

FEED MY SHEEP

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The Ascension of Elijah

A “housekeeping” note before we move into the meat of this issue: Last month, we announced that we would be starting a new, occasional publication. It will be devoted to such things as we wrote about in the May FMS, which was titled “Intermezzo: The White Horse and Other ‘Coincidences.’ ” (Request a copy if you missed it.) The new publication, which we have now named *Third Day Diary*, will include our discernments of what God is doing today in our personal lives as well as on the national/international scene. In other words, we are trying to read the signs—which are often cleverly disguised as “coincidences.” If God is truly sovereign, then there is no such thing as a coincidence. Chaos theory (randomness and chance occurrence) is now being abandoned by leading edge physicists and other scientists.

We produced that special issue of FMS to introduce our readers to that type of material. We realize that not everyone will have a taste for it. We also know, based on phone calls, that some of you meant to tell us to include you on the list for the new publication, but simply forgot. So this is a reminder; this is the “last call.” Just ask to receive the *Third Day Diary*. Do it now because we will hardly ever be mentioning it again.

We remind it you it will be published as time and resources permit; we will not commit ourselves to a regular schedule. Even now, there has been much coming forth concerning the White Horse and related signs about which I could write a small book, but trying to maintain the FMS on a monthly schedule comes first.

Were Enoch and Elijah perfect?

Last month’s FMS was a continuation of our studies on the doctrine of sanctification—the second

stage of salvation. We zeroed in on the teaching of some denominations, or sects of denominations, that perfection can be achieved in this life. A more rounded look at the Scriptures, however, precludes any such notion, as we showed last month. Nonetheless, we continue to hear certain objections; chiefly, that “yes, indeed, men *can* achieve perfection in this life, just look at the case of Enoch and Elijah.” The implication is that Enoch and Elijah must have achieved perfection, otherwise they would not have been taken directly to heaven.

This objection might have some validity if in fact these two godly men were whisked off bodily to heaven and remain there to this day. Many churches teach just that, although they do not adhere to the tenet of perfectionism. So let us examine the cases of Enoch and Elijah and see if perhaps we can correct some mistaken notions.

Elijah’s ascension

Elijah’s supposed trip in the fiery chariot has been termed his “rapture,” his “translation” and his “ascension.” Thus, for the rapture preachers, it becomes a type of the rapture while non-rapture teachers see in it a type of the ascension of Jesus. But what really happened to the fiery prophet and equally important, when did it happen? The story is recounted in 2 Kings, chapter 2. As the scene opens, we find Elijah and his protégé, Elisha, making the rounds to the several schools of the prophets which Elijah himself had probably established.

KJV 2 Kings 2:1 And it came to pass, when Yahweh would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal.

2 And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for Yahweh hath sent me to Bethel. And Elisha said *unto him*, As Yahweh liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel.

3 And the sons of the prophets that *were* at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that Yahweh will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know *it*; hold ye your peace.

Evidently, both Elisha, and the sons of the prophets knew by revelation that Elijah was soon to be taken from their midst—at least for a period of time. As they cross Jordan, Elijah asks his number one pupil if there is anything he can do for him before he leaves.

9 And it came to pass, when they were gone over [the Jordan], that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.

10 And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: *nevertheless*, if thou see me *when I am* taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.

11 And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, *there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder*; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

12 And Elisha saw *it*, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces.

The fiery chariot myth

What does this passage say and what does it not say? Taking the latter first, it does *not* say that Elijah became immortal or that he remained thereafter in heaven. Nor does it necessarily say that Elijah went into the “heaven” where God dwells, nor does it say that Elijah met with God face-to-face. In fact, it does not even say that Elijah went up in a fiery chariot, all Sunday school teaching and common Christian artwork notwithstanding. Look at the text. It says in two places (verse 1 and v. 11) that Elijah went up “by a whirlwind,” not in a fiery chariot!

What it does say about the fiery chariot is that

it was the means of separating Elijah and Elisha. It “...parted them both asunder...”. There is no question but that this ascension of Elijah was pre-planned by God, and that Elijah and others knew it was coming. The Hebrew word for whirlwind [סַעַר; ca`ar {sah'-ar}] means a tempest, storm or whirlwind. Who controls the weather? God. Could God send a ca`ar, tempest, storm, whirlwind, at the right place and at the right time to pick up and transport Elijah? Absolutely. What kind of storm could do that?

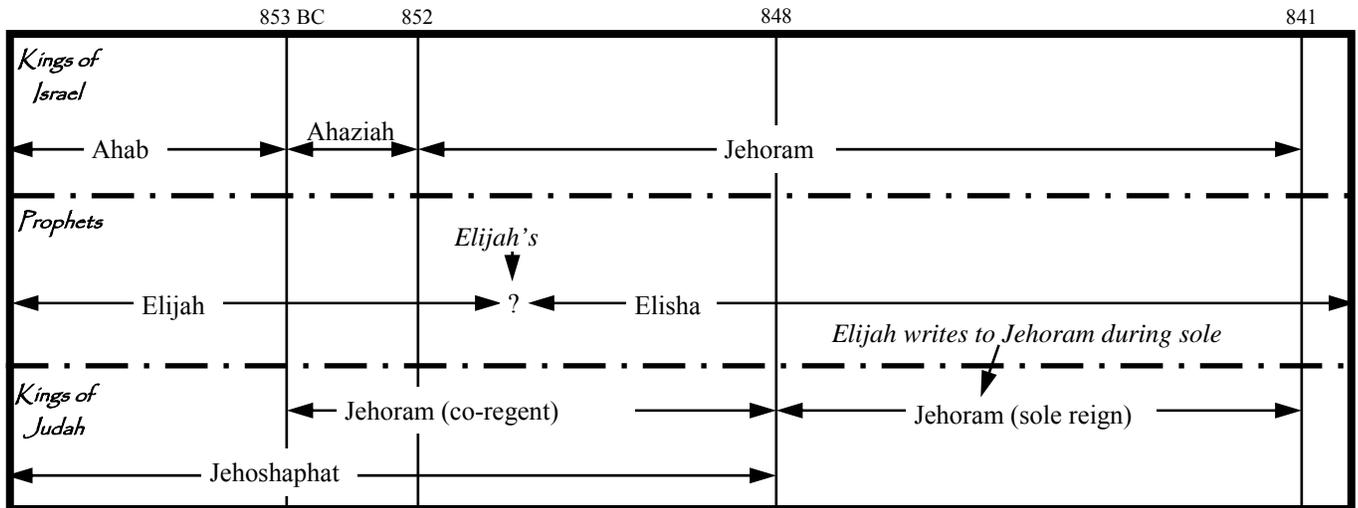
A hurricane could. This writer experienced one of the most frightening times of his life in August 1969 when Hurricane Camille struck the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. I was in the Air Force stationed at Keesler AFB in Biloxi, Mississippi where I was in the middle of a year-long intensive training in electronics school. Camille was the largest, most ferocious, most deadly hurricane ever to hit the United States. Sustained winds reached 210 m.p.h.! Hurricanes Andrew and Hugo and others haven't even come close to that intensity.

The eye of the storm went right over Keesler. I was in a leadership position at that time among the airmen and I (foolishly) took it upon myself to go outside our concrete-block barracks into the eerie and utter calm of the eye passing over. Being an Ohio boy, this was the first hurricane I had ever seen and I was determined to actually see it. Even at that halfway point of the storm, I saw, among other things, huge garbage dumpsters which had been tossed down the street as if they had been cardboard boxes. Could a man have been carried up into the air by such a storm? Unquestionably! Some of the 150 or so killed by Camille probably experienced just such a fate.

Jordan: tornado alley

But it was no hurricane which transported Elijah; a hurricane would have also transported (or killed) Elisha and the other observers. But a whirlwind? Yes, a tornado fits the bill perfectly. A tornado is very path- and location-specific and thus could have uplifted Elijah and not affected the bystanders. And while most persons who get entangled in a tornado are killed, there have been occasional reports of people who have survived being lifted into the air by a tornado. It is no problem for the sovereign God of the universe to send a tornado to snatch Elijah from the earth and transport him to heaven.

But where is the “heaven” to which Elijah was carried? The Hebrew word here covers a broad spectrum. It can refer to the abode of God, outer



space, the visible universe, the atmosphere, or simply the sky or the air. Our English word “heaven(s)” serves the same purpose for all those meanings. We contend that to insist that Elijah was carried up into “heaven,” meaning the abode of God, is to make an assumption unwarranted by the text. And since those who teach such also insist that he went into the physical atmosphere and then presumably further out from there into outer space, our question is: where is that heaven where you think God dwells? Over at Alpha Centauri (our nearest stellar neighbor at 4.3 light years distance)? Is God’s abode even in our own Milky Way galaxy? Or is our God really “far out,” dwelling in the Andromeda Galaxy? My sarcasm is to point out that such a concept as God dwelling *anywhere* in physical outer space is juvenile and is best left to episodes of *Star Trek* (not that everything about *Star Trek* is necessarily false or juvenile).

Did Elijah physically go up? It certainly appears so. We simply say that it is possible that Elijah was carried into the sky by a tornado and came down probably very shortly thereafter. But he obviously landed at some considerable distance from where he arose since some of the sons of the prophets searched for his corpse for three days and couldn’t find a trace. (2 Kings 2:16-18.)

Another possibility is that the “fiery chariot” and “whirlwind” were related effects of some kind of aerial mechanical conveyance. In other words Elijah hopped aboard a craft—whatever it was, and as it arose, the fire and whirlwind were the results of a vortex-like disturbance of the air. In any event, Elijah went up and came down again. He was still alive, but now God retired him to a more private life, Elisha having been assigned the duties of being “point man”

of the prophets.

Chronological analysis

We shall next demonstrate by reasoning from the Scriptures that Elijah was not then, and is *not now* in heaven, the abode of God. A brief exploration of Bible chronology is necessary here. According to the biblical accounts in the books of First and Second Kings, Elijah’s ministry extended at least partly through the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram, kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Ahab reigned from 874-853 B.C.¹ His successor, Ahaziah, reigned only about a year. Elijah had prophesied that Ahaziah would soon die for the sin of inquiring of Baal-zebub instead of Yahweh. So Ahaziah died in 852 and Jehoram (alternate spelling: Joram) succeeded him (2 Kings 1:17, 18).

The above chart will help us to visualize the various reigns and events more clearly. The next event recorded in 2 Kings is the sky ride of Elijah. It occurred sometime during the reign of Jehoram, king of Israel (reigned 852-841 B.C.), but sometime before the death of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah. In other words, Elijah went up by the whirlwind no earlier than 852 and absolutely no later than 848 B.C. How we can know that with certainty will now be explained.

The Bible often pegs the starting year of a king in Israel to the such-and-such year of the reign of the current king in Judah and vice-versa. For example:

2 Kings 3:1 Now Jehoram the son of Ahab began to reign over Israel in Samaria the eighteenth year of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, and reigned twelve years.

That verse relates a very important fact to our study to which we shall return presently. To the casual Bible reader a possibly confusing factor now enters the analysis. Not only did the kingdom of Israel have a king named Jehoram, but the kingdom of Judah also had a king of the same name who reigned for virtually the same period of time.

When King Jehoshaphat of Judah died in 848, his eldest son, Jehoram, inherited the throne. Jehoram had already been serving as co-regent since 853. A ruthless and wicked man, Jehoram, consolidated his power and had his brothers murdered (2 Chronicles 21:1-7). Sometime during his sole reign (848-841), the Edomites revolted (2 Chronicles 21:8-11). Moreover, we learn from the same passage that Jehoram of Judah also sponsored idolatry and enforced temple prostitution. Later in the same chapter we read:

2 Chronicles 21:12 And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus saith Yahweh God of David thy father, Because thou hast not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat thy father, nor in the ways of Asa king of Judah,

13 But hast walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and hast made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to go a whoring, like to the whoredoms of the house of Ahab, and also hast slain thy brethren of thy father's house, *which were better than thyself*:

14 Behold, with a great plague will Yahweh smite thy people, and thy children, and thy wives, and all thy goods:

15 And thou *shalt have* great sickness by disease of thy bowels, until thy bowels fall out by reason of the sickness day by day.

The important fact to note here is that Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram of Judah and this occurred sometime between 848 and 841 B.C. Yet Elijah had supposedly been whisked off to heaven bodily never to be seen again, sometime before 848, and possibly as early as 852 B.C. How do we know it was before 848? Because only at the time of Elijah's ascension was Elisha commissioned and empowered to be the "point man," the guy who speaks to the king. And in 2 Kings 3 it relates how during the reign of King Jehoshaphat of Judah, who died in 848, that Elisha was summoned to the court concerning the rebellion of Moab against Jehoram, king of Israel, who was seeking Jehoshaphat as an ally.

2 Kings 3: 11 But Jehoshaphat said, *Is there not*

here a prophet of Yahweh, that we may enquire of Yahweh by him? And one of the king of Israel's servants answered and said, Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah.

Note that Elisha "poured water," past tense. The passing of the mantle had already taken place when Elisha was summoned to the court. So Elisha was obviously the prophet-in-charge. And yet sometime **after** this incident (i.e., sometime in the period 848-841), Elijah writes a letter to the wicked Jehoram of Judah. It is evident that Elijah was still alive and well on earth, living in semi-retirement, and perhaps having been outraged enough by the debauchery of Jehoram, he picked up the pen once again to denounce the civil ruler. Clearly, Elijah's trip into "heaven" was only a brief flight into the sky from which he returned safely, and we can assume that he lived out his days and died just as all men do.

To suggest—as some commentators do in order to harmonize this passage with their theory of Elijah going bodily and permanently to heaven—that the letter was actually written by Elisha and that he forged the now (supposedly) immortal Elijah's name to it is both ludicrous and intellectually dishonest. Certainly Elisha, who had a double portion of Elijah's miracle-working abilities, did not have to forge Elijah's name in order to bolster his own credibility if he were going to denounce the king in a letter.

There is more biblical proof that Elijah is not in heaven. We shall present it next issue for it applies to the case of Enoch as well, which we shall also analyze next issue. Ω

FOOTNOTES

1. The dates are taken from some of the foremost scholars of biblical chronology: Dr. Edwin R. Thiele, from his works: *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* and *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*; and Dr. Stephen E. Jones' *Secrets of Time* (available from us, \$22 ppd.). Dr. Bullinger's *Companion Bible* dates do not agree exactly with Drs. Thiele and Jones, but the principle is the same and the same proof can be adduced using Bullinger's dates.

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