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Elisha—The Successor of Elijah (2 Kings ii. 1-18).

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THE narrative opens with an introductory clause which anticipates one of the main incidents that are to be related. The events in question took place 'when the Lord took Elijah by a whirlwind up into heaven.' This clause cannot be meant to indicate the climax of the narrative, for no skilful storyteller would thus reveal his secret at the very start, and that too in a subordinate clause! And therefore it is misleading to entitle the incident related in these verses 'the translation of Elijah.' The real culminating point of the story has to be gathered from what follows.

One of the main tasks of future scholarship will be to bring together parallels to stories such as this both from the Old Testament itself and from the literature of other peoples. That the collecting of such parallels has been suspended during recent years is greatly to be regretted. When we ask whether there are similar stories of 'translations' outside of Israel, we find that they are quite numerous. Apart from the translation of the Biblical Enoch, there is that of Xisuthros, the hero of the Babylonian deluge, of the Greek Herakles, and of the Roman Romulus; and of Moses it is said, with a diminution of the mythological element, that Jahveh Himself buried him and no man knows his grave. Of course it was only of very outstanding men that such stories were told; and the transference of such a conception to Elijah is an unconscious tribute to that great man. After he had gone hence, the conviction prevailed among his people that he had been far too great a man to leave this life in the ordinary way and go down to Sheol like other men. That he was taken up 'by a whirlwind' shows the prevailing conceptions regarding the deity who thus took him. God moves in a whirlwind over the land. When the wind roars and shakes the trees, ancient Israel realizes that God is near. And it was to take a place in this 'warlike host' that accompanied Jahveh through the air, that Elijah was taken away from this world. All his life he had been a messenger of storm, a fiery champion of his God.

And now to the narrative itself. From Gilgal, north of Bethel, which the narrator regards as having been his home at the time, Elijah sets forth on his last journey. He is accompanied by Elisha, his servant and pupil. Ancient Israel looked upon it as a matter of course that a 'man of God' should

have such a disciple to render him personal service, or, in the Hebrew phrase, 'to pour water upon his hands'—one who would do his errands, enjoy his intimate fellowship, and ultimately take his place. Moses had Joshua, and afterwards Elisha himself had Gehazi. In times still more primitive the magician had his pupil, and in after days the university professor had his *famulus*, as a Faust had his Wagner. 'And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee, for Jahveh hath sent me (only) as far as Bethel. And Elisha said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he said, I also know it: hold ye your peace.' How easily we read these words! How little they seem to contain! And modern scientific commentators contribute little to their exposition, apparently unaware of their profound and wide significance. We have still to learn that the Hebrew style of narrative is not so simple as it seems to a superficial glance. All primitive story-telling—including that of Israel—fixes the reader's attention mainly on what is perceptible to the senses, on what can be seen and heard. In that ancient civilization the inner life was not yet sufficiently disclosed to be expressly treated and described in detail. On the other hand, that inner life was there and—in Israel how richly—developed. But it finds only indirect expression: it is hidden behind actions and words. Therefore the expositor's real task is to read between the lines and bring out the spiritual conditions and experiences thus shown through word and deed. In the present case Elijah, Elisha, and the sons of the prophets are all revealed in and through what they say. Elijah is unwilling to have his disciple with him. The reason is not given, but we are meant to guess it. It is not fitting that the ordinary man should be a witness of the Divine secret that is about to be revealed. Besides, Elijah is anxious to spare his young friend. Jahveh is terrible, and how easily can His nearness prove destructive to one who rashly and unbidden intrudes on His revelation. At this stage Elijah cannot give Elisha the real reason for his request to be left alone: the slightest hint of it would reveal the secret prematurely. A pretext must suffice meantime, and

so he says, 'Jahveh has sent me (only) as far as Bethel.' The explanation has an air of probability. God sends His prophet on errands, both near and far, and for such a short distance, '(only) as far as Bethel,' he needs no escort. The explanation is, of course, true as far as it goes; but it is not the whole truth. The high ideal of absolute and complete veracity had not yet dawned on the hearts of these men. Elisha declares that he will not leave his master. His forcible manner of speech indicates that he is labouring under great excitement. He too is a prophet, and has more than human knowledge. He too knows what is imminent, but he declares earnestly that after having accompanied his master for many a long year on all his errands, he will not now abandon him in his last hour on earth, but will go with him into the dread meeting with the Divine. Elijah's answer is not recorded by the narrator, who avoids every superfluous word. One of the most difficult tasks of the expositor is to supply what is lacking in the ancient record. Here we are to gather that he silently nods his reluctant permission.

In order to exhibit the heroism of Elisha's resolve to abide by his master, the narrator now introduces other persons as a foil. These are the sons of the prophets, members of the prophetic guilds who, as is implied, were at that time to be found in every city in Israel, and who in communal life cultivated the spirit of ecstasy. It is also implied here that the great prophet was the acknowledged head of these guilds. A somewhat different picture is presented by the accounts that deal expressly with Elijah himself. These show Elijah as appearing everywhere by himself, whereas Elisha certainly seems to have been closely associated with these sons of the prophets. They too are credited with supernatural knowledge. They have somehow come to know that their master was to be in their city that day, and, in accordance with Eastern custom, they have come forth to give him a respectful reception. They have also learned of Elijah's imminent departure. Some ominous rumour, some dread whisper has preceded the two wayfarers, and has passed from lip to lip, and the sons of the prophets are filled with amazement when they realize that Elisha is determined to follow his master even on *this* journey. 'Knowest thou not that Jahveh will take thy master from thy head to-day?' they ask in awe. Elisha replies, 'I know it: hold ye your peace.' Inferior minds are glib of speech; greater minds do not attempt to utter the ineffable. The whole scene is bathed in the dread mystery of the future and constitutes a genuine prophetic

scene. The narrator has himself felt the grandeur of the whole situation and, to help his readers to appreciate it to the full, has repeated it three times. Later narrative art gives prominence to significant points by particularizing them; ancient art achieves the same purpose by repetition. Similar repetitions of entire incidents frequently occur in folklorist narratives. Thus, when Bethel is reached, Elijah again orders his disciple to leave him, and again Elisha declares his determination to remain. Again, this time from Jericho, sons of the prophets greet the two, and again Elisha bids them be silent. In Jericho the scene at Bethel is repeated. This time Elijah says, 'Jahveh has sent me (only) as far as the Jordan.' Even this is not yet the whole truth—but once more Elisha demonstrates his loyalty. Thrice has the temptation been presented and thrice he has conquered.

They now went forward to the Jordan—not a long way from Jericho. Fifty sons of the prophets belonging to Jericho—there must thus have been a large prophetic settlement in that city—went with them part of the way, but stopped some distance from the river. Evidently these men also would have liked to be near Elijah in that fateful hour, but they had not the courage that endures to the end.

Here the skilful narrator has again set forth Elisha's perfect loyalty against the background of lesser men. That he uses the same persons for this purpose only shows his wise restraint, and, as we shall see immediately, he has reserved these fifty men for another purpose. These incidents display the fine qualities of Hebrew narrative art: the details are worked out in view of the whole situation, and it is borne in upon us that these writers had attained a very high degree of skill.

At the Jordan Elijah performs a notable miracle. He strikes the water with his cloak; the water is divided, and the two men pass over the river dryshod. This is a frequent motif in folklore of all ages. A similar marvel is done by Moses at the Red Sea, and again—in imitation of that—by Joshua at the Jordan. It is repeated here by Elijah, because it was felt that no higher honour could be paid to that great man than to ascribe to him such marvels as were credited to the mighty men of Israel's early days. But Elijah works this miracle with his cloak. This was an animal skin, the only garment that the prophet wore. Prophets of his type—this is confirmed from other sources—had nothing in common with the new fashions of that day in respect of 'soft clothing.' They retained the customs of the olden time, when Israel dwelt in the desert, and even in his dress Elijah clung to the old ways.

Miracle workers always had some instrument with which they performed their marvels. Moses had his rod. Elijah here uses the mantle which he had once thrown over Elisha, thus constraining that young man to follow him. The underlying conception was that the garment had become charged with Divine power by its constant contact with the person of the man of God. The same idea shines through the gospel story of 'the woman with the issue of blood' (Mk 5^{25ff.}). At this stage of the narrative the full meaning of the miracle is not apparent, but, as we shall see, the narrator is here also pursuing a well-considered purpose.

Elisha has thus accompanied the prophet to the last stage, and his fidelity now receives its reward. Deeply touched by such loyalty, Elijah offers to fulfil a wish of his disciple. 'Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken from thee.' Now at last Elijah himself speaks plainly of what is to happen—further concealment would be meaningless. As a reward for his fidelity he offers at this final moment to 'do something for him,' *i.e.* he will bequeath him a miracle. This means that the great prophet possesses Divine power and can do much for others. The same conception recurs frequently in the stories about Elisha himself. But as Elijah cannot know Elisha's special desire, he invites him to express a wish—another motif familiar to students of folklore. What will Elisha now wish for? How will he utilize this unique opportunity? Will he ask for a son, or for some material possession? Nay! His heart's desire transcends that. He asks for no specific marvel, however great; he desires the Divine power itself. Not all of it—that would be too much—but two-thirds of it. 'I pray thee, let two-thirds of thy spirit be upon me.' In ancient Israel the 'spirit' was not conceived as an indivisible personal being, but rather as a Divine power that could work marvels. Such a 'spirit' could be divided into various 'spirits,' and Elijah had his own, 'the spirit of Elijah.' But two-thirds was the portion of the first-born in the inheritance of his father (Dt 21¹⁷). Even that was a great demand, and Elijah answers, 'Thou hast asked a great deal.' The implication is that Elisha is a venturesome man and ambitious in his desires. But it is not in any man's power, not even in Elijah's, to grant such a wish. God alone can impart the spirit and He pours it out as seemeth to Him good—another thought that goes deep. But Elijah can give his disciple a 'sign,' and ancient Israel, in its naive objective way of thinking, attached great importance to such 'signs,' as manifestations of what was spiritual. 'If thou see

me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.' Only he who has received the spirit can see into the Divine: to the ordinary eye, that world remains closed.

And now the narrator has reached the 'translation' itself. By skilful preparation he has placed it, as it were, on a lofty pedestal. The two men go forward talking, when suddenly a Divine phenomenon occurs. Thus suddenly and arrestingly the Divine always manifests itself in the world. Even when the fact of its coming is known, men can never calculate the moment of its coming. This phenomenon was 'a chariot of fire, and horses of fire.' We hear of similar phenomena in other passages of the Old Testament, and the reference is always to chariots of war. Jahveh is a warrior God who fights his battles in the air with fiery hosts. These figures probably represent a combination of conceptions—fiery spirits like those mentioned in *Thousand and One Nights*, mythological conceptions of the darting thunderbolts or volcanic flames, as well as of the constellations which ride in chariots across the sky fighting Jahveh's battles. The important idea for us here is that it is to this host that Elijah is now translated. That belligerent prophet, who fought so heroically for his deity on earth, is now called, when his earthly warfare is over, to fight God's battles from the sky. In spite of the mythological dress in which it is clothed, it is a wonderful tribute to the man. Just as some modern nations still love to 'deify' their favourite heroes, so Israel translated their Elijah to a place among the fighting spirits. When this heavenly portent appeared, it 'parted the two men asunder,' *i.e.* Elisha, overwhelmed by the storm, was hurled to one side, 'and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven'—a sample of the simple but profoundly impressive words of which the Old Testament is so full. That this scene is located in the district on the other side of the river Jordan is readily understood as another indication that Israel ranked him with Moses. He too had disappeared from men's sight in the land that lay 'beyond Jordan.'

'And Elisha saw it.' No cloud obscured the manifestation of the Divine! No frenzy of fear had blinded his sight! He was counted worthy to see the Divine with open eyes. And so Elijah's sign to him was fulfilled; he received a portion of the prophet's spirit. But his first emotion was not that of joyous pride, nor that of human awe in presence of the Divine power; he was filled with indescribable pain at the loss of his master. 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!' For Elisha it meant the loss of

a father, for Israel the loss of its great wall of defence. This conception of Elijah as the champion of Israel is not in keeping with the rest of the tradition regarding him. Elijah did not come prominently forward to help Israel in its battles. All his life he was in opposition to his nation. It was otherwise with Elisha. In the struggles with Syria, and especially under the dynasty of Jehu, he was a tower of strength to the nation, and to *him* was justly given the title, 'the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof!' (2 K 13¹⁴). Later days, therefore, have painted the picture of Elijah with colours borrowed from Elisha's career.

'Then,' when Elisha looked up again, 'he saw Elijah no more.' The Divine world was opened but for a moment and straightway the door was closed again. This is another touch of that chaste and truly religious restraint in presence of the mystery of the Divine.

Then Elisha 'took hold of his own clothes and rent them in two pieces.' This rending of the loosely woven garments was in Israel the immediate consequence of extreme excitation, especially of fear and pain. There he now stood naked. But 'he took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him'—no earthly thing can enter into heaven. This is a beautiful combination of two different motifs. The successor falls heir to the robe of his predecessor—an accepted custom in antiquity. But this garment was a wonder-working mantle. How many marvels had the great prophet wrought by its means! And, with a truly graphic touch, it is now shown that Elisha has actually inherited his master's 'spirit.' He proceeds at once to put this to the proof. He advances to the river and exclaims from the depths of his soul, 'Where is Jahveh? the God of Elijah, where is he?'¹ *i.e.* Jahveh, who did marvels by Elijah, turn now to me. With these words he smites the waters exactly as his master had done. It is a moment of breathless suspense, the culmination of the whole story. The miracle is repeated. 'The waters were divided hither and thither. And Elisha went over.' Elijah's power *has* passed to him. This part of the narrative is a clear proof that a marvel could be transferred by tradition from one man of God to another. Elisha has done what his master did—he takes rank on the same heights as he. We can also see now *why* this act was narrated of Elijah at the first crossing of the river. It was done, in order to be able to show, at the close, that Elijah's successor was able to accomplish the same marvel.

¹ V. 14 as far as 'and smote the waters' is an unimportant addition. Cf. R.V.

The narrator now returns to the fifty sons of the prophets belonging to Jericho, and we can now see why they have been brought into the story. They see Elisha's marvel from afar, as they had done the other, and they exclaim, 'The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.' In these words they reveal the main purpose of the whole narrative. Ancient story-tellers themselves offer no comment on their own narratives; they prefer the comment to come from the lips of one or other of their *dramatis personæ*. Then these sons of the prophets come to meet Elisha, and 'bow themselves to the ground before him,' as before their new master. Elijah has passed away, but Elisha is his accredited successor, the head of the prophetic order.

This is the end of the story as planned by the narrator. It would completely destroy its symmetry to add to it the incidents that immediately follow it in the Book of Kings.

There is, however, a supplement which has been added by a later hand. The sons of the prophets say to Elisha, 'There be with (or among) thy servants fifty strong men; let them go and seek thy master. Perhaps the spirit of Jahveh hath taken him and cast him upon some mountain or into some ravine.' This addendum is interesting as affording us a glance into the nature of prophetic ecstasy. When the spirit comes upon a prophet, he is sometimes rapt away and courses in wild flight over hill and dale. He may even occasionally be hurt. The sons of the prophets therefore suggest that Elijah may be lying somewhere on the hills, exhausted or even dead. Elisha knows better, and says, 'Do not send,' but when they continue to urge their request, he reluctantly consents. The men go forth and search for three days, but they do not find the vanished prophet. When they return, Elisha says, 'Did I not tell you not to go?' He knew that Elijah would no longer be found on earth.

That this is a later addition to the narrative with which we have been occupied is clear from the fact that in the original story the sons of the prophets knew from the beginning that Elijah was to be taken away. In this supplement they are unaware of it. There is another slight discrepancy. In the main story there are fifty of these sons of the prophets. In the supplement we read of fifty strong ones amongst them. That is to say, the writer of this supplement had not thoroughly read and remembered the original. The purpose of the addendum was to furnish proof that Elijah had not merely died, but that he had actually been 'taken away.' Such supplements to ancient tradition were attempts, on the part of men who found it difficult to believe

the narratives, to persuade themselves and others that the events recorded were really true. Judged from the artistic standpoint, the addition is open to the criticism that it again diverts the attention of the reader from Elisha, who is the chief figure, to Elijah, about whom everything needful has already been told.

The purpose of the original story was to show how Elisha became Elijah's successor. The hero of it is Elisha, not Elijah. The author compares him with the greater man and shows that he was worthy to be ranked side by side with him. That was the considered verdict of men who had a far more vivid impression of the two than any of us

can have to-day, and is therefore of great value to us for our own conception of the history of the time. In order to set forth his conception of Elisha, the narrator has utilized an older tradition of Elijah's ascension. Of course in that narrative Elijah was the centre of interest, but our author has ventured so to adapt the story that his own hero, Elisha, plays the chief part. He has succeeded beyond measure and has given us one of the most perfect narratives that we possess. Without detracting from the greatness of Elijah he has made Elisha the central figure of his narrative. It made a splendid opening to his collection of tales about Elisha, the successor of Elijah.

The Mind of Christ on Moral Problems of To-day. Socialism.

BY HERBERT G. WOOD, SELLY OAK, BIRMINGHAM.

'JESUS was the greatest Socialist that ever lived' is a sentiment frequently heard in Adult School circles and in Labour Churches. It has behind it the sound conviction of the skilled artisans that the Carpenter of Nazareth belongs to them, that He must care about social injustice and endorse their claims for fuller, freer life, and that His quarrel with Pharisaism means at least the condemnation of all social snobbery. When an attempt is made to go further and to claim the patronage of Christ for Socialism in some more clearly defined sense, questions arise which are not easily answered, and doubts emerge which are not easily stilled. Such doubts do not indeed trouble the out-and-out Marxist. He is convinced that Christianity must have begun as a revolutionary communist movement of an economically oppressed class, and then have been captured, deflated, and transformed by the more respectable adherents, who so watered down and glossed over the New Testament that they turned the noblest manifesto of Socialism into the meanest defence of private property. That primitive Christianity slowed down and lost something of its first fine careless rapture is as true as it was inevitable. But the evidence of a complete moral volte-face on social and economic issues in the early Church is still to seek.

It is natural that social reformers should wish to secure Christ as their ally. He must, we think,

have seen social wrongs exactly as we see them, and have perceived the truth of just that analysis of the situation which appeals to us. If we accept the Marxist theory of the exploitation of labour, we are readily convinced that Jesus must have accepted it also, and it is not difficult to read it into the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Does not the story mean that Jesus saw how impossible it is to have great riches at one end of the social scale without dire poverty at the other? The want of Lazarus is the foundation of the wealth of Dives, and the callousness of Dives is the more heinous because his wealth was the outcome of social injustice. Dives goes to hell just because he is rich, and Lazarus is recompensed in heaven for his sheer poverty. It is not a far cry from such an interpretation to the view that in principle our Lord must have been committed to the abolition of private property in capital, or to Mr. Bernard Shaw's theory of economic equality as the essence of the social commonwealth. Yet we have to admit that Jesus was not face to face with our modern problem, and before we can hope to reach the mind of Christ for to-day, we must try to understand the historical problem of the relation of Jesus to the social and economic situation of His own people.

The starting-point for such a study may well be found in a passage from St. Luke's Gospel (12¹³⁻²¹). An individual with a grievance asked Jesus to