

**FARRAR
FREDERIC
WILLIAM**

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE:
THE SECOND BOOK OF
KINGS

Frederic Farrar
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The Second Book of Kings

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*The Expositor's Bible: The Second Book of Kings:**

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"Theories of inspiration which impaginate the Everlasting Spirit, and make each verse a cluster of objectless and mechanical miracles, are not seriously believed by any one: the Bible itself abides in its endless power and unexhausted truth. All that is not of asbestos is being burned away by the restless fires of thought and criticism. That which remains is enough, and it is indestructible." – Bishop of Derry.

CHAPTER I

AHAZIAH BEN-AHAB OF ISRAEL

b. c. 855-854

2 Kings i. 1-18

"Ye know not of what spirit are ye." – Luke ix. 55.

"He is the mediator of a better covenant, which hath been enacted upon better promises." – Heb. viii. 6.

Ahaziah, the eldest son and successor of Ahab, has been called "the most shadowy of the Israelitish kings."¹ He seems to have been in all respects one of the most weak, faithless, and deplorably miserable. He did but reign two years – perhaps in reality little more than one; but this brief space was crowded with intolerable disasters. Everything that he touched seemed to

¹ Rawlinson, *Kings of Israel and Judah*, p. 86. "The name of Ahaziah ('the Lord taketh hold'), like that of all Ahab's sons, testifies to the fact that the husband of Jezebel still worshipped Jehovah. Among the names of the judges and kings before Ahab in Israel, and Asa in Judah, scarcely a single instance occurs of names compounded with Jehovah; thenceforward they became the rule" (Wellhausen, *Israel and Judah*, Es. 1, p. 66).

be marked out for ruin or failure, and in character he showed himself a true son of Jezebel and Ahab.

What results followed the defeat of Ahab and Jehoshaphat at Ramoth-Gilead we are not told. The war must have ended in terms of peace of some kind – perhaps in the cession of Ramoth-Gilead; for Ahaziah does not seem to have been disturbed during his brief reign by any Syrian invasion. Nor were there any troubles on the side of Judah. Ahaziah's sister was the wife of Jehoshaphat's heir, and the good understanding between the two kingdoms was so closely cemented, that in both royal houses there was an identity of names – two Ahaziahs and two Jehorams.

But even the Judæan alliance was marked with misfortune. Jehoshaphat's prosperity and ambition, together with his firm dominance over Edom – in which country he had appointed a vassal, who was sometimes allowed the courtesy title of king²– led him to emulate Solomon by an attempt to revive the old maritime enterprise which had astonished Jerusalem with ivory, and apes, and peacocks imported from India. He therefore built "ships of Tarshish" at Ezion-Geber to sail to Ophir. They were called "Tarshish-ships," because they were of the same build as those which sailed to Tartessus, in Spain, from Joppa. Ahaziah was to some extent associated with him in the enterprise. But it turned out even more disastrously than it had done in former times. So unskilled was the seamanship of those days among all nations except the Phœnicians, that the whole

² 1 Kings xxii. 47; 2 Kings iii. 9: comp. viii. 20.

fleet was wrecked and shattered to pieces in the very harbour of Ezion-Geber before it had set sail.

Ahaziah, whose affinity with the King of Tyre and possession of some of the western ports had given his subjects more knowledge of ships and voyages, then proposed to Jehoshaphat that the vessels should be manned with sailors from Israel as well as Judah. But Jehoshaphat was tired of a futile and expensive effort. He refused a partnership which might easily lead to complications, and on which the prophets of Jehovah frowned. It was the last attempt made by the Israelites to become merchants by sea as well as by land.

Ahaziah's brief reign was marked by one immense humiliation. David, who extended the dominion of the Hebrews in all directions, had smitten the Moabites, and inflicted on them one of the horrible atrocities against which the ill-instructed conscience of men in those days of ignorance did not revolt.³ He had made the male warriors lie on the ground, and then, measuring them by lines, he put every two lines to death and kept one alive. After this the Moabites had continued to be tributaries. They had fallen to the share of the Northern Kingdom, and yearly acknowledged the suzerainty of Israel by paying a heavy tribute of the fleeces of a hundred thousand lambs and a hundred thousand rams. But now that the warrior Ahab was dead, and

³ 2 Sam. viii. 2. On the ethics of these wars of extermination, such as are commanded in the Pentateuch, and were practised by Joshua, Samuel, Saul, David, and others, see Josh. vi. 17; 1 Sam. xv. 3, 33; 2 Sam. viii. 2, etc., and Mozley's *Lectures on the Old Testament*, pp. 83-103.

Israel had been crushed by the catastrophe at Ramoth-Gilead, Mesha, the energetic viceroy of Moab, seized his opportunity to revolt and to break from the neck of his people the odious yoke. The revolt was entirely successful. The sacred historian gives us no details, but one of the most priceless of modern archaeological discoveries has confirmed the Scriptural reference by securing and translating a fragment of Mesha's own account of the annals of his reign. We have, in what is called "The Moabite Stone," the memorial written in glorification of himself and of his god Chemosh, "the abomination of the children of Ammon," by a contemporary of Ahab and Jehoshaphat.⁴ It is the oldest specimen which we possess of Hebrew writing; perhaps the only specimen, except the Siloam inscription, which has come down to us from before the date of the Exile. It was discovered in 1878 by the German missionary Klein, amid the ruins of the royal city of Daibon (Dibon, Num. xxi. 30), and was purchased for the Berlin Museum in 1879. Owing to all kinds of errors and intrigues, it did not remain in the hands of its purchaser, but was broken into fragments by the nomad tribe of Beni Hamide, from whom it was in some way obtained by M. Clermont-Ganneau. There is no ground for questioning its perfect genuineness, though the discovery of its value led to the forgery of a number of spurious and often indecent inscriptions. There can be no reasonable doubt that when we look at it we see before us the identical memorial of triumph which the Moabite

⁴ See Stade, i. 86. He gives a photograph and translation of it at p. 534.

emîr erected in the days of Ahaziah on the *bamah* of Chemosh at Dibon, one of his chief towns.

This document is supremely interesting, not only for its historical allusions, but also as an illustration of customs and modes of thought which have left their traces in the records of the people of Jehovah, as well as in those of the people of Chemosh.⁵ Mesha tells us that his father reigned in Dibon for thirty years, and that he succeeded. He reared this stone to Chemosh in the town of Karcha, as a memorial of gratitude for the assistance which had resulted in the overthrow of all his enemies. Omri, King of Israel, had oppressed Moab many days, because Chemosh was wroth with his people. Ahaziah wished to oppress Moab as his father had done. But Chemosh enabled Mesha to recover Medeba, and afterwards Baal-Meon, Kirjatan, Ataroth, Nebo, and Jahaz, which he reoccupied and rebuilt. Perhaps they had been practically abandoned by all effective Israelite garrisons. In some of these towns he put the inhabitants under a ban, and sacrificed them to Moloch in a great slaughter. In Nebo alone he slew seven thousand men. Having turned many towns into fortresses, he was enabled to defy Israel altogether, to refuse the old burdensome tribute, and to re-establish a strong Moabite kingdom east of the Dead Sea; for Israel was wholly unable to meet his forces in the open field. Month after month of the reign of the miserable son of Ahab must have been marked by tidings of shame, defeat, and massacre.

⁵ See *Records of the Past*, xi. 166, 167.

Added to these public calamities, there came to Ahaziah a terrible personal misfortune. As he was coming down from the roof of his palace, he seems to have stopped to lean against the lattice of some window or balcony in his upper chamber in Samaria.⁶ It gave way under his weight, and he was hurled down into the courtyard or street below. He was so seriously hurt that he spent the rest of his reign on a sick-bed in pain and weakness, and ultimately died of the injuries he had received.

A succession of woes so grievous might well have awakened the wretched king to serious thought. But he had been trained under the idolatrous influences of his mother. As though it were not enough for him to walk in the steps of Ahab, of Jezebel, and of Jeroboam, he had the fatuity to go out of his way to patronise another and yet more odious superstition. Ekron was the nearest town to him of the Philistine Pentapolis, and at Ekron was established the local cult of a particular Baal known as Baal-Zebub ("the lord of flies").⁷ Flies, which in temperate countries are sometimes an intense annoyance, become in tropical climates an intolerable plague. Even the Greeks had their Zeus Apomuios ("Zeus the averter of flies"), and some Greek tribes worshipped Zeus Ipektonos ("Zeus the slayer of vermin"),

⁶ 2 Kings i. 2; Heb., *be'ad hass'bakāh*; LXX., διὰ τοῦ δικτυωτοῦ; Vulg., *per cancellos* (comp. 1 Kings vii. 18; 2 Chron. iv. 12).

⁷ LXX., Βάαλ μυῖαν θεὸν Ἀκκαρῶν. So, too, Jos., *Antt.*, IX. ii. 1. It is possible that the god was represented holding a fly as the type of pestilence, just as the statue of Pthah held in its hands a mouse (Herod., ii. 141). Flies convey all kinds of contagion (Plin., *H. N.*, x. 28).

and Zeus Muiagros and Apomuios, and Apollo Smintheus ("the destroyer of mice").⁸ The Romans, too, among the numberless quaint heroes of their Pantheon, had a certain Myiagrus and Myiodes, whose function it was to keep flies at a distance.⁹ This fly-god, Baal-Zebub of Ekron, had an oracle, to whose lying responses the young and superstitious prince attached implicit credence. That a king of Israel professing any sort of allegiance to Jehovah, and having hundreds of prophets in his own kingdom, should send an embassy to the shrine of an abominable local divinity in a town of the Philistines – whose chief object of worship was

"That twice-battered god of Palestine,
Who mourned in earnest when the captive ark
Maimed his brute image on the grunsel edge
Where he fell flat, and shamed his worshippers" —

was, it must be admitted, an act of apostasy more outrageously

⁸ Pausan., v. 14, § 2.

⁹ The name, or a derisive modification of it, was given by the Jews in the days of Christ to the prince of the devils. In Matt. xii. 24 the true reading is Βεελζεβούλ, which perhaps means (in contempt) "the lord of dung"; but might mean "the lord of the [celestial] habitation" (οἰκοδοσπότην). Comp. Matt. x. 25; Eph. ii. 2; "Baal Shamaim," the Belsamen of Augustine (Gesén., *Monum. Phœnic.*, 387; Movers, *Phönizier*, i. 176). For "opprobrious puns" applied to idols, see Lightfoot, *Exercitationes ad Matt.*, xii. 24. The common word for idols, *gilloolim*, is perhaps connected with *galal*, "dung." Hitzig thinks that the god was represented under the symbol of the *Scarabæus pillularius*, or dung-beetle.

insulting than had ever yet been perpetrated by any Hebrew king. Nothing can more clearly illustrate the callous indifference shown by the race of Jezebel to the lessons which God had so decisively taught them by Elijah and by Micaiah.

But and in this "dementation preceding doom" Ahaziah sent to ask the fly-god's oracle whether he should recover of his injury. His infatuated perversity became known to Elijah, who was bidden by "the angel," or messenger, "of the Lord" – which may only be the recognised phrase in the prophetic schools, putting in a concrete and vivid form the voice of inward inspiration – to go up, apparently on the road towards Samaria, and meet the messengers of Ahaziah on their way to Ekron. Where Elijah was at the time we do not know. Ten years had elapsed since the calling of Elisha, and four since Elijah had confronted Ahab at the door of Naboth's vineyard. In the interval he has not once been mentioned, nor can we conjecture with the least certainty whether he had been living in congenial solitude or had been helping to train the Sons of the Prophets in the high duties of their calling. Why he had not appeared to support Micaiah we cannot tell. Now, at any rate, the son of Ahab was drawing upon himself an ancient curse by going a-whoring after wizards and familiar spirits, and it was high time for Elijah to interfere.¹⁰

Quem vult Deus perire, dementat prius;

The messengers had not proceeded far on their way when the

¹⁰ Lev. xx. 6.

prophet met them, and sternly bade them go back to their king, with the denunciation, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that ye go to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron? Now, therefore, thus saith Jehovah, 'Thou shalt not descend from that bed on which thou art gone up, but dying thou shalt die.'"

He spoke, and after his manner vanished with no less suddenness.

The messengers, overawed by that startling apparition, did not dream of daring to disobey. They at once went back to the king, who, astonished at their reappearance before they could possibly have reached the oracle, asked them why they had returned.

They told him of the apparition by which they had been confronted. That it was a prophet who had spoken to them they knew; but the appearances of Elijah had been so few, and at such long intervals, that they knew not who he was.

"What sort of man was he that spoke to you?" asked the king.

"He was," they answered, "a lord of hair,¹¹ and girded about his loins with a girdle of skin."¹²

Too well did Ahaziah recognise from this description the enemy of his guilty race! If he had not been present on Carmel, or at Jezreel, on the occasions when that swart and shaggy figure of the awful Wanderer had confronted his father, he must have often heard descriptions of this strange Bedawy ascetic who "feared

¹¹ רֵשֶׁשׁ לְאֵב (LXX., δασύς), whether in reference to his long shaggy locks, or his sheepskin *addereth*, μηλωτή (Zech. xiii. 4; Heb. xii. 37).

¹² ζώνη δερματίνη (Matt iii. 4).

man so little because he feared God so much."

"It is Elijah the Tishbite!" he exclaimed, with a bitterness which was succeeded by fierce wrath; and with something of his mother's indomitable rage he sent a captain with fifty soldiers to arrest him.

The captain found Elijah sitting at the top of "the hill," perhaps of Carmel; and what followed is thus described: —

"Thou man of God," he cried, "the king hath said, Come down."

There was something strangely incongruous in this rude address. The title "man of God" seems first to have been currently given to Elijah, and it recognises his inspired mission as well as the supernatural power which he was believed to wield. How preposterous, then, was it to bid a man of God to obey a king's order and to give himself up to imprisonment or death!

"If I be a man of God," said Elijah, "then let fire come down from heaven, to consume thee and thy fifty."¹³

The fire fell and reduced them all to ashes.¹⁴

Undeterred by so tremendous a consummation, the king sent another captain with his fifty, who repeated the order in terms yet more imperative.¹⁵

Again Elijah called down the fire from heaven, and the second

¹³ There is perhaps an intentional play of words between "man (אִישׁ) of God" and "fire (אֵשׁ) of God" (Klostermann).

¹⁴ Hebrew.

¹⁵ "Come down *quickly*" (2 Kings i. 9).

captain with his fifty soldiers was reduced to ashes.

For the third time the obstinate king, whose infatuation must indeed have been transcendent, despatched a captain with his fifty. But he, warned by the fate of his predecessors, went up to Elijah and fell on his knees, and implored him to spare the life of himself and his fifty innocent soldiers.

Then "the angel of the Lord" bade Elijah go down to the king with him and not be afraid.

What are we to think of this narrative?

Of course, if we are to judge it on such moral grounds as we learn from the spirit of the Gospel, Christ Himself has taught us to condemn it. There have been men who so hideously misunderstood the true lessons of revelation as to applaud such deeds, and hold them up for modern imitation. The dark persecutors of the Spanish Inquisition, nay, even men like Calvin and Beza, argued from this scene that "fire is the proper instrument for the punishment of heretics." To all who have been thus misled by a false and superstitious theory of inspiration, Christ Himself says, with unmistakable plainness, as He said to the Sons of Thunder at Engannim, "Ye know not what spirit ye are of. I am not come to destroy men's lives, but to save."¹⁶ In the abstract, and judged by Christian standards, the calling down of

¹⁶ Luke ix. 51-56. This is a more than sufficient answer to the censure of Theodoret, that "they who condemn the prophet are wagging their tongues against God." The remark is based on utter misapprehension; and if we are to form no judgment on the morality of Scripture examples, they would be of no help for us. Compare the striking remark of the minister to Balfour of Burleigh in Scott's *Old Mortality*.

lightning to consume more than a hundred soldiers, who were but obeying the orders of a king – the protection of personal safety by the miraculous destruction of a king's messengers – could only be regarded as a deed of horror. "There are few tracks of Elijah that are ordinary and fit for common feet," says Bishop Hall; and he adds, "Not in his own defence would the prophet have been the death of so many, if God had not, by a peculiar instinct, made him an instrument of His just vengeance."¹⁷

For myself, I more than doubt whether we have any right to appeal to these "peculiar instincts" and unrecorded inspirations; and it is so important that we should not form utterly false views of what Scripture does and does not teach, that we must once more deal with this narrative quite plainly, and not beat about the bush with the untenable devices and effeminate euphemisms of commentators, who give us the "to-and-fro-conflicting" apologies of *a priori* theory instead of the clear judgments of inflexible morality.

"It is impossible not to feel," says Professor Milligan,¹⁸ "that the events thus presented to us are of a very startling kind, and that it is not easy to reconcile them either with the conception that we form of an honoured servant of God, or with our ideas of eternal justice. Elijah rather appears to us at first sight as a proud, arrogant, and merciless wielder of the power committed to him: we wonder that an answer should have been given to

¹⁷ Quoted by Rev. Professor Lumby, *ad loc.*

¹⁸ *Elijah*, p. 146.

his prayer; we are shocked at the destruction of so many men, who listened only to the command of their captain and their king; and we cannot help contrasting Elijah's conduct, as a whole, with the beneficent and loving tenderness of the New Testament dispensation."

Professor Milligan proceeds rightly to set aside the attempts which have been made to represent the first two captains and their fifties as especially guilty – which is a most flimsy hypothesis, and would not in any case touch the heart of the matter. He says that the event stands on exactly the same footing as the slaughter of the 450 prophets of Baal at Kishon, and of the 3000 idolaters by order of Moses at Sinai; the swallowing up of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram; the ban of total extirpation on Jericho and on Canaan; the sweeping massacre of the Amalekites by Saul; and many similar instances of recorded savagery. But the reference to analogous acts furnishes no justification for those acts. What, then, is their justification, if any can be found?

Some would defend them on the grounds that the potter may do what he likes with the clay. That analogy, though perfectly admissible when used for the purpose to which it is applied by St. Paul, is grossly inapplicable to such cases as this. St. Paul uses it simply to prove that we cannot judge or understand the purposes of God, in which, as he shows, mercy often lies behind apparent severity. But, when urged to maintain the rectitude of sweeping judgments in which a man arms his own feebleness with the omnipotence of Heaven, they amount to no more than

the tyrant's plea that "might makes right." "Man is a reed," said Pascal, "but he is a *thinking* reed." He may not therefore be indiscriminately crushed. He was made by God in His image, after His likeness, and therefore his rights have a Divine and indefeasible sanction.

All that can be said is that these deeds of wholesale severity were not in disaccord with the conscience even of many of the best Old Testament saints. They did not feel the least compunction in inflicting judgments on whole populations in a way which would argue in us an infamous callousness. Nay, their consciences approved of those deeds; they were but acting up to the standard of their times, and they regarded themselves as righteous instruments of divinely directed vengeance.¹⁹ Take, for instance, the frightful Eastern law which among the Jews no less than among Babylonians and Persians thought nothing of overwhelming the innocent with the guilty in the same catastrophe; which required the stoning, not only of Achan, but of all Achan's innocent family, as an expiation for his theft; and the stoning, not only of Naboth, but also of Naboth's sons, in requital for his asserted blasphemy. Two reasons may be assigned for the chasm between their moral sense and ours on such subjects – one was their amazing indifference to the

¹⁹ This is practically the sum-total of the answer given again and again by Canon Mozley in his *Lectures on the Old Testament*, 2nd edition, 1878. For instance, he says that "the Jewish idea of justice gives us the reason why the Divine commands (of exterminating wars, etc.) were then adapted to man as the agent for executing them, and are not adapted now" (p. 102).

sacredness of human life, and the other their invariable habit of regarding men in their corporate relations rather than in their individual capacity. Our conscience teaches us that to slay the innocent with the guilty is an action of monstrous injustice;²⁰ but they, regarding each person as indissolubly mixed up with all his family and tribe, magnified the conception of *corporate responsibility*, and merged the individual in the mass.

It is clear that, if we take the narrative literally, Elijah would not have felt the least remorse in calling fire from heaven to consume these scores of soldiers, because the prophetic narrator who recorded the story, perhaps two centuries later, must have understood the spirit of those days, and certainly felt no shame for the prophet's act of vengeance. On the contrary, he relates it with entire approval for the glorification of his hero. We cannot blame him for not rising above the moral standard of his age. He held that the natural manifestation of an angry Jehovah was, literally or metaphorically, in consuming fire. Considering the slow education of mankind in the most elementary principles of mercy and righteousness, we must not judge the views of prophets who lived so many ages before Christ by those of religious teachers who enjoy the inherited experience of two millenniums of Christianity. Thus much is plainly taught us by Christ Himself, and there perhaps we might be content to leave the question. But we are compelled to ask, Do we not too much form all our judgments of the Scripture narratives on *a priori*

²⁰ Comp. Ezek. xviii. 2-30.

traditions and unreasoned prejudices? Can we with adequate knowledge and honest conviction declare our certainty that this scene of destruction ever occurred as a literal fact? If we turn to any of the great students and critics of Germany, to whom we are indebted for the floods of light which their researches have thrown on the sacred page, they with almost consentient voice regard these details of this story as legendary. There is indeed every reason to believe the account of Ahaziah's accident, of his sending to consult the oracle of Baal-Zebub, of the turning back of his messengers by Elijah, and of the menace which he heard from the prophet's lips. But the calling down of lightning to consume his captains and soldiers to ashes belongs to the cycle of Elijah-traditions preserved in the schools of the prophets; and in the case of miracles so startling and to our moral sense so repellent – miracles which assume the most insensate folly on the part of the king, and the most callous ruthlessness on the part of the prophet – the question may be fairly asked, Is there any proof, is there anything beyond dogmatic assertion to convince us, that we were intended to accept them *au pied de la lettre*? May they not be the formal vehicle chosen for the illustration of the undoubted powers and righteous mission of Elijah as the upholder of the worship of Jehovah? In a literature which abounds, as all Eastern literature abounds, in vivid and concrete methods of indicating abstract truths, have we any cogent proof that the supernatural details, of which some may have been introduced into these narratives by the scribes in the

schools of the prophets, were not, in some instances, *meant* to be regarded as imaginative apologues? The most orthodox divines, both Jewish and Christian, have not hesitated to treat the Book of Jonah as an instance of the use of fiction for purposes of moral and spiritual edification. Were any critic to maintain that the story of the destruction of Ahaziah's emissaries belongs to the same class of narratives, I do not know how he could be refuted, however much he might be denounced by stereotyped prejudice and ignorance. I do not, however, myself regard the story as a mere parable composed to show how awful was the power of the prophets, and how fearfully it might be exercised. I look upon it rather as possibly the narrative of some event which has been imaginatively embellished, and intermingled with details which we call supernatural.²¹ Circumstances which we consider natural would be regarded as directly miraculous by an Eastern enthusiast, who saw in every event the immediate act of Jehovah to the exclusion of all secondary causes, and who attributed every occurrence of life to the intervention of those "millions of spiritual creatures," who

"walk the earth

Unseen both when we wake and when we sleep."

If such a supposition be correct and admissible – and assuredly it is based on all that we increasingly learn of the methods of Eastern literature, and of the forms in which religious ideas were

²¹ For the *idea* involved see Num. xi. 1; Deut. iv. 24; Psalm xxi. 9; Isa. xxvi. 11; Heb. x. 27, etc.

inculcated in early ages – then all difficulties are removed. We are not dealing with the mercilessness of a prophet, or the wielding of Divine powers in a manner which higher revelation condemns, but only with the well-known fact that the Elijah-spirit was not the Christ-spirit, and that the scribes of Ramah or Gilgal, and "the men of the tradition" and the "men of letters" who lived at Jabez, when they used the methods of Targum and Haggadah in handing down the stories of the prophets, had not received that full measure of enlightenment which came only when the Light of the World had shone.²²

²² 1 Chron. ii. 55, where "Shimeathites" means "men of the tradition," and "scribes," "men of letters."

CHAPTER II

THE ASCENSION OF ELIJAH

2 Kings ii. 1-18

Ἡλίας ἕξ ἀνθρώπων ἠφανίσθη, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἔγνω
μεχρις τῆς σήμερον αὐτοῦ τὴν τελεύτην. – Jos., *Antt.*, IX.
ii. 2.

Γεγόνασιν ἀφανεῖς, θάνατον δὲ αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς οἶδεν.
– St. Ephræm Syrus.

The date of the assumption of Elijah is wholly uncertain, and it becomes still more so because of the confusion of chronological order which results from the composite character of the records here collected. It appears from various scattered notices that Elijah lived on till the reign of Jehoram of Judah, whereas the narrative in this chapter is placed before the death of Jehoshaphat.

When the time came that "Jehovah would take up Elijah by a whirlwind into heaven," the prophet had a prevision of his approaching end, and determined for the last time to visit the hills of his native Gilead. The story of his end, though not written in rhythm, is told in a style of the loftiest poetry, resembling other ancient poems in its simple and solemn repetitions. On his

way to Gilead, Elijah desires to visit ancient sanctuaries where schools of the prophets were now established, and accompanied by Elisha, whose faithful ministrations he had enjoyed for ten almost silent years, he went to Gilgal. This was not the Gilgal in the Jordan valley so famous in the days of Joshua,²³ but *Jiljilia* in the hills of Ephraim,²⁴ where many young prophets were in course of training.²⁵

Knowing that he was on his way to death, Elijah felt the imperious instinct which leads the soul to seek solitude at the supreme crises of life. He would have preferred that even Elisha should leave him, and he bade him stop at Gilgal, because the Lord had sent him as far as Bethel. But Elisha was determined to see the end, and exclaimed with strong asseveration, "As Jehovah liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee."

So they went on to Bethel, where there was another school of prophets, under the immediate shadow of Jeroboam's golden calf, though we are not told whether they continued the protest of the old nameless seer from Judah, or not.²⁶ Here the youths of the college came respectfully to Elisha – for they were prevented by a sense of awe from addressing Elijah – and asked him "whether he knew that that day God would take away his master." "Yes,

²³ Josh. iv. 19; v. 9, 10.

²⁴ Deut. xi. 30. It is on a hill south-west of Shiloh (*Seilun*), near the road to Jericho (Hos. iv. 15; Amos iv. 4). The name means "a circle," and there may have been an ancient circle of sacred stones there.

²⁵ 2 Kings iv. 38.

²⁶ 1 Kings xiii.

I know it," he answers; but – for this is no subject for idle talk – "hold ye your peace."

Once more Elijah tries to shake off the attendance of his friend and disciple. He bids him stay at Bethel, since Jehovah has sent him on to Jericho. Once more Elisha repeats his oath that he will not leave him, and once more the sons of the prophets at Jericho, who warn him of what is coming, are told to say no more.

But little of the journey now remains. In vain Elijah urges Elisha to stay at Jericho; they proceed to Jordan. Conscious that some great event is impending, and that Elijah is leaving these scenes for ever, fifty of the sons of the prophets watch the two as they descend the valley to the river. Here they saw Elijah take off his mantle of hair, roll it up, and smite the waters with it. The waters part asunder, and the prophets pass over dry-shod.²⁷ As they crossed over Elijah asks Elisha what he should do for him, and Elisha entreats that a double portion of Elijah's spirit may rest upon him. By this he does not mean to ask for twice Elijah's power and inspiration, but only for an elder son's portion, which was twice what was inherited by the younger sons.²⁸ "Thou hast

²⁷ As there are fords at Jericho, the object of this miracle, as of the one subsequently ascribed to Elisha, is not self-evident. Nothing is more certain than that there is a Divine economy in the exercise of supernatural powers. The pomp and prodigality of superfluous portents belong, not to Scripture, but to the *Acta sanctorum*, and the saint-stories of Arabia and India.

²⁸ Deut. xxi. 17. The Hebrew is פִּי שְׁנַיִם, "a mouthful, or ration of two." Comp. Gen. xliii. 34. Even Ewald's "*Nur Zweidrittel und auch diese kaum*" is too strong (*Gesch.*, iii. 517). In no sense was Elisha greater than Elijah: he wrought more wonders, but he left little of his teaching, and produced on the mind of his nation a far less strong

asked a hard thing," said Elijah; "but if thou seest me when I am taken hence, it shall be so."

The sequel can be only told in the words of the text: "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire,²⁹ and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!'³⁰ And he saw him no more."

Respecting the manner in which Elijah ended his earthly career, we know nothing beyond what is conveyed by this splendid narrative. His death, like that of Moses, was surrounded by mystery and miracles, and we can say nothing further about it. The question must still remain unanswered for many minds whether it was intended by the prophetic annalists for literal history, for spiritual allegory, or for actual events bathed in the colourings of an imagination to which the providential assumed the aspect of the supernatural.³¹ We are twice told that "Elijah

impression.

²⁹ In 2 Kings vi. 17 the stormblast (*sā'ārāh*) and chariots and horses of fire are part of a vision of the Divine protection. Comp. Isa. lxvi. 15; Job xxxviii, 1; Nah. i. 3; Psalms xviii. 6-15, civ. 3.

³⁰ That is, the protection and defence of Israel by thy prayers.

³¹ Even the Church-father St. Ephrām Syrus evidently felt some misgivings. He says: "Suddenly there came from the height a storm of fire, and in the midst of the flame the form of a chariot and horses, and parted them both asunder; the one of them it left on the earth, the other it carried to the height; but whether the wind carried him, or in what place it left him, the Scripture has not informed us, but it says that

went up by a whirlwind into heaven,"³² and in that storm – which would have seemed a fit scene for the close of a career of storm – God, in the high poetry of the Psalmist, may have made the winds His angels, and the flames of fire His ministers. For us it must suffice to say of Elijah, as the Book of Genesis says of Enoch, that "he was not, for God took him."

Elisha signalled the removal of his master by a burst of natural grief. He seized his garments and rent them in twain. Elijah had dropped his mantle of skin, and his grieving disciple took it with him as a priceless relic.³³ The legendary St. Antony bequeathed to St. Athanasius the only thing which he had, his sheepskin mantle; and in the mantle of Elijah his successor inherited his most characteristic and almost his sole possession. He returned to Jordan, and with this mantle he smote the waters as Elijah had done. At first they did not divide;³⁴ but when he exclaimed, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah, even He?" they parted hither and thither. Seeing the portent, the sons of the prophets came with humble prostrations, and acknowledged him as their new leader.

after some years, a terrifying letter from him full of menaces, was delivered to King Jehoram of Judah" (quoted by Keil *ad loc.*). See 2 Chron. xxi. 12. The letter is called "a writing" (*miktâb*).

³² 2 Kings ii. 11; Eccclus. xlvi. 12. The LXX. curiously says ἐν συσσεισμῷ ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν. So too the Rabbis, *Sucah*, f. 5.

³³ The circumstance has left its trace in the proverbs of nations, and in the German word *Mantelkind* for a spiritual successor.

³⁴ 2 Kings ii. 14. LXX., καὶ οὐ διηρέθη; Vulg., *Percussit aquas, et non sunt divisæ.*

They were not, however, satisfied with what they had seen, or had heard from Elisha, of the departure of the great prophet, and begged leave to send fifty strong men to search whether the wind of the Lord had not swept him away to some mountain or valley. Elisha at first refused, but afterwards yielded to their persistent importunity. They searched for three days among the hills of Gilead, but found him not, either living or dead, as Elisha had warned them would be the case.

From that time forward Elijah has taken his place in all Jewish and Mohammedan legends as the mysterious and deathless wanderer. Malachi spoke of him as destined to appear again to herald the coming of the Messiah,³⁵ and Christ taught His disciples that John the Baptist had come in the spirit and power of Elijah. In Jewish legend he often appears and disappears. A chair is set for him at the circumcision of every Jewish child. At the Paschal feast the door is set open for him to enter. All doubtful questions are left for decision until he comes again. To the Mohammedans he is known as the wonder-working and awful El Khudr.³⁶

Elisha is mentioned but once in all the later books of Scripture; but Elijah is mentioned many times, and the son of Sirach sums up his greatness when he says: "Then stood up Elias

³⁵ Mal. iv. 4-6.

³⁶ *Bava-Metzia*, f. 37, 2, etc. His name is used for incantations in the Kabbala. *Kitsur Sh'lh*, f. 71, 1 (Hershon, *Talmudic Miscellany*, p. 340). The chair set for him is called "the throne of Elijah." For many Rabbinic legends see Hershon, *Treasures of the Talmud*, pp. 172-178. The Persians regard him as the teacher of Zoroaster.

as fire, and his word burned like a torch. O Elias, how wast thou honoured in thy wondrous deeds! and who may glory like unto thee – who anointed kings to take revenge, and prophets to succeed after him – who wast ordained for reproof in their times, to pacify the wrath of the Lord's judgment before it broke forth into fury, and to turn the heart of the father unto the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob! Blessed are they that saw thee and slept in love; for we shall surely live!"

CHAPTER III

ELISHA

2 Kings ii. 1-25

"He did wonders in his life, and at death even his works were marvellous. For all this the people repented not." – Ecclus. xlvi. 14, 15.

At this point we enter into the cycle of supernatural stories, which gathered round the name of Elisha in the prophetic communities. Some of them are full of charm and tenderness; but in some cases it is difficult to point out their intrinsic superiority over the ecclesiastical miracles with which monkish historians have embellished the lives of the saints. We can but narrate them as they stand, for we possess none of the means for critical or historical analysis which might enable us to discriminate between essential facts and accidental elements.

We see at once that the figure of Elisha³⁷ is far less impressive than that of Elijah. He inspires less of awe and terror. He lives far more in cities and amid the ordinary surroundings of civilised life. The honour with which he was treated was the honour of

³⁷ The name Elisha means "My God is salvation."

respect and admiration for his kindness. He plays his part in no stupendous scenes like those at Carmel and at Horeb, and nearly all his miracles were miracles of mercy. Other remarkable differences are observable in the records of Elijah and Elisha. In the case of the former his main work was the opposition to Baal-worship; but although Baal-worship still prevailed (2 Kings x. 18-27) we read of no protests raised by Elisha against it. "With him" – perhaps it should be more accurately said, in the narrative which tells us of him – "the miracles are everything, the prophetic work nothing." The conception of a prophet's mission in these stories of him differs widely from that which dominates the splendid *midrash* of Elijah.

His separate career began with an act of beneficence. He had stopped for a time at Jericho. The curse of the rebuilding of the town upon a site which Joshua had devoted to the ban had expended itself on Hiel, its builder. It was now a flourishing city, and the home of a large school of prophets. But though the situation was pleasant as "a garden of the Lord,"³⁸ the water was bad, and the land "miscarried." In other words, the deleterious spring caused diseases among the inhabitants, and caused the trees to cast their fruit. So the men of the city came to Elisha, and humbly addressing him as "my lord," implored his help. He told them to bring him a new cruse full of salt, and going with it to the fountain cast it into the springs, proclaiming in Jehovah's name that they were healed, and that there should be no more

³⁸ Gen. xiii. 10. "The city of palms" (Deut. xxxiv. 3).

death or miscarrying land. The gushing waters of the Ain-es-Sultân, fed by the spring of Quarantania, are to this day pointed out as the Fountains of Elisha, as they have been since the days of Josephus.³⁹

The anecdote of this beautiful interposition to help a troubled city is followed by one of the stories which naturally repel us more than any other in the Old Testament. Elisha, on leaving Jericho, returned to Bethel, and as he climbed through the forest up the ascent leading to the town through what is now called the Wady Suweinât, a number of young lads – with the rudeness which in boys is often a venial characteristic of their gay spirits or want of proper training, and which to this day is common among boys in the East – laughed at him, and mocked him with the cry "Go up, round-head! go up, round-head!"⁴⁰ What struck these ill-bred and irreverent youngsters was the contrast between the rough hair-skin garb and unkempt shaggy locks of Elijah, "the lord of hair," and the smooth civilised aspect and shorter hair of his disciple. If the word *quereach* means "bald"⁴¹

³⁹ Jos., *B. J.*, IV. viii. 3; Robinson, *Bibl. Researches*, i. 554.

⁴⁰ Abarbanel's notion that they meant "Ascend to heaven as Elijah did" is absurd.

⁴¹ גִּבְעָה This means bald at the back of the head, as גִּבְעָה (*gibbeach*), means "forehead-bald" (Ewald, iii. 512). Elisha could not have been bald from old age, since he lived on for nearly sixty years, and must have been a young man. Baldness involved a suspicion of leprosy, and was disliked by Easterns (Lev. xxi. 5, xiii. 43; Isa. iii. 17, 24, xv. 2), as much as by the Romans (Suet., *Jul. Cæs.*, 45; *Domit.*, 18). Elisha's prophetic activity lasted through the reigns of Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Joash (*i. e.*, 12 + 28 + 17 + 2 years).

we see an additional reason for their ill-mannered jeers, since baldness was a cause of reproach and suspicion in the East, where it is comparatively rare. No doubt, too, the conduct of these young scoffers was the more offensive, and even the more wicked, because of the deeper reverence for age which prevails in Eastern countries, and above all because Elisha was known as a prophet. Perhaps, too, if some other reading lies behind the ἐλίθαζον of one MS. of the Septuagint, they pelted him with stones.⁴² That Elisha should have rebuked them, and that seriously – that he should even have inflicted some punishment upon them to reform their manners – would have been natural; but we cannot repress the shudder with which we read the verse, "And he turned back and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty-and-two children of them." Surely the punishment was disproportionate to the offence! Who could doom so much as a single rude boy, not to speak of forty-two, to a horrible and agonising death for shouting after any one? It is the chief exception to the general course of Elisha's compassionate interpositions. Here, too, we must leave the narrative where it is; but we hold it quite admissible to conjecture that the incident, in some form or other, really occurred – that the boys were insolent, and that some of them may have been killed by the

⁴² The κατέπαιζον of the Vat. LXX. implies persistent and vehement insult. The Post-Mishnic Rabbis, however, say that Elisha was punished with sickness for this deed (*Bava-Metzia*, f. 87, 1).

wild beasts which at that time abounded in Palestine – and yet that the *nuances* of the story which cause deepest offence to us may have suffered from some corruption of the tradition in the original records, and may admit of being represented in a slightly different form.

After this Elisha went for a time to the ancient haunts of his master on Mount Carmel, and thence returned to Samaria, the capital of his country, which he seems to have chosen for his most permanent dwelling-place.

CHAPTER IV

THE INVASION OF MOAB

2 Kings iii. 4-27

"What reinforcement we may gain from hope,
If not, what resolution from despair."

Milton, Paradise Lost, i. 190.

Ahaziah, as Elijah had warned him, never recovered from the injuries received in his fall through the lattice, and after his brief and luckless reign died without a child. He was succeeded by his brother Jehoram ("Jehovah is exalted"), who reigned for twelve years.⁴³

⁴³ There are great difficulties in the statement (2 Kings iii. 1) that he began to reign in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat. I have not entered, nor shall I enter, into the minute and precarious conjectures necessitated by the uncertainties and contradictions of this synchronism introduced into the narrative by some editor. Suffice it that with the aid of the Assyrian records we have certain *points de repère*; from which we can, with the assistance of the historian, conjecturally restore the main data. In the dates given at the head of the chapters I follow Kittel, as a careful inquirer. Some of the approximately fixed dates are (see [Appendix I](#)): —854. Battle of Karkar (Ahab and Benhadad against Shalmaneser II.)738. Tribute of Menahem to Tiglath-Pileser II.732. Fall of Damascus.722. Capture of Samaria by Sargon.720. Defeat of Sabaco by Sargon in battle of Raphia.705. Accession of Sennacherib.701. Campaign against Hezekiah.608. Death of Josiah.

Jehoram began well. Though it is said that he did "that which was evil in the sight of the Lord," we are told that he was not so guilty as his father or his mother. He did not, of course, abolish the worship of Jehovah under the cherubic symbol of the calves; no king of Israel thought of doing that, and so far as we know neither Elijah, nor Elisha, nor Jonah, nor Micaiah, nor any genuine prophet of Israel before Hosea, ever protested against that worship, which was chiefly disparaged by prophets of Judah like Amos and the nameless seer.⁴⁴ But Jehoram at least removed the *Matstsebah* or stone obelisk which had been reared in Baal's honour in front of his temple by Ahab, or by Jezebel in his name.⁴⁵ In this direction, however, his reformation must have been exceedingly partial, for until the sweeping measures taken by Jehu the temple and images of Baal still continued to exist in Samaria under his very eyes, and must have been connived at if not approved.

The first great measure which occupied the thoughts of Jehoram was to subdue the kingdom of Moab, which had been restored to independence by the bravery of the great pastoral-king Mesha;⁴⁶ or at any rate to avenge the series of humiliating defeats which Mesha had inflicted on his brother Ahaziah. A

⁴⁴ But neither the man of God from Judah nor Amos directly denounce the calf-worship, so much as its concomitant sins and irregularities.

⁴⁵ Perhaps the true reading is "pillars" (LXX., Vulg., Arab.).

⁴⁶ He is called "a sheep-master," *noked*; LXX., νοκῆδ. Elsewhere the word occurs only in Amos i. 1. The Alex. LXX. has ἤν φέρων φόρον.

war of forty years' duration⁴⁷ had ended in the complete success of Moab. The loss of a tribute of the fleeces of one hundred thousand lambs and one hundred thousand rams was too serious to be lightly faced.⁴⁸ Jehoram laid his plans well. First he ordered a muster of all the men of war throughout his kingdom, and then appealed for the co-operation of Jehoshaphat and his vassal-king of Edom. Both kings consented to join him. Jehoshaphat had already been the victim of a powerful and wanton aggression on the part of King Mesha,⁴⁹ from which he had been delivered by the panic of his foes in the Valley of Salt. Though the king of Edom had, on that occasion, been an ally of Mesha, the forces of Edom had fallen the first victims of that internecine panic. Both Judah and Edom, therefore, had grave wrongs to avenge, and eagerly seized the opportunity to humble the growing pride of the people of Chemosh. The attack was wisely arranged. It was determined to advance against Moab from the south, through the territory of Edom, by a rough and mountainous track, and, as far as possible, to take the nation by surprise. The combined host took a seven days' circuit round the south of the Dead Sea, hoping to find an abundant supply of water in the stream which flows

⁴⁷ According to the Moabite Stone.

⁴⁸ It is not clear whether the lambs and rams were sent with the fleeces. The A.V. says "lambs and rams with their wool," in accordance with Josephus – μυριάδας εἴκοσι προβάτων σὺν τοῖς πόκοις. The LXX. has the vague ἐπὶ πόκων, and implies that this was a special fine after a defeat in the revolt (ἐν τῇ ἐπαναστάσει): but comp. Isa. xvi. 1.

⁴⁹ 2 Chron. xx. 1-30.

through the Wady-el-Ahsa, which separates Edom from Moab.⁵⁰ But owing to recent droughts the Wady was waterless, and the armies, with their horses, suffered all the agonies of thirst. Jehoram gave way to despair, bewailing that Jehovah should have brought together these three kings to deliver them a helpless prey into the hands of Moab. But the pious Jehoshaphat at once thinks of "inquiring of the Lord" by some true prophet, and one of Jehoram's courtiers informs him that no less a person than Elisha, the son of Shaphat, who had been the attendant of Elijah, is with the host.⁵¹ We are surprised to find that his presence in the camp had excited so little attention as to be unknown to the king;⁵² but Jehoshaphat, on hearing his name, instantly acknowledged his prophetic inspiration. So urgent was the need, and so deep the sense of Elisha's greatness, that the three kings in person went on an embassy "to the servant of him who ran before

⁵⁰ Robinson (*Bibl. Res.*, ii. 157) identifies it with the brook *Zered*. Deut. ii. 13; Num. xxi. 12. The name means "valley of water-pits." W. R. Smith quotes Doughty, *Travels*, i. 26.

⁵¹ Comp. 1 Kings xxii. 7. The phrase "who poured water on the hands of Elijah" is a touch of Oriental custom which the traveller in remote parts of Palestine may still often see. Once, when driven by a storm into the house of the Sheykh of a tribe which had a rather bad reputation for brigandage, I was most hospitably entertained; and the old white-haired Sheykh, his son, and ourselves were waited on by the grandson, a magnificent youth, who immediately after the meal brought out an old richly chased ewer and basin, and poured water over our hands, soiled by eating out of the common dish, of course without spoons or forks.

⁵² This seems to have struck Josephus (*Antt.*, IX. iii. 1), who says that "he *chanced* to be in a tent (ἔτυχε κατεσκηνωκῶς) outside the host."

the chariot of Ahab." Their humble appeal to him produced so little elation in his mind that, addressing Jehoram, who was the most powerful, he exclaimed, with rough indignation: "What have I to do with thee? Get thee to the prophets of thy father," – nominal prophets of Jehovah, who will say to thee smooth things and prophesy deceits, as four hundred of them did to Ahab – "and to the Baal-prophets of thy mother." Instead of resenting this scant respect Jehoram, in utmost distress, deprecated the prophet's anger, and appealed to his pity for the peril of the three armies. But Elisha is not mollified. He tells Jehoram that but for the presence of Jehoshaphat he would not so much as look at him: so completely was the destiny of the people mixed up with the character of their kings! Out of respect for Jehoshaphat Elisha will do what he can. But all his soul is in a tumult of emotion. For the moment he can do nothing. He needs to be calmed from his agitation by the spell of music, and bids them send a minstrel to him. The harper came, and as Elisha listened his soul was composed, and "the hand of the Lord came upon him" to illuminate and inspire his thoughts.⁵³ The result was that he bade them dig trenches in the dry wady, and promised that, though they should see neither wind nor rain, the valley should be filled with water to quench the thirst of the fainting armies, their horses and their cattle. After this God would also deliver

⁵³ Comp. 1 Sam. x. 5; 1 Chron. xxv. 1; Ezek. i. 3, xxxiii. 22. *Menaggēn* is one who plays on a stringed instrument, *n'gînāh*. The Pythagoreans used music in the same way (Cic., *Tusc. Disp.*, iv. 2).

the Moabites into their hand; and they were bidden to smite the cities, fell the trees, stop the wells, and mar the smiling pastures, which constituted the wealth of Moab, with stones. That the hosts of Judah and Israel and jealous Edom should be prone to afflict this awfully devastating vengeance on a power by which they had been so severely defeated on past occasions, and on which they had so many wrongs and blood-feuds to avenge, was natural; but it is surprising to find a prophet of the Lord giving the commission to ruin the gifts of God and spoil the innocent labours of man, and thus to inflict misery on generations yet unborn. The behest is directly contrary to rules of international war which have prevailed even between non-Christian nations, among whom the stopping or poisoning of wells and the cutting down of fruit trees has been expressly forbidden. It is also against the rules of war laid down in Deuteronomy.⁵⁴ Such, however, was the command attributed to Elisha; and, as we shall see, it was fulfilled, and seems to have led to disastrous consequences.

Cheered by the promise of Divine aid which the prophet had given them, the host retired to rest. The next morning at day-dawn, when the *minchah* of fine flour, oil, and frankincense was offered,⁵⁵ water, which, according to the tradition of Josephus, had fallen at three days' distance on the hills of Edom, came flowing from the south and filled the wady with its refreshing streams.

⁵⁴ Deut. xx. 19, 20.

⁵⁵ Lev. ii. 1. Comp. 1 Kings xviii. 36.

The incident itself is highly instructive. It throws light both upon the general accuracy of the ancient narrative, and on the fact that events to which a directly supernatural colouring is given are, in many instances, not so much supernatural as providential. The deliverance of Israel was due, not to a portent wrought by Elisha, but to the pure wisdom which he derived from the inspiration of God. When the counsels of princes were of none effect, and for lack of the spirit of counsel the people were perishing, his mind alone, illuminated by a wisdom from on high, saw what was the right step to take. He bade the soldiers dig trenches in the dry torrent bed, – which was the very step most likely to ensure their deliverance from the torment of thirst, and which would be done under similar circumstances to this day. They saw neither wind nor rain; but there had been a storm among the farther hills, and the swollen watercourses discharged their overflow into the trenches of the wady which were ready prepared for them, and offered the path of least resistance.

Moab, meanwhile, had heard of the advance of the three kings through the territories of Edom. The whole military population had mustered in arms, and stood on the frontier, on the other side of the dry wady, to oppose the invasion. For they knew this would be a struggle of life and death, and that if defeated they would have no mercy to expect. When the sun rose, and its first rays burned on the wady, which had been dry on the previous evening, the water which, unknown to the Moabites, had filled the trenches in the night, looked red as blood. Doubtless

it may have been stained, as Ewald says, by the red soil which gave its name to the red land of the "red king, Edom"; but as it gleamed under the dawn the Moabites thought that those seemingly crimson pools had been filled with the blood of their enemies, who had fallen by each other's swords. Their own recent experience when Jehoshaphat met them in the Valley of Salt showed them how easy it was for temporary allies to be seized by panic, and to fight among themselves.⁵⁶

The army of their invaders was composed of heterogeneous and mutually conflicting elements. Between Israel and Judah there had been nearly a century of war,⁵⁷ and only a brief reunion; and Edom, recently the willing and natural ally of Moab, was not likely to fight very zealously for Judah, which had reduced her to vassalage. So the Moabites said to one another, as they pointed to the unexpected apparition of those red pools: "This is blood. The kings are surely destroyed, and they have smitten each man his fellow. Moab to the spoil!" They rushed down tumultuously on the camp of Israel, and found the soldiers of Jehoram ready to receive them. Taken by surprise, for they had expected no resistance, they were hurled back in utter confusion and with immense slaughter. The three kings pushed their advantage to the utmost. They went forward into the land, driving and smiting the Moabites before them, and ruthlessly carrying out the command attributed to Elisha. They beat down the cities – most of which

⁵⁶ This dreadful result crippled the revolt of Vindex against Nero.

⁵⁷ Jeroboam I., b. c. 937; Joram, 854.

in a land of flocks and herds were little more than pastoral villages; they rendered the green fields useless with stones; they filled up all the wells with earth; they felled every fruit-bearing tree of any value. At last only one stronghold, Kir-haraseth, the chief fenced town of Moab, held out against them.⁵⁸ Even this fortress was sore bested. The slingers, for which Israel, and specially the tribe of Benjamin, was so famous, advanced to drive its defenders from the battlements. King Mesha fought with undaunted heroism. He decided to take the seven hundred warriors who were left to him, and cut his way through the besieging host to the king of Edom. He thought that even now he might persuade the Edomites to abandon this new and unnatural alliance, and turn the battle against their common enemies. But the numbers against him were too strong, and he found the plan impossible. Then he formed a dreadful resolution, dictated to him by the extremity of his despair. His inscription at Karcha shows that he was a profound and even fanatical believer in Chemosh, his god. Chemosh could still deliver him. If Chemosh was, as Mesha says in his inscription, "angry with his land" – if, even for a time, he allowed his faithful people and his devoted king to be afflicted – it could not be for any lack of power on his part, but only because they had in some way offended him,

⁵⁸ Isa. xv. 1, Kir of Moab; Jer. xlvi. 31, Kir-heres. It is built on a steep calcareous rock, surrounded by a deep, narrow glen, which thence descends westward to the Dead Sea, under the name of the Wady Kerak. We know that the armies of Nineveh habitually practised these brutal modes of devastation in the districts which they conquered. See Layard, *passim*; Rawlinson, *Ancient Monarchies* ii. 84.

so that he was wroth, or because he had gone on a journey, or was asleep, or deaf.⁵⁹ How could he be appeased? Only by the offering of the most precious of all the king's possessions; only by the self-devotion of the crown-prince, on whom were centred all the nation's hopes. Mesha would force Chemosh to help him for very shame. He would offer to Chemosh a human sacrifice, the sacrifice of his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead. Doubtless the young prince gave himself up as a willing offering, for that was essential to the holocaust being valid and acceptable.⁶⁰

So upon the wall of Kir-haraseth, in the sight of all the Moabites, and of the three invading armies, the brave and desperate hero of a hundred fights, who had inflicted so many reverses upon these enemies, and received so many at their hands, but who, having liberated his country, now saw all the efforts of his life ruined at one blow – took his eldest son, kindled the sacrificial fire, and then and there solemnly offered that horrible burnt-offering.⁶¹

And it proved effectual, though far otherwise than Mesha had expected. He was delivered; and, doubtless, if ever he reared, at Kirharaseth or elsewhere, another memorial stone, he would

⁵⁹ 1 Kings xviii. 27. Comp. Psalm xxxv. 23, xliv. 23, lxxxiii. 1, etc.

⁶⁰ Comp. Micah vi. 7. This is an entirely different incident from that alluded to in Amos ii. 1.

⁶¹ Eusebius (*Præp. Evang.*, iv. 16) quotes from Philo's Phœnician history a reference to human sacrifices (τοῖς τιμωροῖς δαίμοσιν) at moments of desperation.

have attributed his deliverance to his national god. But here, in the annals of Elisha, the result is hurried over, and a veil is, so to speak, dropped upon the dreadful scene with the one ambiguous expression, "And there was great wrath against Israel: and they departed from him, and returned to their own land."

The phrase awakens but does not satisfy our curiosity. We are not certain of the translation, or of the meaning. It may be, as in the margin of the Revised Version, "there came great wrath upon Israel."⁶² But wrath from whom? and on what account? The word "wrath" all but invariably denotes divine wrath; but we cannot imagine (as some critics do) that any Israelite of the schools of the prophets would sanction the notion that the chosen people were allowed to suffer from the kindled wrath of Chemosh. Can we then suppose that the desperate act of King Mesha was a proof that Israel, who was no doubt the most interested and the most remorseless of the invaders, had pressed the Moabites too hard, and carried his vengeance much too far? That is by no means impossible. The prophet Amos denounces upon Moab in after years the doom that fire should devour the palaces of Kirioth, and that Moab should perish with shoutings, and all his royal line be cut off, for the far less offence of having burned into lime the bones of the king of Edom.⁶³ The command of Elisha did not exempt the Israelites from their

⁶² The rendering is doubtful. LXX., καὶ ἐγένετο μετάμελος μέγας ἐπὶ Ἰσραήλ; Vulg., indignatio in Israel; Luther, *Da ward Israel sehr zornig.*

⁶³ Amos ii. 1-3.

share of moral responsibility. Jehu was commissioned to be an executioner of vengeance upon the house of Ahab. Yet Jehu is expressly condemned by the prophet Hosea for the tiger-like ferocity and horrible thoroughness with which he had carried out his destined work.⁶⁴ Only one other explanation is possible. If "wrath" here has the unusual sense of human indignation, the clause can only imply that the armies of Judah and Edom were roused to anger by the unpitying spirit which Israel had displayed. The horrible tragedy enacted upon the wall of Kirharaseth awoke their consciences to the sense of human compassion. These, after all, were fellow-men – fellow-men of kindred blood to their own – whom they had driven to straits so frightful as to cause a king to burn his own heir alive as a mute appeal to his god in the hour of overwhelming ruin. They had done enough:

"Sunt lacrimæ rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt."

They hastily broke up the league, dissolved the alliance, returned horror-stricken to their own land. They left Moab indeed in possession of his last fortress, but they had reduced his territory to a wilderness before they retired and called it peace.

⁶⁴ Hos. i. 4: "I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu."

CHAPTER V

ELISHA'S MIRACLES

2 Kings iv. 1-44

We are now in the full tide of Elisha's miracles, and as regards many of them we can do little more than illustrate the text as it stands. The record of them clearly comes from some account prevalent in the schools of the prophets, which is however only fragmentary, and has been unchronologically pieced into the annals of the kings of Israel.

The story of Elisha abounds far more in the supernatural than that of Elijah, and is believed by most critics to be of earlier date. Yet the scenes and portents of his life are almost wholly lacking in the element of grandeur which belong to those of the elder seer. His personality, if on the whole softer and more beneficent, inspires less of awe, and the whole tone of the biography which recorded these isolated incidents is lacking in the poetic and impassioned elevation which marks the episodes of Elijah's history. We see in the records of Elisha, as in the biographies – so rich in prodigies – of fourth-century hermits and mediæval saints, how little impressive in itself is the exercise of abnormal powers; how it derives its sole grandeur from the

accompaniment of great moral lessons and spiritual revelations. John the Baptist "did no miracle," yet our Lord placed him not only far above Elisha, but even above Moses and Samuel and Elijah, when He said of him, "Verily I say unto you, of them that have been born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."

It is impossible not to be struck with the singular parallelism between the powers exercised by Elisha and those which are attributed to his predecessor. "How true an heir is Elisha of his master," says Bishop Hall, "not in his graces only, but in his actions! Both of them divided the waters of Jordan, the one as his last act, the other as his first. Elijah's curse was the death of the captains and their troops; Elisha's curse was the death of the children. Elijah rebuked Ahab to his face; Elisha, Jehoram. Elijah supplied the drought of Israel by rain from heaven; Elisha supplied the drought of the three kings by waters gushing out of the earth; Elijah increased the oil of the Sareptan, Elisha increased the oil of the prophet's widow; Elijah raised from death the Sareptan's son, Elisha the Shunammite's; both of them had one mantle, one spirit; both of them climbed up one Carmel, one heaven." The resemblance, however, is not at all in character, but only in external and miraculous circumstances. In all other respects Elisha furnishes a contrast to Elijah which startles us quite as much as any superficial resemblances. Elijah was a free, wild Bedawy prophet, hating and shunning as his ordinary residence the abodes of men, making his home in the rocky wady

or in the mountain glades, appearing and disappearing suddenly as the wind. He asserted his power most often in ministries of retribution. Clad in the sheepskin of a Gadite shepherd or mountaineer, he was not one of those who wear soft clothing or are found in kings' houses. He usually met monarchs as their enemy and their reprover, but for the most part avoided them. He never intervened for years together even in national events of the utmost importance, whether military or religious, unless he received the direct call of God, or there appeared to him to be a "*dignus Vindice nodus*." Elisha, on the other hand, makes his home in cities, and chiefly in Samaria. He is familiar with kings and moves about with armies, and has no long retirements into unknown solitudes; and though he could speak roughly to Jehoram, he is often on the friendliest terms with him and with other sovereigns.

The stories of Elisha give us many interesting glimpses into the social life of Israel in his day. As to their literal historic accuracy, those must make positive affirmation who feel that they can do so in accordance alike with adequate authority and with the sacredness of truth. Many will be unable to escape the opinion that they bear some resemblance to other Jewish haggadoth, written for edification, with every innocent intention, in the schools of the Prophets, but no more intended for perfectly literal acceptance in all their details than the Life of St. Paul the Hermit, by St. Jerome; or that of St. Antony, attributed erroneously to St. Athanasius; or that of St. Francis in the

Fioretti; or the lives of humble saints of the people called *Kisar-el-anbiah*, which are so popular among poor Mohammedans. Into that question there is no need to enter further. *Abundet quisque in sensu suo*.

I. On one occasion a widow of one of the Sons of the Prophets – for these communities, though cœnobitic, were not celibate – came to him in deep distress. Her husband – the Jews, with their usual guesswork, most improbably identify him with Obadiah, the chamberlain of Ahab⁶⁵ – had died insolvent. As she had nothing to pay, her creditor under the grim provision of the law was about to exercise his right of selling her two sons into slavery to recoup himself for the debt.⁶⁶ Would Elisha help her?

Prophets were never men of wealth, so that he could not pay her debt. He asked her what she possessed to satisfy the demand. "Nothing," she said, "but a pot of the common oil, used for anointing the body after a bath."

Elisha bade her go and borrow from her neighbours all the empty vessels she could, then to return home, shut the door, and pour the oil into the vessels.

She did so. They were all filled, and she asked her son to bring yet another. But there was not another to be had, so she went out and told the Man of God. He bade her sell the miraculously multiplied oil to pay the debt, and live with her sons on the

⁶⁵ Jos., *Antt.*, IX. iv. 2. This perhaps is only suggested by the reminiscences of 1 Kings xviii. 2, 3, 12.

⁶⁶ Lev. xxv. 39-41; Matt. xviii. 25.

proceeds of what was over.

II. We next find Elisha at Shunem, famous as the abode of the fair maiden – probably Abishag, the nurse of David's decrepitude – who is the heroine of the Song of Songs. It is a village, now called Solam, on the slopes of Little Hermon (Jebel-el-Duhy), three miles north of Jezreel. At this place there lived a lady of wealth and influence, whose husband owned the surrounding land. There were but few khans in Palestine, and even where they now exist the traveller has in most cases to supply his own food. Elisha, in his journeys to and fro among the schools of the Prophets, had often enjoyed the welcome hospitality eagerly pressed upon him by the lady of Shunem. Struck with his sacred character, she persuaded her husband to take a step unusual even to the boundless hospitality of the East. She begged him to do honour to this holy Man of God by building for him a little chamber (*alîyah*) on the flat roof of the house, to which he might have easy and private access by the outside staircase.⁶⁷ The chamber was built, and furnished, like any other simple Eastern room, with a bed, a divan to sit on, a table, and a lamp; and there the weary prophet on his journeys often found a peaceful, simple, and delightful resting-place.

Grateful for the reverence with which she treated him, and the kind care with which she had supplied his needs, Elisha was anxious to recompense her in whatever way might be possible.

⁶⁷ 2 Kings iv. 10. Not "a little chamber on the wall" (A.V.), but "an *alîyah* with walls" (margin, R.V.).

The thought of money payment was of course out of the question: merely to hint at it would have been a breach of manners. But perhaps he might be of use to her in some other way. At this time, and for years afterwards during his long ministry of perhaps fifty-six years, he was attended by a servant named Gehazi, who stood to him in the same sort of relation which he had held to Elijah. He told Gehazi to summon the Shunammite lady. In the deep humility of Eastern womanhood she came and stood in his presence. Even then he did not address her. So downtrodden was the position of women in the East that any dignified person, much more a great prophet, could not converse with a woman without compromising his dignity. The more scrupulous Pharisees in the days of Christ always carefully gathered up their garments in the streets, lest they should so much as touch a woman with their skirts in passing by, as the modern Chakams in Jerusalem do to this day.⁶⁸ The disciples themselves, sophisticated by familiarity with such teachers, were astonished that Jesus at the well of Shechem should talk with a woman.⁶⁹ So, though the lady stood there, Elisha, instead of speaking to her directly, told Gehazi to thank her for all the devout respect and care, all 'the modesty of fearful duty,'⁷⁰ which she had displayed

⁶⁸ Frankl., *Jews in the East*.

⁶⁹ John iv. 27: "Then came His disciples, and marvelled that He was *talking* (μετὰ γυναικὸς) *with a woman*."

⁷⁰ 2 Kings iv. 13: "Behold, thou hast been careful for us with all this care" (LXX., πᾶσαν τὴν ἔκστασιν ταύτην).

towards them, and to ask her if he should say a good word for her to the King or the Captain of the Host. This is just the sort of favour which an Eastern would be likely to value most.⁷¹ The Shunammite, however, was well provided for; she had nothing to complain of, and nothing to request. She thanked Elisha for his kindly proposal, but declined it, and went away.

"Is there, then, nothing which we can do for her?" asked Elisha of Gehazi.⁷²

There was. Gehazi had learnt that the sorrow of her life – a sorrow and a source of reproach to any Eastern household, but most of all to that of a wealthy householder – was her childlessness.

"Call her," he said.

She came back, and stood reverently in the doorway. "When the time comes round," he said to her, "you shall embrace a son."

The promise raised in her heart a thrill of joy. It was too precious to be believed. "Nay," she said "my lord, thou Man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid."

But the promise was fulfilled, and the lady of Shunem became the happy mother of a son.

III. The charming episode then passes over some years. The child had grown into a little boy, old enough now to go out alone

⁷¹ The Sheykh with whom I stayed at Bint es Jebeil could think of no return which I could offer for his hospitality so acceptable as if I would say a good word for him to the authorities at Beyroul.

⁷² Gehazi is usually called the *na'ar* or "lad" of Elisha – a term implying lower service than Elisha's "ministry" to Elijah.

to see his father in the harvest fields and to run about among the reapers. But as he played about in the heat he had a sunstroke, and cried to his father, "O my head, my head!" Not knowing how serious the matter was, his father simply ordered one of his lads to carry the child home to his mother. The fond mother nursed him tenderly upon her knees, but at noon he died.

Then the lady of Shunem showed all the faith and strength and wisdom of her character. "The good Shunammite," says Bishop Hall, "had lost her son; her faith she lost not." Overwhelming as was this calamity – the loss of an only child – she suppressed all her emotions, and, instead of bursting into the wild helpless wail of Eastern mourners, or rushing to her husband with the agonising news, she took the little boy's body in her arms, carried it up to the chamber which had been built for Elisha, and laid it upon his bed. Then, shutting the door, she called to her husband to send to her one of his reapers and one of the asses, for she was going quickly to the Man of God and would return in the cool of the evening. "Why should you go to-day particularly?" he asked. "It is neither new moon, nor sabbath." "It is all right," she said;⁷³ and with perfect confidence in the rectitude of all her purposes, he sent her the she-ass, and a servant to drive it and to run beside it for her protection on the journey of sixteen miles.

"Drive on the ass," she said. "Slacken me not the riding unless I tell you." So with all possible speed she made her way – a journey of several hours – from Shunem to Mount Carmel.

⁷³ 2 Kings iv. 23. Hebrew "Peace"; A.V., "It shall be well."

Elisha, from his retreat on the hill, marked her coming from a distance, and it rendered him anxious. "Here comes the Shunammite," he said to Gehazi. "Run to meet her, and ask Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child?"

"All well," she answered, for her message was not to Gehazi, and she could not trust her voice to speak; but pressing on uphillwards, she flung herself before Elisha and grasped his feet. Displeased at the familiarity which dared thus to clasp the feet of his master, Gehazi ran up to thrust her away by force, but Elisha interfered. "Let her alone," he cried; "she is in deep affliction, and Jehovah has not revealed to me the cause." Then her long pent-up emotion burst forth. "Did I desire a son of my lord?" she cried. "Did I not say do not deceive me?"

It was enough – though she seemed unable to bring out the dreadful words that her boy was dead. Catching her meaning, Elisha said to Gehazi, "Gird up thy loins, take my staff, and without so much as stopping to salute any one, or to return a salutation,⁷⁴ lay my staff on the dead child's face." But the broken-hearted mother refused to leave Elisha. She imagined that the servant, the staff, might be severed from Elisha; but she knew that wherever the prophet was, there was power. So Elisha arose and followed her, and on the way Gehazi met them with the news that the child lay still and dead, with the fruitless staff upon his face.

⁷⁴ Salutations occupy some time in the formally courteous East. Comp. Luke x. 4.

Then Elisha in deep anguish went up to the chamber and shut the door, and saw the boy's body lying pale upon his bed. After earnest prayer he outstretched himself over the little corpse, as Elijah had done at Zarephath. Soon it began to grow warm with returning life, and Elisha, after pacing up and down the room, once more stretched himself over him. Then the child opened his eyes and sneezed seven times, and Elisha called to Gehazi to summon the mother.

"Take up thy son," he said. She prostrated herself at his feet in speechless gratitude, and took up her recovered child, and went.

IV. We next find Elisha at Gilgal, in the time of the famine of which we read his prediction in a later chapter.⁷⁵ The sons of the prophets were seated round him, listening to his instructions; the hour came for their simple meal, and he ordered the great pot to be put on the fire for the vegetable soup, on which, with bread, they chiefly lived. One of them went out for herbs, and carelessly brought his outer garment (the *abeyah*)⁷⁶ full of wild poisonous coloquints,⁷⁷ which, by ignorance or inadvertence, were shred into the pottage. But when it was cooked and poured out they perceived the poisonous taste, and cried out, "O Man of God, death in the pot!"

⁷⁵ 2 Kings viii. 1.

⁷⁶ Not "lap," as in A. V. (Heb., *beged*); LXX. συνέλιξε πλήρες τὸ ἱμάτιον αὐτοῦ; Vulg., *implevit vestem suam* (both correctly).

⁷⁷ Heb., *paquoth*; LXX., τολύπην ἀγρίαν; Vulg; *colocynthidas agri*. Hence the name *cucumis prophetarum*.

"Bring meal," he said, for he seems always to have been a man of the fewest words.

They cast in some meal, and were all able to eat of the now harmless pottage. It has been noticed that in this, as in other incidents of the story, there is no invocation of the name of Jehovah.

V. Not far from Gilgal was the little village of Baalshalisha,⁷⁸ at which lived a farmer who wished to bring an offering of firstfruits and *karmel* (bruised grain) in his wallet to Elisha as a Man of God.⁷⁹ It was a poor gift enough – only twenty of the coarse barley loaves which were eaten by the common people, and a sack⁸⁰ full of fresh ears of corn.⁸¹ Elisha told his servitor⁸² – perhaps Gehazi – to set them before the people present. "What?" he asked, "this trifle of food before a hundred men!" But Elisha told him in the Lord's name that it should more than suffice; and so it did.

⁷⁸ Lord of the Chain and "Three lands." Three wadies meet at this spot, a little west of Bethel.

⁷⁹ 2 Kings iv. 42. *Karmel*, Lev. ii. 14. Perhaps a sort of frumenty.

⁸⁰ The word for "wallet" (*tsiqlon*; Vulg., *pera*) occurs here only. Peshito, "garment." The Vatican LXX. omits it. The Greek version has ἐν κωρύκῳ αὐτοῦ.

⁸¹ See Lev. ii. 14, xxiii. 14.

⁸² 2 Kings iv. 43. The word for "his servitor" (*m'chartho*) is used also of Joshua. It does not mean a mere ordinary attendant. LXX., λειτουργός; Vulg., *minister*.

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF NAAMAN

2 Kings v. 1-27

Matt. viii. 3: Θέλω, καθαρίσθητι

After these shorter anecdotes we have the longer episode of Naaman.⁸³

A part of the misery inflicted by the Syrians on Israel was caused by the forays in which their light-armed bands, very much like the borderers on the marches of Wales or Scotland, descended upon the country and carried off plunder and captives before they could be pursued.

In one of these raids they had seized a little Israelitish girl and sold her to be a slave. She had been purchased for the household of Naaman, the captain of the Syrian host, who had helped his king and nation to win important victories either against Israel or against Assyria. Ancient Jewish tradition identified him with the man who had "drawn his bow at a venture" and slain King Ahab. But all Naaman's valour and rank and fame, and the honour felt

⁸³ It is curiously omitted by Josephus, though he mentions him (Ἰαμανός) as the slayer of Ahab (*Antt.*, VIII. xv. 5). The name is an old Hebrew name (*Num.* xxvi. 40).

for him by his king, were valueless to him, for he was suffering from the horrible affliction of leprosy. Lepers do not seem to have been segregated in other countries so strictly as they were in Israel, or at any rate Naaman's leprosy was not of so severe a form as to incapacitate him from his public functions.

But it was evident that he was a man who had won the affection of all who knew him; and the little slave girl who waited on his wife breathed to her a passionate wish that Naaman could visit the Man of God in Samaria, for he would recover him from his leprosy. The saying was repeated, and one of Naaman's friends mentioned it to the king of Syria. Benhadad was so much struck by it that he instantly determined to send a letter, with a truly royal gift to the king of Israel, who could, he supposed, as a matter of course, command the services of the prophet. The letter came to Jehoram with a stupendous present of ingots of silver to the value of ten talents, and six thousand pieces of gold, and ten changes of raiment.⁸⁴ After the ordinary salutations, and a mention of the gifts, the letter continued "And now, when this letter is come to thee, behold I have sent Naaman my servant, that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy."

Jehoram lived in perpetual terror of his powerful and encroaching neighbour. Nothing was said in the letter about the Man of God; and the king rent his clothes, exclaiming that he was not God to kill and to make alive, and that this must be a

⁸⁴ The word *l'boosh* means a gala dress. Comp. v. 5; Gen. xlv. 22. χιτῶνες ἐπημοιβῶν (Hom., *Od.*, xiv. 514). Comp. viii. 249.

base pretext for a quarrel. It never so much as occurred to him, as it certainly would have done to Jehoshaphat, that the prophet, who was so widely known and honoured, and whose mission had been so clearly attested in the invasion of Moab, might at least help him to face this problem. Otherwise the difficulty might indeed seem insuperable, for leprosy was universally regarded as an incurable disease.

But Elisha was not afraid: he boldly told Jehoram to send the Syrian captain to him. Naaman, with his horses and his chariots, in all the splendour of a royal ambassador, drove up to the humble house of the prophet. Being so great a man, he expected a deferential reception, and looked for the performance of his cure in some striking and dramatic manner. "The prophet," so he said to himself, "will come out, and solemnly invoke the name of his God Jehovah, and wave his hand over the leprous limbs, and so work the miracle."⁸⁵

But the servant of the King of kings was not exultantly impressed, as false prophets so often are, by earthly greatness. Elisha did not even pay him the compliment of coming out of the house to meet him. He wished to efface himself completely, and to fix the leper's thoughts on the one truth that if healing was granted to him, it was due to the gift of God, not to the thaumaturgy or arts of man. He simply sent out his servant to the Syrian commander-in-chief with the brief message, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and be thou clean."

⁸⁵ Elisha would not be likely to *touch* the place.

Naaman, accustomed to the extreme deference of many dependants, was not only offended, but enraged, by what he regarded as the scant courtesy and procrastinated boon of the prophet. Why was he not received as a man of the highest distinction? What necessity could there be for sending him all the way to the Jordan? And why was he bidden to wash in that wretched, useless, tortuous stream, rather than in the pure and flowing waters of his own native Abanah and Pharpar?⁸⁶ How was he to tell that this "Man of God" did not design to mock him by sending him on a fool's errand, so that he would come back as a laughing-stock both to the Israelites and to his own people? Perhaps he had not felt any great faith in the prophet, to begin with; but whatever he once felt had now vanished. He turned and went away in a rage.

But in this crisis the affection of his friends and servants stood him in good stead. Addressing him, in their love and pity, by the unusual term of honour "my father," they urged upon him that, as he certainly would not have refused some *great* test, there was no reason why he should refuse this simple and humble one.

He was won over by their reasonings, and descending the hot steep valley of the Jordan, bathed himself in the river seven times. God healed him, and, as Elisha had promised, "his flesh," corroded by leprosy, "came again like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

This healing of Naaman is alluded to by our Lord to illustrate

⁸⁶ Now the *Burâda* ("cold") and the Nahr-el-Awâj.

the truth that the love of God extended farther than the limits of the chosen race; that His Fatherhood is co-extensive with the whole family of man.

It is difficult to conceive the transport of a man cured of this most loathsome and humiliating of all earthly afflictions. Naaman, who seems to have possessed "a mind naturally Christian," was filled with gratitude. Unlike the thankless Jewish lepers whom Christ cured as He left Engannim, this alien returned to give glory to God. Once more the whole imposing cavalcade rode through the streets of Samaria, and stopped at Elisha's door. This time Naaman was admitted into his presence. He saw, and no doubt Elisha had strongly impressed on him the truth, that his healing was the work not of man but of God; and as he had found no help in the deities of Syria, he confessed that the God of Israel was the only true God among those of the nations. In token of his thankfulness he presses Elisha, as God's instrument in the unspeakable mercy which has been granted to him, to accept "a blessing" (*i. e.*, a present) from him – "from thy servant," as he humbly styled himself.

Elisha was no greedy Balaam. It was essential that Naaman and the Syrians should not look on him as on some vulgar sorcerer who wrought wonders for "the rewards of divination." His wants were so simple that he stood above temptation. His desires and treasures were not on earth. To put an end to all importunity, he appealed to Jehovah with his usual solemn formula – "As the Lord liveth before whom I stand, I will receive

no present."⁸⁷

Still more deeply impressed by the prophet's incorruptible superiority to so much as a suspicion of low motives, Naaman asked that he might receive two mules' burden of earth wherewith to build an altar to the God of Israel of His own sacred soil.⁸⁸ The very soil ruled by such a God must, he thought, be holier than other soil; and he wished to take it back to Syria, just as the people of Pisa rejoiced to fill their Campo Santo with mould from the Holy Land, and just as mothers like to baptize their children in water brought home from the Jordan. Henceforth, said Naaman, I will offer burnt-offering and sacrifice to no God but unto Jehovah. Yet there was one difficulty in the way. When the King of Syria went to worship in the temple of his god Rimmon it was the duty of Naaman to accompany him.⁸⁹ The king leaned on his hand, and when he bowed before the idol it was Naaman's duty to bow also. He begged that for this concession God would pardon him.

Elisha's answer was perhaps different from what Elijah might

⁸⁷ Compare the answer of Abraham to the King of Sodom (Gen. xiv. 23).

⁸⁸ The feeling which influenced Naaman is the same which led the Jews to build Nahardea in Persia of stones from Jerusalem. Altars were to be of earth (Exod. xx. 24), but no altar is mentioned in 2 Kings v. 17, and the LXX. does not even specify *earth* (γόμεος ζεῦγος ἡμιόνων).

⁸⁹ This is the only place in Scripture where Rimmon is mentioned, though we have the name Tab-Rimmon ("Rimmon is good"), 1 Kings xv. 18, and Hadad-Rimmon (Zech. xii. 11). He was the god of the thunder. The word means "pomegranate," and some have fancied that this was one of his symbols. But the resemblance may be accidental, and the name was properly *Ramman*.

have given. He practically allowed Naaman to give this sign of outward compliance with idolatry, by saying to him, "Go in peace." It is from this circumstance that the phrase "to bow in the house of Rimmon" has become proverbial to indicate a dangerous and dishonest compromise. But Elisha's permission must not be misunderstood. He did but hand over this semi-heathen convert to the grace of God. It must be remembered that he lived in days long preceding the conviction that proselytism is a part of true religion; in days when the thought of missions to heathen lands was utterly unknown. The position of Naaman was wholly different from that of any Israelite. He was only the convert, or the half-convert of a day, and though he acknowledged the supremacy of Jehovah as alone worthy of his worship, he probably shared in the belief – common even in Israel – that there were other gods, local gods, gods of the nations, to whom Jehovah might have divided the limits of their power.⁹⁰ To demand of one who, like Naaman, had been an idolater all his days, the sudden abandonment of every custom and tradition of his life, would have been to demand from him an unreasonable, and, in his circumstances, useless and all but impossible self-sacrifice. The best way was to let him feel and see for himself the futility of Rimmon-worship. If he were not frightened back from his sudden faith in Jehovah, the scruple of conscience which he already felt in making his request might naturally grow within him and lead him to all that was best and highest. The temporary

⁹⁰ See Deut. xxxii. 8, where the LXX. has κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων.

condonation of an imperfection might be a wise step towards the ultimate realisation of a truth. We cannot at all blame Elisha, if, with such knowledge as he then possessed, he took a mercifully tolerant view of the exigencies of Naaman's position. The bowing in the house of Rimmon under such conditions probably seemed to him no more than an act of outward respect to the king and to the national religion in a case where no evil results could follow from Naaman's example.⁹¹

But the general principle that *we* must *not* bow in the house of Rimmon remains unchanged. The light and knowledge vouchsafed to us far transcend those which existed in times when men had not seen the days of the Son of Man. The only rule which sincere Christians can follow is to have no truce with Canaan, no halting between two opinions, no tampering, no compliance, no connivance, no complicity with evil, – even no tolerance of evil as far as their own conduct is concerned. No good man, in the light of the Gospel dispensation, could

⁹¹ The moral difficulty must have been early felt, for the Alexandrian LXX. reads καὶ προσκυνήσω ἅμα αὐτῷ ἐγὼ Κυρίῳ τῷ Θεῷ μου. But he would still be bowing in the House of Rimmon, though he might in his heart worship God. "Elisha, like Elijah" (says Dean Stanley), "made no effort to set right what had gone so wrong. Their mission was to make the best of what they found; not to bring back a rule of religion which had passed away, but to dwell on the Moral Law which could be fulfilled everywhere, not on the Ceremonial Law which circumstances seemed to have put out of their reach: 'not sending the Shunammite to Jerusalem' (says Cardinal Newman), 'not eager for a proselyte in Naaman, yet making the heathen fear the Name of God, and proving to them that there was a prophet in Israel'" (Stanley, *Lectures*, ii. 377; Newman, *Sermons*, viii. 415).

condone himself in seeming to sanction – still less in doing – anything which in his opinion ought not to be done, or in saying anything which implied his own acquiescence in things which he knows to be evil. "Sir," said a parishioner to one of the non-juring clergy: "there is many a man who has made a great gash in his conscience; cannot you make a little nick in yours?" No! a *little* nick is, in one sense, as fatal as a great gash. It is an abandonment of *the principle*; it is a violation of the Law. The wrong of it consists in this – that all evil begins, not in the commission of great crimes, but in the slight divergence from right rules. The angle made by two lines may be infinitesimally small, but produce the lines and it may require infinitude to span the separation between the lines which inclose so tiny an angle. The wise man gave the only true rule about wrong-doing, when he said, "Enter not into the path of the wicked and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it and pass away."⁹² And the reason for his rule is that the beginning of sin – like the beginning of strife – "is as when one letteth out water."⁹³

The proper answer to all abuses of any supposed concession to the lawfulness of bowing in the house of Rimmon – if that be interpreted to mean the doing of anything which our consciences cannot wholly approve – is *Obsta principiis*– avoid the beginnings of evil.

⁹² Prov. iv. 14, 15.

⁹³ Prov. xviii. 14.

"We are not worst at once; the course of evil
Begins so slowly, and from such slight source,
An infant's hand might stem the breach with clay;
But let the stream grow wider, and philosophy,
Age, and religion too, may strive in vain
To stem the headstrong current."

The mean cupidity of Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, gives a deplorable sequel to the story of the prophet's magnanimity. This man's wretched greed did its utmost to nullify the good influence of his master's example. There may be more wicked acts recorded in Scripture than that of Gehazi, but there is scarcely one which shows so paltry a disposition.

He had heard the conversation between his master and the Syrian marshal, and his cunning heart despised as a futile sentimentality the magnanimity which had refused an eagerly proffered reward. Naaman was rich: he had received a priceless boon; it would be rather a pleasure to him than otherwise to return for it some acknowledgment which he would not miss. Had he not even seemed a little hurt by Elisha's refusal to receive it? What possible harm could there be in taking what he was anxious to give? And how useful those magnificent presents would be, and to what excellent uses could they be put! He could not approve of the fantastic and unpractical scrupulosity which had led Elisha to refuse the "blessing" which he had so richly earned. Such attitudes of unworldliness seemed entirely foolish to Gehazi.

So pleaded the Judas-spirit within the man. By such specious delusions he inflamed his own covetousness, and fostered the evil temptation which had taken sudden and powerful hold upon his heart, until it took shape in a wicked resolve.

The mischief of Elisha's quixotic refusal was done, but it could be speedily undone, and no one would be the worse. The evil spirit was whispering to Gehazi: —

"Be mine and Sin's for one short hour; and then
Be all thy life the happiest man of men."

"Behold," he said, with some contempt both for Elisha and for Naaman, "my master hath let off this Naaman the Syrian; but as the Lord liveth I will run after him, and take somewhat of him."

"As the Lord liveth!" It had been a favourite appeal of Elijah and Elisha, and the use of it by Gehazi shows how utterly meaningless and how very dangerous such solemn words become when they are degraded into formulæ.⁹⁴ It is thus that the habit of swearing begins. The light use of holy words very soon leads to their utter degradation. How keen is the satire in Cowper's little story: —

"A Persian, humble servant of the sun,
Who, though devout, yet bigotry had none,
Hearing a lawyer, grave in his address,

⁹⁴ On Gehazi's lips it meant no more than the incessant *Wallah*, "by God," of Mohammedans.

With adjurations every word impress, —
Supposed the man a bishop, or, at least,
God's Name so often on his lips – a priest.
Bowed at the close with all his gracious airs,
And begged an interest in his frequent prayers!"

Had Gehazi felt their true meaning – had he realised that on Elisha's lips they meant something infinitely more real than on his own, he would not have forgotten that in Elisha's answer to Naaman they had all the validity of an oath, and that he was inflicting on his master a shameful wrong, when he led Naaman to believe that, after so sacred an adjuration, the prophet had frivolously changed his mind.

Gehazi had not very far to run,⁹⁵ for in a country full of hills, and of which the roads are rough, horses and chariots advance but slowly. Naaman, chancing to glance backwards, saw the prophet's attendant running after him. Anticipating that he must be the bearer of some message from Elisha, he not only halted the cavalcade, but sprang down from his chariot,⁹⁶ and went to meet him with the anxious question, "Is all well?"

"Well," answered Gehazi; and then had ready his cunning lie. "Two youths," he said, "of the prophetic schools had just unexpectedly come to his master from the hill country of

⁹⁵ 2 Kings v. 19. Heb., *kib'rath aretz*, "a little way" – literally, "a space of country." (The Vatican LXX. follows another reading, εἰς Δεβραθὰ τῆς γῆς; Vulg., *electo terræ tempore*[?].)

⁹⁶ LXX., κατεπήδησεν.

Ephraim; and though he would accept nothing for himself, Elisha would be glad if Naaman would spare him two changes of garments, and one talent of silver for these poor members of a sacred calling."⁹⁷

Naaman must have been a little more or a little less than human if he did not feel a touch of disappointment on hearing this message. The gift was nothing to him. It was a delight to him to give it, if only to lighten a little the burden of gratitude which he felt towards his benefactor. But if he had felt elevated by the magnanimous example of Elisha's disinterestedness, he must have thought that this hasty request pointed to a little regret on the prophet's part for his noble self-denial. After all, then, even prophets were but men, and gold after all was gold! The change of mind about the gift brought Elisha a little nearer the ordinary level of humanity, and, so far, it acted as a sort of disenchantment from the high ideal exhibited by his former refusal. And so Naaman said, with alacrity, "Be content: take two talents."

The fact that Gehazi's conduct thus inevitably compromised his master, and undid the effects of his example, is part of the measure of the man's apostacy. It showed how false and hypocritical was his position, how unworthy he was to be the ministering servant of a prophet. Elisha was evidently deceived in the man altogether. The heinousness of his guilt lies in the words *Corruptio optimi pessima*. When religion is used for a cloak

⁹⁷ A talent of silver was worth about £400 – an enormous sum for two half-naked youths.

of covetousness, of usurping ambition, of secret immorality, it becomes deadlier than infidelity. Men raze the sanctuary, and build their idol temples on the hallowed ground. They cover their base encroachments and impure designs with the "cloke of profession, doubly lined with the fox-fur of hypocrisy," and hide the leprosy which is breaking out upon their foreheads with the golden *petalon* on which is inscribed the title of "holiness to the Lord."

At first Gehazi did not like to take so large a sum as two talents; but the crime was already committed, and there was not much more harm done in taking two talents than in taking one. Naaman urged him, and it is very improbable that, unless the chances of detection weighed with him, he needed much urging. So the Syrian weighed out silver ingots to the amount of two talents, and putting them in two satchels laid them on two of his servants and told them to carry the money before Gehazi to Elisha's house. But Gehazi had to keep a look-out lest his nefarious dealings should be observed, and when they came to Ophel – the word means the foot of the hill of Samaria, or some part of the fortifications⁹⁸– he took the bags from the two Syrians, dismissed them, and carried the money to some place where he could conceal it in the house. Then, as though nothing had happened, with his usual smooth face of sanctimonious integrity, the pious Jesuit went and stood before his master.

⁹⁸ 2 Kings v. 24. The LXX. (εἰς τὸ σκοτεινὸν) seems to have read **אֶפְהַל** (*ophel*); "darkness," a treasury or secret place, for **אֶפְהַל**, and so the Vulgate *jam vesperi*.

He had not been unnoticed! His heart must have sunk within him when there smote upon his ear Elisha's question, —

"Whence comest thou, Gehazi?"

But one lie is as easy as another, and Gehazi was doubtless an adept at lying.

"Thy servant went no whither," he replied, with an air of innocent surprise.

"*Went not my beloved one?*"⁹⁹ said Elisha — and he must have said it with a groan, as he thought how utterly unworthy the youth, whom he thus called "my loving heart" or "my dear friend," — "when the man turned from his chariot to meet thee?" It may be that from the hill of Samaria Elisha had seen it all, or that he had been told by one who had seen it. If not, he had been rightly led to read the secret of his servant's guilt. "Is it a time," he asked, "to act thus?" Did not my example show thee that there was a high object in refusing this Syrian's gifts, and in leading him to feel that the servants of Jehovah do His bidding with no afterthought of sordid considerations? Are there not enough troubles about us actual and impending, to show that this is no time for the accumulation of earthly treasures? Is it a time to receive money — and all that money will procure? to receive garments, and olive-yards and vineyards, and oxen, and men-servants and maid-servants? Has a prophet no higher aim than the accumulation of earthly goods, and are his needs such as earthly

⁹⁹ 2 Kings v. 26. The verse is so interpreted by some critics, especially Ewald, followed by Stanley. Margin, R.V.: "Mine heart went not from me, when" etc.

goods can supply? And hast thou, the daily friend and attendant of a prophet, learnt so little from his precepts and his example?

Then followed the tremendous penalty for so grievous a transgression – a transgression made up of meanness, irreverence, greed, cheating, treachery, and lies.

"The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever!" "Oh heavy talents of Gehazi!" exclaims Bishop Hall: "Oh the horror of the one unchangeable suit! How much better had been a light purse and a homely coat, with a sound body and a clean soul!"

"And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow."¹⁰⁰

It is the characteristic of the leprous taint in the system to be thus suddenly developed, and apparently in crises of sudden and overpowering emotion it might affect the whole blood. And one of the many morals which lie in Gehazi's story is again that moral to which the world's whole experience sets its seal – that though the guilty soul may sell itself for a desired price, the sum-total of that price is nought. It is Achan's ingots buried under the sod on which stood his tent. It is Naboth's vineyard made abhorrent to Ahab on the day he entered it. It is the thirty pieces of silver which Judas dashed with a shriek upon the Temple floor. It is Gehazi's leprosy for which no silver talents or changes of raiment could atone.

The story of Gehazi – of the son of the prophets who would

¹⁰⁰ Exod. iv. 6; Num. xii. 10.

naturally have succeeded Elisha as Elisha had succeeded Elijah – must have had a tremendous significance to warn the members of the prophetic schools from the peril of covetousness. That peril, as all history proves to us, is one from which popes and priests, monks, and even nominally ascetic and nominally pauper communities, have never been exempt; – to which, it may even be said, that they have been peculiarly liable. Mercenariness and falsity, displayed under the pretence of religion, were never more overwhelmingly rebuked. Yet, as the Rabbis said, it would have been better if Elisha, in repelling with the left hand, had also drawn with the right.¹⁰¹

The fine story of Elisha and Naaman, and the fall and punishment of Gehazi, is followed by one of the anecdotes of the prophet's life which appears to our unsophisticated, perhaps to our imperfectly enlightened judgment, to rise but little above the ecclesiastical portents related in mediæval hagiologies.

At some unnamed place – perhaps Jericho – the house of the Sons of the Prophets had become too small for their numbers and requirements, and they asked Elisha's leave to go down to the Jordan and cut beams to make a new residence. Elisha gave them leave, and at their request consented to go with them. While they were hewing, the axe-head of one of them fell into the water, and he cried out, "Alas! master, it was borrowed!" Elisha ascertained

¹⁰¹ The later Rabbis thought that Elisha was too severe with Gehazi, and was punished with sickness because "he repelled him with both his hands" (*Bava-Metsia*, f. 87, 1, and *Yalkut Jeremiah*).

where it had fallen. He then cut down a stick,¹⁰² and cast it on the spot, and the iron swam and the man recovered it.

The story is perhaps an imaginative reproduction of some unwonted incident. At any rate, we have no sufficient evidence to prove that it may not be so. It is wholly unlike the economy invariably shown in the Scripture narratives which tell us of the exercise of supernatural power. All the eternal laws of nature are here superseded at a word, as though it were an every-day matter, without even any recorded invocation of Jehovah, to restore an axe-head, which could obviously have been recovered or resupplied in some much less stupendous way than by making iron swim on the surface of a swift-flowing river. It is easy to invent conventional and *à priori* apologies to show that religion demands the unquestioning acceptance of this prodigy, and that a man must be shockingly wicked who does not feel certain that it happened exactly in the literal sense; but whether the doubt or the defence be morally worthier, is a thing which God alone can judge.¹⁰³

¹⁰² The Hebrew word for "cut off" (*qatsab*) is very rare. LXX., ἀπέκνισε ξύλον; Vulg., *præcidit lignum*.

¹⁰³ It must be further borne in mind that "the iron did swim" (A.V.) is less accurate than "made the iron to swim" (R.V.). The LXX. has ἐπεπόλασε, "brought to the surface." Von Gerlach says, "He thrust the stick into the water, and raised the iron to the surface."

CHAPTER VII

ELISHA AND THE SYRIANS

2 Kings vi. 1-23

"Now there was found in the city a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city." – Eccles. ix. 15.

Elisha, unlike his master Elijah, was, during a great part of his long career, intimately mixed up with the political and military fortunes of his country. The king of Israel who occurs in the following narratives is left nameless – always the sign of later and more vague tradition; but he has usually been identified with Jehoram ben-Ahab, and, though not without some misgivings, we shall assume that the identification is correct. His dealings with Elisha never seem to have been very cordial, though on one occasion he calls him "my father." The relations between them at times became strained and even stormy.

His reign was rendered miserable by the incessant infestation of Syrian marauders. In these difficulties he was greatly helped by Elisha. The prophet repeatedly frustrated the designs of the Syrian king by revealing to Jehoram the places of Benhadad's ambuscades, so that Jehoram could change the destination of his

hunting parties or other movements, and escape the plots laid to seize his person. Benhadad, finding himself thus frustrated, and suspecting that it was due to treachery, called his servants together in grief and indignation, and asked who was the traitor among them. His officers assured him that they were all faithful, but that the secrets whispered in his bed-chamber were revealed to Jehoram by Elisha the prophet in Israel, whose fame had spread into Syria, perhaps because of the cure of Naaman. The king, unable to take any step while his counsels were thus published to his enemies, thought – not very consistently – that he could surprise and seize Elisha himself, and sent to find out where he was. At that time he was living in Dothan, about twelve miles north-east of Samaria,¹⁰⁴ and Benhadad sent a contingent with horses and chariots by night to surround the city, and prevent any escape from its gates. That he could thus besiege a town so near the capital shows the helplessness to which Israel had been now reduced.

When Elisha's servitor rose in the morning he was terrified to see the Syrians encamped round the city, and cried to Elisha, "Alas! my master, what shall we do?"

"Fear not," said the prophet: "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." He prayed God to grant the youth the same open eyes, the same spiritual vision which he himself enjoyed; and the youth saw the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

¹⁰⁴ Gen. xxxvii. 17, *Dothain*, "two wells" (?).

This incident has been full of comfort to millions, as a beautiful illustration of the truth that —

"The hosts of God encamp around
The dwellings of the just;
Deliverance He affords to all
Who on His promise trust.

"Oh, make but trial of His love,
Experience will decide,
How blest are they, and only they,
Who in His truth confide."

The youth's affectionate alarm had not been shared by his master. He knew that to every true servant of God the promise will be fulfilled, "He shall defend thee under His wings; thou shalt be safe under His feathers; His righteousness and truth shall be thy shield and buckler."¹⁰⁵

Were our eyes similarly opened, we too should see the reality of the Divine protection and providence, whether under the visible form of angelic ministrants or not. Scripture in general, and the Psalms in particular, are full of the serenity inspired by this conviction. The story of Elisha is a picture-commentary on the Psalmist's words: "The angel of the Lord encampeth round them that fear Him, and delivereth them."¹⁰⁶ "He shall give His

¹⁰⁵ Psalm xci. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Psalm xxxiv. 7.

angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."¹⁰⁷ "And I will encamp about Mine house because of the army, because of him that passeth by, and because of him that returneth: and no oppressor shall pass through them any more: for now have I seen with Mine eyes."¹⁰⁸ "The angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old."¹⁰⁹

But what is the exact meaning of all these lovely promises? They do not mean that God's children and saints will always be shielded from anguish or defeat, from the triumph of their enemies, or even from apparently hopeless and final failure, or miserable death. The lesson is not that their persons shall be inviolable, or that the enemies who advance against them to eat up their flesh shall always stumble and fall. The experiences of tens of thousands of troubled lives and martyred ends instantly prove the futility of any such reading of these assurances. The saints of God, the prophets of God, have died in exile and in prison, have been tortured on the rack and broken on the wheel, and burnt to ashes at innumerable stakes; they have been destitute, afflicted, tormented, in their lives – stoned, beheaded, sawn asunder, in every form of hideous death; they have rotted in miry dungeons, have starved on desolate shores, have sighed out their souls into the agonising flame. The Cross of Christ stands as

¹⁰⁷ Psalm xci. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Zech. ix. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Isa. lxiii. 9.

the emblem and the explanation of their lives, which fools count to be madness, and their end without honour. On earth they have, far more often than not, been crushed by the hatred and been delivered over to the will of their enemies. Where, then, have been those horses and chariots of fire?

They have been there no less than around Elisha at Dothan. The eyes spiritually opened have seen them, even when the sword flashed, or the flames wrapped them in indescribable torment. The sense of God's protection has least deserted His saints when to the world's eyes they seemed to have been most utterly abandoned. There has been a joy in prisons and at stakes, it has been said, far exceeding the joy of harvest. "Pray for me," said a poor boy of fifteen, who was being burned at Smithfield in the fierce days of Mary Tudor. "I would as soon pray for a dog as for a heretic like thee," answered one of the spectators. "Then, Son of God, shine Thou upon me!" cried the boy-martyr; and instantly, upon a dull and cloudy day, the sun shone out, and bathed his young face in glory; whereat, says the martyrologist, men greatly marvelled. But is there one death-bed of a saint on which that glory has not shone?

The presence of those horses and chariots of fire, unseen by the carnal eye – the promises which, if they be taken literally, all experience seems to frustrate – mean two things, which they who are the heirs of such promises, and who would without them be of all men most miserable, have clearly understood.

They mean, first, that as long as a child of God is on the path

of duty, and until that duty has been fulfilled, he is inviolable and invulnerable. He shall tread upon the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon shall he trample under his feet. He shall take up the serpent in his hands; and if he drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt him. He shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flieth by day; of the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor of the demon that destroyeth in the noonday. A thousand shall fall at his right hand, and ten thousand beside him; but it shall not come nigh him. The histories and the legends of numberless marvellous deliverances all confirm the truth that, when a man fears the Lord, He will keep him in all his ways, and give His angels charge over him, lest at any time he dash his foot against a stone. God will not permit any mortal force, or any combination of forces, to hinder the accomplishment of the task entrusted to His servant. It is the sense of this truth which, under circumstances however menacing, should enable us to

"bate no jot

Of heart or hope, but still bear up, and steer

Uphillward"

It is this conviction which has nerved men to face insuperable difficulties, and achieve impossible and un hoped-for ends. It works in the spirit of the cry, "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel be thou changed into a plain!" It inspires the faith as a grain of mustard seed which is able to say to this mountain, "Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea," –

and it shall obey. It stands unmoved upon the pinnacle of the Temple whereon it has been placed, while the enemy and the tempter, smitten by amazement, falls. In the hour of difficulty it can cry, —

"Rescue me, O Lord, in this mine evil hour,
As of old so many by Thy mighty power, —
Enoch and Elias from the common doom;
Noe from the waters in a saving home;
Abraham from the abounding guilt of heathenesse;
Job from all his multiform and fell distress;
Isaac when his faither's knife was raised to slay;
Lot from burning Sodom on the judgment day;
Moses from the land of bondage and despair;
Daniel from the hungry lions in their lair;
And the children three amid the furnace flame;
Chaste Susanna from the slander and the shame;
David from Golia, and the wrath of Saul;
And the two Apostles from their prison-thrall."

The strangeness, the unexpectedness, the apparently inadequate source of the deliverance, have deepened the trust that it has not been due to accident. Once, when Felix of Nola was flying from his enemies, he took refuge in a cave, and he had scarcely entered it before a spider began to spin its web over the fissure. The pursuer, passing by, saw the spider's web, and did not look into the cave; and the saint, as he came out into safety, remarked: "*Ubi Deus est, ibi aranea murus, ubi non est ibi murus*

aranaea" ("Where God is, a spider's web is as a wall; where He is not, a wall is but as a spider's web").

This is one lesson conveyed in the words of Christ when the Pharisees told Him that Herod desired to kill Him. He knew that Herod could not kill Him till He had done His Father's will and finished His work. "Go ye," He said, "and tell this fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to-day and to-morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless, I must walk to-day, and to-morrow, and the day following."

But had all this been otherwise – had Felix been seized by his pursuers and perished, as has been the common lot of God's prophets and heroes – he would not therefore have felt himself mocked by these exceeding great and precious promises. The chariots and horses of fire are still there, and are there to work a deliverance yet greater and more eternal. Their office is not to deliver the perishing body, but to carry into God's glory the immortal soul. This is indicated in the death-scene of Elijah. This was the vision of the dying Stephen. This was what Christian legend meant when it embellished with beautiful incidents such scenes as the death of Polycarp. This was what led Bunyan to write, when he describes the death of Christian, that "all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." When poor Captain Allan Gardiner lay starving to death in that Antarctic isle with his wretched companions, he yet painted on the entrance of the cave which had sheltered them, and near to which his remains were found, a hand pointing downward at the words, "Though

He slay me, yet will I put my trust in Him."

There was a touch of almost joyful humour in the way in which Elisha proceeded to use, in the present emergency, the power of Divine deliverance. He seems to have gone out of the town and down the hill to the Syrian captains,¹¹⁰ and prayed God to send them illusion (ἄβλεψία), so that they might be misled.¹¹¹ Then he boldly said to them, "You are being deceived: you have come the wrong way, and to the wrong city. I will take you to the man whom ye seek." The incident reminds us of the story of Athanasius, who, when he was being pursued on the Nile, took the opportunity of a bend of the river boldly to turn back his boat towards Alexandria. "Do you know where Athanasius is?" shouted the pursuers. "He is not far off!" answered the disguised Archbishop; and the emissaries of Constantius went on in the opposite direction from that in which he made his escape.

Elisha led the Syrians in their delusion straight into the city of Samaria, where they suddenly found themselves at the mercy of the king and his troops. Delighted at so great a chance of vengeance, Jehoram eagerly exclaimed, "My father, shall I smite, shall I smite?"

Certainly the request cannot be regarded as unnatural, when we remember that in the Book of Deuteronomy, which did not

¹¹⁰ Adopting the reading of the Syriac version: "And when they [Elisha and his servant] came down to them [the Syrians]." The ordinary reading is "to *him*," which makes the narrative less clear.

¹¹¹ 2 Kings vi. 19. מַנְיָן, ἀορασία, only found in Gen. xix. 11.

come to light till after this period, we read the rule that, when the Israelites had taken a besieged city, "thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword";¹¹² and that when Israel defeated the Midianites¹¹³ they slew all the males, and Moses was wroth with the officers of the host because they had not also slain all the women. He then (as we are told) ordered them to slay all except the virgins, and also – horrible to relate – "*every male among the little ones.*" The spirit of Elisha on this occasion was larger and more merciful. It almost rose to the spirit of Him who said, "It was said to them of old time, Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy; but I say unto you, Love your enemies; forgive them that hate you; do good unto them that despitefully use you and persecute you." He asked Jehoram reproachfully whether he would even have smitten those whom he had taken captive with sword and bow.¹¹⁴ He not only bade the king to spare them, but to set food before them, and send them home. Jehoram did so at great expense, and the narrative ends by telling us that the example of such merciful generosity produced so favourable an impression that "the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel."

It is difficult, however, to see where this statement can be chronologically fitted in. The very next chapter – so loosely is the compilation put together, so completely is the sequence of

¹¹² Deut. xx. 13.

¹¹³ Num. xxxi. 7.

¹¹⁴ Vulg., *Non percuties; neque enim cepisti eos ... ut percutias.*

events here neglected – begins with telling us that Benhadad with all his host went up and besieged Samaria. Any peace or respite gained by Elisha's compassionate magnanimity must, in any case, have been exceedingly short-lived. Josephus tries to get over the difficulty by drawing a sufficiently futile distinction between marauding bands and a direct invasion,¹¹⁵ and he says that King Benhadad gave up his frays through *fear* of Elisha. But, in the first place, the encompassing of Dothan had been carried out by "*a great host* with horses and chariots," which is hardly consistent with the notion of a foray, though it creates new difficulties as to the numbers whom Elisha led to Samaria; secondly, the substitution of a direct invasion for predatory incursions would have been no gain to Israel, but a more deadly peril; and, thirdly, if it was fear of Elisha which stopped the king's raids, it is strange that it had no effect in preventing his invasions. We have, however, no data for any final solution of these problems, and it is useless to meet them with a network of idle conjectures. Such difficulties naturally occur in narratives so vague and unchronological as those presented to us in the documents from the story of Elisha which the compiler wove into his history of Israel and Judah.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Jos., *Antt.*, IX. iv. 4, Κρύφα μὲν οὐκέτι ... φανερωῶς δέ.

¹¹⁶ Kittel, following Kuenen, surmises that this story has got misplaced; that it does not belong to the days of Jehoram ben-Ahab and Benhadad II., but to the days of Jehoahaz ben-Jehu and Benhadad III., the son of Hazael (*Gesch. der Hebr.*, 249). In a very uncertain question I have followed the conclusion arrived at by the majority of scholars, ancient and modern.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FAMINE AND THE SIEGE

2 Kings vi. 24-vii. 20

"'Tis truly no good plan when princes play
The vulture among carrion; but when
They play the carrion among vultures – that
Is ten times worse."

Lessing, Nathan the Wise, Act I., Sc. 3.

If the Benhadad, King of Syria, who reduced Samaria to the horrible straits recorded in this chapter, (2 Kings vi.) was the same Benhadad whom Ahab had treated with such impolitic confidence, his hatred against Israel must indeed have burned hotly. Besides the affair at Dothan, he had already been twice routed with enormous slaughter, and against those disasters he could only set the death of Ahab at Ramoth-Gilead. It is obvious from the preceding narrative that he could advance at any time at his will and pleasure into the heart of his enemy's country, and shut him up in his capital almost without resistance. The siege-trains of ancient days were very inefficient, and any strong fortress could hold out for years, if only it was well provisioned.

Such was not the case with Samaria, and it was reduced to a condition of sore famine. Food so loathsome as an ass's head, which at other times the poorest would have spurned, was now sold for eighty shekels' weight of silver (about £8); and the fourth part of a *xestes* or *kab*— which was itself the smallest dry-measure, the sixth part of a *seah*— of the coarse, common pulse, or roasted chick-peas, vulgarly known as "dove's dung," fetched five shekels (about 12s. 6d.).¹¹⁷

While things were at this awful pass, "the King of Israel," as he is vaguely called throughout this story, went his rounds upon the wall to visit the sentries and encourage the soldiers in their defence. As he passed, a woman cried, "Help, my lord, O king!" In Eastern monarchies the king is a judge of the humblest; a suppliant, however mean, may cry to him. Jehoram thought that this was but one of the appeals which sprang from the clamorous mendicancy of famine with which he had grown so painfully familiar. "The Lord curse you!" he exclaimed impatiently.¹¹⁸ "How can I help you? Every barn-floor is bare, every wine-press drained." And he passed on.

But the woman continued her wild clamour, and turning round

¹¹⁷ So *asafætida* is called "devil's dung" in Germany; and the *Herba alcali*, "sparrow's dung" by Arabs. The *Q'ri*, however, supports the *literal* meaning; and compare 2 Kings xviii. 27; Jos., *B. J.*, V. xiii. 7. Analogies for these prices are quoted from classic authors. Plutarch (*Artax.*, xxiv.) mentions a siege in which an ass's head could hardly be got for sixty drachmas (£2 10s.), though usually the whole animal only cost £1. Pliny (*H. N.*, viii. 57) says that during Hannibal's siege of Casilinum a mouse sold for £6 5s.

¹¹⁸ So Clericus. Comp. Jos. ἐπιράσατο αὐτῆ.

at her importunity, he asked, "What aileth thee?"

He heard in reply a narrative as appalling as ever smote the ear of a king in a besieged city. Among the curses denounced upon apostate Israel in the Pentateuch, we read, "Ye shall eat the flesh of your sons, and the flesh of your daughters shall ye eat";¹¹⁹ or, as it is expressed more fully in the Book of Deuteronomy, "He shall besiege thee in all thy gates throughout all thy land... And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and thy daughters, which the Lord thy God hath given thee, in the siege, and in the straitness wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee: so that the man that is tender among you, and very delicate, his eye shall be evil towards his brother, and towards the wife of his bosom, and towards the remnant of his children which he shall leave; so that he shall not give to any of them of the flesh of his children whom he shall eat, because he hath nothing left him in the siege... The tender and delicate woman, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, her eye shall be evil towards the husband of her bosom, and towards her son, and towards her daughter, and towards her children: for she shall eat them for want of all things secretly in the siege and the straitness, if thou wilt not observe to do all the words of the law, ... that thou mayest fear the glorious and fearful name, *The Lord thy God*."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Lev. xxvi. 29.

¹²⁰ Deut. xxviii. 52-58.

We find almost the same words in the prophet Jeremiah;¹²¹ and in Lamentations we read: "The hands of the pitiful women have sodden their own children: they were their meat in the destruction of the daughter of My people."¹²²

Isaiah asks, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" Alas! it has always been so in those awful scenes of famine, whether after shipwreck or in beleaguered cities, when man becomes degraded to an animal, with all an animal's primitive instincts, and when the wild beast appears under the thin veneer of civilisation. So it was at the siege of Jerusalem, and at the siege of Magdeburg, and at the wreck of the *Medusa*, and on many another occasion when the pangs of hunger have corroded away every vestige of the tender affections and of the moral sense.

And this had occurred at Samaria: her women had become cannibals and devoured their own little ones.

"This woman," screamed the suppliant, pointing her lean finger at a wretch like herself – "this woman said unto me, 'Give thy son, that we may eat him to-day, and we will afterwards eat my son.' I yielded to her suggestion. We killed my little son, and ate his flesh when we had sodden it. Next day I said to her, 'Now give thy son, that we may eat him'; and she hath hid her son!"

How could the king answer such a horrible appeal? Injustice had been done; but was he to order and to sanction by way

¹²¹ Jer. xix. 9.

¹²² Lam. iv. 10; comp. ii. 20; Ezek. v. 10; Jos., *B. J.*, VI. iii. 4.

of redress fresh cannibalism, and the murder by its mother of another babe? In that foul obliteration of every natural instinct, what could he do, what could any man do? Can there be equity among raging wild beasts, when they roar for their prey and are unfed?

All that the miserable king could do was to rend his clothes in horror and to pass on, and as his starving subjects passed by him on the wall they saw that he wore sackcloth beneath his purple, in sign, if not of repentance, yet of anguish, if not of prayer, yet of uttermost humiliation.¹²³

But if indeed he had, in his misery, donned that sackcloth in order that at least the semblance of self-mortification might move Jehovah to pity, as it had done in the case of his father Ahab, the external sign of his humility had done nothing to change his heart. The gruesome appeal to which he had just been forced to listen only kindled him to a burst of fury¹²⁴. The man who had warned, who had prophesied, who so far during this siege had not raised his finger to help – the man who was believed to be able to wield the powers of heaven, and had wrought no deliverance for his people, but suffered them to sink unaided into these depths of abjectness – should he be permitted to live? If Jehovah would not help, of what use was Elisha? "God do so to me, and more also," exclaimed Jehoram – using his mother's

¹²³ 1 Kings xxi. 27; Isa. xx. 2, 3.

¹²⁴ Compare the wrath of Pashur the priest in consequence of the denunciation of Jeremiah (Jer. xx. 2).

oath to Elijah¹²⁵– "if the head of Elisha, the son of Shaphat, shall stand on him this day."

Was this the king who had come to Elisha with such humble entreaty, when three armies were perishing of thirst before the eyes of Moab? Was this the king who had called Elisha "my father," when the prophet had led the deluded host of Syrians into Samaria, and bidden Jehoram to set large provision before them? It was the same king, but now transported with fury and reduced to despair. His threat against God's prophet was in reality a defiance of God, as when our unhappy Plantagenet, Henry II., maddened by the loss of Le Mans, exclaimed that, since God had robbed him of the town he loved, he would pay God out by robbing Him of that which He most loved in him – his soul.

Jehoram's threat was meant in grim earnest, and he sent an executioner to carry it out. Elisha was sitting in his house with the elders of the city, who had come to him for counsel at this hour of supreme need. He knew what was intended for him, and it had also been revealed to him that the king would follow his messenger to cancel his sanguinary threat. "See ye," he said to the elders, "how this son of a murderer" – for again he indicates his contempt and indignation for the son of Ahab and Jezebel – "hath sent to behead me! When he comes, shut the door, and hold it fast against him. His master is following hard at his heels."

The messenger came, and was refused admittance. The king

¹²⁵ 1 Kings xix. 2.

followed him,¹²⁶ and entering the room where the prophet and elders sat, he gave up his wicked design of slaying Elisha with the sword, but he overwhelmed him with reproaches, and in despair renounced all further trust in Jehovah. Elisha, as the king's words imply, must have refused all permission to capitulate: he must have held out from the first a promise that God would send deliverance. But no deliverance had come. The people were starving. Women were devouring their babes. Nothing worse could happen if they flung open their gates to the Syrian host. "Behold," the king said, "this evil is Jehovah's doing. You have deceived us. Jehovah does not intend to deliver us. Why should I wait for Him any longer?" Perhaps the king meant to imply that his mother's Baal was better worth serving, and would never have left his votaries to sink into these straits.

And now man's extremity had come, and it was God's opportunity. Elisha at last was permitted to announce that the worst was over, that the next day plenty should smile on the besieged city. "Thus saith the Lord," he exclaimed to the exhausted and despondent king, "To-morrow about this time, instead of an ass's head being sold for eighty shekels, and a thimbleful of pulse for five shekels, a peck of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two pecks of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria."

The king was leaning on the hand of his chief officer, and to

¹²⁶ In 2 Kings vi. 33 we should read *melek* (king) for *maleak* (messenger). Jehoram repented of his hasty order.

this soldier the promise seemed not only incredible, but silly: for at the best he could only suppose that the Syrian host would raise the siege; and though to hope for that looked an absurdity, yet even that would not in the least fulfil the immense prediction. He answered, therefore, in utter scorn: "Yes! Jehovah is making windows in heaven! But even thus could this be?" It is much as if he should have answered some solemn pledge with a derisive proverb such as, "Yes! if the sky should fall, we should catch larks!"

Such contemptuous repudiation of a Divine promise was a blasphemy; and answering scorn with scorn, and riddle with riddling, Elisha answers the mocker, "Yes! and *you* shall see this, but shall not enjoy it."

The word of the Lord was the word of a true prophet, and the miracle was wrought. Not only was the siege raised, but the wholly unforeseen spoil of the entire Syrian camp, with all its accumulated rapine, brought about the predicted plenty.

There were four lepers¹²⁷ outside the gate of Samaria, like the leprous mendicants who gather there to this day. They were cut off from all human society, except their own. Leprosy was treated as contagious, and if "houses of the unfortunate" (*Biut-el-Masákin*) were provided for them, as seems to have been the case at Jerusalem, they were built outside the city walls.¹²⁸ They could only live by beggary, and this was an aggravation of their

¹²⁷ The Jews say Gehazi, and his three sons (Jarchi).

¹²⁸ Lev. xiii. 46; Num. v. 2, 3.

miserable condition. And how could any one fling food to these beggars over the walls, when food of any kind was barely to be had within them?

So taking counsel of their despair, they decided that they would desert to the Syrians: among them they would at least find food, if their lives were spared; and if not, death would be a happy release from their present misery.

So in the evening twilight, when they could not be seen or shot at from the city wall as deserters, they stole down to the Syrian camp.

When they reached its outermost circle, to their amazement all was silence. They crept into one of the tents in fear and astonishment. There was food and drink there, and they satisfied the cravings of their hunger. It was also stored with booty from the plundered cities and villages of Israel. To this they helped themselves, and took it away and hid it. Having spoiled this tent, they entered a second. It was likewise deserted, and they carried a fresh store of treasures to their hiding-place. And then they began to feel uneasy at not divulging to their starving fellow-citizens the strange and golden tidings of a deserted camp. The night was wearing on; day would reveal the secret. If they carried the good news, they would doubtless earn a rich guerdon. If they waited till morning, they might be put to death for their selfish reticence and theft. It was safest to return to the city, and rouse the warder, and send a message to the palace. So the lepers hurried back through the night, and shouted to the sentinel at the gate, "We went to

the Syrian camp, and it was deserted! Not a man was there, not a sound was to be heard. The horses were tethered there, and the asses, and the tents were left just as they were."

The sentinel called the other watchmen to hear the wonderful news, and instantly ran with it to the palace. The slumbering house was roused; and though it was still night, the king himself arose. But he could not shake off his despondency, and made no reference to Elisha's prediction. News sometimes sounds too good to be true. "It is only a decoy," he said. "They can only have left their camp to lure us into an ambushade, that they may return, and slaughter us, and capture our city."

"Send to see," answered one of his courtiers. "Send five horsemen to test the truth, and to look out. If they perish, their fate is but the fate of us all."

So two chariots with horses were despatched, with instructions not only to visit the camp, but track the movements of the host.

They went, and found that it was as the lepers had said. The camp was deserted, and lay there as an immense booty; and for some reason the Syrians had fled towards the Jordan to make good their escape to Damascus by the eastern bank. The whole road was strewn with the traces of their headlong flight; it was full of scattered garments and vessels.

Probably, too, the messengers came across some disabled fugitive, and learnt the secret of this amazing stampede. It was the result of one of those sudden unaccountable panics to which the huge, unwieldy, heterogeneous Eastern armies,

which have no organised system of sentries, and no trained discipline, are constantly liable. We have already met with several instances in the history of Israel. Such was the panic which seized the Midianites when Gideon's three hundred blew their trumpets; and the panic of the Syrians before Ahab's pages of the provinces; and of the combined armies in the Valley of Salt; and of the Moabites at Wady-el-Ahsy; and afterwards of the Assyrians before the walls of Jerusalem. Fear is physically contagious, and, when once it has set in, it swells with such unaccountable violence, that the Greeks called these terrors "panic," because they believed them to be directly inspired by the god Pan. Well-disciplined as was the army of the Ten Thousand Greeks in their famous retreat, they nearly fell victims to a sudden panic, had not Clearchus, with prompt resource, published by the herald the proclamation of a reward for the arrest of the man who had let the ass loose. Such an unaccountable terror – caused by a noise as of chariots and of horses which reverberated among the hills – had seized the Syrian host. They thought that Jehoram had secretly hired an army of the princes of the Khetas¹²⁹ and of the Egyptians to march suddenly upon them. In wild confusion, not stopping to reason or to inquire, they took to flight, increasing their panic by the noise and rush of their own precipitance.

No sooner had the messengers delivered their glad tidings,

¹²⁹ The capitals of the ancient Hittites – a nation whose fame had been almost entirely obliterated till a few years ago – were Karchemish, Kadesh, Hamath, and Helbon (Aleppo).

than the people of Samaria began to pour tumultuously out of the gates, to fling themselves on the food and on the spoil. It was like the rush of the dirty, starving, emaciated wretches which horrified the keepers of the reserved stores at Smolensk in Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, and forced them to shut the gates, and fling food and grain to the struggling soldiers out of the windows of the granaries. To secure order and prevent disaster, the king appointed his attendant lord to keep the gate. But the torrent of people flung him down, and they trampled on his body in their eagerness for relief. He died after having seen that the promise of Elisha was fulfilled, and that the cheapness and abundance had been granted, the prophecy of which he thought only fit for his sceptical derision.

"The sudden panic which delivered the city," says Dean Stanley, "is the one marked intervention on behalf of the northern capital. No other incident could be found in the sacred annals so appropriately to express, in the Church of Gouda, the pious gratitude of the citizens of Leyden, for their deliverance from the Spanish army, as the miraculous raising of the siege of Samaria."¹³⁰

¹³⁰ *Lectures*, ii. 345.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHUNAMMITE AND HAZAEL

2 Kings viii. 1-6, 7-15. (Circ. b. c. 886.)

"Our acts still follow with us from afar,
And what we have been makes us what we are."

George Eliot.

The next anecdote of Elisha brings us once more into contact with the Lady of Shunem. Famines, or dearths, were unhappily of very frequent occurrence in a country which is so wholly dependent, as Palestine is, upon the early and latter rain. On some former occasion Elisha had foreseen that "Jehovah had called for a famine"; for the sword, the famine, and the pestilence are represented as ministers who wait His bidding.¹³¹ He had also foreseen that it would be of long duration, and in kindness to the Shunammite had warned her that she had better remove for a time into a land in which there was greater plenty. It was under similar circumstances that Elimelech and Naomi, ancestors of David's line, had taken their sons Mahlon and Chilion, and gone to live in the land of Moab; and, indeed, the famine which

¹³¹ Jer. xxv. 29; Ezek. xxxviii. 21.

decided the migration of Jacob and his children into Egypt had been a turning-point in the history of the Chosen People.

The Lady of Shunem had learnt by experience the weight of Elisha's words. Her husband is not mentioned, and was probably dead; so she arose with her household, and went for seven years to live in the plain of Philistia. At the end of that time the dearth had ceased, and she returned to Shunem, but only to find that during her absence her house and land were in possession of other owners, and had probably escheated to the Crown. The king was the ultimate, and to a great extent the only, source of justice in his little kingdom, and she went to lay her claim before him and demand the restitution of her property. By a providential circumstance she came exactly at the most favourable moment. The king – it must have been Jehoram – was at the very time talking to Gehazi about the great works of Elisha. As it is unlikely that he would converse long with a leper, and as Gehazi is still called "the servant of the man of God," the incident may here be narrated out of order. It is pleasant to find Jehoram taking so deep an interest in the prophet's story. Already on many occasions during his wars with Moab and Syria, as well as on the occasion of Naaman's visit, if that had already occurred, he had received the completest proof of the reality of Elisha's mission, but he might be naturally unaware of the many private incidents in which he had exhibited a supernatural power. Among other stories Gehazi was telling him that of the Shunammite, and how Elisha had given life to her dead son. At that juncture she came

before the king, and Gehazi said, "My lord, O king, this is the very woman, and this is her son whom Elisha recalled to life." In answer to Jehoram's questions she confirmed the story, and he was so much impressed by the narrative that he not only ordered the immediate restitution of her land, but also of the value of its products during the seven years of her exile.

We now come to the fulfilment of the second of the commands which Elijah had received so long before at Horeb. To complete the retribution which was yet to fall on Israel, he had been bidden to anoint Hazael to be king of Syria in the room of Benhadad. Hitherto the mandate had remained unfulfilled, because no opportunity had occurred; but the appointed time had now arrived. Elisha, for some purpose, and during an interval of peace, visited Damascus, where the visit of Naaman and the events of the Syrian wars had made his name very famous. Benhadad II., grandson or great-grandson of Rezin, after a stormy reign of some thirty years, marked by some successes, but also by the terrible reverses already recorded, lay dangerously ill. Hearing the news that the wonder-working prophet of Israel was in his capital, he sent to ask of him the question, "Shall I recover?" It had been the custom from the earliest days to propitiate the favour of prophets by presents, without which even the humblest suppliant hardly ventured to approach them.¹³² The gift sent by Benhadad was truly royal, for he thought perhaps that

¹³² See the cases of Samuel (1 Sam. ix. 7), of Ahijah (1 Kings xiv. 3), and of Elisha himself (2 Kings iv. 42).

he could purchase the intercession or the miraculous intervention of this mighty thaumaturge. He sent Hazael with a selection "of every good thing of Damascus," and, like an Eastern, he endeavoured to make his offering seem more magnificent¹³³ by distributing it on the backs of forty camels.

At the head of this imposing procession of camels walked Hazael, the commander of the forces, and stood in Elisha's presence with the humble appeal, "Thy son Benhadad, King of Syria, hath sent me to thee, saying, Shall I recover of this disease?"

About the king's munificence we are told no more, but we cannot doubt that it was refused. If Naaman's still costlier blessing had been rejected, though he was about to receive through Elisha's ministration an inestimable boon, it is unlikely that Elisha would accept a gift for which he could offer no return, and which, in fact, directly or indirectly, involved the death of the sender. But the historian does not think it necessary to pause and tell us that Elisha sent back the forty camels unladen of their treasures. It was not worth while to narrate what was a matter of course. If it had been no time, a few years earlier, to receive money and garments, and olive-yards and vineyards, and men-servants and maid-servants, still less was it a time to do so now. The days were darker now than they had been, and Elisha himself stood near the Great White Throne. The protection of

¹³³ As Jacob did in sending forward his present to Esau. Comp. Chardin, *Voyages*, iii. 217.

these fearless prophets lay in their utter simplicity of soul. They rose above human fears because they stood above human desires. What Elisha possessed was more than sufficient for the needs of the plain and humble life of one whose communing was with God. It was not wonderful that prophets should rise to an elevation whence they could look down with indifference upon the superfluities of the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, when even sages of the heathen have attained to a similar independence of earthly luxuries. One who can climb such mountain-heights can look with silent contempt on gold.

But there is a serious difficulty about Elisha's answer to the embassy. "Go, say unto him" – so it is rendered in our Authorised Version – "Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath showed me that he shall surely die."

It is evident that the translators of 1611 meant the emphasis to be laid on the "*mayest*," and understood the answer of Elisha to mean, "Thy recovery is quite possible; and yet" – he adds to Hazael, and not as part of his answer to the king – "Jehovah has shown me that dying he shall die," – not indeed of this disease, but by other means before he has recovered from it.

Unfortunately, however, the Hebrew will not bear this meaning. Elisha bids Hazael to go back with the distinct message, "Thou shalt surely recover," as it is rightly rendered in the Revised Version.

This, however, is the rendering, not of the *written* text as it stands, but of the margin. Every one knows that in the Masoretic

original the text itself is called the K'thîb, or "what is written," whereas the margin is called *Q'ri*, "read." Now, our translators, both those of 1611 and those of the Revision Committee, all but invariably follow the Kethîb as the most authentic reading. In this instance, however, they abandon the rule and translate the marginal reading.

What, then, is the written text?

It is the reverse of the marginal reading, for it has: "Go, say, Thou shalt *not* recover."

The reader may naturally ask the cause of this startling discrepancy.

It seems to be twofold.

(I.) Both the Hebrew word *lo*, "not" (לֹא), and the word *lo*, "to him" (לוֹ), have precisely the same pronunciation. Hence this text might mean either "Go, say *to him*, Thou shalt certainly recover," or "Go, say, Thou shalt *not* recover." The same identity of the negative and the dative of the preposition has made nonsense of another passage of the Authorised Version, where "Thou hast multiplied the nation, and *not* increased the joy: they joy before Thee according to the joy of harvest," should be "Thou hast multiplied the nation, and increased *its* joy." So, too, the verse "It is He that hath made us, and *not* we ourselves," may mean "It is He that hath made us, and *to Him* we belong." In the present case the adoption of the negative (which would have conveyed to Benhadad the exact truth) is not possible; for it makes the next clause and its introduction by the word "Howbeit" entirely

meaningless.

But (II.) this confusion in the text might not have arisen in the present instance but for the difficulty of Elisha's appearing to send a deliberately false message to Benhadad, and a message which he tells Hazael at the time is false.

Can this be deemed impossible?

With the views prevalent in "those times of ignorance," I think not. Abraham and Isaac, saints and patriarchs as they were, both told practical falsehoods about their wives. They, indeed, were reprov'd for this, though not severely; but, on the other hand, Jael is not reprov'd for her treachery to Sisera; and Samuel, under the semblance of a Divine permission, used a diplomatic ruse when he visited the household of Jesse; and in the apologue of Micaiah a lying spirit is represented as sent forth to do service to Jehovah; and Elisha himself tells a deliberate falsehood to the Syrians at Dothan. The sensitiveness to the duty of always speaking the exact truth is not felt in the East with anything like the intensity that it is in Christian lands; and reluctant as we should be to find in the message of Elisha another instance of that *falsitas dispensativa* which has been so fatally patronised by some of the Fathers and by many Romish theologians, the love of truth itself would compel us to accept this view of the case, if there were no other possible interpretation.

I think, however, that another view is possible. I think that Elisha may have said to Hazael, "Go, say unto him, Thou shalt surely recover," with the same accent of irony in which Micaiah

said at first to the two kings, "Go up to Ramoth-Gilead, and prosper; for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king." I think that his whole manner and the tone of his voice may have shown to Hazael, and may have been meant to show him, that this was not Elisha's real message to Benhadad. Or, to adopt the same line of explanation with an unimportant difference, Elisha may have meant to imply, "Go, follow the bent which I know you *will* follow; go, carry back to your master the lying message that I said he would recover. But that is not *my* message. My message, whether it suits your courtier instincts or not, is that Jehovah has warned me that he shall surely die."

That some such meaning as this attaches to the verse seems to be shown by the context. For not only was some reproof involved in Elisha's words, but he showed his grief still more by his manner. It was as though he had said, "Take back what message you choose, but Benhadad will certainly die"; and then he fastened his steady gaze on the soldier's countenance, till Hazael blushed and became uneasy. Only when he noted that Hazael's conscience was troubled by the glittering eyes which seemed to read the inmost secrets of his heart did Elisha drop his glance, and burst into tears. "Why weepeth, my lord?" asked Hazael, in still deeper uneasiness. Whereupon Elisha revealed to him the future. "I weep," he said, "because I see in thee the curse and the avenger of the sins of my native land. Thou wilt become to them a sword of God; thou wilt set their fortresses on fire; thou wilt slaughter their youths; thou wilt dash their

little ones to pieces against the stones; thou wilt rip up their women with child." That he actually inflicted these savageries of warfare on the miserable Israelites we are not told, but we are told that he smote them in all their coasts; that Jehovah delivered them into his hands; that he oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz.¹³⁴ That being so, there can be no question that he carried out the same laws of atrocious warfare which belonged to those times and continued long afterwards. Such atrocities were not only inflicted on the Israelites again and again by the Assyrians and others,¹³⁵ but they themselves had often inflicted them, and inflicted them with what they believed to be Divine approval, on their own enemies.¹³⁶ Centuries after, one of their own poets accounted it a beatitude to him who should dash the children of the Babylonians against the stones.¹³⁷

As the answer of Hazael is usually read and interpreted, we are taught to regard it as an indignant declaration that he could never be guilty of such vile deeds. It is regarded as though it were "an abhorrent repudiation of his future self." The lesson often drawn from it in sermons is that a man may live to do, and to delight in, crimes which he once hated and deemed it impossible that he should ever commit.

The lesson is a most true one, and is capable of a thousand

¹³⁴ 2 Kings x. 32, xiii. 3, 22.

¹³⁵ Isa. xiii. 15, 16; Hos. x. 14, xiii. 16; Nah. iii. 10.

¹³⁶ See Josh. vi. 17, 21; 1 Sam. xv. 3; Lev. xxvii. 28, 29.

¹³⁷ Psalm cxxxvii. 9.

illustrations. It conveys the deeply needed warning that those who, even in thought, dabble with wrong courses, which they only regard as venial peccadilloes, may live to commit, without any sense of horror, the most enormous offences. It is the explanation of the terrible fact that youths who once seemed innocent and holy-minded may grow up, step by step, into colossal criminals. "Men," says Scherer, "advance unconsciously from errors to faults, and from faults to crimes, till sensibility is destroyed by the habitual spectacle of guilt, and the most savage atrocities come to be dignified by the name of State policy."

*"Lui-même à son portrait forcé de rendre hommage,
Il frémira d'horreur devant sa propre image."*

But true and needful as these lessons are, they are entirely beside the mark as deduced from the story of Hazael. What he said was not, as in our Authorised Version, "But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" nor by "great thing" does he mean "so deadly a crime." His words, more accurately rendered in our Revision, are, "But what is thy servant, which is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?" or, "But what is the dog, thy servant?" It was a hypocritic deprecation of the future importance and eminence which Elisha had prophesied for him. There is not the least sense of horror either in his words or in his thoughts. He merely means "A mere dog, such as I am, can never accomplish such great designs." A

dog in the East is utterly despised;¹³⁸ and Hazael, with Oriental irony, calls himself a dog, though he was the Syrian Commander-in-chief – just as a Chinaman, in speaking of himself, adopts the periphrasis "this little thief."

Elisha did not notice his sham humility, but told him, "The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be King over Syria." The date of the event was b. c. 886.

The scene has sometimes been misrepresented to Elisha's discredit, as though he suggested to the general the crimes of murder and rebellion. The accusation is entirely untenable. Elisha was, indeed, in one sense, commissioned to anoint Hazael King of Syria, because the cruel soldier had been predestined by God to that position; but, in another sense, he had no power whatever to give to Hazael the mighty kingdom of Aram, nor to wrest it from the dynasty which had now held it for many generations. All this was brought about by the Divine purpose, in a course of events entirely out of the sphere of the humble man of God. In the transferring of this crown he was in no sense the agent or the suggester. The thought of usurpation must, without doubt, have been already in Hazael's mind. Benhadad, as far as we know, was childless. At any rate he had no natural heirs, and seems to have been a drunken king, whose reckless undertakings and immense failures had so completely alienated the affections of his subjects from himself and his dynasty, that he died undesired and unlamented, and no hand was uplifted to strike a blow in his

¹³⁸ 1 Sam. xxiv. 14; 2 Sam. ix. 8.

defence. It hardly needed a prophet to foresee that the sceptre would be snatched by so strong a hand as that of Hazael from a grasp so feeble as that of Benhadad II. The utmost that Elisha had done was, under Divine guidance, to read his character and his designs, and to tell him that the accomplishment of these designs was near at hand.

So Hazael went back to Benhadad, and in answer to the eager inquiry, "What said Elisha to thee?" he gave the answer which Elisha had foreseen that he meant to give, and which was in any case a falsehood, for it suppressed half of what Elisha had really said. "He told me," said Hazael, "that thou shouldest surely recover."

Was the sequel of the interview the murder of Benhadad by Hazael?

The story has usually been so read, but Elisha had neither prophesied this nor suggested it. The sequel is thus described. "And it came to pass on the morrow, that *he* took the coverlet,¹³⁹ and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died: and Hazael reigned in his stead." The repetition of the name Hazael in the last clause is superfluous if he was the subject of the previous clause, and it has been consequently conjectured

¹³⁹ מִבְּרֵית הַמַּיִם. Jos., *Antt.*, IX. iv. 6, δίκτυον διάβροχον. Aquila, Symmachus, τὸ στρωμα. Michaelis supposed it to be the mosquito-net (κωνωπεῖον). Comp. 1 Sam. xix. 13. Ewald suggested "bath-mattress" (iii. 523). Sir G. Grove (*s. v.* "Elisha," *Bibl. Dict.*, ii. 923) mentions that Abbas Pasha is said to have been murdered in the same manner. Some, however, think that the measure was taken by way of cure (Bruce, *Travels*, iii. 33. Klostermann, *ad loc.*, alters the text at his pleasure).

that "he took" is merely the impersonal idiom "one took." Some suppose that, as Benhadad was in the bath, his servant took the bath-cloth, wetted it, and laid its thick folds over the mouth of the helpless king; others, that he soaked the thick quilt, which the king was too weak to lift away.¹⁴⁰ In either case it is hardly likely that a great officer like Hazael would have been in the bath-room or the bed-room of the dying king. Yet we must remember that the Prætorian Præfect Macro is said to have suffocated Tiberius with his bed-clothes. Josephus says that Hazael strangled his master with a net; and, indeed, he has generally been held guilty of the perpetration of the murder. But it is fair to give him the benefit of the doubt. Be that as it may, he seems to have reigned for some forty-six years (b. c. 886-840), and to have bequeathed the sceptre to a son on whom he had bestowed the old dynastic name of Benhadad.

¹⁴⁰ 2 Kings viii. 15; LXX., τὸ μαχβάρ; Vulg., *stragulum*; lit., "woven cloth."

CHAPTER X

(1) *JEHORAM BEN-JEHOSHAPHAT OF JUDAH*

b. c. 851-843

(2) *AHAZIAH BEN-JEHORAM OF JUDAH*

b. c. 843-842

2 Kings viii. 16-24, 25-29

"Bear like the Turk, no brother near the throne." – Pope.

The narrative now reverts to the kingdom of Judah, of which the historian, mainly occupied with the great deeds of the prophet in Israel, takes at this period but little notice.

He tells us that in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel, son of Ahab, his namesake and brother-in-law, Jehoram of Judah,

began to reign in Judah, though his father, Jehoshaphat, was then king.¹⁴¹

The statement is full of difficulties, especially as we have been already told (i. 17) that Jehoram ben-Ahab of Israel began to reign in the *second* year of Jehoram ben-Jehoshaphat of Judah, and (iii. 1) in the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat. It is hardly worth while to pause here to disentangle these complexities in a writer who, like most Eastern historians, is content with loose chronological references. By the current mode of reckoning, the twenty-five years of Jehoshaphat's reign may merely mean twenty-three and a month or two of two other years; and some suppose that, when Jehoram of Judah was about sixteen, his father went on the expedition against Moab, and associated his son with him in the throne. This is only conjecture. Jehoshaphat, of all kings, least needed a coadjutor, particularly so weak and worthless a one as his son; and though the association of colleagues with themselves has been common in some realms, there is not a single instance of it in the history of Israel and Judah – the case of Uzziah, who was a leper, not being to the point.¹⁴²

The kings both of Israel and of Judah at this period, with the single exception of the brave and good Jehoshaphat, were unworthy and miserable. The blight of the Jezebel-marriage and

¹⁴¹ The following genealogy may help to elucidate the troublesome identity of names:

¹⁴² Jotham ben-Uzziah was not the colleague of his father, but his public representative.

the curse of Baal-worship lay upon both kingdoms. It is scarcely possible to find such wretched monarchs as the two sons of Jezebel – Ahaziah and Jehoram in Israel, and the son-in-law and grandson of Jezebel, Jehoram and Ahaziah, in Judah. Their respective reigns are annals of shameful apostasy, and almost unbroken disaster.

Jehoram ben-Jehoshaphat of Judah was thirty-two years old when he began his independent reign, and reigned for eight deplorable years. The fact that his mother's name is (exceptionally) omitted seems to imply that his father Jehoshaphat set the good example of monogamy.¹⁴³ Jehoram was wholly under the influence of Athaliah, his wife, and of Jezebel, his mother-in-law, and he introduced into Judah their alien abominations. He "walked in their way, and did evil in the sight of the Lord." The Chronicler fills up the general remark by saying that he did his utmost to foster idolatry by erecting *bamoth* in the mountains of Judah, and compelled his people to worship there, in order to decentralise the religious services of the kingdom, and so to diminish the glory of the Temple. He introduced Baal-worship into Judah, and either he or his son was the guilty builder of a temple to Baalim, not only on the "opprobrious mount" on which stood the idolatrous chapels of Solomon, but on the Hill of the House itself. This temple had its own high priest, and was actually adorned with treasures torn

¹⁴³ The only other king of Judah whose mother's name is not mentioned (perhaps because his father Jotham had but one wife) is Ahaz.

from the Temple of Jehovah.¹⁴⁴ So bad was Jehoram's conduct that the historian can only attribute his non-destruction to the "covenant of salt" which God had made with David, "to give him a lamp for his children always."

But if actual destruction did not come upon him and his race, he came very near such a fate, and he certainly experienced that "the path of transgressors is hard." There is nothing to record about him but crime and catastrophe. First Edom revolted. Jehoshaphat had subdued the Edomites, and only allowed them to be governed by a vassal; now they threw off the yoke. The Jewish King advanced against them to "Zair" – by which must be meant apparently either Zoar (through which the road to Edom lay), or their capital, Mount Seir.¹⁴⁵ There he was surrounded by the Edomite hosts; and though by a desperate act of valour he cut his way through them at night in spite of their reserve of chariots, yet his army left him in the lurch.¹⁴⁶ Edom succeeded in establishing its final independence, to which we see an allusion in the one hope held out to Esau by Isaac in that "blessing" which was practically a curse.

The loss of so powerful a subject-territory, which now

¹⁴⁴ 2 Kings xi. 18; 2 Chron. xxi. 11, xxiv. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Vulg., *Seira*; Arab., *Sa'ir* (but the historian never uses the name Mount Seir); LXX., Σιῶρ. There is perhaps some corruption in the text, and the reading of the Chronicler "with his princes" shows that it may have once been שִׁירָשׁוֹׁתָיִם.

¹⁴⁶ 2 Kings viii. 21. "The people" (*i. e.*, the army of Judah) "fled to their tents." Apparently this means that they slunk away home. The word "tents" is a reminiscence of their nomad days, like the treasonable cry, "To your tents, O Israel."

constituted a source of danger on the eastern frontier of Judah, was succeeded by another disaster on the south-west, in the Shephelah or lowland plain. Here Libnah revolted,¹⁴⁷ and by gaining its autonomy contracted yet farther the narrow limits of the southern kingdom.

The Book of Kings tells us no more about the Jewish Jehoram, only adding that he died and was buried with his fathers, and was succeeded by his son Ahaziah. But the Book of Chronicles, which adds far darker touches to his character, also heightens to an extraordinary degree the intensity of his punishment. It tells us that he began his reign by the atrocious murder of his six younger brothers, for whom, following the old precedent of Rehoboam, Jehoshaphat had provided by establishing them as governors of various cities. As his throne was secure, we cannot imagine any motive for this brutal massacre except the greed of gain, and we can only suppose that, as Jehoram ben-Jehoshaphat became little more than a friendly vassal of his kinsmen in Israel, so he fell under the deadly influence of his wife Athaliah, as completely as his father-in-law had done under the spell of her mother Jezebel. With his brothers he also swept away a number of the chief nobles, who perhaps embraced the cause of his murdered kinsmen. Such conduct breathes the known spirit of Jezebel and of Athaliah. To rebuke him for this wickedness, he received the menace of a tremendous judgment upon his home and people in a writing from *Elijah*, whom we should certainly have assumed

¹⁴⁷ Josh. x. 29-39.

to be dead long before that time. The judgment itself followed. The Philistines and Arabians invaded Judah, captured Jerusalem, and murdered all Jehoram's own children, except Ahaziah, who was the youngest. Then Jehoram, at the age of thirty-eight, was smitten with an incurable disease of the bowels, of which he died two years later, and not only died unlamented, but was refused burial in the sepulchres of the kings. In any case his reign and that of his son and successor were the most miserable in the annals of Judah, as the reigns of their namesakes and kinsmen, Ahaziah ben-Ahab and Jehoram ben-Ahab, were also the most miserable in the annals of Israel.

Jehoram was succeeded on the throne of Judah by his son Ahaziah. If the chronology and the facts be correct, Ahaziah ben-Jehoram of Judah must have been born when his father was only eighteen, though he was the youngest of the king's sons, and so escaped from being massacred in the Philistine invasion. He succeeded at the age of twenty-two, and only reigned a single year. During this year his mother, the Gebîrah Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and granddaughter of the Tyrian Ethbaal, was all-supreme. She bent the weak nature of her son to still further apostasies. She was "his counsellor to do wickedly," and her Baal-priest Mattan was more important than the Aaronic high priest of the despised and desecrated Temple. Never did Judah sink to so low a level, and it was well that the days of Ahaziah of Judah were cut short.

The only event in his reign was the share he took with his uncle

Jehoram of Israel in his campaign to protect Ramoth-Gilead from Hazael. The expedition seems to have been successful in its main purpose. Ramoth-Gilead, the key to the districts of Argob and Bashan, was of immense importance for commanding the country beyond Jordan. It seems to be the same as Ramath-Mizpeh (Josh. xiii. 26); and if so, it was the spot where Jacob made his covenant with Laban. Ahab, or his successors, in spite of the disastrous end of the expedition to Ahab personally, had evidently recovered the frontier fortress from the Syrian king.¹⁴⁸ Its position upon a hill made its possession vital to the interests of Gilead; for the master of Ramah was the master of that Trans-Jordanic district. But Hazael had succeeded his murdered master, and was already beginning to fulfil the ruthless mission which Elisha had foreseen with tears. Jehoram ben-Ahab seems to have held his own against Hazael for a time; but in the course of the campaign at Ramoth he was so severely wounded that he was compelled to leave his army under the command of Jehu, and to return to Jezreel, to be healed of his wounds. Thither his nephew Ahaziah of Judah went to visit him; and there, as we shall hear, he too met his doom. That fate, the Chronicler tells us, was the penalty of his iniquities. "The destruction of Ahaziah was of God by coming to Joram."

We have no ground for accusing either king of any want of courage; yet it was obviously impolitic of Jehoram to linger unnecessarily in his luxurious capital, while the army of Israel

¹⁴⁸ Jos., *Antt.*, IX. vi. 1.

was engaged in service on a dangerous frontier. The wounds inflicted by the Syrian archers may have been originally severe. Their arrows at this time played as momentous a part in history as the cloth-yard shafts of our English bowmen which "sewed the French ranks together" at Poitiers, Créçy, and Azincour. But Jehoram had at any rate so far recovered that he could ride in his chariot; and if he had been wise and bravely vigorous, he would not have left his army under a subordinate at so perilous an epoch, and menaced by so resolute a foe. Or if he were indeed compelled to consult the better physicians at Jezreel, he should have persuaded his nephew Ahaziah of Judah – who seems to have been more or less of a vassal as well as a kinsman – to keep an eye on the beleaguered fort. Both kings, however, deserted their post, – Jehoram to recover perfect health; and Ahaziah, who had been his comrade – as their father and grandfather had gone together to the same war – to pay a state visit of condolence to the royal invalid. The army was left under a popular, resolute, and wholly unscrupulous commander, and the results powerfully affected the immediate and the ultimate destiny of both kingdoms.

CHAPTER XI

THE REVOLT OF JEHU

b. c. 842

2 Kings ix. 1-37

"Te semper anteit sæva Necessitas
Clavos trabales et cuneos manu,
Gestans ahenâ."

Horat., Od., I. xxxv. 17.

A long period had elapsed since Elijah had received the triple commission which was to mark the close of his career. Two of those Divine behests had now been accomplished. He had anointed Elisha, son of Shaphat, of Abel-Meholah, to be prophet in his room;¹⁴⁹ and Elisha had anointed Hazael to be king over Syria;¹⁵⁰ the third and more dangerous commission, involving nothing less than the overthrow of the mighty dynasty of Omri, remained still unaccomplished.

¹⁴⁹ 1 Kings xix. 15, 16.

¹⁵⁰ 2 Kings viii. 12, 13.

If the name of Jehu ("Jehovah is He")¹⁵¹ had been actually mentioned to Elijah, the dreadful secret must have remained buried in the breast of the prophet and in that of his successor for many years. Further, Jehu was yet a very young man, and to have marked him out as the founder of a dynasty would have been to doom him to certain destruction. An Eastern king, whose family has once securely seated itself on the throne, is hedged round with an awful divinity, and demands an unquestioning obedience. Elijah had been removed from earth before this task had been fulfilled, and Elisha had to wait for his opportunity. But the doom was passed, though the judgment was belated. The sons of Ahab were left a space to repent, or to fill to the brim the cup of their father's iniquities.

"The sword of Heaven is not in haste to smite,
Nor yet doth linger."

Ahaziah, Ahab's eldest son, after a reign of one year, marked only by crimes and misfortunes, had ended in overwhelming disaster his deplorable career. His brother Jehoram had succeeded him, and had now been on the throne for at least twelve years, which had been chiefly signalled by that unsuccessful attempt to recover the territory of revolted Moab, to which we owe the celebrated Stone of Mesha. We have already narrated the result of the campaign which had so many vicissitudes. The combined armies of Israel, Judah, and Edom

¹⁵¹ The name was not uncommon, 1 Chron. ii. 38, iv. 35, xii. 3.

had been delivered by the interposition of Elisha from perishing of thirst beside the scorched-up bed of the Wady-el-Ahsy; and availing themselves of the rash assault of the Moabites, had swept everything before them. But Moab stood at bay at Kir-Haraseth (Kerak), his strongest fortress, six miles from Ar or Rabbah, and ten miles east of the southern end of the Dead Sea. It stood three thousand feet above the level of the sea, and is defended by a network of steep valleys. Nevertheless, Israel would have subdued it, but for the act of horrible despair to which the King of Moab resorted in his extremity, by offering up his eldest son as a burnt-offering to Chemosh upon the wall of the city. Horror-stricken by the catastrophe, and terrified with the dread that the vengeance of Chemosh could not but be aroused by so tremendous a sacrifice, the besieging host had retired. From that moment Moab had not only been free, but assumed the *rôle* of an aggressor, and sent her marauding bands to harry and carry the farms and homesteads of her former conqueror.¹⁵²

Then followed the aggressions of Benhadad which had been frustrated by the insight of Elisha, and which owed their temporary cessation to his generosity.¹⁵³ The reappearance of the Syrians in the field had reduced Samaria to the lowest depths of ghastly famine. But the day of the guilty city had not yet come, and a sudden panic, caused among the invaders by a rumoured assault of Hittites and Egyptians, had saved her from

¹⁵² 2 Kings xiii. 20, xxiv. 2; Jer. xlvi.

¹⁵³ 2 Kings vi. 8-23.

destruction.¹⁵⁴ Taking advantage of the respite caused by the change of the Syrian dynasty, and pressing on his advantage, Jehoram, with the aid of his Judæan nephew, had once more got possession of Ramoth-Gilead before Hazael was secure on the throne which he had usurped.

This then was the situation: – The allied and kindred kings of Israel and Judah were idling in the pomp of hospitality at Jezreel; their armies were encamped about Ramoth-Gilead; and at the head of the host of Israel was the crafty and vehement grandson of Nimshi.

Elisha saw and seized his opportunity. The day of vengeance from the Lord had dawned. Things had not materially altered since the days of Ahab. If Jehovah was nominally worshipped, if the very names of the kings of Israel bore witness to His supremacy,¹⁵⁵ Baal was worshipped too. The curse which Elijah had pronounced against Ahab and his house remained unfulfilled. The credit of prophecy was at stake. The blood of Naboth and his slaughtered sons cried to the Lord from the ground; and hitherto it seemed to have cried in vain. If the *Nebiûm* (the prophetic class) were to have their due weight in Israel, the hour had come, and the man was ready.

The light which falls on Elisha is dim and intermittent. His name is surrounded by a halo of nebulous wonders, of which many are of a private and personal character. But he was a known

¹⁵⁴ 2 Kings vii. 6.

¹⁵⁵ Jehoram = Jehovah is exalted. Ahaziah = Jehovah holds.

enemy of Ahab and his house. He had, indeed, more than once interposed to snatch them from ruin, as in the expedition against Moab, and in the awful straits of the siege of Samaria by the Syrians. But his person had none the less been hateful to the sons of Jezebel, and his life had been endangered by their bursts of sudden fury. He could hardly again have a chance so favourable as that which now offered itself, when the armed host was at one place and the king at another. Perhaps, too, he may have been made aware that the soldiers were not well pleased to find at their head a king who was so far a *fainéant* as to leave them exposed to a powerful enemy, and show no eagerness to return. His "urgent private affairs" were not so urgent as to entitle him to take his ease at luxurious Jezreel.

Where Elisha was at the time we do not know – perhaps at Dothan, perhaps at Samaria. Suddenly he called to him a youth – one of the Sons of the Prophets, on whose speed and courage he could rely – placed in his hands a vial of the consecrated anointing oil,¹⁵⁶ told him to gird up his loins,¹⁵⁷ and to speed across the Jordan to Ramoth-Gilead. When he arrived, he was to bid Jehu rise up from the company of his fellow-captains to hurry him into "a chamber within a chamber,"¹⁵⁸ to shut the door for secrecy, to pour the consecrating oil upon his head, to anoint him King of Israel in the name of Jehovah, and then to fly without

¹⁵⁶ Vial (*pak*) only here and in 1 Sam. x. 1. "The oil" (LXX., τὸν φακὸν τοῦ ἐλαίου).

¹⁵⁷ "His habit fit for speed *succinct*" (Milton).

¹⁵⁸ Inner chamber, 1 Kings xx. 30.

a moment's delay.¹⁵⁹

The messenger – the Rabbis guess that he was Jonah, the son of Amittai¹⁶⁰– knew well that his was a service of immense peril, in which his life might easily pay the forfeit of his temerity. How was he to guess that at once, without striking a blow, the host of Israel would fling to the winds its sworn allegiance to the son of the warrior Ahab, the fourth monarch of the powerful dynasty of Omri? Might not any one of a thousand possible accidents thwart a conspiracy of which the success depended on the unflinching courage and promptitude of his single hand?

He was but a youth, but he was the trained pupil of a master who had, again and again, stood before kings, and not been afraid. He sprang from a community which inherited the splendid traditions of the Prophet of Flame.

He did not hesitate a moment. He tightened the camel's hide round his naked limbs, flung back the long dark locks of the Nazarite, and sped upon his way. A true son of the schools of Jehovah's prophets has, and can have, no fear of man. The armies of Israel and Judah saw the wild, flying figure of a young man, with his hairy garment and streaming locks, rush through the camp. Whatever might be their surmisings, he brooked no questions. Availing himself of the awe with which the shadow of Elijah had covered the sacrosanct person of a prophetic

¹⁵⁹ Perhaps, if Elisha had gone in person, suspicion might have been aroused. He was not more than fifty at this time, and lived forty-three years more.

¹⁶⁰ *Seder Olam*, c. 18.

messenger, he made his way straight to the war-council of the captains; and brushing aside every attempt to impede his progress with the plea that he was the bearer of Jehovah's message, he burst into the council of the astonished warriors, who were assembled in the private courtyard of a house in the fortress-town.¹⁶¹

He knew the fame of Jehu, but did not know his person, and dared not waste time. "I have an errand to thee, O captain," he said to the assembly generally. The message had been addressed to no one in particular, and Jehu naturally asked, "Unto which of all of us?" With the same swift intuition which has often enabled men in similar circumstances to recognise a leader – as Josephus recognised Vespasian, and St. Severinus recognised Odoacer, and Joan of Arc recognised Charles VI. of France – he at once replied, "To thee, O captain." Jehu did not hesitate a moment. Prophets had shown, many a time, that their messages might not be neglected or despised. He rose, and followed the youth, who led him into the most secret recess of the house, and there, emptying on his head the fragrant oil of consecration, said, "Thus saith Jehovah, God of Israel, I have anointed thee king over the people of Jehovah, even over Israel."¹⁶² He was to smite the house of his master Ahab in vengeance for the blood

¹⁶¹ It seems as though they were *inside* the town to defend it, not a beleaguering host outside.

¹⁶² The expression is remarkable, as showing how completely the prerogative of the Chosen People was supposed to rest with the Ten Tribes, as the most important representatives of the seed of Abraham.

of Jehovah's prophets and servants whom Jezebel had murdered. Ahab's house, every male of it, young and old, bond and free,¹⁶³ is doomed to perish, as the houses of Jeroboam and of Baasha had perished before them, by a bloody end. Further, the dogs should eat Jezebel by the rampart of Jezreel,¹⁶⁴ and there should be none to bury her.

One moment sufficed for his daring deed, for his burning message; the next he had flung open the door and fled. The soldiers of the camp must have whispered still more anxiously together as they saw the same agitated youth rushing through their lines with the same impetuosity which had marked his entrance. In those dark days the sudden appearance of a prophet was usually the herald of some terrific storm.¹⁶⁵

Jehu was utterly taken by surprise; but according to the reading preserved by Ephraem Syrus in 2 Kings ix. 26, he had on the previous night seen in a dream the blood of Naboth and his sons. If the thought of revolt had ever passed for a moment through his mind, it had never assumed a definite shape. True, he had been a warrior from his youth. True, he had been one of Ahab's bodyguard, and had ridden before him in a chariot at least twenty years earlier, and had now risen by valour and

¹⁶³ "Him that is shut up, and him that is left at large in Israel" (2 Kings ix. 8; 1 Kings xiv. 10, xvi. 3, 4).

¹⁶⁴ The A.V. has, less accurately, "in the *portion* of Jezreel." See 1 Kings xxi. 23. Heb., קְלָיָה. The קְלָיָה of an Eastern town is the ditch and empty space – a sort of external *pomærium* around it. It is the place of offal, and the haunt of vultures and pariah dogs.

¹⁶⁵ 1 Sam. xvi. 4: "Comest thou peaceably?"

capacity to the high station of captain of the host. True, also, that he had heard the great curse which Elijah had pronounced on Ahab at the door of Naboth's vineyard; but he heard it while he was yet an obscure youth, and he had little dreamed that his was the hand which should carry it into execution. Who was he? And had not the house of Omri been, in some sense, sanctioned by Heaven? And were not the words of the prophet "wild and wandering cries," of which the issues might be averted by such a repentance as that of Ahab?

And he felt another misgiving. Might not this scene be the plot of some secret enemy? Might it not at any rate be a reckless jest palmed upon him by his comrades? If any jealous member of the confederacy of captains betrayed the fact that Jehu had tampered with their allegiance, would his head be safe for a single hour? He would act warily. He came back to his fellow-captains and said nothing.

But they were burning with curiosity. Something must be impending. Prophets did not rush in thus tumultuously for no purpose. Must not the youth's mantle of hair be some standard of war?

"Is all right?" they shouted. "Why did this frantic fellow come to thee?"¹⁶⁶

"You know all about it," answered Jehu, with wary coolness. "You know more about it than I do. You know the man, and what

¹⁶⁶ 2 Kings ix. 11, חַמְשָׁנִים LXX., ὁ ἐπίληπτος. Comp. ver. 20, "he driveth furiously" (חַמְשָׁנִים).

his talk was."

"Lies!" bluntly answered the rough soldiers.¹⁶⁷ "Tell us now."

Then Jehu's eye took measure of them and their feelings. A judge of men and of men's countenances, he saw conspiracy flashing in their faces. He saw that they suspected the true state of things, and were on fire to carry it out. Perhaps they had caught sight of the vial of oil under the youth's scant dress. Could any quickened observation at least fail to notice that the soldier's dark locks were shining and fragrant, as they had not been a moment ago, with consecrated oil?

Then Jehu frankly told them the perilous secret. Thus and thus had the young prophet spoken, and had said, "Thus saith Jehovah, I have anointed thee king over Israel."

The message was met with a shout of answering approbation. That shout was the death-knell of the house of Omri. It showed that the reigning dynasty had utterly forfeited its popularity. No luck had followed the sons of Naboth's murderer. Israel was weary of their mother Jezebel. Why was this king Jehoram, this king of evil auspices, who had been repudiated by Moab and harried by Syria – why, in the first gleam of possible prosperity, was he being detained at Jezreel by wounds which rumour said were already sufficiently healed to allow him to return to his post? Down with the seed of the murderer and the sorceress! Let brave Jehu be king, as Jehovah has said!

So the captains sprang to their feet, and then and there seized

¹⁶⁷ Ver. 12, a lie! (רִקְשׁ).

Jehu, and carried him in triumph to the top of the stairs which ran round the inside of the courtyard, and stripped off their mantles to extemporise for him the semblance of a cushioned throne.¹⁶⁸ Then in the presence of such soldiers as they could trust they blew a sudden blast of the ram's horn, and shouted, "Jehu is king!"

Jehu was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet. Nothing tries a man's vigour and nerve so surely as a sudden crisis. It is this swift resolution which has raised many a man to the throne, as it raised Otho, and Napoleon I. and Napoleon III. The history of Israel is specially full of *coups d'état*, but no one of them is half so decisive or overwhelming as this. Jehu instantly accepted the office of Jehovah's avenger on the house of Ahab.¹⁶⁹ Everything, as Jehu saw, depended on the suddenness and fury with which the blow was delivered. "If you want me to be your king,"¹⁷⁰ he said, "keep the lines secure, and guard the fortress walls. I will be my own messenger to Jehoram. Let no deserter go forth to give him warning."¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ What is meant by the *gerem* of the staircase is uncertain. The word means "a bone" (Aquila, ὀστῶδες), and is, in this connection, an ἄπαξ λεγόμενον. The Targum explains it as the top vane of a stair-dial. The margin of the R.V. renders it "on the bare steps." The Vulgate renders it *in similitudinem tribunalis*, as though *gerem* meant *tselem*. The LXX. conceal their perplexity by simply translating the word ἐπὶ τὸ γαρέμ. Grotius and Clericus, *in fastigio graduum*. Symmachus, ἐπὶ μίαν τῶν ἀναβαθμίδων.

¹⁶⁹ 2 Kings ix. 14: "So Jehu conspired against Joram." The same word is used in 2 Chron. xxiv. 25, 26.

¹⁷⁰ 2 Kings ix. 15, R.V.: "If this be your mind."

¹⁷¹ So far as we know, he never returned to Ramoth-Gilead, of which indeed we hear no more.

It was agreed; and Jehu, only taking with him Bidkar, his fellow-officer, and a small band of followers, set forth at full speed from Ramoth-Gilead.

The fortress of Ramoth, now the important town of Es-Salt, a place which must always have been the key of Gilead, was built on the summit of a rocky headland, fortified by nature as well as by art. It is south of the river Jabbok, and lies at the head of the only easy road which runs down westward to the Jordan and eastward to the rich plateau of the interior.¹⁷² Crossing the fords of the Jordan, Jehu would soon be able to join the main road, which, passing Tirzah, Zaretan, and Beth-shean, and sweeping eastward of Mount Gilboa, gives ready access to Jezreel.

The watchman on the lofty watchtower of the summer palace caught sight of a storm of dust careering along from the eastward up the valley towards the city.¹⁷³ The times were wild and troublous. What could it be? He shouted his alarm, "I see a troop!" The tidings were startling, and the king was instantly informed that chariots and horsemen were approaching the royal city. "Send a horseman to meet them," he said, "with the message, 'Is all well?'"

Forth flew the rider, and cried to the rushing escort, "The king asks, 'Is all well? Is it peace?'" For probably the anxious city hoped that there might have been some victory of the army

¹⁷² Tristram, *Land of Moab*.

¹⁷³ Heb., *Shiph'hath*, "a dust-storm" (LXX., κωνιορτόν, αἱ ὄχλον; Vulg., *globum*), not as in A.V. and R.V., "a company." Comp. Isa. lx. 6; Ezek. xxvi. 10.

against Hazeal, which would fill them with joy.

"What hast thou to do with peace? Turn thee behind me," answered Jehu; and perforce the horseman, whatever may have been his conjectures, had to follow in the rear.

"He reached them," cried the sentry on the watchtower, "but he does not return."

The news was enigmatical and alarming; and the troubled king sent another horseman. Again the same colloquy occurred, and again the watchman gave the ominous message, adding to it the yet more perplexing news that, in the mad and headlong driving¹⁷⁴ of the charioteer, he recognises the driving of Jehu, the son of Nimshi.¹⁷⁵

What had happened to his army? Why should the captain of the host be driving thus furiously to Jezreel?

Matters were evidently very critical, whatever the swift approach of chariots and horsemen might portend. "Yoke my chariot," said Jehoram; and his nephew Ahaziah, who had shared his campaign, and was no less consumed with anxiety to learn tidings which could not but be pressing, rode by him in another chariot to meet Jehu. They took with them no escort worth

¹⁷⁴ Clearly the rendering "he driveth furiously" is right. The word "furiously" is *beshigga'ôn* (Vulg., *præceps*), and is connected with "mad," ver. 11. LXX., ἐν παραλλαγή. Arab. Chald., "quietly." Josephus, "leisurely, and in good order." Such an approach would not, however, have been at all in accordance with the perilous urgency of his intent.

¹⁷⁵ Jehu, the son of Jehoshaphat, is named from his grandfather Nimshi, who seems to have been the founder of the greatness of his house.

mentioning. The rebellion was not only sudden, but wholly unexpected.

The two kings met Jehu in a spot of the darkest omen. It was the plot of ground which had once been the vineyard of Naboth, at the door of which Ahab had heard from Elijah the awful message of his doom. As the New Forest was ominous to our early Norman kings as the witness of their cruelties and encroachments, so was this spot to the house of Omri, though it was adjacent to their ivory palace, and had been transformed from a vineyard into a garden or pleasance.

"Is it peace, Jehu?" shouted the agitated king; by which probably he only meant to ask, "Is all going well in the army at Ramoth?"

The fierce answer which burst from the lips of his general fatally undeceived him. "What peace," brutally answered the rebel, "so long as the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts are so many?" She, after all, was the *fons et origo mali* to the house of Jehoram. Hers was the dark spirit of murder and idolatry which had walked in that house. She was the instigator and the executer of the crime against Naboth. She had been the foundress of Baal- and Asherah-worship; she was the murderess of the prophets; she had been specially marked out for vengeance in the doom pronounced both by Elijah and Elisha.

The answer was unmistakable. This was a revolt, a revolution. "Treachery, Ahaziah!" shouted the terrified king, and instantly

wheeled round his chariot to flee.¹⁷⁶ But not so swiftly as to escape the Nemesis which had been stealing upon him with leaden feet, but now smote him irretrievably with iron hand. Without an instant's hesitation, Jehu snatched his bow from his attendant charioteer, "filled his hands with it," and from its full stretch and resonant string sped the arrow, which smote Jehoram in the back with fatal force, and passed through his heart.¹⁷⁷ Without a word the unhappy king sank down upon his knees¹⁷⁸ in his chariot, and fell face forward, dead.

"Take him up," cried Jehu to Bidkar,¹⁷⁹ "and fling him down where he is, – here in this portion of the field of Naboth the Jezreelite. Here, years ago, you and I, as we rode behind Ahab,¹⁸⁰ heard Elijah utter his oracle on this man's father, that vengeance should meet him here. Where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth and his sons, let dogs lick the blood of the son of Ahab."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ 2 Kings ix. 23: "Turned his hands." Comp. 1 Kings xxii. 34.

¹⁷⁷ Ver. 24. Vulg., *inter scapulas*.

¹⁷⁸ LXX., reading לַצְּרָרִים לְצַדִּיקִים.

¹⁷⁹ Bidkar, perhaps Bar-dekar, "Son of stabbing." Comp. 1 Kings iv. 9.

¹⁸⁰ Heb., *ts'madim*, "in pairs"; LXX., ἐπιβεβηκότες ἐπὶ ζεύγη. It is uncertain whether Jehu and Bidkar were in the same chariot as Ahab, as Josephus says (καθεζομένους ὀπισθεν τοῦ ἄρματος), or in a separate chariot.

¹⁸¹ 2 Kings ix. 26: "Saith the Lord." Ephraem Syrus omits these words. He says that the night before Jehu had seen the blood of Naboth and his sons in a dream. Comp. Hom., *Od.*, iii. 258: Τῶ κε οἱ οὐδὲ θανόντι χυτὴν ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἔχευαν 'Αλλ' ἄρα τονγε κύνες τε καὶ οἰωνοὶ κατέδαψαν Κείμενον ἐν πεδίῳ.

But Jehu was not the man to let the king's murder stay his chariot-wheels when more work had yet to be done. Ahaziah of Judah, too, belonged to Ahab's house, for he was Ahab's grandson, and Jehoram's nephew and ally. Without stopping to mourn or avenge the tragedy of his uncle's murder, Ahaziah fled towards Bethgan or Engannim,¹⁸² the fountain of gardens, south of Jezreel, on the road to Samaria and Jerusalem. Jehu gave the laconic order, "Smite him also";¹⁸³ but fright added wings to the speed of the hapless King of Judah. His chariot-steeds were royal steeds, and were fresh; those of Jehu were spent with the long, fierce drive from Ramoth. He got as far as the ascent of Gur before he was overtaken.¹⁸⁴ There, not far from Ibleam, the rocky hill impeded his flight, and he was wounded by the pursuers. But he managed to struggle onwards to Megiddo, on the south of the plain of Jezreel, and there he hid himself.¹⁸⁵ He was discovered, dragged out, and slain. Even Jehu's fierce emissaries did not make war on dead bodies, any more than Hannibal did, or Charles V. They left such meanness to Jehu

¹⁸² A.V., "By the way of the garden-house." LXX., Βαθγάβ.

¹⁸³ The text is a little uncertain.

¹⁸⁴ Thenius supposes "Gur" to mean "a caravanserai." Comp. 2 Chron. xxvi. 7, *Gur-Baal*; Vulg., *Hospitium Baalis*.

¹⁸⁵ The account of the Chronicler (2 Chron. xxii. 9) differs from that of the earlier historian. It may, however, be (uncertainly) reconciled with it as in the text, if we suppose the words "he was hid in Samaria" to mean in Megiddo, in the territory of Samaria. Obviously, however, the traditions varied. There are difficulties about the story, for Ibleam is on the west towards Megiddo, and not between Jezreel and Samaria.

himself, and to our Charles II. They did not interfere with the dead king's remains. His servants carried them to Jerusalem, and there he was buried with his fathers in the sepulchre of the kings, in the city of David. As there was nothing more to tell about him, the historian omits the usual formula about the rest of the acts of Ahaziah, and all that he did. His death illustrates the proverb *Mitgegangen mitgefangen*: he was the comrade of evil men, and he perished with them.

Jehu speedily reached Jezreel, but the interposition of Jehoram and the orders for the pursuit of Ahaziah had caused a brief delay, and Jezebel had already been made aware that her doom was imminent.

Not even the sudden and dreadful death of her son, and the nearness of her own fate, daunted the steely heart of the Tyrian sorceress. If she was to die, she would meet death like a queen. As though for some Court banquet, she painted her eyelashes and eyebrows with antimony, to make her eyes look large and lustrous,¹⁸⁶ and put on her jewelled head-dress.¹⁸⁷ Then she mounted the palace tower, and, looking down through the lattice above the city gate, watched the thundering advance of Jehu's chariot, and hailed the triumphant usurper with the bitterest

¹⁸⁶ צִיָּבָה, "Lead-glance." A mixture of pulverised antimony (*stibium*) and zinc is still used by women in the East for this purpose. *In calliblepharis dilatat oculos* (Plin., *H. N.*, xxxiii.). Keren-Happuk, the name given by Job to one of his daughters, means "horn of stibium." The object could hardly have been to *attract* Jehu (as Ephraem Syrus thinks), for Jezebel had already a *grandson* twenty-three years old (viii. 26).

¹⁸⁷ A.V., "Tired her head." Comp. *tiara*. Lit., "made good"; LXX., ἡγάθουε.

insult she could devise. She knew that Omri, her husband's father, had taken swift vengeance on the guilt of the usurper Zimri, who had been forced to burn himself in the harem at Tirzah after one month's troubled reign. Her shrill voice was heard above the roar of the chariot-wheels in the ominous taunt, —

"Is it peace, thou Zimri, thou murderer of thy master?"¹⁸⁸

No! — She meant, "There is no peace for thee nor thine, any more than for me or mine! Thou mayest murder us; but thee too, thy doom awaiteth!"

Stung by the ill-omened words, Jehu looked up at her and shouted, —

"Who is on my side? Who?"

The palace was apparently rife with traitors. Ahab had been the first polygamist among the kings of Israel, and therefore the first also to introduce the odious atrocity of eunuchs. Those hapless wretches, the portents of Eastern seraglios, the disgrace of humanity, are almost always the retributive enemies of the societies of which they are the helpless victims. Fidelity or gratitude are rarely to be looked for from natures warped into malignity by the ruthless misdoing of men. Nor was the nature of Jezebel one to inspire affection. One or two eunuchs¹⁸⁹ immediately thrust out of the windows their bloated

¹⁸⁸ Josephus gives the sense very well: Καλὸς δοῦλος ὁ ἀποκτείνας τὸν δεσπότην (*Antt.*, IX. vi. 4). The same question might have been addressed to Baasha, Shallum, Menahem, Pekah, and Hoshea; but at least Jehu might plead a prophet's call.

¹⁸⁹ "Two or three." Lit., "two three," like the old English "two three" for "several."

and beardless faces. "Fling her down!" Jehu shouted. Down they flung the wretched queen (has any queen ever died a death so shamelessly ignominious?), and her blood spirted upon the wall, and on the horses. Jehu, who had only stopped for an instant in his headlong rush, drove his horses over her corpse,¹⁹⁰ and entered the gate of her capital with his wheels crimson with her blood. History records scarcely another instance of such a scene, except when Tullia, a century later, drove her chariot over the dead body of her father Servius Tullius in the *Vicus Sceleratus* of ancient Rome.¹⁹¹

But what cared Jehu? Many a conqueror ere now has sat down to the dinner prepared for his enemy; and the obsequious household of the dead tyrants, ready to do the bidding of their new lord, ushered the hungry man to the banquet provided for the kings whom he had slain. No man dreamt of uttering a wail; no man thought of raising a finger for dead Jehoram or for dead Jezebel, though they had all been under *her* sway for at least five-and-thirty years. "The wicked perish, and no man regardeth." "When the wicked perish, there is shouting."¹⁹²

We may be startled at a revolution so sudden and so complete; yet it is true to history. A tyrant or a cabal may oppress a nation

¹⁹⁰ Ver. 33. Heb., "He trod her underfoot." LXX., Συνεπάτησαν αὐτήν; Vulg., *Conculcaverunt eam*.

¹⁹¹ Liv., i. 46-48.

¹⁹² Prov. xi. 10. Compare the remark of Voltaire, who saw "le peuple ivré de vin et de joie de la mort de Louis XIV."

for long years. Their word may be thought absolute, their power irresistible. Tyranny seems to paralyse the courage of resistance, like the fabled head of Medusa. Remove its fascination of corruption, and men become men, and not machines, once more. Jehu's daring woke Israel from the lethargy which had made her tolerate the murders and enchantments of this Baal-worshipping alien. In the same way in one week Robespierre seemed to be an invincible autocrat; the next week his power had crumbled into dust and ashes at a touch.

It was not until Jehu had sated his thirst and hunger after that wild drive, which had ended in the murder of two kings and a queen and in his sudden elevation to a throne, that it even occurred to this new tiger-king to ask what had become of Jezebel. But when he had eaten and drunk, he said, "Go, see now to this cursed woman, and bury her: for she is a king's daughter." That she had been first Princess, then Queen, then Gebîrah in Israel for nearly a full lifetime was nothing: it was nothing to Jehu that she was a wife, and mother, and grandmother of kings and queens both of Israel and Judah; – but she was also the daughter of Ethbaal, the priest-king of Tyre and Sidon, and therefore any shameful treatment of her remains might kindle trouble from the region of Phœnicia.¹⁹³

But no one had taken the trouble so much as to look after the

¹⁹³ 1 Kings xvi. 31. At this time Ethbaal was dead. He reigned probably from b. c. 940-908, and died at the age of sixty-eight (Jos., *Antt.*, VIII. xiii. 1, IX. vi. 6; c. *Ap.*, i. 18).

corpse of Jezebel. The populace of Jezreel were occupied with their new king. Where Jezebel fell, there she had been suffered to lie; and no one, apparently, cared even to despoil her of the royal robes, now saturated with bloodshed. Flung from the palace-tower, her body had fallen in the open space just outside the walls – what is called "the mounds" of an Eastern city. In the strange carelessness of sanitation which describes as "fate" even the visitation of an avoidable pestilence, all sorts of offal are shot into this vacant space to fester in the tropic heat. I myself have seen the pariah dogs and the vultures feeding on a ghastly dead horse in a ruined space within the street of Beit-Dejun; and the dogs and the vultures – "those national undertakers" – had done their work unbidden on the corpse of the Tyrian queen. When men went to bury her, they only found a few dog-mumbled bones – the skull, and the feet, and the palms of the hands.¹⁹⁴ They brought the news to Jehu as he rested after his feast. It did not by any means discompose him. He at once recognised that another levin-bolt had fallen from the thunder-crash of Elijah's prophecy, and he troubled himself about the matter no further. Her carcase, as the man of God had prophesied, had become as dung upon the face of the field, so that none could say, "This is Jezebel."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ 1 Kings xxi. 23.

¹⁹⁵ Comp. Psalm lxxxiii. 10. Her name remained a by-word till the latest days (Rev. ii. 20), and the Spanish Jews called their persecutress Isabella the Catholic "Jezebel."

CHAPTER XII

JEHU ESTABLISHED ON THE THRONE

b. c. 842-814

2 Kings x. 1-17

"The devil can quote Scripture for his purpose."

Shakespeare.

But the work of Jehu was not yet over. He was established at Jezreel; he was lord of the palace and seraglio of his master; the army of Israel was with him. But who could be sure that no civil war would arise, as between the partisans of Zimri and Omri, as between Omri and Tibni? Ahab, first of the kings of Israel, had left many sons. There were no less than seventy of these princes at Samaria. Might there not be among them some youth of greater courage and capacity than the murdered Jehoram? And could it be anticipated that the late dynasty was so utterly unfortunate and execrated as to have none left to do them reverence, or to strike one blow on their behalf, after more

than half a century of undisputed sway?¹⁹⁶ Jehu's *coup de main* had been brilliantly successful. In one day he had leapt into the throne. But Samaria was strong upon its watch-tower hill. It was full of Ahab's sons, and had not yet declared on Jehu's side. It might be expected to feel some gratitude to the dynasty which Jehu had supplanted, seeing that it owed to the grandfather of the king whom he had just slain its very existence as the capital of Israel.

He would put a bold face on his usurpation, and strike while the iron was hot. He would not rouse opposition by seeming to assume that Samaria would accept his rebellion. He therefore wrote a letter to the rulers of Samaria¹⁹⁷— which was but a journey of nine hours' distance from Jezreel — and to the guardians of the young princes, reminding them that they were masters in a strong city, protected with its own contingent of chariots and horses, and well supplied with armour. He suggested that they should select the most promising of Ahab's sons, make him king, and begin a civil war on his behalf.

The event showed how prudent was this line of conduct. As yet Jehu had not transferred the army from Ramoth-Gilead. He had doubtless taken good care to prevent intelligence of his plans from reaching the adherents of Jehoram in Samaria. To them the

¹⁹⁶ Omri, 12 years; Ahab, 22; Ahaziah, 18; Jehoram, 12.

¹⁹⁷ The reading of 2 Kings x. 1, "Unto the rulers of *Jezreel*," is clearly wrong. The LXX. reads, "Unto the rulers of Samaria." Unless "Jezreel" be a clerical error for Israel, we must read, "He sent letters from Jezreel unto the rulers of Samaria."

unknown was the terrible. All they knew was that "Behold, two kings stood not before him!" The army must have sanctioned his revolt: what chance had they? As for loyalty and affection, if ever they had existed towards this hapless dynasty, they had vanished like a dream. The people of Samaria and Jezreel had once been obedient as sheep to the iron dominance of Jezebel. They had tolerated her idol-abominations, and the insolence of her army of dark-browed priests. They had not risen to defend the prophets of Jehovah, and had suffered even Elijah, twice over, to be forced to flee for his life. They had borne, hitherto without a murmur, the tragedies, the sieges, the famines, the humiliations, with which during these reigns they had been familiar. And was not Jehovah against the waning fortunes of the Beni-Omri? Elijah had undoubtedly cursed them, and now the curse was falling. Jehu must doubtless have let it be known that he was only carrying out the behest of their own citizen the great Elisha, who had sent to him the anointing oil. They could find abundant excuses to justify their defection from the old house, and they sent to the terrible man a message of almost abject submission: – Let him do as he would; they would make no king: they were his servants, and would do his bidding.

Jehu was not likely to be content with verbal or even written promises. He determined, with cynical subtlety, to make them put a very bloody sign-manual to their treaty, by implicating them irrevocably in his rebellion. He wrote them a second mandate.

"If," he said, "ye accept my rule, prove it by your obedience.

Cut off the heads of your master's sons, and see that they are brought to me here to-morrow by yourselves before the evening."

The ruthless order was fulfilled to the letter by the terrified traitors. The king's sons were with their tutors, the lords of the city. On the very morning that Jehu's second missive arrived, every one of these poor guiltless youths was unceremoniously beheaded. The hideous, bleeding trophies were packed in fig-baskets and sent to Jezreel.¹⁹⁸

When Jehu was informed of this revolting present it was evening, and he was sitting at a meal with his friends.¹⁹⁹ He did not trouble himself to rise from his feast or to look at "death made proud by pure and princely beauty." He knew that those seventy heads could only be the heads of the royal youths. He issued a cool and brutal order that they should be piled in two heaps²⁰⁰ until the morning on either side the entrance of the city gates. Were they watched? or were the dogs and vultures and hyænas again left to do their work upon them? We do not know. In any case it was a scene of brutal barbarism such as might have been witnessed in living memory in Khiva or Bokhara;²⁰¹ nor must we forget that even in the last century the heads of the brave and the noble rotted on Westminster Hall and Temple Bar, and over

¹⁹⁸ Fig-baskets, Jer. xxiv. 2. The word *dudim* is rendered "pots" in 1 Sam. ii. 14. LXX., ἐν καρτάλλοις; Vulg., *in cophinis*. In Psalm lxxxii. 6 the LXX. has ἐν τῷ κοφίνῳ.

¹⁹⁹ Jos., *Antt.*, IX. vi. 5.

²⁰⁰ Heb., *Tsibourîm*; LXX., βουνοῦς.

²⁰¹ Comp. 1 Sam. xvii. 54; 2 Macc. xv. 30.

the Gate of York, and over the Tolbooth at Edinburgh, and on Wexford Bridge.

The day dawned, and all the people were gathered at the gate, which was the scene of justice. With the calmest air imaginable the warrior came out to them, and stood between the mangled heads of those who but yesterday had been the pampered minions of fortune and luxury. His speech was short and politic in its brutality. "Be yourselves the judges," he said. "Ye are righteous. Jezebel called me a Zimri. Yes! I conspired against my master and slew him: but" – and here he casually pointed to the horrible, bleeding heaps – "who smote all these?" The people of Jezreel and the lords of Samaria were not only passive witnesses of his rebellion; they were active sharers in it. They had dabbled their hands in the same blood. Now they could not choose but accept his dynasty: for who was there besides himself? And then, changing his tone, he does not offer "the tyrant's devilish plea, necessity," to cloak his atrocities, but – like a Romish inquisitor of Seville or Granada – claims Divine sanction for his sanguinary violence. This was not *his* doing. He was but an instrument in the hands of fate. Jehovah is alone responsible. He is doing what He spake by His servant Elijah. Yes! and there was yet more to do; for no word of Jehovah's shall fall to the ground.

With the same cynical ruthlessness, and cold indifference to smearing his robes in the blood of the slain, he carried out to the bitter end his task of policy which he gilded with the name

of Divine justice. Not content with slaying Ahab's sons, he set himself to extirpate his race, and slew all who remained to him in Jezreel, not only his kith and kin, but every lord and every Baal-priest who favoured his house, until he left him none remaining.

But what a frightful picture do these scenes furnish us of the state of religion and even of civilisation in Jezreel! There was this man-eating tiger of a king wallowing in the blood of princes, and enacting scenes which remind us of Dahomey and Ashantee, or of some Tartary khanate where human hands are told out in the market-place after some avenging raid. And amid all this savagery, squalor, and Turkish atrocity, the man pleads the sanction of Jehovah, and claims, unrebuked, that he is only carrying out the behests of Jehovah's prophets! It is not until long afterwards that the voice of a prophet is heard repudiating his plea and denouncing his bloodthirstiness.

"An evil soul producing holy witness
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek —
A goodly apple rotten at the core."

CHAPTER XIII

FRESH MURDERS – THE EXTIRPATION OF BAAL- WORSHIP (b. c. 842)

2 Kings x. 12-28

"Jéhu, sur les hauts lieux, enfin osant offrir
Un téméraire encens que Dieu ne peut souffrir,
N'a pour servir sa cause et venger ses injures
Ni le cœur assez droit, ni les mains assez pures."

Racine.

After such abject subservience had been shown him by the lords of Samaria and Jezreel, Jehu evidently had no further shadow of apprehension. He seems to have loved blood for its own sake – to have been seized by a vertigo of blood-poisoning. Having waded through slaughter to a throne, he loved to wash his footsteps in the blood of the slain, and to stretch to the very uttermost – to stretch until it cracked all its ravelled threads – the Divine sanction claimed by his fanaticism or his hypocrisy.

When he had finished his massacres at Jezreel, he went to

Samaria. It was only a journey of a few hours. On the high road he met a company of travellers, whose escort and rich apparel showed that they were persons of importance. They were about to halt, perhaps for refreshment, at the shearing-house of the shepherds – the place in which the sheep were gathered before they were shorn.²⁰²

"Who are ye?" he asked.

They answered that they were princes of the house of Judah, the brethren of Ahaziah,²⁰³ on their way to see the two kings at Jezreel, and to salute their cousins, the children of Jehoram, and their kinsfolk the children of Jezebel the Gebîrah.²⁰⁴ The answer sealed their fate. Jehu ordered his followers to take them alive. At first he had not decided what he would do with them. But half measures had now become impossible. This cavalcade of princes little knew that they were on their way to greet the dead children of a dead king and a dead queen. Jehu felt that the possibilities of an endless *vendetta* must be quenched in blood. He gave orders to slay them, and there in one hour forty-two more scions of the royal houses of Judah and Israel were done to death.²⁰⁵ With the

²⁰² 2 Kings x. 12. The shepherds House of Meeting (*Beth-equed-haraim*). LXX., ἐν Βαιθακάθ; Vulg., *ad cameram pastorum*; Aquila, οἴκος κάμψεως. It has been conjectured by Klostermann that it belonged to the Rechabites, that they had been persecuted by Jezebel, and that they were glad to help in taking vengeance on her descendants.

²⁰³ The Chronicler (2 Chron. xxii. 8) says "sons of the brethren of Ahaziah."

²⁰⁴ LXX., ἡ δυναστεύουσα.

²⁰⁵ 2 Kings x. 14, A.V., "at the pit." Lit., "in" or "into the cistern."

usual reckless insouciance of the East, where any tank or well is made the natural receptacle for corpses regardless of ultimate consequences, their bodies were flung into the cistern of the shearing-house, in which the sheep were washed before shearing, just as the bodies of Gedaliah's followers were flung by Ishmael into the well at Mizpah, and the bodies of our own murdered countrymen were flung into the well of Cawnpore. He did not leave one of them alive.

Thus Jehu "murdered two kings, and one hundred and twelve princes, and gave Queen Jezebel to dogs to eat; and if priests had but noticed how even Hosea condemns and denounces his savagery, they would have abstained from some of their glorifications of assassins and butchers, nor would they have appealed to this man's hideous example, as they have done, to excuse some of their own revolting atrocities."²⁰⁶ But

"Crime was ne'er so black
As ghostly cheer and pious thanks to lack.
Satan is modest. At heaven's door he lays
His evil offspring, and in Scriptural phrase
And saintly posture gives to God the praise
And honour of his monstrous progeny."²⁰⁷

One cruel deed more or less was nothing to Jehu. Leaving this tank choked with death and incarnadined with royal blood,

²⁰⁶ See Martin, *Hist. de France*, ix. 114.

²⁰⁷ Whittier.

he went on his way as if nothing particular had happened. He had not proceeded far when he saw a man well known to him, and of a spirit kindred to his own. It was the Arab ascetic and Nazarite Jehonadab, the son of Rechab (or "The Rider"), the chief of the tribe of Kenites who had flung in their lot with the children of Israel since the days of Moses.²⁰⁸ It was the tribe which had produced a Jael; and Jehonadab had something of the fierce, fanatical spirit of the ancient chieftainess, who, in her own tent, had dashed out with the tent-peg the brains of Sisera. His very name, "The Lord is noble," indicated that he was a worshipper of Jehovah, and his fierce zeal showed him to be a genuine Kenite. Disgusted with the wickedness of cities, disgusted above all with the loathly vice of drunkenness, which, as we see from the contemporary prophets, had begun in this age to acquire fresh prominence in luxurious and wealthy communities, he exacted of his sons a solemn oath that neither they nor their successors would drink wine nor strong drink, and that, shunning the squalor and corruption of cities, they would live in tents, as their nomad ancestors had done in the days when Jethro and Hobab were princes of pastoral Midian. We learn from Jeremiah, nearly two and a half centuries later, how faithfully that oath had been observed; and how, in spite

²⁰⁸ Jer. xxxv. 1-19. Josephus (*Antt.*, IX. vi. 6) calls him "a good man and a just, who had long been a friend of Jehu." "He was," says Ewald (*Gesch.*, iii. 543), "of a society of those who despaired of being able to observe true religion undisturbedly in the midst of the nation with the stringency with which they understood it, and therefore withdrew into the desert."

of all temptation, the vow of abstinence was maintained, even when the strain of foreign invasion had driven the Rechabites into Jerusalem from their desolated pastures.²⁰⁹

Jehu knew that the stern fanaticism of the Kenite Emîr would rejoice in his exterminating zeal, and he recognised that the friendship and countenance of this "good man and just," as Josephus calls him, would add strength to his cause, and enable him to carry out his dark design. He therefore blessed him.²¹⁰

"Is thine heart right with my heart, as my heart is with thy heart?" he asked, after he had returned the greeting of Jehonadab.

"It is, it is!" answered the vehement Rechabite.²¹¹

"Then give me thy hand," he said; and grasping the Arab by the hand,²¹² he pulled him up into his chariot – the highest distinction he could bestow upon him – and bade him come and witness his zeal for Jehovah.

His first task on arriving at Samaria was to tear up the last fibres of Ahab's kith and destroy all his partisans. This was indeed to push to a self-interested extreme the denunciation which had been pronounced upon Ahab; but the crime helped to secure his fiercely founded throne.

²⁰⁹ Jer. xxxv. (written about b. c. 604). Communities of Nazarites seem to have sprung up at this epoch, perhaps as a protest against the prevailing luxury (Amos ii. 11).

²¹⁰ In Josephus it is Jehonadab who blesses the king.

²¹¹ Heb., שָׁוִי שֵׁי.

²¹² Striking hands was a sign of good faith (Job xvii. 3; Prov. xxii. 26).

One deep-seated plot was yet unaccomplished. It was the total extermination of Baal-worship. To drive out for ever this orgiastic, corrupt, and alien idolatry was right; but there is nothing to show that Jehu would have been unable to effect this purpose by one stern decree, together with the destruction of Baal's images and temple. A method so simply righteous did not suit this Nero-Torquemada, who seemed to be never happy unless he united Jesuitical cunning with the pouring out of rivers of massacre.

He summoned the people together; and as though he now threw off all pretence of zeal for orthodoxy, he proclaimed that Ahab had served Baal a little, but Jehu would serve him much. The Samaritans must have been endowed with infinite gullibility if they could suppose that the king who had ridden into the city side by side with such a man as Jehonadab – "the warrior in his coat of mail, the ascetic in his shirt of hair" – who had already exhibited an unfathomable cunning, and had swept away the Baal-priests of Jezreel, was indeed sincere in this new conversion.²¹³ Perhaps they felt it dangerous to question the sincerity of kings. The Baal-worshippers of former days were known, and Jehu proclaimed that if any one of them was missing at the great sacrifice which he intended to offer to Baal he should be put to death. A solemn assembly to Baal was proclaimed, and

²¹³ He did it "in subtilty" (הַבְּקִיָּצָה). This substantive occurs nowhere else, but is connected with the name Jacob. LXX., ἐν πτερνισμῶ, "in taking by the heel," with reference to the name Jacob, "supplanter."

every apostate from God to nature-worship from all Israel was present, till the idol's temple was thronged from end to end.²¹⁴ To add splendour to the solemnity, Jehu bade the wardrobe-keeper to bring out all the rich vestments of Tyrian dye and Sidonian broidery, and clothe the worshippers.²¹⁵ Solemnly advancing to the altar with the Rechabite by his side, he warned the assembly to see that their gathering was not polluted by the presence of a single known worshipper of Jehovah. Then, apparently, he still further disarmed suspicion by taking a personal part in offering the burnt-offering. Meanwhile, he had surrounded the temple and blocked every exit with eighty armed warriors, and had threatened that any one of them should be put to death if he let a single Baal-worshipper escape. When he had finished the offering,²¹⁶ he went forth, and bade his soldiers enter, and slay, and slay, and slay till none were left. Then flinging the corpses in a heap, they made their way to the fortress of the Temple, where some of the priests may have taken refuge. They dragged out and burnt the *matstseboth* of Baal,²¹⁷ broke down the great central

²¹⁴ Lit., "mouth to mouth." LXX., στόμα εἰς στόμα.

²¹⁵ Ver. 22, מַלְבָּשֵׁי, *Vestiarum*, occurs here only. The LXX. omits it or puts it in Greek letters. Targum, κάμπτραι, "chests" Sil. Italicus (iii. 23) describes the robes of the priests of the Gaditanian Hercules, — "Nec discolor ulli, Ante aras cultus; velantur corpora lino Et Pelusiaco præfulget stamine vertex." Keil, ad loc. It was a mixture of "the rich dye of Tyre and the rich web of Nile."

²¹⁶ The phrase may be impersonal, "when one [*i. e.*, they] had finished the sacrifice"; but the narrative seems to imply that Jehu offered it himself (LXX., ὡς συνετέλεσαν ποιοῦντες τὴν ὀλοκαύτωςιν Vulg., *cum completum esset holocaustum*).

²¹⁷ A.V., images; R.V., pillars.

idol, and utterly dismantled the whole building. To complete the pollution of the dishallowed shrine, he made it a common midden for Samaria, which it continued to be for centuries afterwards.²¹⁸ It was his last voluntary massacre. The House of Ahab was no more. Baal-worship in Israel never survived that exterminating blow.

Happily for the human race, such atrocities committed in the name of religion have not been common. In Pagan history we have but few instances, except the slaughter of the Magians at the beginning of the reign of Darius, son of Hystaspes. Alas that other parallels should be furnished by the abominable tyranny of a false Christianity, blessed and incited by popes and priests! The persecutions and massacres of the Albigenses, preached by Arnold of Citeaux, and instigated by Pope Innocent III.; the expulsion of the Jews from Spain; the deadly work of Torquemada; the murderous furies of Alva among the hapless Netherlanders, urged and approved by Pope Pius V.; the massacre of St. Bartholomew, for which Pope Gregory and his cardinals sang their horrible *Te Deum* in their desecrated shrines, – these are the parallels to the deeds of Jehu. He has found his chief imitators among the votaries of a blood-stained and usurping sacerdotalism, which has committed so many crimes and inflicted so many horrors on mankind.

And did God approve all this detestable mixture of zealous enthusiasm with lying deceit and the insatiate thirst of blood?

²¹⁸ Comp. Ezra vi. 11; Dan. ii. 5.

If right be right, and wrong be wrong, the answer must not be an elaborate subterfuge, but an uncompromising "No!" We need be under no doubt on that subject. Christ Himself reproved His Apostles for savage zealotry, and taught them that the Elijah-spirit was not the Christ-spirit. Nor is the Elisha-spirit the Christian spirit any the more if these deeds of hypocrisy and blood were in any sense approved by him who is sometimes regarded as the mild and gentle Elisha. Where was he? Why was he silent? Could he possibly approve of this murderer's fury? We do not, indeed, know how far Elisha lent his sanction to anything more than the general end. Ahab's house had been doomed to vengeance by the voice which gave utterance to the verdict of the national conscience. The doom was just; Jehu was ordained to be the executioner. In no other way could the judgment be carried out. The times were not sentimental. The murder of Jehoram was not regarded as an act of tyrannicide, but of divinely commissioned justice. Elisha *may* have shrunk from the unreined furies of the man whom he had sent his emissary to anoint. On the other hand, we have not the least proof that he did so. He partook, probably, of the wild spirit of the times, when such deeds were regarded with feelings very different from the abhorrence with which we, better taught by the spirit of love, and more enlightened by the widening dawn of history, now justly regard them. No remonstrance of *contemporary* prophecy, however faint, is recorded as having been uttered against the doings of Jehu. The fact that, several

centuries later, they could be recorded by the historian without a syllable of reprobation shows that the education of nations in the lessons of righteousness is slow, and that we are still amid the annals of the deep night of moral imperfection. But the nation was on the eve of purer teaching, and in the prophets Amos and Hosea we read the clear condemnation of deeds of cruelty in general, and specially of the king who felt no pity. Amos condemns even the idolatrous King of Edom, "because he did pursue his brother with the sword, and did cast off all pity, and his anger did tear perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever."²¹⁹ He condemns no less severely the Chemosh-worshipping King of Moab even for an insult done to the dead: "Because he burned the bones of the King of Edom into lime."²²⁰ Jehu had warred pitilessly upon the living, and had shamelessly insulted the dead. He had flung the heads of seventy princes in two bleeding heaps on the common road for all eyes to stare upon, and he had polluted the cistern of Beth-eqed-haroim with the dead bodies of forty-two youths of the royal house of Judah. He might plead that he was but carrying out to the full the commission of Jehovah, imposed upon him by Elisha; but Hosea, a century later, gives God's message against his house: "Yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel."²²¹

²¹⁹ Amos i. 11.

²²⁰ Amos ii. 1.

²²¹ Hos. i. 4.

Nay, more! If, as is possible, the ghastly story of the siege of Samaria, narrated in the memoirs of Elisha, is displaced, and if it really belongs to the reign of Jehoahaz ben-Jehu, then Elisha himself brands the cruelty of the rushing thunderbolt of vengeance which his own hand had launched. For he calls the unnamed "King of Israel" "the son of a murderer."

Men who are swords of God, and human executioners of Divine justice, may easily deceive themselves. God works the ends of His own providence, and He uses their ministry. "The fierceness of man shall turn to Thy praise, and the fierceness of them shalt Thou refrain."²²² But they can never make their plea of prophetic sanction a cloak of maliciousness. Cromwell had stern work to do. Rightly or wrongly, he deemed it inevitable, and did not shrink from it. But he hated it. Over and over again, he tells us, he had prayed to God that He would not put him to this work. To the best of his power he avoided, he minimised, every act of vengeance, even when the sternness of his Puritan sense of righteousness made him look on it as duty. Far different was the case of Jehu. He loved murder and cunning for their own sakes, and, like Joab, he dyed the garments of peace with the blood of war.

How little was his gain! It had been happier for him if he had never mounted higher than the captaincy of the host, or even so high. He reigned for twenty-eight years (842-814) – longer than any king except his great-grandson Jeroboam II.;

²²² Psalm lxxvi. 10.

and in recognition of any element of righteousness which had actuated his revolt, his children, even to the fourth generation, were suffered to sit upon the throne. His dynasty lasted for one hundred and thirteen years.²²³ But his own reign was only memorable for defeat, trouble, and irreparable disaster.

For Hazael, who had seized the throne of his murdered lord Benhadad, was a fierce and able warrior. He held his own against the overweening might of his northern neighbour Assyria; and whenever he obtained a respite from this desperate warfare, he indemnified himself for all losses by enlarging his dominion out of the territories of the Ten Tribes. "In those days the Lord began to cut Israel short, and Hazael smote them in all the borders of Israel." Jehu had the mortification of seeing the fairest and most fruitful regions of his dominion, those which had belonged to Israel from the most ancient times, wrenched out of his grasp. From this time forwards Israel lost half the fair Promised Land which God had given to their fathers. It was the beginning of the end. Henceforth the tribal inheritance of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh was an oppressed dependency of Aram. Hazael overran and annexed the land of Bashan from the spurs of Mount Hermon to the Lake of Gennezareth; Gaulan, and volcanic Argob, and Hauran the entire ancient kingdom of Og, King of Bashan, with all the herds and pasture-lands. Southward of this he seized the whole forest-clad plateau of

²²³ Jehu 842-814. Jehoahaz 814-797. Joash 797-781. Jeroboam II. 781-740. Zechariah 740.

Gilead, with its lovely ravines, north of the Jabbok, the territory of Gad; and pushing still southward, established his sway over the district, of the Ammonites and the tribe of Reuben, as far as the city of Aroer, on the other side of the great chasm of Arnon (Wady Mojib). All the fatness of Bashan and Rabbah with her watery plain of the Beni-Ammon, and the grass-covered uplands which fed the enormous flocks of Mesha, the great Emîr and sheep-master of Moab, passed from Israel to Syria, never to be recovered. What made the humiliation more terrible was that the invasion and conquest were accompanied with acts of unwonted cruelty. Elisha had wept to think what evil Hazael would do the children of Israel²²⁴

²²⁴ 2 Kings viii. 12.

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