

## Elijah, His Mantle & the Chariot of Fire

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“Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated [Elijah from Elisha]; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried out, ‘My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!’ So he saw him no more ... [but] he took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him...” (2 K. 2:11-14).

The story we are reviewing today is the last in our series about the prophet, Elijah. We have not covered every story, nor all of the incidents between the stories, which tell about the sins of King Ahab and of his son, Ahaziah, how they both died, and so on. But we have now moved from the first to the second book of Kings, and we have come to the final appearance – and disappearance – of Elijah. And, as usual, the scene is dramatic.

Elijah had been called by the Lord to go and speak to some messengers from Ahaziah, the king of Israel, called here the king of Samaria, to tell him that because he, like his father, chose to consult the prophets of Baal instead of the Lord he would die. When the messengers took this words back to the king, obviously he was upset and so he sent 50 soldiers to get Elijah and bring him in. They found him sitting on top of a hill. But when they told him to come down, Elijah called down fire from heaven instead, and it consumed all 50 of them. Not deterred, the king sent 50 more men and the same thing happened to them. Finally, 50 more came, but this time the captain was very wary, and began not by demanding anything but by pleading for his life. And so Elijah went with him, only to tell the king the same message as before, this time to his face. And so Ahaziah died.

This is the context of the present story, and of course a striking feature of it is the fire from heaven. We’ve seen this before with Elijah in the contest with the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, and now, again, we have a *chariot* and *horses* of fire. Interestingly, in 2 Kings 6 an entire mountain is seen *full of horses and chariots of fire* all around Elisha, protecting him from the Syrian army that threatened him with chariots of iron. What is the meaning of all these fiery images? And what do the horses and chariots themselves represent?

Of course the prophets, Elijah and Elisha, both represent the Lord. Specifically, because they spoke His Word they represent His Word as we have it today – the Old and New Testaments. This is critical to the whole sense of the story. But it seems that between the two of them Elijah represented more of the spiritual sense of the Word, and Elisha more of the literal sense; in any case, what is clear is that the mantle, or tunic, an outer garment that passed from Elijah to Elisha represented the literal sense of the Word *which was cast off when Elijah ascended into heaven*. And note, whereas Elisha died and was buried in a tomb (2 K. 13:20-21), Elijah, his master *did not die, but was carried directly up to heaven*. Surely this speaks to the spiritual sense of the Scriptures, which sense is well known in the spiritual world even though the literal stories perish from memory with the death of the body.

Now we know that a horse represents the understanding of the Word: – a white horse a true understanding, a dark horse a false understanding, and so on (see Rev. 6:2-8 & AE 355, AR 298, WH 2, etc.). The reason for this is that the horse beautifully displays the characteristics and use of the human understanding in its quickness, agility and strength, and its ability to carry us along or pull us swiftly from one idea to another, sometimes even into arguments – intellectual or spiritual battles. So in the book of Revelation the Lord Himself was seen riding on a beautiful white horse overcoming the powers of darkness in the heavens (Rev. 19:11).

But if a horse represents the understanding, what is a chariot? As a piece of machinery with wheels and a platform for its rider it is a symbol for the doctrine and thinking that we draw from the Word by means of our understanding for application to life. And what do we mean by doctrine? It's not dogma – something we are told to believe – it's simply a set or system of teachings based on principles drawn from the Word, which can carry us on the path or into the fields of our daily lives. Note the chariot is driven by a human rider, who represents the will, or in the case of a soldier the determination to make use of this doctrine and understanding in the battles of spiritual life.

(In this context, think of “horse power” as representing the power of understanding, which truly is like a powerful engine that allows us to accomplish great things. Also our common expression for a foolish approach, “putting the cart before the horse,” neatly illustrates the problems we encounter when we put doctrine ahead of understanding. It goes the other way around!)

But doctrine, that is, any set or system of teachings, may be man-made or it may be from the Lord. So the horses and chariots of any armies that fight against Israel represent the thoughts and principles of the external, natural mind challenging the Word of the Lord. But *horses and chariots of fire* represent the thoughts and principles of heaven defending it.

And here note that when Elijah was carried up to heaven Elisha cried out in grief, tearing his own clothes apart and calling out, “My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!” Joash, a later king of Israel, said exactly the same thing of Elisha when *he* died, even though there was no such vision at that time. The point is that these men were calling *the prophets themselves* horses and chariots. They were speaking of *them* as representing the truth of the Word and the power of understanding – without which they would rightly feel (and be) lost!

So... what about the fire in today's story? This specifically represents love or passion – which is why we talk about getting “fired up” about something or being “inflamed” with zeal or anger. Fire, too, can be good or bad, but obviously a fire from heaven represents a good spiritual love from the Lord, or, in the case of the fire that consumed Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel, the consuming power of that love. So *horses and chariots of fire* clearly represent the understanding and the doctrine of heavenly love taught in the Word.

But Elijah was not carried up into heaven by a chariot – at least the Word doesn't say so exactly. The chariot and horses of fire *came between* him and Elisha, “separating the two of them; *and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.*” So what does the whirlwind represent?

Interestingly, a whirlwind, which is a swirling or twisting wind is several times used as a metaphor for turning, churning *chariot wheels*, as for example in Isaiah, where we read, “Behold,

Jehovah will come with fire and with His chariots like a whirlwind” (Isa. 66:15). And since wind in general represents the spirit of truth, a swirling, upward lifting wind can be seen to represent the uplifting power of truth, or the understanding of it. Of course, a whirlwind can also do a lot of damage on the ground, which might be the case when truth is applied to the various evils and falsities of our lives. And it is also sometimes used as a metaphor for the chariots of Israel’s enemies, thus representing the swirl of falsities that cause temptations and upset the order of life. Still, in our story, since the whirlwind carries Elijah to heaven, although our teachings don’t say so explicitly it is safe to assume that it represents the spirit of truth lifting the Lord Himself up above the falsities and evils of the world so that He could be glorified. At the same time, Elijah’s cloak or mantle, the outward appearance or literal sense of the events of His life was left behind, and the prophet who picked it up represents the Lord now, still in the world *in that literal sense*.

Now you might be thinking, “That’s a lot to take in,” and no doubt it is. But the story doesn’t end with Elisha simply taking up his master’s mantle. It goes on to describe how he struck the water of the Jordan River with it, and crossed back over on dry land into Jericho – all of which brings up another interesting point: – when the Lord was preparing to take Elijah up into heaven He had sent him in a circuit from Gilgal, near the Jordan, inland to the hill country of Bethel, and from there back down to Jericho, and then again to the Jordan, where he had rolled up his mantle and struck the water and the water had divided, allowing both men to walk across on dry ground to the east side of the river, outside the borders of Israel. Why?

Well, the Jordan formed the eastern boundary of the land and so represents introductory truths – things we have to learn on our way to becoming serious church members. The land on the east side of the fords of Jordan near Jericho was called Gilead. It was a mountainous region but included good grazing land, and, of course, it was the region from which the Israelites had first approached the land of Canaan upon their return from Egypt and Mt. Sinai. So it represents a spiritual state that is good, but external, focused on natural or material things that can prepare us for the deeper realities of the church and heaven. So it seems, in going back to the place where Israel first entered into their promised land, Elijah was taking Elisha back to square one, back to the beginning, back to the place where Israel had dedicated itself to the conquest of the land, where they had eagerly agreed to follow Joshua in doing whatever it took to possess it.

Again, the image of the Lord glorifying Himself comes to mind. He is about to leave the physical world and ascend into heaven. But before He disappears from the disciples’ sight He shows them His hands and His feet; He invites them to touch Him and watch Him eat; and He renews His covenant with them in very practical ways, telling them to go throughout the world, teaching people and baptizing them in His name, preaching repentance and remission of sins. In short He gives them *things to do and not do*, just as Moses and then Joshua gave Israel a list of *things to do and not do* in order to be successful in the land they were to inherit.

So after Elijah (the Lord) was glorified He left behind that marvelous cloak of the stories of His life with which Elisha (the Lord still in His Word) once again struck the waters of introductory truth and crossed back over into the land to, as if to begin the conquest all over again since the whole project had been desecrated by a long succession of wicked kings and general corruption.

Thus at last we come to the end of this amazing series of events featuring Elijah. But what are

we to DO with it? How can we apply it to our own lives?

The answer is really and truly pretty simple. While on one hand it is about the Lord's own life and His ultimate glorification following a long series of confrontations with the evil and falsity represented by Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal, on a personal level for us it seems to be ALL about rededication and renewal for our own battles – battles to reclaim the land of our own hearts and minds when they are overwhelmed by selfish and worldly things.

In this preparation and in these battles the one thing that stands out is the presence of the Word – first in its spiritual sense as we deal with what is going on inside the land (inside our heads), and then in its literal sense as we bring the lofty principles of what we have learned down into the actual deeds of our lives, starting over, getting back to the basics, simply doing (as Elisha so frequently declared) what the Word actually teaches in our daily lives.

If Elijah made dramatic appearances, with fiery signs and awesome consequences in the mountains and hill country of the land, Elisha focused mostly on people and things in the lowlands, representing the activities of daily, outward life. So in our experience, conviction and commitment precede action; we have to know what we're about; we have to be clear and decisive about what's right and wrong; we have to understand the Word as to its inner doctrine of genuine truth and love; these things have to be alive and active first within us. Then we can take the lessons of that doctrine and see how they are embodied in the literal sense, see what they mean in practical terms, and get down to business from simple obedience and goodwill.

In a sense we're always starting over. Each day is a new day, and every day we have to begin with a commitment to what is true and good so that we can, in fact, live well. Elijah powerfully dramatizes the contrast between truth and falsity; Elisha takes those principles and puts them to work. In both cases the Lord is inspiring us and leading us through His Word – from principle to practice, from principle to practice, over and over until we get it right.

The mantle or outer cloak of Elijah represents the Word in its literal sense. So the prophet himself represents the Lord, teaching it all from His perception of the spiritual sense. But Elisha, who represents the Lord as to the literal sense, takes that mantle of external responsibility and follows through with it, showing through his own journeys and miracles how we can receive power from the Lord to do the things that restore His kingdom, bringing heaven to earth.

Can we accept the challenge? Will we? If so we can start today, based on the dramatic lessons of the stories of the two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who both represent the Lord with us.

Amen.

Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1-18  
Arcana Caelestia #2762:1-2  
or White Horse #2:sel.