

Elijah and 3 Years Famine

The prophet Elijah appears in the Scripture narrative with virtually no introduction. The emphasis is on the message rather than the man:

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

Here was a Divine pronouncement that a time of famine was approaching. But the New Testament commentary gives us details which are not apparent in this chapter:

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave her rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit” (Jas. 5:17-18).

We find then, that the prophecy of famine was in response to Elijah’s own earnest prayer. He prayed for the famine to come, and three-and-a-half years later he prayed for the famine to end. But why did he do so? Again, the context of the New Testament commentary is helpful:

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly ...”

The effectual and fervent prayer of Elijah then, provides us with an example of how we ought to pray for one another, “that ye may be healed”. His prayer for a national famine was motivated by a desire that the spiritually diseased people would take heed to the Divine chastisement and be healed. Again, the verses that follow are in a similar vein:

“... brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him: Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (Jas. 5:19-20)

Here, we see again that Elijah’s prayer was for his people, that they would be converted, and be saved from death. But significantly, Elijah prayed for the famine with scant regard for his own needs. He would suffer hunger with his people: yet he had the faith that somehow if it was Yahweh’s Will for the famine to take place, that He would also provide for Elijah’s needs. A passage which comes to mind is Matthew chapter 6:

“Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on ... Behold, the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?” (Mat. 6:25-26).

The Father of Creation feeds the birds of the air, and therefore will also feed those who trust in Him. Elijah provides a powerful example of this: Divine sustenance in a day of evil. In his case, not only were the fowls of the air (the ravens) provided for, they in turn provided for his needs. It is interesting to note in this connection a few verses later: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Mat. 6:33). Elijah is a case in point: putting his concern for his nation above his own natural needs, Yahweh provided for him – as it is written elsewhere: “Yahweh will not suffer the soul of the righteous to famish: but he casteth away the substance of the wicked” (Prov. 10:3). King Ahab sought after the affairs of this life only, and was deprived of his sustenance, whereas the righteous soul of Elijah did not famish.

Being provided for by the ravens and a flowing brook, Elijah was sustained for a short period – how long, we do not know. But in due time, the brook dried up, and another means of provision was needed. So the word

of Yahweh came again to Elijah: “arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zion, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee” (1 Kings 17:9).

THE WIDOW WOMAN

It is interesting to notice that the record in 2 Kings portrays this arrangement as being for the benefit of Elijah, that he might be sustained. But again, the New Testament, particularly the words of Christ, provides additional commentary:

“I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow ...” (Lu. 4:25-26).

Here, we learn that Elijah was to go to sustain the widow, being “sent” to her for that purpose – despite her evidently being a Gentile. It was for pointing this out, coupled with another teaching regarding Naaman the Syrian, that “all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath. And rose up and thrust him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way” (Lu. 4:28-29). To this day, Jews still cannot accept the preference of faithful Gentiles over their unfaithful nation, and reject Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah.

It is interesting to note that the word came to Elijah: “I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee” (1 Kings 17:9). A little earlier in the chapter, a similar thing was said of the fowls: “thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there” (vs 4). Neither the ravens, or the widow woman were aware of this commandment: it was evidently not a spoken instruction that they were to obey. This is rather an illustration of the ways of providence: Yahweh had determined a role for the birds and the widow woman, which they would duly fulfill – it was therefore a non-verbal ordinance that such a thing would surely come to pass (see *The Ways of Providence* by Bro Robert Roberts for more on this aspect).

When Elijah approached the widow’s house, he found that all the woman had was a handful of meal, and a little oil, which she and her son were about to eat before their expected death. But how could such a small amount cater for the three of them until the rain came again? The power of Yahweh will always prevail on behalf of his saints. Just as much later on, Messiah would feed the multitudes with a few loaves and fish, even so the cruse of oil and the barrel of meal were increased daily, ensuring there was sufficient for the purpose. There are 2 verses which come to mind:

“better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 4:6).

“better is little with the fear of Yahweh than great treasure and trouble therewith. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith” (Prov. 15:16-17).

The woman only had a handful of meal, yet was greatly blessed with provision to meet all her needs. The food that the three individuals of faith ate was not luxurious, a stalled ox, but a simple meal, a dinner of herbs. Yet there was a love of the things of God, and so Elijah was sent there for his needs to be met, and also to sustain the widow woman in her affliction.

THE ALLEGED TROUBLER OF ISRAEL

1 Kings 18 shows that Ahab the king understood how that the famine was associated with Elijah, and sought after him (1 Kings 17:10) to destroy him. Then we read of how Elijah made himself known to Ahab:

“And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel? And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou and thy father’s house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of Yahweh, and thou hast followed Baalim” (1 Kings 18:17-18).

Notice that Ahab accused Elijah: “art thou that troubleth Israel?” This is the accusation leveled even today at those who obey the injunction to “earnestly contend for the faith” (Jude 1:3). Those who oppose the inroads of Apostasy are branded as being trouble makers, when in fact, it is rather those who embrace and perpetuate error in word and practice, who are the real troublemakers of Israel. Ahab was the true troublemaker, in forsaking Yahweh for Baal, and teaching the people to do likewise.

DETERMINING THE TRUE GOD

Under the direction of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:36), Elijah organized a demonstration to determine which Deity should be worshipped, Baal or Yahweh. The arrangement was that Baal’s prophets would choose a bullock, cut it up for offering it in sacrifice, and call upon the name of their god for fire to come down and devour the offering. Elijah was to do similarly, “and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken” (1 Kings 18:23-24). The Baal worshippers went first:

“they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called upon the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying O Baal hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made ... and they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. And it came to pass ... that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded” (1 Kings 18:26-29).

The impotence of Baal thus demonstrated, Elijah proceeded to offer his bullock to demonstrate the power of Yahweh. But there was something that he had to do first: “he repaired the altar of Yahweh that was broken down” (1 Kings 18:30). There was a restoration of the altar for acceptable worship, before anything else could be done. This was the priority: to commence a national reformation by firstly restoring the altar. This was the pattern of Israel’s restoration in the days of Ezra: firstly they restored the Altar so that acceptable sacrifice could be made, and then the rest of the work was performed and completed (Ezra 3:2).

But although the existing altar was rebuilt, it was not used on this occasion. Elijah instead made a second altar upon which he would offer his sacrifice. The details are as follows:

“And Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of Yahweh came, saying Israel shall be thy name: and with the stones he built an altar in the name of Yahweh: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid it on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood ...” (1 Kings 18:31-35).

The four barrels were filled and poured upon the sacrifice four times, “and the water ran about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water”.

It is evident that in these details, we are intended to see spiritual principles. We are given a starting point by being told that the 12 stones represented “the number of the tribes of Jacob” (1 Kings 18:31). The stones being set up speak of the restoration of those tribes, and the hope of Israel which forms the basis of acceptable worship for both Jew and Gentile – and demonstrates the greatness of Israel’s God. This being so, we would tentatively advance suggestions as to what the other details represent.

SUGGESTED REPRESENTATIONS

The stones of the Altar representing Israel, the trench around the Altar could represent the Gentiles: those who are outside of, and surround Israel. This trench was sufficient to accommodate “two measure of seed”,

although it was actually to contain water, and not seed. When the water was poured upon the Altar, the trench was itself filled with water. "Seed" in Scripture is used as a symbol of the Word (see the parable of the sower: Luke 8:11), as is water (see Eph. 5:26) in its cleansing effect. The Word that we have before us is made up of two major parts, the Old and New testament: the Jews can only accept the Old Testament, but Gentiles can receive both.

There were 4 barrels of water, which were used 4 times to pour water on the sacrifice – hence, there were 12 barrels full of water poured out. The number 12, we have seen speaks of Israel: it is significant therefore to note that the Hope of Israel (12) was contained in 4 Gospel records.

The offering then, emphasized the restoration of Israel with their God, as an acceptable offering. But a new altar was used, not the old. Hence, Christ has done away with the old law, and has instituted the new covenant, established upon better promises. Israel of old will be restored, but they will be accepted upon a new basis, the forgiveness of their sins, and the turning of their hearts towards their God once again.

Elijah prayed to Yahweh, for his power to be demonstrated – but not simply to demonstrate the impotence of Baal. It was also "... that this people may know that thou art Yahweh Elohim, and that thou hast turned their hearts back again: (2 Kings 18:37). Indeed, this remains a future work of Elijah when he comes again, in the resurrection (see Mal. 4:15). His entire concern was for his nation, and their wellbeing, hence he put their benefit before his own personal need as we have seen, and now prays for them to be shown the greatness of their God.

"then the fire of Yahweh fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell upon their faces: and they said, Yahweh, he is the God; Yahweh, he is the God" (1 Kings 18:38-39).

The tide had turned as it were, and Yahweh was extolled as being the Deity most powerful, to be worshipped rather than Baal. Elijah consequently had the prophets of Baal slain, all four hundred and fifty of them, and then he prayed for the rain to come again. The lesson had been learned, the hearts of the people had been turned, and the famine was to end.

A CLOUD LIKE A MAN'S HAND

As a sign that the rain was coming, there was provided a cloud shaped like a man's hand. Elijah told his servant to go and look towards the sea, and this he did seven times. On the seventh time, he saw the cloud:

"And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea like a man's hand" (1 Kings 18:43-44).

The word for 'hand' in this place, we are told, signifies an open hand. It was not a man's hand shaped like a fist, which would have spoken of anger, and judgment: it was rather an open hand, speaking of the provision of plenty. A similar idea is found in Psalm 145:

"the eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing" (Psa. 145:15-16).

Now that the nation had learned their lesson, the famine had accomplished the desired effect. Yet sadly, it was very soon afterwards that the people turned back to their idolatry, and the abominations of the heathen – and they remain faithless to this day. Rejecting Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah, they do not trust in Yahweh's provision for their sins to be forgiven, and so there remains a work of reconciliation – which Elijah shall surely accomplish when he is raised from the dead, and rewarded when our Lord shall come.

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