The Ministry of Elijah: A Theory.

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NOTHING almost is told in the Bible of Elijah's early life. Like Melchizedek, he is suddenly introduced to us, without reference to father or mother, or descent, or the beginning of his days. He is indeed called *The Tishbite*, which seems to suggest the town or village in which he was born; but this has nowhere been certainly identified, so that the name conveys to us no real information. The only thing said of him, which fixes the region from which he came, is this, that "he was of the inhabitants of Gilead."

That fact has been made the most of. Gilead was on the eastern side of the Jordan, and less under the influences which told on the western section. Hence there were times when it stood toward the more settled portions of the country in very much the same relation as that in which, a century and a half ago, the Highlands stood to the Lowlands of Scotland. And some, founding on this difference, picture Elijah as growing up, not amid the amenities of civilised life, but amid the rude simplicities of an Arab encampment. In this way they account for his sudden appearance, **when he first presented himself at the court of Ahab**—not clad in soft clothing, as if he had lived in a king's palace, but as a wild man from the wilderness, tall and strong, with long hair, and with a sheep-skin or the skin of some other animal thrown over his shoulders.

But how came Elijah to think of undertaking the mission in which he engaged? There is a natural and a supernatural explanation which may be offered.

The natural explanation is that by which we account to ourselves for the ministry of Mohammed. It does not seem at all strange to us that the false prophet, brooding as he did in the desert over the idolatries of his country, should have come to the conclusion that an obligation lay upon him to proclaim to the world the unity of the Godhead. And, in like manner, there is nothing surprising in the fact that an earnest Israelite was moved at this time to lift up his voice like a trumpet, to tell the Hebrew people of their sin. The period was exceedingly corrupt, and was threatening to become more and more so. The decline began when

Jeroboam, for political reasons which we can easily understand, set up rival temples in Dan and Bethel; and it went on at an accelerated pace when Ahab married the daughter of a heathen king, who was much abler and more in earnest than himself, and who soon brought her husband over to her ways of thinking. So rapidly was the process of degeneration proceeding, that the risk seemed imminent of the candle of the Lord being absolutely extinguished, and the kingdom of Israel being reduced to become one of the pagan nations of the world. That one of the faithful should contemplate a catastrophe like that with dismay was exceedingly natural, and equally natural it was that he should have been stirred up to take steps to prevent it.

But Elijah did not run merely because he was himself moved to do so. He ran because he was sent. His mission had also a supernatural origin. Of this no express mention is made; but two things are said in connection with his early experiences in Gilead, which are not a little significant. One is, that before he presented himself to Ahab, a peculiar relationship had already been established between himself and God. That is distinctly implied in the language which he used: "*As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand.*" The expression has a well-understood meaning. It represents the attitude of a recognised and confidential servant; such an attitude, for example, as was occupied by those whom the queen of Sheba congratulated on their relationship to Solomon: "*Happy are these thy servants that stand before thee, and hear thy wisdom.*" Something very special must obviously have taken place between God and the prophet before he entered on his work. He claimed to speak, not as from himself, but as an ambassador. And an authority so high he would not have pretended to, if it had not been expressly conferred upon him. But there is another thing to be noted. The judgment which Elijah denounced upon the land had, as we learn from St. James in the New Testament, been made the subject of special prayer to God before he left the land of Gilead. "*He prayed that it might not rain, and it did not*

rain for the space of three years and six months." This piece of information, which we receive from an unexpected quarter, brings out a new and interesting and significant fact, viz. that Elijah did not merely wait in God's presence as a servant to hear His will, but that he had express dealing with Him on the subject of the mission which he was moved to undertake.

In all this there may not appear to be very much, but enough is revealed to warrant the conclusion that Elijah became a prophet not at his own instance merely, but by the inspiration of God. Let us see, however, how he proceeded with his mission.

The fact to which reference has just been made, that the judgments sent upon the people came *on the suggestion of Elijah*, and in answer to his prayer, seems to be a very significant one. It appears, indeed, to supply the key to the prophet's early ministry. We picture to ourselves a man full of indignation as he thought of the apostacy of the land, and full of a fiery zeal for the honour of the God who was being forsaken. In this state of mind he cannot wait for the development of the divine plan of reformation, but burns for an opportunity to try methods of his own. He prays that it may not rain. He takes it upon him to indicate what ought to be done in the circumstances. So eager is he, that he is not content to obey. He leads, he guides, he points out what behoves to be done; and the remarkable thing is, that God allows him to follow out his own course, doing what is asked of Him, and suffering him to discover his errors only through his own failures.

How is Israel to be brought back to Jehovah? That was the problem to be solved; and Elijah's theory to begin with was this, that there was no remedy so sovereign as *correction, judgment, punishment*. Only, he seems to say, let me be allowed to bring upon them some awful and sensible trouble, and they will turn from their sins and repent. Well! the power he asked was given to him, and the drought came. One year passed—two years—three years, and no rain or dew came to refresh the thirsty ground. There was tremendous suffering; but what was the result? *Nothing!* When at the end of the period of trial the prophet asked the people to say whether they believed or not in Jehovah, they answered him not a word. *The method of correction had failed.*

Elijah, however, was not disheartened. It was possible, he evidently thought, that the famine

might be accounted for in a natural way; the hand of God had not been displayed through it in a sufficiently evident manner. And he now presented a second petition, viz. that the Divine existence might be manifested so as to be recognised by the most stupid and inconsiderate. In other words, he now placed his dependence on a *sign* or *wonder*. And God again assented to his wish. On Mount Carmel there came that answer by fire, which seemed in its power of demonstration to be complete. Nor for the moment did there seem to be any doubt about its efficacy. The strange sight brought the people to their knees, and under the pressure of convictions, which appeared to be overpowering, they cried out, "Jehovah, He is the God! Jehovah, He is the God." Elijah was now satisfied that the end had been gained. Baal worship was overthrown. The national faith was restored. And under the influence of the exultation so produced he swept the false prophets out of existence, and felt no fatigue in the race which he ran along with the king's chariot into Jezreel. But before the day closed, an extraordinary and unexpected spectacle came to be witnessed. A message was received from the queen—the ablest and most determined enemy of the Hebrew religion—intimating that she was neither converted nor discouraged, and that she was preparing to take her revenge on the agent in the nominal reformation; and the night saw the valiant defender of the faith in ignominious flight, and never in his panic halting until he had reached the distant and, as he hoped, the inaccessible recesses of the peninsula of Sinai. *The method of sign or wonder had failed also!*

And now Elijah owns himself to be completely beaten. He has tried his two specifics, and they have accomplished nothing, and he knows of no other means by which the change he seeks may be effected. He asks, therefore, that he may be permitted to die, as seeing no further use to which his life can possibly be put.

But here God interposes. Man's extremity is God's opportunity. Now that Elijah has been made to realise the vanity of his plans, he is open to hear of and recognise the suitability of others. He is told that his work in the world is not done, and he is taught, in a very notable way, a lesson which he apparently much needed to learn.

The work which he was set to do was to anoint two men as kings, respectively of Syria and Israel,

and to prepare as his own successor Elisha of Abelmeholah; and the lesson he learnt was this, that no spiritual impressions will ever be permanent unless they are made by the Holy Ghost. How that lesson was taught is expressly told in the story. It was by means of several extraordinary demonstrations. First, a hurricane arose and rushed down the mountain ravines with such tremendous fury that the rocks were riven by it; but the Lord was not in the wind. Next came an earthquake, whose power seemed equally awful; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. Afterwards fire burst forth which looked as if it would devour everything before it; but the Lord was not in the fire. Finally, however, there was heard a still small voice—the thrilling, penetrating call as of a living person, and the prophet who had been appalled, but not overpowered by the preceding manifestations, gave way before this more searching appeal, and came forth from his cave with his mantle over his face to listen to the Divine message. What was it that was thus taught him? Was it not this: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord.”

Now what greatly interests us further in Elijah's history is the record of how his latter days were spent. From this point his life becomes less eventful. He comes forth again once or twice, as of old, when special circumstances seemed to demand his reappearance in public life, as, for example, when Ahab had murdered Naboth for the sake of his vineyard; but as a rule he lives in retirement, and in a manner which is less romantic and exciting. It would, however, be a great mistake to conclude that he spent the evening of his days

as a hermit or in doing nothing. The truth is, that the last chapter of his life was probably his busiest. How it came about we do not know, but the age of persecution seemed to have passed. A spirit of comparative toleration prevailed. Schools of the prophets were allowed to be established in various places, and *Elijah spent his closing years in an active superintendence of these*. Thus he was taught a lesson which we have much need to lay to heart in these days, that the kingdom of darkness in this world is not a fortress which may be taken by assault, but one which will be reduced only by a long and laborious process of sapping and mining. The prophet, when he commenced his ministry, imagined that the idolatry of his country could be overthrown by a stroke. He closed his life-work by organising a system of means which required the co-operation of many men, and which it took years to carry into effect. His history then, from this point of view, is a very instructive one. What it proclaims is this, that we must neither grow weary of quiet well-doing, nor imagine that supernatural effects are to follow from natural causes. The results from our ordinary religious agencies—our colleges and Sabbath schools—our sermons and prayer-meetings—may seem to us exceedingly small, and we may grow impatient when we think of them. But after all, they may prove more efficacious than Elijah's drought or his answer by fire. In any case, we see in them God's method for subduing the world to Himself; and if the method seems to accomplish little, the explanation may be that we are forgetting the other lesson the prophet was taught, viz. the need for an outpouring of the Holy Ghost.

The Moral Teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

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THERE is perhaps no portion of the New Testament about which so many questions of all kinds have arisen as the Sermon on the Mount. These may roughly be divided under three heads—I. The purely critical. II. Those which are suggested by these critical questions, and answered indirectly by our solution of them. III. Questions which deal with the subject-matter. It is not my purpose to treat of the first two with any fulness in

the present paper. I shall only touch upon them mainly with the object of safeguarding myself in dealing with the third. For critical questions so closely connect themselves with every part of Holy Scripture, that we can never safely ignore them.

I. Before speaking of the first set of questions, I should like to make one preliminary remark, obvious in principle, but very frequently ignored