

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 7

THE CONVOCATION ON MOUNT CARMEL

"And as Obadiah was in the way, behold, Elijah met him; and he knew him, and fell on his face, and said, Art thou that my lord Elijah? And he answered him, I am: go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here.

And he said, What have I sinned, that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me? As the Lord thy God liveth, there is no nation or kingdom whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee: and when they said, He is not there; he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they found thee not. And now thou sayest, Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here.

And it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone from thee that the Spirit of the Lord shall carry thee whither I know not; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me: but I thy servant fear the Lord from my youth.

Was it not told my Lord what I did when Jezebel slew the prophets of the Lord, how I hid an hundred men of the Lord's prophets by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water? And now thou sayest, Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here: and he shall slay me.

And Elijah said, As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him today.

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him: and Ahab went to meet Elijah. And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim. Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table.

So Ahab sent unto all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together to mount Carmel. And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word." (I Kings 18:7-22)

"AND AFTER THREE DAYS AND AN HALF THE SPIRIT OF LIFE FROM GOD

ENTERED INTO THEM, AND THEY STOOD UPON THEIR FEET; AND GREAT FEAR FELL UPON THEM WHICH SAW THEM" (Revelation 11:11) [96]

FOR three and a half years, a price had been set on the head of Elijah. The bloodhounds of Ahab had been on his track, but had failed to discover his lurking-place.

Obadiah, in search of provender for the cattle belonging to his royal master, had taken the westerly direction from Jezreel, along the great plain of Esdraelon. At some turn of the highway, on this great battle-ground of Hebrew history, all at once he confronts the strange figure of the missing prophet, with his mantle and staff.

The royal Chamberlain, startled at the unexpected apparition, prostrates himself to the earth, and exclaims, in half-doubting bewilderment, "**Art thou my lord Elijah?**"

He had perhaps supposed, like many, that with the announcement of the drought, Elijah's prophetic work and mission had been finished; and that he had either retired to his native Gilead, or had possibly been taken to Heaven to receive a prophet's reward.

High in rank and position as Obadiah was, it shows the blended reverence and awe with which he regarded the seer, when he falls down "**on his face before him,**" addressing him as "**my lord,**" and speaking of himself as "**thy servant**" - the obsequious language of a slave to his master. Elijah's command is to go forthwith to Ahab - "**Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here.**"

Obadiah, at first, with what in the circumstances, perhaps, was not altogether, as has been supposed, a blameworthy [97] or pusillanimous hesitation, remonstrates.

He knows the dark purposes of hate and revenge in his master's bosom towards the Prophet; that the people, too, maddened with the horrors of famine, would be eager to second the vengeance of their king. If Elijah fell into their hands, his head would to a certainty be hung that night on the gate of Jezreel. If, therefore, in obedience to the prophet's wish, he proceeded to inform the king that the troubler is found; he concludes either that Elijah will forfeit his life, or else that the GOD of Elijah, to defeat the king's purpose, will transport his servant miraculously to some other Cherith or Sarepta, and shelter him there.

On the latter supposition, Obadiah dreads the consequences to his own person. The monarch would wreak upon him his disappointed revenge. He would charge him as being in secret league with his enemy, and deal with him as a traitor to the throne.

The Tishbite relieves his apprehension. He gives him the promise, that that very day, ere the sun set over the brow of Carmel, he would shew himself to his royal master. Obadiah is reassured, and assents to Elijah's directions.

The message is delivered. The king in hot haste sets out from his palace, and soon the seer and he stand face to face.

How strangely diverse the two characters!

The prophet of Jehovah, and the champion of Baal; the upholder of the true religion, and the abettor of lies; Light confronting darkness - Truth confronting error. They meet like two charged thunder-clouds, and we watch, with bated breath, the bursting of the storm.

When the impetuous monarch finds that the prey he has been seeking for years, is at last within his grasp;- could [98] we wonder should the instigations of the queen and his own uncontrollable passion drive him to cruel extremities, and the dust of the highway be stained with the Tishbite's blood?

When Ahab reins up his horse, he is the first to speak. But the very sight of that commanding figure - the brave heroic seer - seems at once to unman him.

His narrow soul shrivels in his presence. Instead of summary vengeance;- instead of the order we expected to hear given to his armed retainers, "Let the traitor die!" and their swords at the summons leaping from their sheathes;- his rage expends itself in the feeble challenge - "**Art thou he that troubleth Israel?**"

The GOD of Elijah has the heart of that king in his hand, and turns it "even as He turns the rivers of water;" He has said to the proud waves, "**Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther.**"

"Art thou he that troubleth Israel!"

How does Elijah meet the charge? He imagines himself alone loyal to the GOD of his fathers, amid the thousands of an apostate kingdom; with the full consciousness that monarch, queen, princes, courtiers, priests, people, were leagued against him. Do we find him cowering in abject terror at Ahab's feet, imploring on any terms for life; or else, endeavouring to disarm the king's wrath, by telling him that the occasion of it is now at an end,- that he has Divine authority for commanding that the windows of Heaven be opened, and for unbarring the long-closed gates of famine; so that, if the accusation has been hitherto correct as to his being a '**troubler in Israel,**' he will prove to be so no more?

Nay! his are no such coward lips. The eye of 'the Prophet of Fire' flashes;- and he rejoins in a voice of thunder - "**I have not troubled Israel; but thou and thy father's house, in [99] that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and followed the Baalim.**"

Brave, undaunted man! - noble type of every faithful minister of GOD - boldly speaking out the truth; uninfluenced either by fear or by flattery;- scorning all compromise, all unworthy servility, and taking as a guiding principle the words of the great Apostle- "**If I please men, I am not the servant of Christ.**"

Many there are who will listen long enough, and patiently enough, to general descants on the truth;- to general denunciations of sin, or eloquent expositions of virtue and holiness;- but who resent closer personal remonstrance - the faithful charging home of the darling sin.

Herod bore with the stern Preacher of the desert, so long as he kept to his general theme - Repentance. But when he came to speak plainly of Herodias, "**It is not lawful for thee to have**

her;" - then the frown gathered on his countenance, and the outspoken reprover was sent in chains from his presence.

Would that we had more Elijahs amongst us,- fearless rebukers of all vice and wrongdoing;- who, unmoved and undeterred by the world's fashion and opinion, would unsparingly lash the conventional follies and sins of the times, whatever these may be.

But to return - What is to be done?

Elijah, as master of the occasion, dictates to his sovereign what the urgent nature of the crisis imperiously demands. In the name of his GOD, he proposes to gather together "**all Israel**" to Mount Carmel.

A mighty throng it is to be, and the place selected is befitting convocation-ground. ¹

"Carmel," remarks a distinguished traveller, "is not so much a mountain, as a ridge, an upland park extending for many miles into the interior of the country." Changed, as in many respects it is at this day, in its outward aspect, and in minor details, the prospect from its plateau,- the same grand outlines of unvarying nature,- still remain.

If the town of Acre, dimly visible in the far north, and Cesarea, now in ruins, in the extreme southern view, were both yet future cities in the days of Elijah; the Prophet's eye, from these familiar heights, would at all events fall, equally with that of the modern traveller, on the distant bay of the one, and the bold promontory of the other;- on the near plains of Sharon and Esdraelon;- on the river Kishon, rolling its sluggish waters through the windings of the intervening hills, on "the rocky dells, with their deep jungle of copse;" above all, on the giant northern boundary of the Lebanon range and the blue expanse of the Mediterranean. [100]

Enough of fertility still is left in the present wild and uncultured state of this great headland of western Palestine, to attest the beauty and fruitfulness of the past, when herds of cattle browsed on rich pastures; graceful forests of oak and olive, fig, sycamore, and pine clothing its undulating slopes; and to vindicate the truth of Isaiah's figurative language, when, describing the future glory of the Church of CHRIST, he compares it to "**the excellency of Carmel.**" ²

[101] "At the eastern extremity," says the same authority just quoted, "which is also the highest point of the ridge, is a spot marked out, alike by tradition and by natural features, as one of the most authentic localities of the Old Testament history . . . Here is no town, only a shapeless ruin; yet the spot has a name, 'El-Maharrakah,' 'The Burning,' or 'The Sacrifice.' . . . But, be the tradition good or bad, the localities adapt themselves to the event in almost every particular.

The summit thus marked out is the extreme eastern point of the range, commanding the last view of the sea behind, and the first view of the great plain in front, just where the glades of forest sink into the usual barrenness of the hills and vales of Palestine. There, on the highest ridge of the mountain, may well have stood, on its sacred 'high place,' the altar of the Lord which Jezebel had cast down. Close behind, on a wide upland sweep, under the shade of [102] ancient olives, and round a well of water, said to be perennial, and which may therefore have escaped the general drought and have been able to furnish water for the trenches round the altar, must have

been ranged the multitudes. Full before them the whole plain of Esdraelon, with Tabor and its kindred ranges in the distance. On the rising ground at the opening of its valley the city of Jezreel, with Ahab's palace and Jezebel's temple distinctly visible." ³

Such was the theatre for "a conflict more momentous than any which their ancestors had fought in the plain below." It was a momentous question which was to be decided "Who is the Lord? JEHOVAH or BAAL!"

Is the GOD of the Patriarchs to be re-enthroned on His altars and in the hearts of the children of Abraham? Are the silver trumpets to gather a willing people in the day of His power? Or are these heirs of the old covenant to barter their birthright for a base superstition? By a worse than Philistine invasion, is the bitter cry of "**Ichabod!**" to ascend from the broken heart of the solitary Prophet, the last ray and relic of the departing glory?

Imagine the vast concourse gathering.

The flanks of the mountain teem with the living mass. As they are assembling, perhaps at sunset, and pitching their tents on the varied slopes of the elongated hill, so as to be ready for the great scenes of the morrow,- let us note the three parties of which the multitude is composed;- for that crowd on Carmel is a typical picture of the Church and the world to this hour.

Our eye first falls on the royal tent, with the spear in the ground and the rich Tyrian banners floating overhead. [103]

An hour ago, deafening plaudits rose from the throng, as the prancing coursers swept past, bearing thither the monarch with his courtiers. Close by them are those most deeply concerned in the issues of the day;- rank on rank of Phoenician priests, flaming in gorgeous vestments of purple bespangled with gold. There are eight hundred and fifty of them altogether; four hundred and fifty of these are Baal's ministers; you may know them by the sun-symbol on their embroidered dress; and these four hundred with the symbol of the crescent moon, are the priests of the goddess Astarte, who have been housed in the royal palaces of Israel, and have places assigned them at Jezebel's table; these again, supported by thousands around, who, in blindfold ignorance, had followed the creed of their atheist king.

Such constitute one of the companies in that heterogeneous crowd. They have that adjunct which impiety and irreligion often have upon their side - human power and influence. They have sold themselves to work iniquity. They have publicly dethroned Jehovah, and espoused idols, saying, Who is the Lord Jehovah, that he should reign over us?

The second class or company was small indeed.

For aught we can tell, there may have been several composing it. Obadiah's faithful hundreds may have come out from their caves,- those rocky caverns which are still shown in the gorges of Carmel as their supposed hiding-places. But Elijah is the only representative of this second group who is mentioned in the sacred narrative.

Though there be nothing imposing about him externally;- though he wears the roughest garb;-

though he has been living for years in cave or lowly hamlet, dependent for his daily meals, now on the [104] birds of the forest, now on the charity of a poor Gentile widow;- yet there is something truly royal about that solitary man as he stands like a lone rock towering amid the chafing waves!

He has One on his side (and he is conscious of it), 'mightier than the mightiest.'

He knows that as a prince he has power with GOD, and is about to prevail. He is there the delegate of true, believing, leal-hearted Israelites,- worshippers of the living Jehovah,- those who are still stanch in their allegiance to their fathers' GOD,- uninfluenced by court-intrigues or by the fear of man;- who had wept many a secret tear over the grievous national apostasy,- and in cave and lone forest, "**faithful among the faithless**," had oft breathed the ancestral prayer, "**Arise, O God, and let thine enemies be scattered.**"

But there was still a third, and by far the most numerous class, to which adhered the bulk of the people.

It was made up of those who were swayed between opposing views, divided in opinion,- hesitating upon which side to declare; conscience, perhaps, pointing one way, and self-interest another;- a false feeling of deference to the king-blind, obsequious loyalty, leading them to adopt the idolatrous court-faith: on the other hand, all the sacred memories of their history, and the recorded kindness of the GOD of Israel, rebuking them for the baseness of their apostasy.

It was for them,- this fickle, undecided rabble, but who really constituted the numerical strength of the kingdom,- it was for their sakes Elijah demanded the convocation: "**Gather to me**," he says, "**all Israel.**"

Again, it is "**the people**" whom he addresses with the startling words, "**How long halt ye between two opinions?**"

He saw they were labouring under [105] a ruinous delusion,- ruinous to themselves, and most insulting to the GOD he served.

- They evidently imagined they could compromise matters;- that they could amalgamate the worship of Jehovah and Baal. They were not willing to forget that they were the historical descendants of those who had seen the Divine Majesty shining gloriously on Teman and Paran,- for whose sakes the tongue of the Red Sea had been rebuked, and Jordan driven back.

They were not disposed altogether to discard their ancestral traditional creed; but they desired to incorporate it with the licentious rites of the idols of Tyre.

If persecution threatened to descend against those who refused thus to blend the Phoenician with the Hebrew ritual, they were not so wedded to the latter in its integrity, as to be ready to suffer or to die for it.

They could not dream of undergoing the martyr-life of those who were hiding in the mountain-caves of Samaria, fed on bread and water. They would appease Ahab, and absolve their own

consciences, by espousing both creeds. They would retain that of their fathers, but blend with it the impurities of the Phoenician worship.

Have we not here a vivid and truthful picture of the professing Christian world in every age?

It, too, has ever had its three distinct classes.

- *the Baal-worshippers*, - *the atheist class*, - whose virtual religious creed is "no God." Speak to them of the GOD of Elijah, and their secret retort is, "**Who is the Lord, that he should reign over us?**" - "**Depart from us, for we desire not a knowledge of thy ways.**" Such are the slaves of custom in religion as in everything else; - who have no conscience of their own; - no settled convictions of duty. They do as Ahab does.

Their miserable religious [106] theory is, that all creeds are alike; or rather, if their feelings were analyzed, that all religion is a pretence and delusion; the lie which superstition has palmed, and which credulity has perpetuated. Having overthrown the altar of GOD, they are sacrificing daily incense at the Baal-shrines of self, pleasure, lust, and sin!

A second class are the true worshippers of GOD; - (and, blessed be His name, there has never yet been an age, and never shall be, when these are not found.)

The thousands, or the ten thousands; or, it may be, only the units, who have "**not bowed the knee to Baal:**" - His true Israel - the salt of the earth - pillars which prevent the fabric of society tottering to its base.

- those who love His name, and do His commandments, and seek to promote His glory.
- those who, like Elijah, would sooner die than be unfaithful to Him, or do homage at an unhallowed shrine.
- the Enochs and Noahs of patriarchal times.
- the Lots amid the iniquity and worldliness of Sodom.
- the Daniels amid the snares of Babylon.
- the "few names," even amid the grievous indifference of Sardis, who have "not defiled their garments."
- the hundreds around us, who, amid manifold temptations, the ridicule of evil companions - the power of degrading worldliness - the enticing snares of vice, - are faithful to their GOD and Saviour.

In one word, those who are Christians indeed, - who know holiness to be happiness, who have avouched the Lord to be their GOD, and would not barter the joys of true religion for all the gains and gold of earth, and all the gilded baubles of worldly ambition.

One other class still remains; and we fear, as in Elijah's time, by far the most numerous. It is the mass - the vast [107] *mass of the undecided*.

Those who are half-hearted Christians - "borderers" - hovering on the confines of light and darkness - of truth and error: who have not repudiated religion, - nay, who nominally profess to be on GOD's side; but who, in reality, are on the side of Satan. Waverers, like the waves of the

unstable sea, "**driven by the wind and tossed!**"

They have the wish to die happy and go to Heaven at last; but they cannot make up their minds, as yet, to renounce their favourite sins.

- They wish to flee to CHRIST as their Saviour;- but not yet.
- They wish to give up the world's follies and sins;- but not yet.
- They wish to shake themselves free of their enslaving lusts;- but not yet.

Their immortal interests are all this while trembling in the balance.

- they have had their convictions,
- their impressions,
- their serious thoughts,
- their hours of penitence;
- the tear of remorse has stood in their eye,
- a trembling prayer has filtered on their tongue;
- but they have never yet had courage or resolution to make the great decision, to cast in their lot unmistakably on the side of GOD.

They are living for both worlds, and losing both.

They have enough of religion to make them unhappy, but not enough to save their souls!

A little religion is the most miserable of all states.

- It becomes an accuser, not a comforter.
- It is the thorn in the flesh
- It is the lash of the scorpion.

Better remain at Jezebel's table, than come feeble, irresolute, half-hearted, to Carmel; to hear the thunder tones of the Prophet;- to see the fire of GOD descending. Yet scorning it all.

Look at the effect of Elijah's bold remonstrance. The people were awestruck. He had touched their consciences. They felt his appeal and rebuke to be only too true. They [108] stood silent and self-condemned!

And the same feeling of self-condemnation must come home to multitudes still: that they have for years, and that, too, while enjoying many religious privileges, been living on in guilty uncertainty as to their soul's everlasting salvation;

- attempting to unite impossibilities;
- attempting to join what Heaven has divorced:
- to serve GOD and Mammon,- Jehovah and Baal,- holiness and sin!

Nothing is so displeasing to GOD as this divided heart;- this attempting to blend and incorporate what can as little be blended, as oil can commingle with water, or darkness with light.

"I would," JESUS says, **"thou wert either cold or hot."** He demands the whole heart or nothing. There can be no middle course - no intermediate ground. The saying is solemnly explicit, **"He that is not with me is against me."**

Are there some among us, who, like the multitudes on Carmel, are silent under the question? - who feel that theirs has been worse than indecision;- the hollow name to live, while they are spiritually dead?

GOD is not willing that you should perish. He is ready to meet you on Carmel with His overtures of mercy - the remonstrances of His own unwearying love!

Listen to His voice and expostulation, "O ye sons of men, how long will ye love vanity? How long barter the finite for the infinite, the temporal for the imperishable? O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself, but in me is thy help found! "

He sets before you life and death, salvation or destruction, Heaven or hell. Listen to the great Gospel declaration,- the alternative is for you to select,- **"If thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever!"** [109]

¹ *"Carmel has derived its modern name from the great prophet MarElyas is the common designation, Kurlmel being occasionally, but only seldom, heard. It is also the usual name of the convent, though dedicated "In honorem B. B. Virginis Mariae." - Smith's Dictionary, Art. Carmel.*

² *Carmel was famous also for its vineyards. King Uzziah had three hundred husbandmen and vine-dressers (II Chronicles 26:10). Some of these are still kept in repair by the Druses. Modern travellers describe its "impenetrable brushwood of oaks, and other evergreens, tenanted in the wilder parts by a profusion of game and wild animals;" - "but in other places bright with hollyhocks, jasmine, and various flowering creepers." "The whole mountain side was dressed with blossoms, and flowering shrubs and fragrant herbs." - Porter, Martineau, &c., as quoted in Bible Dictionary, Art. Carmel. - "At every step the ancient glory of Carmel became more and more evident to me. What a memorable morning in this wild flower-garden! The hawthorn, the jasmine, and many another tree and shrub, whose sweetly odorous and elegant bunches of blossom are unknown to me by name, are now in flower. The oak, the myrtle, and the laurel have tempered their deep winter green with glittering leaflets of a lighter hue. And what a variety of flowers are trodden by the traveller on his way! There is not one I have seen in Galilee or on the plains along the coast, that I do not find here again on Carmel,- from the crocuses on the rocky grounds to the fennel plants and narcissuses of the Leontes; from the intense red, white, and purple anemones of the plains to the ferns that hide themselves in the dark sepulchral caves. Yes! Carmel indeed is still Carmel: the fruitful - the graceful - the fragrant - the lovely mountain that he was in the days of old." - Van de Velde, vol. i., p. 318.*

³ *Sinai and Palestine*, pp. 350-1

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