jehu.

³So literally; the words “of Jezreel” are manifestly a clerical error, whether we emendate it into “of Israel” or “of the city.”

to kill all the royal princes and bring their heads to Jezreel.⁴ This would not only accomplish the primary object of Jehu, but, by making them participate in the crimes of his revolution, render any future movement against his rule impossible. At the same time the ghastly sight of those heads, sent to Jezreel by the chief representatives of the old regime, would offer an excellent opportunity for an appeal to the people.

[188]

When, therefore, next day the heads of the seventy princes were brought in baskets to Jezreel, he ordered them to be laid “at the entering in of the gate,”⁵ where the blood of Jezebel had so lately bespattered the wall, and the chariot of the conqueror passed over her body. And in the morning Jehu, pointing to the gory heaps, could tell the people⁶ that not only himself, but all the chief personages under the late government, had part in the destruction of the house of Ahab; that those to whom they had been entrusted had chosen rather to slay these princes in cold blood than to take up their cause—that all had perished, and so the word spoken by the LORD through the great prophet Elijah had been fulfilled. Thus his rule and the slaughter of the house of Ahab had as he put it the support of all men and the sanction of God Himself.

It was now possible for Jehu to take possession of his capital without danger of opposition, and there to carry out his final measures against the old order of things. But before doing so he took care, so to speak, to secure his rear by killing all that had been connected with the house of Ahab in Jezreel, “all his great men,” his friends,⁷ and his chief officials.⁸

⁴That, instead of coming with them to Jezreel, as they had been ordered (*ver. 7*), they sent the gory heads, is another indication of their feelings.

⁵The practice of bringing in the heads of enemies in evidence of their being killed was frequent in antiquity, and on the Assyrian monuments also we see them laid in heaps.

⁶The expression “ye are righteous” (*ver. 9*) probably meant: Ye have taken no part in this revolution, and are unbiased; I appeal to you as judges! Josephus adds the somewhat realistic touch, that the messengers from Samaria, bearing the seventy heads, arrived as Jehu and his friends were feasting at supper, and that this was the reason why he ordered them to be heaped up against the morning.

⁷So, and not “kinsfolks,” as in the A.V.

⁸So the word should be rendered here as in *2 Samuel 8:18*; *1 Kings 4:5*. The “priests” of Ahab were slain in Samaria.

On his way to Samaria another tragedy was to be enacted. It was at a solitary place, in a locality which has not been ascertained, but which bore the name of “house of binding of the shepherds”—or, as the Chaldee Paraphrast calls it: “The house of assembly of the shepherds.” Here, where evidently the roads from Jezreel and Jerusalem joined, Jehu and his followers met the forty-two princes, “the brethren of Ahaziah, king of Judah,”⁹ who were going on a friendly visit to “the children of the king [Joram] and the children of the mistress,” [lady-ruler, Gebhirah—evidently Jezebel].¹⁰

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So rapid had been the movements of Jehu, and so great was the fear of him, that tidings of what had passed in Israel had not traveled so far as to arrest the journey of the princes of Judah. Jehu’s order was to “take them alive.” Whether they offered resistance, or this was part of the original order of Jehu, certain it is that they were all killed “at the cistern of Beth-Eqed,”¹¹ into which their bodies were probably thrown.

As Jehu passed from the scene of slaughter he met a figure that seems strange and mysterious. “Jehonadab, the son of Rechab,” who had come from Samaria to meet the new king, belonged to the Kenites ([1 Chronicles 2:55](#)). This tribe, which was probably of Arab nationality, appears so early as the days of Abraham ([Genesis 15:19](#)). Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, belonged to it ([Judges 1:16](#)). Part at least of the tribe accompanied Israel into the Land of Promise ([Numbers 10:29-32](#)), and settled in the south of Judah ([Judges 1:16](#)), where we find them by-and-by mixed up with the Amalekites ([1 Samuel 15:6](#)). Another part of the tribe, however, seems to have wandered far north, where Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, slew Sisera on his flight from Barak ([Judges 4:17](#), etc.; [5:24](#), etc.). Thus they appear to have occupied the extreme south and north of the country, and would even on that ground possess political importance.

⁹The expression “brethren” must here be taken in the wider sense. In [2 Chronicles 22:8](#) they are called “the princes of Judah, and the sons of the brethren of Ahaziah.”

¹⁰Most commentators suppose that they were going to Jezreel, but from [10:1](#) we infer that the royal princes of Israel were at Samaria. As Jehu met them coming from the south, we must assume that he did not follow the direct road from Jezreel. If he had gone first to Megiddo, and thence to Samaria, this would explain how he might have met the “brethren of Ahaziah” coming from the south.

¹¹This, and not “at the pit of the shearing house” ([10:14](#)).

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But what interests us more is their religious relationship to Israel. From the deed of Jael we infer that they were intensely attached to the national cause. Again, from the circumstance that Jehonadab, the son of Rechab—evidently the chief of the tribe—came from Samaria to meet Jehu, and from the anxiety which the latter displayed as to Jehonadab’s views and intentions, as well as from the manner in which he treated him, we gather that the chieftain was a person of considerable political importance, while the invitation of Jehu: “Come with me, and see my zeal for Jehovah,” shows that he and his tribe were identified with the service of Jehovah in the land. All this throws fresh light on the special injunction which from that time onward Jehonadab laid upon his tribe ([Jeremiah 35:1-16](#)). They were neither to build houses, nor to sow seed, nor to plant or have vineyards; but to dwell in tents, and so both to be and to declare themselves strangers in the land.

This rule, which the descendants of Rechab observed for centuries, must, from its peculiarity, have had a religious, not a political,¹² bearing. It has with great probability been connected with Elijah,¹³ but the important question has not yet been mooted whether it originated before or after the occupation of Samaria by Jehu.

We believe the latter to have been the case, and it seems evidenced even by the circumstance that Jehonadab came from Samaria to meet Jehu. We suppose that the ministry of Elijah had made the deepest impression on Jehonadab and his tribe. The very appearance and bearing of the prophet would appeal to them, and his words seem as those of a second Moses. Earnestly they waited for the results of his mission and of that of Elisha. And when the word of Jehovah to and by Elijah was being fulfilled—Hazael made king of Syria, Jehu king of Israel, and the house of Ahab destroyed, root and branches—they would naturally turn to Jehu, in the hope that

¹²This is the view of Hitzig (on [Jeremiah 35](#)), who cites the instance of the Nabataeans, who, to ensure their freedom, abstained from agriculture. But this does not explain the abstinence from wine. Besides, why should this rule have only been laid down by Jehonadab, and if its reason had been to secure their freedom, would not the flight of the Rechabites to Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah have been in direct contravention of their object?

¹³So Ewald (*Gesch. d. Volk. Isr. Vol. 3. pp. 542-544*), although parts of his analysis are fanciful.

a national return to Jehovah would follow. It was a kind of Old Testament John the Baptist's hope of a kingdom of God. Feelings such as these prompted Jehonadab to go and meet Jehu, while the latter, knowing the deep impression which the Rechabite movement in favor of the reformation of Elijah had produced in the land, would be anxious to secure his public support, perhaps even—so strange and mixed are our motives—to gain his approbation. But what Jehonadab saw of Jehu must soon have convinced him that he was not one to carry out an Elijah-movement in its positive and spiritual aspect, however fitted an instrument he might be to execute Divine punishment. And so Jehonadab left Jehu to perpetuate in his own tribe the testimony of Elijah, by making them Nazarites forever, thus symbolizing their dedication to God, and by ordering them to be conspicuously strangers in the land, thus setting forth their expectation of the judgments which Elijah had predicted upon apostate Israel.

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We are now prepared to accompany Jehonadab, as after responding to Jehu's anxious challenge about his feelings toward him, he mounted Jehu's chariot to go with him and see his zeal for Jehovah. The first measure of the conqueror was to repeat in Samaria what he had done in Jezreel, and to kill all related to or connected with the family of Ahab. His next was, by a truly Eastern device, to seize and destroy the adherents of the religious rites introduced under the late regime. Although this was in fulfillment of his mission, it will be observed that it also afforded the best means of establishing his own rule, since the national worship of Baal was identified with the house of Ahab. Accordingly we imagine that when Jehu publicly announced that he meant to serve Baal even much more than Ahab, and proclaimed a solemn assembly for Baal, the gathering would be thoroughly representative. First, as we understand it, Jehu summoned all the prophets and priests of Baal, and "all his servants"—either the leading laity generally, or else those in Samaria itself ostensibly to make preparation for his great sacrifice. Next, similar proclamation was made throughout the country. In both cases the object was to secure the attendance of all professed worshippers of Baal. On the day appointed, the courts of the Temple of Baal were thronged "from one opening to the other [the opposite]." To make the leaders of the

new religion the more prominent, Jehu now directed that each of them should be arrayed in festive vestments,¹⁴

[192] and then, to prevent any possible mistake, since some of the servants of Jehovah might have followed Jehu and Jehonadab to the house of Baal, he ordered, on his arrival, to search for and remove any worshippers of the LORD.

Neither of these measures would excite surprise, but would only be regarded as indications of Jehu's zeal, and his desire that the rites of Baal should not be profaned by the presence of strangers. The attendance of Jehonadab might seem strange; but he was in the train of the king whom he was known to have served, in whose company he had returned to Samaria, and with whom he had continued while he issued his mandates, and prepared for the feast of Baal. He might therefore be simply an adherent of Jehu, and now prepared to follow his lead.

[193] The rest may be briefly told. As the sacrifices were offered Jehu surrounded the building with eighty of his trusted guards, who, on the given word of command, entered the building, threw down all they encountered, and penetrated into "the sanctuary¹⁵ of the house of Baal," where all who had been marked out to them were slaughtered. Then they brought out the wooden images and burnt them, while the large stone statue of Baal, as well as the Temple itself, were destroyed. And completely to desecrate the site, and

¹⁴The vestments of the priests of Baal are also referred to by classical writers. They seem to have been of byssus. Generally it is supposed that all the worshippers in that temple received these vestments, in which case they must have been supplied from the royal chamber of vestments, since the temple-vestry, however well filled, could scarcely have furnished sufficient for such a multitude. But a more attentive consideration will lead to the conclusion that the "servants of Baal" who were so robed were only the prophets, priests, and other leaders of the movement. For a universal robing would imply an almost impossible scene of bustle and confusion in that crowded edifice, while the possession of a distinctive dress would have rendered needless the next direction (*ver. 23*), to see that those with them were not of the servants of Jehovah. Lastly, Josephus distinctly states that the vestments, which we imagine not to have been ordinary priestly, but festive robes were given to "all the priests," and he lays stress on the subsequent slaughter as that of "the prophets" of Baal. On other grounds also this view seems to commend itself, and it is certainly not incompatible with the text.

¹⁵This, as surrounded by walls - is distinctive from the open court where the general worshippers were gathered - is designated by the words rendered in the A.V. "the city of the house of Baal."

mark the contempt attaching to it, Jehu converted it into a place for public convenience.

“Thus,” as Scripture marks, “Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel.” Yet, as the cessation of idolatry after the return from the exile did not issue in true repentance towards God, nor in faith in the Messiah, so did not this destruction of Baal-worship lead up to the service of Jehovah. Rather did king and people stray farther from the LORD their God. Of the succeeding events in Jehu’s reign, which lasted no less than twenty-eight years, no account is given in Scripture, except this notice, that “in those days Jehovah began to cut Israel short: and Hazael smote them in all the coasts of Israel; from Jordan eastward, all the land of Gilead, of the Gadites, and the Reubenites, and the Manassites, from Aroer, which is by the river Arnon, even Gilead and Bashan.” And the Assyrian monuments throw farther light upon this brief record. They inform us about the wars of Hazael against Assyria, and they represent Jehu as bringing tribute to the king of Assyria. The inference which we derive is that Jehu had entered into a tributary alliance with the more powerful empire of Assyria against Hazael, and that when the latter had made his peace with Assyria, he turned against Jehu, and inflicted on Israel the losses thus briefly noticed in Scripture. Be this as it may, this at least is certain, that with the loss of the whole trans-Jordanic territory, the decline of the northern kingdom had commenced.

Nor was the state of matters more hopeful in the southern kingdom of Judah. The brief and bloody reign of Athaliah was, indeed, followed by the counter-revolution of Jehoiada, and the elevation of Joash to the throne. But the reformation then inaugurated was of short duration. After the death of Jehoiada, the worship of Jehovah was once more forsaken for that of “groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their trespass” ([2 Chronicles 24:18](#)).

And although the LORD sent them prophets to bring them again unto the LORD, they not only would not give ear, but actually at the commandment of the king, and in the very house of Jehovah, shed the blood of Zechariah, which, according to Jewish legend, could not be wiped out, but continued to bubble on the stones, till the Assyrians entered and laid low the sanctuary thus profaned. And even before that, the army of Hazael, though greatly inferior in

numbers, defeated that of Judah, desolated and despoiled the land, and laid siege to Jerusalem. The Syrian army was, indeed, bought off, but the hand of God lay heavy on the king. Stricken down by disease he was murdered in his bed by his own servants, and they the sons of strangers. Thus had inward and outward decline come to Judah also. And darker and yet darker gathered the clouds of judgment over a land and people which had “forsaken Jehovah, the God of their fathers.”

Chronological Note to Chapter 15

To aid such readers as are interested in the somewhat difficult study of the chronology of that period, we shall put together the principal points in the elaborate note of Dr. Bahr in his Commentary on [2 Kings 8:16](#).

Let it be kept in mind that the accession of Jehu forms the beginning of a new period, alike as regards the kings of Israel and those of Judah, since both Joram and Ahaziah were killed in the revolution of Jehu. Again, let it be remembered that chronologists fix, with singular unanimity, on the year 884 B.C. as that of the accession of Jehu, and the death of the two kings. Starting from this point, we can reckon backwards the years of the various kings in the past, and forward those of the reigns that followed Joram and Ahaziah. In all such computations we must, however, bear in mind that the Jews always reckoned the years of a king from the month Nisan to the month Nisan, so that not only a month, but even a day before or after that month, was reckoned as if it had been a year. It will be seen that the computation of a fragment of a year as if it had been a whole year must frequently introduce elements of confusion in our attempts to piece together the statements of the various reigns. And this must therefore be taken into account when studying the chronology. Keeping this in view, and counting backwards from the year 884, we have:—

I. KINGS OF JUDAH.

1. Ahaziah: died, 884; reigned one, not full, year ([2 Kings 8:26](#)); acceded in 884 or 885 B.C.

2. Jehoram: died, 885; reigned eight years ([2 Kings 8:17](#)); acceded in 891 or 892 B.C.

3. Jehoshaphat: reigned twenty-five years ([1 Kings 22:42](#)); acceded in 916 or 917 B.C.

II. KINGS OF ISRAEL.

1. Ahab: reigned twenty-two years (1 Kings 16:29). Since the first year of the reign of Jehoshaphat coincided with the fourth of that of Ahab, Ahab acceded in 919 or 920 B.C.

2. Ahaziah: reigned two, not full, years (1 Kings 22:51; cp. 2 Kings 3:1); acceded between 897 and 898 B.C.

3. Joram: died in 884; reigned twelve years (2 Kings 3:1); acceded between 895 and 896 B.C.

III CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THE YEARS OF REIGNS OF THE KINGS OF JUDAH AND ISRAEL.

1. Ahaziah of Judah acceded in the twelfth year of Joram of Israel (2 Kings 8:26); and as the two were killed in 884, the one year of Ahaziah's reign cannot have been a full one.

[196] 2. Jehoram of Judah acceded in the fifth year of Joram of Israel (2 Kings 8:16). Since Joram acceded in 895 or 896 B.C., the fifth year of his reign must have coincided with that of the accession of Jehoram in 891 or 892, as indicated under I.

3. Ahaziah of Israel, and his successor Joram, acceded respectively in the seventeenth (1 Kings 22:51) and the eighteenth (2 Kings 3:1) years of Jehoshaphat, whence it follows that (as indicated under II.) the two years of Ahaziah of Israel were not full years. As Jehoshaphat acceded in 916, the seventeenth year of his reign would have been 899 B.C., and the eighteenth year 898; while according to the computation under II., Ahaziah acceded between 897 and 898, and Joram between 895 and 896. But these slight discrepancies are, no doubt, due to the Jewish mode of calculating the years of a reign, to which reference has been made above.

4. If we add the sum of the three reigns in Judah (Jehoshaphat twenty-five, Jehoram eight, and Ahaziah one), we obtain the number thirty-four, or, making allowance for the Jewish mode of computation, thirty-two years. Again, the sum of the three reigns in Israel (Ahab twenty-two, Ahaziah two, and Joram twelve), gives thirty-six, not full, years.

The whole period from the reign of Ahab to that of Jehu comprised between thirty-five and thirty-six years, and as Jehoshaphat acceded in the fourth year of Ahab, the figures will be seen to agree.

The only exception to this general agreement in the numbers is 2 Kings 1:17, where we read that Joram acceded to the throne of Israel in the second year of Jehoram, king of Judah. But in that

case Jehoshaphat could only have reigned seventeen, not twenty-five years; nor could Joram have become king of Israel in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat, as we read in [2 Kings 3:1](#); while Jehoram of Judah would have reigned not eight years ([2 Kings 8:17](#)), but fourteen; nor would he have acceded in the fifth year of Joram ([2 Kings 8:16](#)), but a year earlier than he. Accordingly, most writers have supposed a co-regency of Jehoram with his father Jehoshaphat. But as the text gives no hint of any such co-regency, and there are many and strong reasons against this supposition, Bahr has argued that the clause in [2 Kings 1:17](#), “in the second year of Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah,” is spurious. The usual chronological notice which, as always, appears in the account of a reign, follows in [2 Kings 3:1](#), and there correctly.

As regards the comparison between the Biblical chronology and that based on the Assyrian monuments, we may note.

1. That there are differences between the two from the reign of Ahab to that of Manasseh, but that these differences strangely vary, for, whereas the differences amount in one reign perhaps to forty-three years and more, they amount in another reign to nine years, and even less. This varying divergence leads us to suppose that the differences may depend on something as yet to us unknown, and which, if known, might establish a harmony between the two chronologies. [197]

2. As regards the capture of Samaria in 722, the two chronologies absolutely agree; and substantially also as regards the reign of Manasseh.

3. It is admitted that, taken as a whole, the record in the Bible of persons and events which were contemporaneous accords with the record on the Assyrian monuments, so that (despite any minor discrepancies) “the Bible receives, as regards chronology also, a happy vindication and confirmation” from the Assyrian monuments.