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Elijah and John Knox

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ELIJAH and JOHN KNOX

Roy Newton Keiser, '09

While reading a history of the Reformation some time since the attention of the reader was arrested by a single line on the opening page. The writer chanced to mention the fact that the life of John Knox was not unlike that of the Old Testament prophet, Elijah. This proved to be a very happy suggestion, and as a result this paper has assumed its present form.

Looking at the careers of these two men we found that the first point of comparison occurred very early in their lives and had to do with their birth. The mystery and uncertainty surrounding the place of their birth is the same in the case of both. Nothing absolutely certain is known about Elijah, except that he was from the country east of the Jordan River, called the Land of Gilead. There is but a single brief reference to his origin (I Kings. XVII. 1) but even this is not without ambiguity. The Authorized Version translates the words: "Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead" If this is correct Tishbeh or Tishbi of Gilead had the distinction of giving birth to this prophet. But where is there record either in sacred or profane history of such a place? In regard to his parentage nothing is said, and in this respect he stands in marked contrast to some other prophets who have a wealth of detail clustering around that period of their

lives. He might well be likened to Melchizedek "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life." The first time Elijah's name is mentioned in Holy Writ is where he appeared so suddenly before the king and made the startling announcement, as coming from God, "There shall not be ~~dne~~^{sw} nor rain these years but according to my word."

In the year 1513 A. D., or thereabouts, in some village in Scotland a babe first saw the light of day--a babe whose birth might well have been hailed with joy by all the friends of true religion. Lying in the cradle in the home of a poor family was a babe who was destined to exert a greater influence upon the religious life of Scotland than any man before or after his times. Very little is known of his early life. His family, according to some of the historians, was not one of very much distinction. One of his adversaries affirms that he was "obscuris, natus, parentibus," and even one of his admirers says that "he descended, but of lineage small." Only on one occasion does he refer to his family in any way of a complimentary manner, and that was when addressing the Earl of Bothwell, when he said, "My lord, my grandfather, my grandsire, and father have served under your lord's predecessors and some of them have died."

It is as the body-guard of Wishart that we get the first glimpse of John Knox in history, and these first appearances were very characteristic of the man. The mention of the name

of that noble character, George Wishart, calls forth just a word concerning his history and the undoubted influence he had upon John Knox. He was a real forerunner of the Reformation in Scotland, preaching with great energy and boldness against the evils of his time. His enemies about him were numerous and deeply entrenched in political power. His downfall was sure because the people had not been thoroughly aroused over the subject of reform at this time and consequently did not rise up in their might and fight for him. His last sermon was delivered in Haddington January 1546, and he was far-sighted enough to see that it would probably be his last appeal to his countrymen for the forces of the enemy were closing in upon him. About midnight the soldiers of Bothwell surrounded the house, and he fell into the hands of that cruel prince by whom he was handed over to the care of that traitorous man, Cardinal Benton. For several weeks he was carried around from castle to prison, and finally tried by a prejudicial court and executed at the stake. The Cardinal little realized that by this act he was committing one of the greatest mistakes of his life; for he was now himself standing over a mine which before long sounded his own destruction.

The mantle and spirit of the great preacher descended upon his servant and disciple, and from that time we begin to see the awakening of the "lion" whose roar was to descend over the whole country and cause even the queen on her throne to tremble.

The times in which these reformers lived resembled each other very closely. Baal worship had become the court religion in Elijah's time, and Ahab's court was composed largely of idolatrous and licentious revelers. A political alliance had been formed between Israel and Phoenicia, which alliance was cemented by the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel, the son and the daughter of the allied kings. "A covenant between two Semetic peoples was always supposed to imply a friendship between their gods. Its natural sequel was a syncretism of faith and worship." But Ahab did not think at first of turning his back upon Jehovah. The names he gave his sons--Ahaziah (Jehovah holds) and Jehoram (Jehovah is high)--show that Jehovah was still his God, but like many other rulers Ahab was morally weak, and the baneful influence of the strong-minded queen soon won him to her faith. From the court religion to the national religion is only a step, and that step was now to be taken. The whole land seemed to have become so corrupt that the king and his nobles considered any means lawful to bring about the consummation of their plans. Such were the conditions which Elijah was called upon to face.

How like this was Scotland during John Knox's time! Those high in authority had grown corrupt and immoral. They did not even attempt to conceal their immorality but "flared their amours in the face of the world, as if proud of the soundness of their taste for beauty, and of the rank and birth that had become prostrate to their solicitation." Even the

queen herself, who was supposed to be a model of chastity and virtue to her people, was implicated in a plot to kill her husband in order that she might marry another.

The clergy owned fully one-half of the wealth of the kingdom and a vast part of this was in the hands of a few individuals who had command over the whole body. Avarice, ambition and the love of secular pomp reigned among the "superior orders." When there was a vacancy among the superiors a contest ensued between the Bishops and Abbots for the place, in which the largest bribe was sure to win. The Bishops during this time never preached on any occasion and the only people the preaching heard was by the mendicant monks who employed it for the most mercenary purposes. The lives of the clergy, exempted from secular jurisdiction and corrupted by wealth and idleness, had become a scandal to religion and an outrage to decency.

The likeness is, also, seen in the idolatry of the two peoples, for in John Knox's time Scotland had almost fallen into that state. The Scriptures were as completely hidden from the knowledge of the common people as was the knowledge of the true God during the days of Elijah. Even the Bishops were oftentimes unacquainted with the Scriptures. The people, instead of being taught to offer their worship to one God, were directed to divide it among an innumerable number of inferior deities. God and Jesus Christ were almost forgotten in the worship of the Virgin and the saints. Their religion was

largely polytheistic. If God saw fit to send a prophet of truth to Israel in her darkest days, surely the times were ripe in Scotland for the advent of such a messenger, and he came bearing the illustrious name JOHN, and, like the great forerunner, "the same came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him."

Another common experience in the lives of Elijah and John Knox is that they both suffered exile. Elijah, after announcing that Jehovah was about to avenge the apostasy of Israel by sending a long drouth on the land, fled and dwelt by the brook Cherith. His life was miraculously sustained by ravens, and when the brook dried up on account of the drouth he went to Zarephath, a city of heathen Tyre. Here in the very midst of a heathen country he found a well-spring of kindness, for it was true then, as it is true today, "a prophet is not without honor save in his own country." He must have remained here about two years before the command came from Jehovah to go and show himself to the king.

John Knox so cried out against the prevailing sins of his age, and not being careful to limit his accusations to the lower order of the clergy but attacking the Bishops and Abbots as well, that he soon brought upon himself the united hatred of the clerical body. By them he was hounded from place to place at last taking refuge in the castle of St. Andrew, which was held by the friends of the Reformation. While residing here the castle was besieged by a fleet of French vessels and

finally captured. Knox was taken to France where he served for a large part of his eighteen months' captivity as a galley slave. After regaining freedom he returned to England where he preached for five years with wonderful success. There soon arose opposition from the Bishops, but owing to his ability in argument and his sanction by the church, they dared not harm him. But the government changed hands. The Bloody Mary ascended the English throne and the whole aspect of the religious sky in England seemed changed. She set herself from the first to bring back again the Roman religion, and she made it a point to remove from office all who might oppose her. Knox found himself again in danger, and much against his own wishes he acted upon the advice of his friends and fled to France, thence to Geneva, the refuge for the oppressed and the training school for the great Protestant leaders. After spending some time here and becoming greatly attached to Calvin, he returned to Scotland where he was greeted by vast crowds and the usual opposition of the clergy. It was apparent that the condition in Scotland was not yet ripe for any decisive move, so Geneva became again his home for two years, which proved to be the happiest of his life. At length the report of Mary's death reaches Geneva and he immediately turns his face toward England and the capital Isle of his birth, never to leave her again for any protracted period.

These two reformers were alike in another respect, namely their greatest enemies were women. A strange coincidence is

this: Elijah did not fear so much the wicked Ahab as he did the cruel and treacherous queen Jezebel. The only time the prophet ever despaired of life and desired that he might escape the rest of life that lay before him was after his slaughter of the priests of Baal when she made the threat, "so let the gods do to me and more also if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And the narrative continues, "When he saw that he arose and went for his life."

John Knox was rather more afflicted in this respect than was Elijah, for instead of one he had three women opposers. Mary Queen of England had sworn vengeance against him and he had been obliged to save himself by flight. Mary the regent Queen of Scotland was very much opposed to his doctrines and was really at heart a staunch Catholic. She, together with Elizabeth, was much prejudiced against the reformer because of a pamphlet he wrote in Geneva against the rule of women, by which he endeavored to show that women were not fitted by nature to rule kingdoms. All the writer's apologies could never fully reconcile Elizabeth. The third and greatest enemy of all was Mary Queen of the Scots. She had been reared at a French court and although beautiful in person and attractive in manners, yet at heart she was false and likely to betray her best friend if she thought it would be conducive to her interests. She was of a naturally violent temper and the devotion that had been paid her at the French court because of her personal charms rendered her extremely impatient of contra-

diction. Such was the arrogant, selfish and unscrupulous queen our reformer was obliged to oppose. Between Mary Queen of Scots and Jezebel there is not such a very marked difference, for probably if we knew as much about the life of the latter we would find a few womanly traits in her character. At heart they were largely the same and the only reason Mary did not cause the death of John Knox is because she dared not on account of the strong following which the preacher of righteousness had secured.

Such in brief were the careers of Elijah and John Knox. For conscientiousness, personal force, and undaunted courage they must ever commend themselves to the appreciation of all healthy minds.

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