

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

J. R. MacDuff, D.D.

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Chapter 2

NATIONAL APOSTASY

"And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." (I Kings 17:1)

"Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts is the land darkened, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire" (Isaiah 9:19)

"And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from Heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters" - (Revelation 8:10) [16]

AHAB was at this time on the throne of Israel; - his residence was at Jezreel, and the windows of his ivory palace looked along the vast plain of Esdraelon, one of the most fertile and exuberant portions of Palestine. His was a gloomy reign. His predecessor, Jeroboam, by setting up golden calves at Dan and Bethel, had paved the way for the shameless idolatry which now disgraced the land and provoked the Divine judgments.

Compared with Ahab's apostasy, however, that of Jeroboam was a trivial and modified departure from the true worship.

The latter may be regarded rather as a desperate, and, in the circumstances, a world-wise stroke of state policy. On the revolt of the ten tribes and their formation into a northern kingdom, the first sovereign was naturally jealous of the effect which attendance at the old festal gatherings in Jerusalem might have on his new subjects. These might revive, in the separated tribes, the ancient love of unity, and attachment to the time-honoured capital. **"Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together: whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord"** (Psalm 122:3-4).

If he is to perpetuate his dynasty and save the dismemberment of his infant kingdom, he too must meet the religious wants [17] and aspirations of his people, by having a "city" or "cities of solemnities;" - He must have sacred shrines and sacred rites to vie in splendour with the ceremonies of Mount Zion. For this purpose he made selection of the two extreme border towns - Dan in the north, and Bethel in the south.

Both were already invested with sacred recollections in connection with the earlier history of the

chosen race, and in them he erected two temples, with rites of corresponding magnificence. "His long stay in Egypt had familiarized him with the outward forms under which the Divinity was there represented; and now, for the first time since the Exodus, was an Egyptian element introduced into the national worship of Palestine. A golden figure of Mnevis, the sacred calf of Heliopolis, was set up at each sanctuary, with the address, '**Behold thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt.**'" ¹

Ahab's "abominable idolatries" owed, if not their origin, at all events their chief instigation, to a guilty matrimonial alliance he had formed with Jezebel, daughter of Athbaal, King of Tyre. Little could be expected from the antecedents of this Tyrian princess; her own father having himself originally been a heathen priest and having afterwards mounted the throne of his brother as a usurper.

Greatly Ahab's intellectual superior - crafty, bold, designing, unscrupulous, cruel,- she wielded from the first a fatal influence [19] over her weak and pliant partner.

He soon forgot the solemn inheritance that had been transmitted to him in that sacred land. Shrines and temples sacred to Baal and Astarte, the tutelary deities of Phoenicia, covered the hilltops and valleys, "marked by the grove of olive or ilex round the sacred rock or stone on which the altar was erected."

This false worship, indeed, was no novelty in Hebrew history.

We find it had struck its roots deep - even so early as the time of the Judges. Gideon's thrashing-floor at Ophrah, was close by a rock, surmounted by a spreading Terebinth, and under its branches the altar and image of Baal. One part of his mission, as his new name of Jerubbaal imported, was to overthrow the worship of the Phoenician idol, and reassert the supremacy of the GOD of Israel.

The Angel of the Lord appeared to him, at his wine-press, with a message of "peace."

That same night of the Divine appearance, he cut down the consecrated grove on the rock, and converted the long-defiled altar into a place of sacrifice for Jehovah, using the felled trees as fuel for his burnt-offering. The citizens of the little town, enraged at the sacrilege, demanded of Joash to give up his son to instant death.

Joash, however, the Gamaliel of his age, stood on his defence by appealing to the reason of his hearers, and boldly asserting, that if Baal were indeed a god, he needed no puny human arm to vindicate his sovereignty, or inflict his vengeance. "Will ye plead for Baal? Will ye save him? If he be a God, let him plead for himself" (Judges 6:31).

Who knows but the remembrance of this advice of the old Abiezrite may have suggested and shaped [19] Elijah's subsequent appeal on the heights of Carmel.² Be this as it may, the land, during the reign of Ahab, with which we are now concerned, swarmed with priests of the heathen deity imported from pagan Tyre. Four hundred of them sat at the royal table, and stimulated their royal patrons to deeds of vengeance.

The worship of Jehovah of Israel came to be denounced as disaffection to the government - a slight on the court religion. The torch of persecution was lighted. The prophets of the Lord were hunted down,- driven into caves, and saved from utter extermination only by the merciful interposition of Obadiah, a saint in the household of the Nero of his day.

What a guilty and presumptuous attempt to thwart the Divine purpose in portioning off the chosen people from the rest of the world!

The Hebrew nation had been appointed as a perpetual protest against the polytheism of the surrounding kingdoms. By one dastardly act of the new monarch of Israel, the wall of separation was thrown down. The modified calf worship of Jeroboam now lapsed into unblushing idolatry. GOD was dethroned; and Baal, (or Baalim,) a plurality of Lords, was set up in His place. The one living, self-existent, all-pervading JEHOVAH was superseded by a divinity of good or evil, (as might be,) presiding over the [20] several elements of nature.

- One mountain summit would have its altar to the sun - another to the moon - another to the stars.

- One grove would have its temple, or shrine, or image dedicated to the brooks and rivulets - another to the

rain of Heaven - another to the falling dew - another to the seasons.

- The summer would have its shrine to a propitious Baal; the winter with its storms would have its altar and libations of blood to the malevolent Being whose wrath needed to be appeased.

The worshipper's main conception of this hundred-headed god was connected with the attribute of power.

The Phoenician Baal was called by the Greeks the Hercules of Tyre - the embodiment of might, if not of cruelty.

They lost sight of the GOD of holiness, and rectitude, and love:- They were awed by the wrath and judgment which was the habitation of Baal's throne:- They knew nothing of the mercy and righteousness and truth which went before the face of the true GOD of their fathers

The time had arrived for judgment. The cup of iniquity of Ahab and Israel were full. The cloud was charged. It is about to burst on the devoted land. Is there no gleam of light to relieve this thick darkness! Is there no trumpet-tongued messenger, no "minister of FLAMING FIRE," to vindicate the rights and prerogatives of Israel and Israel's Jehovah - to witness for the great essential truth - the unity of GOD;- taking up the old watchword,- "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is ONE Lord?" Yes!

GOD has "**come to send fire on the earth;**" and, in the person of Elijah, "**it is already kindled.**"

He has in him a champion ready harnessed for the battle, who will be bold to speak His word before kings, and not be moved. The fan is in his hand, and he will [21] thoroughly purge his floor - hurl "**Baalzebub, the prince of devils,**" from his seat, and quench the fire on his defiled and defiling altars. "**It is time thou work, Lord, for they have made void thy law.**" "**Let not the heathen say, Where is now their God?**"

It was, then, in the midst of this scene of darkness, apostasy, and blood, that forth came the great Tishbite. The Jewish prophets were compared to vigilant watch-dogs (Isaiah 56:10). But Elijah was no "**dumb dog that cannot bark;**" "**sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber.**" His was not the trumpet to give forth a wavering or uncertain sound.

Standing face to face with guilty Ahab, he startles him with the avowal- "My God - the GOD of Israel - the GOD of thy Fathers - and he who ought to be thy GOD - Jehovah liveth!" "**As the Lord GOD of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word**" (I Kings 17:1)

To understand aright the force of this asseveration, we must view it in the same light as the subsequent scene on Mount Carmel, viz., as a challenge made by the Prophet to settle the question by a solemn appeal to the great power or powers (be who they may) who rule the universe, and who have the elements of nature under their control.

It was as if he had said to his royal master- 'I shall prove that thy base idolatries cannot aid thee in the hour of need. I shall undertake to demonstrate that a plurality of gods is but a plurality of nonentities. Here is the test. In the name of my GOD I utter it.

- *You* have invested the Baalim you worship with lordship over the processes of outer nature
- you have *your* pretended Baal or lord who has the [22] clouds of Heaven in his hand - who can unseal or close their watery treasures at his will.
- You have *your* pretended deity - who spangles morning by morning the pastures on the hills of Israel with dew-drops, or leaves them dry like the fleece of Gideon.
- I shall disprove your polytheism;- I shall unmask the lie of these Phoenician priests whom you feed at the royal table;
- I shall solve the momentous problem, not by word, but by awful deed.
- I shall prove that this dew and these rain-clouds are not Baal's giving - that his priests might rend the sky from morn to even with importunate supplication, and there would be no response.
- But I shall demonstrate that they are in the hands of that "**living God,**" whose servant I am, and "**before whom,**" though unseen, "I stand."

And here will be the proof.

I assert, in the name and by the authority of Him whom I worship, and whose unworthy servant I am, that neither Dew nor Rain shall fall on the parched plains and valleys of Israel except at my bidding. From this day henceforth these skies shall be as brass, and this earth as iron. Let thy Baalim throng disprove it if they can.

- Let them, if they can, thwart this act of delegated omnipotence.
- Let them, if they can, force open the bolted doors of Heaven, and exude dew-drops from the gasping earth.
- Let them, if they can, bribe the miser fountains to unlock their hoarded treasures.

Then, but not till then, will I listen to the tale of thy dumb idols, and renounce my belief in that

Great Being who maketh the clouds His chariot;- who giveth rain from Heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and with gladness.

I know my GOD liveth. From this day forth, trees and grass scorched and blighted - the arrested growth of the vegetable world - waterless channels [23] and cattle lowing on hungry pastures, during "**these years**," shall prove the truth of my solemn declaration.'

We are told of no reply on the part of Ahab.

He may have been struck dumb - quailing under the withering words;- or perhaps the sequel may rather intimate that his brow darkened with vengeance, and that he turned to his palace to take summary means of avenging and rebuking "the madness of the Prophet."

Be this as it may, it is enough for us to know that as months rolled on, it became terribly evident that nature all around - the heavens above and the earth beneath - confirmed the utterances of the man of GOD.

- The blossoms of the fig-tree drooped
- the shoutings of the vintage in the fruitful valleys of Ephraim and Zebulun ceased;
- no oil was distilled from the olive-tree,
- the flocks pined and languished in field and stall
- a fearful famine overspread the land;
- whilst the feeble remnant of the faithful, in their cave-retreats, sang together that song of Zion- "**By terrible things in righteousness wilt thou answer us, O God of our salvation**" (Psalm 55:5).

We shall close the chapter with a few practical lessons from this opening portion of the Prophet's history.

Let us learn the insidious power of error, and guard against it.

With regard to nothing had GOD fenced around His law more solemnly than the introduction of idolatry. The protest, sounded amid the blazing accompaniments of terror on Sinai, was repeated and reiterated in the written Oracles.

The most rigid injunctions were given for the extirpation of [24] the Canaanites, lest an intermixture with a pagan race might corrupt the primitive worship; and not only were the idolatrous nations themselves to be expelled and exterminated, but all vestiges of the idols and idol-altars and groves were to be swept away. "**Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree. And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place**" (Deuteronomy 12:2, 3).

After such a stringent admonition as this, who can estimate the daring presumption and impiety of a whole covenanted nation, from king to peasant and vine-dresser, trampling in the dust the most sacred article in the charter of their religious liberties;- forgetting the strong hand and

stretched-out arm of Him who led them through the depths of the sea;- selling themselves as votaries to bloodthirsty idols, - worshipping Remphan and the host of Heaven!

There is not much danger, in this our land and day, of a relapse into idolatry;- of a cultured intellectual age making all at once a rebound of a thousand years into the darkness of heathen and pagan delusion; although the histories of Greece and Rome tell us too plainly, how the most exquisite intellectual refinement may be in lamentable conjunction with degrading superstition. Neither do we share in the dread entertained by some, in this era of broad common sense, of a relapse into the puerilities and mummeries of Popish superstition. Protestantism -love of intellectual, moral, and spiritual freedom - is too deeply-rooted for that.

Such statements as this indicate that the author held to a postmillennial scheme whereby the Church would be the agent to usher in the Kingdom - making a way for the return of JESUS CHRIST - but events of our generation have shown that the Church is growing weaker and many "protestant" groups are returning to Catholicism and pagan delusion. Perhaps the author would greatly amend his views if he were alive in these turbulent years.

But we are [25] not proof against other more insidious and specious forms of religious error.

The next phase which infidelity will assume, and indeed has assumed, is that of a "science philosophy falsely so called," whose principle and lurking element of danger is the exalting proud reason in the place of childlike faith; sitting in arbitrary and high-handed judgment on the declarations of GOD's Word;

- undermining the foundation-truth of the atonement;
- stripping the cross of Christ of its chiefest glory;

and regarding the Bible - the precious casket in which these truths are contained - not as of fine gold, more precious than Ophir, but rather like the image of Nebuchadnezzar, partly of gold and partly of iron and clay.

Unbelief, varying in its phases and developments, is the same in every age. The monitory word can never be out of place or season, even when we think a rampart of impregnable strength and defence is girdling Church and nation and religious privileges- "**Beware, lest ye also, being led away by the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness.**" "**Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.**"

Let us learn, as a second lesson, that *Divine judgment follows national apostasy.*

It has been often remarked that individuals may, in this world, escape punishment for personal crime,- but nations never do. Retribution, in the case of individuals, may be reserved for a future condition of reward and punishment, where the present unequal distribution of good and evil will be corrected and adjusted. But the case of nations is different. With them, in their aggregate capacity, there is no such [26] after state of dealing; and therefore their reward or their doom is meted out and accomplished here.

What is history? what is prophecy? but a comment on this. Look at these "**burdens,**" pronounced

one after another by the ancient seers;- the burden of Egypt, the burden of Tyre, the burden of Nineveh, the burden of Babylon, and, most affecting and significant of all, the burden of Jerusalem;- what are these, but GOD's own solemn indictments, as apostate nation after apostate nation is cited at His bar?

In the case of each nation or city, the awarded vengeance is in proportion to their crimes. As they have sowed the wind, so do they reap the whirlwind. When the body politic becomes morally diseased, like the putrid corpse or carcass cast out on the street, the winged messengers of retribution are at hand to prey upon it, in accordance with the Jewish proverbial saying, which was so literally fulfilled in their own signal doom,- **"Whosoever the carcass is, there shall the eagles be gathered together."**

Ahab and his whole people, save a feeble remnant, had been guilty of glaring national delinquency.

- They had dishonoured the GOD of their fathers;
- they had adopted and nationalized the mythological creed of the heathen nations;
- they had deified nature, and given to a separate Baal lordship over the elements;
- they had made fire and hail, snow and vapour, stormy wind, each to fulfil the word of a presiding divinity;
- they were disowning the one God who sat enthroned behind the elements He had formed; and who had declared that "while the earth remaineth, seed time and harvest, and cold and heat, and day and night, and summer and winter, should not cease."

Jehovah resolves to mete out judgment in accordance with their guilt. He [27] makes those very gifts of nature the instruments of their punishment which had been the means of their sin.

- They had undeified Him in nature; He will make nature wield the lash of retribution.
- They had given to others a sovereignty over the "rain" and the "dew;" He makes these arrows in His own quiver to be the weapons of vengeance,- with what measure they mete, it was to be measured to them again.

"I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts; a people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face; that sacrificeth in gardens, and burneth incense upon altars of brick . . . These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day.

Behold, it is written before me; I will not keep silence, but will recompense, even recompense into their bosom, your iniquities, and the iniquities of your fathers together, saith the Lord, which have burnt incense upon the mountains, and blasphemed me upon the hills: therefore will I measure their former work into their bosom" (Isaiah 65:2, 3, 6, 7).

Let us remember that the Great Lord and Governor of nations acts upon fixed and unchanging principles still.

We may not undeify Him by the worship of graven images - by bowing the knee to stocks and stones. But there are other national idols which may provoke righteous retribution. The eager

thirst for gold - the hasting to be rich - and, worse than this, when riches, given as a great trust, are either selfishly hoarded or guiltily squandered.

Ah! as the jealous eye of that GOD who will not give His glory to another, sees this modern Baal - *hundred-headed Mammon* - claiming the [28] homage of his million votaries, let us not wonder if ever and anon He should speak in accents of rebuke and judgment through the great national sin,- put a sudden arrest on our perishable, material, unsanctified prosperity; and, in the midst of shut markets and excluded supplies abroad,- closed factory doors, quenched furnaces, and silent shuttles at home,- utter the great truth which, whether individually or nationally, we are so slow to hear - that "Life," true greatness and true glory, consists not in the abundance of the things which we possess.

If the silver and the gold of modern times be taken as symbols of the dew and rain of Israel,- that which is most valued, clung to, depended on,- can we wonder should some Prophet of Fire,- some burning messenger of wrath and retribution,- stand in the midst of our mighty marts, and, with a voice of thunder, proclaim - "**As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word!**"

A third lesson we may here learn is - that GOD invariably raises up suitable instruments in every great crisis of His Church's history.

The Church life - the spiritual life of Israel - could not have been at a lower ebb than at this period under the reign of Ahab.

His own faithful people were counted by units. Thousands were bowing the knee to Baal, and kissing his impious shrine. But Jehovah has His hero prepared for the times. It was one, moreover, as we have already noted, very specially gifted that was needed.

- It was no Jeremiah - plaintive, tender-hearted, crushed himself with the national woes, the tear standing on his cheek.
- It was [29] no John of Apostolic times, or Melancthon of Reformation - gentle, devout, contemplative, sensitive - a heart owing with benignity and love.
- It was no Thomas of Apostolic times, or Erasmus of Reformation times - calm, lative, philosophical; and, in the case of the latter, the man of learning, yet the timid, cautious time-server.
- It was not even a man of the stamp of Paul of Tarsus - brave, unflinching; with the culture and refinement needed to grapple with the sages of Athens, the courtiers of imperial Rome, and the sharp-witted merchants of Corinth; efficient in powers of physical endurance - weak, and uncommanding in bodily presence.

It was one in type and mould like John the Baptist, or like Luther - a Goliath in mind and body - one who could fearlessly confront Pharisee and Sadducee - Herod and Herodias - king, priest and soldier - who could stand unmoved, as the great German Reformer did, amid the crowned heads and priestly potentates in the Diet at Worms, and fearlessly declare that though it were crowded with devils, he would face them all.

Such was emphatically the Tishbite,- bold, brave, trained to habits of endurance. The gigantic

evils of the times needed a giant to grapple with them;- one who could confront wickedness in high places - be the scourger of court vices, and dare anything and everything for the sake of truth.

GOD has ever His star ready to come forth in the midnight of gloom and despair;

- when the sword drops from the hand of Moses, He has His Joshua ready to take it up;
- when the Philistian champion defies the armies of Israel, He has ready the stripling youth with the sling and the pebble-stones to smite him to the [30] dust;
- when His people are led captive, He has Daniel and Cyrus, Joshua and Zerubbabel, ready at His word to turn again the captivity of Zion "**as streams in the south.**"

He has only to "**give the word,**" and "**great is the company of them that publish it.**" Should seasons of gloom, and darkness, and apostasy, again overtake the Church; should rampant infidelity threaten to rise to a perilous ascendancy, and to trample out the fires on GOD's holy altar; trust Him! - a thunder-voice will be ready.

A man of might will be sent to break the impious spell. The Church historian of the future, as he closes one chapter of terror and dismay, will open the next with the words - "**And ELIJAH said . . .**"

Learn, once more, *the power of individual influence.*

We shall not at present speak of Elijah's influence. To this we shall have occasion in a future chapter, more particularly to advert; how, under GOD, this one man rallied an apostate nation - saved his country by saving its religion, and made thousands and tens of thousands in after ages, when he himself was gone, rise up and call him blessed: "**He stood in the breach, and the plague was stayed!**"

- Let us rather, at this point, mark what a corrupt, debased, sensual, and selfish life can do.
- Let us see what may be the awful consequences of one guilty act,- of what a progeny of vice and ruin it may be the prolific parent.

Ahab, in himself, appeared to have some naturally good and amiable qualities. But he is one of those of whom it is said he "**sold himself to work iniquity.**" The stream which might have been flowing through his land dispensing endless blessings in its course, [31] became a stagnant pool, breeding and diffusing corruption.

The defect of his natural character seems to have been indolence, sloth, selfishness, love of ease.

Wavering and fickle, he was an easy tool for the intrigues and artifices of others. And then came the fatal crisis - the act of which we have a little ago spoken, which consummated his own ruin and his people's apostasy - his marriage with an unprincipled and bigoted idolatress.

He paid the penalty which multitudes have done who have in an evil hour scorned the Divine monition - "**Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what communion hath light with darkness! and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that**

believeth with an infidel?" (II Corinthians 6:14, 15).

Doubtless, Ahab's yoke was spoken of and chronicled in its day as a splendid union. Tyre was at this time in its glory - the sovereign of that queenly city could enrich the palace and park of Jezreel with a golden dower. The fretted ceilings of the ivory palace may have been his royal gift - the cunning work of renowned Phoenician craftsmen.

Israel's king may have been lauded and congratulated by the neighbouring princes as a favoured man. Alas! dearly bought was that gilded pageantry - the pomp and pride of having these retainers liveried in purple wrought on Tyrian looms! "**Ichabod, the glory has departed**" - the ark is taken - the god of Ekron is hailed as the GOD of Israel: and all through the instrumentality of this unhappy,- this ungodly alliance of Jehovah's covenanted king with an uncovenanted heathen.

Ahab's whole life is a mournful illustration of resisted and scorned warnings - slighted messages of remonstrance and mercy. The GOD he rejected strove with him to the last. But the guilty partner of his throne and of his crimes, made him spurn at once the messenger and the message; and over that bloody grave into which their mangled bones were at last consigned, is inscribed the epitaph - "Who made Israel to sin."

Would that in this age of "**trust in uncertain riches**" it were borne more sacredly in mind, that it is not gold, but moral worth that is the amplest marriage-dowry.

Rank, position, wealth, accomplishments, may be but the tawdry gilding underneath which lurk moral debasement and ruin.

Think not of Ahab alone, for his was a miserable, characterless, soulless life. But look at Lot. See that man of GOD - that "**righteous man.**" He made the guilty venture of contracting an irreligious marriage. Mark the result! See it in his "**vexed soul,**" his weeping eyes, his laughed-at pleadings; his wife a monument of vengeance, his blackened home, his blackened name, his unknown and unhonoured grave. "**A brand plucked from the burning.**" "**SAVED; YET SO AS BY FIRE!**"

¹ Nehemiah 9:18. Smith's Dictionary, in loco)

² "*Everywhere throughout the land lingered the traces of the old idolatrous sanctuaries- Baal-gad, Baal-Hermon, Baal-Tamar, Baal-Hazor, Baal-Judah, Baal-Mean, Baal-Perazim, Baal-Shalisha - Like the memorials of Saxon heathenism, or of medieval superstition, which furnish the nomenclature of so many spots in our own country; and even in families, as in that of Saul's, we find that the title of the Phoenician god appears; as in the name so common in Tyre and Carthage - Maherbal, Hannibal, Asdrubal.*" - Stanley's *Jewish Church*, p. 291.

As Guilty as Jeroboam was in introducing so flagrant a violation of the Divine command,- erecting "a similitude like to a calf which eateth hay," he seems to have had no intention of superseding the national religion by pagan worship. It was different, however, with his weak and servile successor.

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