Elisha, the Man of God

"Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat: . . . and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. . . . Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him."
—I Kings 19:16,19,21

THE FIRST MENTION OF ELI-sha in the Bible is in I Kings 19. Here we find his predecessor, Elijah, dwelling in a cave at Mt. Horeb (Sinai), hiding from his enemies. It was here that the Lord commanded Elijah to go into the wilderness of Damascus and to accomplish certain things. On his way through Canaan toward Assyria, Elijah found Elisha engaged in plowing a field with twelve yoke of oxen. This indicates that Elisha was a man of considerable means.

Elijah then cast his mantle upon Elisha, showing that he was the one whom the Lord had chosen to become the prophet of Israel to succeed Elijah. Elisha then disposed of his goods, his oxen, etc., and left his farm and all that

he had and followed Elijah and ministered unto him. The mantle literally represented an investiture with the prophet's office and adoption as a son, even though he was not to assume the official duties of the office of prophet until the death of Elijah.

ELIJAH'S MANTLE A PICTURE

This mantle of Elijah was made of skins as indicated by the *Revised Standard Version* of II Kings 1:8: "He wore a garment of haircloth, with a girdle of leather about his loins." The mantle of Elijah may represent not only the anointing of the Holy Spirit but also, being made of animal skins, may picture the robe of righteousness made available for us to cover our sins and imperfections.

This association of the merit of Christ with the Holy Spirit of anointing is made in Psalm 133, which alludes back to the anointing of the priesthood of Israel. There we see that the anointing oil was poured upon the head of Aaron the high priest, and it ran down upon the garment. So it is that the anointing that we have received has come to us because we are under the robe of Christ's righteousness. Both the anointing and the merit, or robe of righteousness, therefore, seems to be represented in the mantle of Elijah.

ELISHA'S MINISTRY BEGINS

Following the event of the calling of Elisha by Elijah, we hear nothing more of Elisha for six to eight years until the time for Elijah to be taken away, caught up with a flaming chariot. This is recorded in II Kings, chapter 2. Following the departure of Elijah, Elisha then began his ministry as the

anointed prophet. He lived a long and productive life in the service of the Lord, performing greater works than that of Elijah. Elijah had promised him a double portion of the Spirit, and so Elisha lived twice as long and performed many more miracles than Elijah, some even after his own death.

Elisha's first miracle was the purifying of the waters of Jericho recorded in II Kings 2:18-22. Some of the other outstanding events in his life of preaching reform were the restoring of the Shunamite's son to life and purifying the deadly pottage at Gilgal. Naaman, the chief captain of the armies of Assyria whose leprosy was cleansed by washing in the waters of the Jordan is recorded in II Kings, chapter 5. There is only one reference to Elisha in the New Testament, in Luke 4:27, referring to the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian.

THE FLOATING AXE HEAD

Next we come to II Kings, chapter 6, where we have the very interesting account of the floating axe head. We would like to look at this particular event carefully and see what lessons the Lord may have here that would be of benefit to his people today.

We notice, first of all, that Elisha's ministry was that of a reformer, teaching the people to turn from sin and idolatry and to be obedient to the God of Israel and the Law. The Lord did not provide us these recorded events in the life of Elisha just to fill up space in the Bible. In examining them, not so much as types but as object lessons for us, we are convinced that he intended these experiences to provide valuable lessons for us, the true Israelites, concerning the moral and spiritual conduct of the Lord's people.

Let us consider then II Kings 6:1-7: "The sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye. And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it."

THE SONS OF THE PROPHETS

First, one might wonder just who the 'sons of the prophets' are that are referred to here. The sons, or students of the prophets, was a religious fraternity having its beginning back in the days of Samuel. This school of the prophets was instituted by Samuel in his old age, and its purpose was to provide Israel with young men familiar with the teachings of the Law to watch over the religious and moral interests of the people. (I Sam. 19:18-20) Gradually, over a period of many years, schools of the prophets were set up in all of the major cities of Israel. Those who attended these schools lived in a communal arrangement, separating themselves from the rest of society, so far as their religious training was concerned, but mingling with the people as they fulfilled their missions of religious and moral uplift.

Here, in the days of Samuel, the Lord was picturing by these schools of the prophets a situation that would be true of the church during this Gospel Age. Just as Samuel instituted the school of the prophets, so Jesus came at his First Advent and established another 'fraternity' which we refer to as the 'school of Christ.'

The first school of prophets was set up at Naioth in Ramah. Naioth means 'residence,' or 'house,' while Ramah means 'that which is above,' or 'heaven.' How true it is that our home is in heaven, and we dwell together with Christ in heavenly places. As these prophetic schools were established in every large city throughout the area of Israel, so it is that the Lord's people have been established in little groups throughout the land. We come together so that we may sit at the feet of the great teacher Jesus, to be taught of him concerning the Word of God. We are not the sons of prophets, however, but rather the sons of God.

TRAINED IN THE SCHOOL OF CHRIST

Just as the sons of the prophets separated themselves from the people at large in receiving their religious training, so we also must come apart from the world if we are to be taught of the Lord. Yet we are still in the world, and we, like the sons of the prophets, must be doing a work of religious and moral reform. The prophet Isaiah tells us what our work in the world is in Isaiah 61:1,2: "The Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the ac-

ceptable year of the LORD." If we are thus being taught by the Lord in the school of Christ, then we must also be faithful ministers of the Truth in our day-to-day contact with the world.

As time went on in this fraternity of the sons of the prophets established by Samuel, the authority over this arrangement was passed down through several of God's prophets until the latter part of the period of the kings. Elijah became the overseer of this arrangement, following which this authority was passed on to Elisha.

Returning to II Kings, chapter 6, we are able to see how Elisha represents the Lord, our great teacher, while the sons of the prophets picture the church. With this in mind we are then able to draw the lesson from this experience. The lesson is primarily that of consecration.

GOING DOWN TO THE JORDAN

In verses 2-4 of II Kings 6, we see the sons of the prophets going down to the Jordan for the purpose of building a house to dwell in. Likewise, at the outset of our Christian experience it was necessary for us to go 'down to the Jordan' and there, by faith, be cleansed by the precious blood of Christ. We remember how our Lord at the age of thirty came to the Jordan and there gave expression to his complete submission to the will of the Father. "Lo, I come to do thy will, O God." (Heb. 10:9) This must have been the attitude of each one of us when we offered our little all to the Lord. That offering was lean and poor, and did not appear as much in the eyes of men, but the Lord saw in the heart of each one of us a sincerity, a

devotion to his will, and he valued this more highly than gold and silver.

Throughout the Old Testament, the lower Jordan, from Galilee to the Dead Sea with its salty and polluted waters, has pictured the curse or condemnation placed against mankind, all of whom are represented in the Dead Sea, the condition of Adamic death. This picture was carried forward to the New Testament when Jesus came to John at Jordan and was baptized in the salty and polluted waters of that river. This pictured the fact that three-and-a-half years later on the cross Jesus would take Adam's place in death, releasing mankind from the curse, and in due time the symbolic waters of the Jordan will be smitten and rolled back, that the people may pass over into the antitypical Canaan, the new age. This was pictured by Joshua leading the Israelites through the Jordan into Canaan centuries earlier.

Before this can take place, however, the work of the Gospel Age must be completed. Now, the benefits of our Lord's sacrifice are applied on an individual basis, according to faith. By faith, we have been lifted up and freed from the condemnation in Adam and we walk in newness of life. Going down to the Jordan represents our voluntary consecration to God and subsequent cleansing in the merit of his sacrifice, our justification.

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

Having come down to the Jordan, the sons of the prophets were to take thence everyone a beam (log) and make a place to dwell in. So it is that we, having come to the Jordan in consecration, then set out on

the lifetime work of preparation for our place in the house of the Lord. Each one of us is represented as a beam. This reminds us of our Lord's words in Revelation 3:12, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God."

Just as Elisha accompanied the sons of the prophets and instructed them in this work, so our Lord is present with us as our High Priest and Advocate, our exemplar and our teacher, and we look to him for instruction regarding this work of preparation going on in the life of each one of us.

OUR STEWARDSHIP—PICTURED BY THE AXE

Let us consider verses 5 through 7: "As one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it."

We know that in building a log dwelling such as the one referred to here, the only tool that was necessary was an axe. It was used to cut down the tree, then to skin the bark off the log. The log was then notched on each end so it would be properly interlocked with the logs from the other walls, at right angles. The axe did 'everything' in preparing each of these beams that were to go into this house. It fittingly represents everything over which we have been made a steward for the purpose of preparing the New Creature so that it may in due time, on the other side of the veil, take its place as a beam in the house of the Lord—as a 'pillar' in the temple of our God.

We notice in our text that this was a 'borrowed' axe. It did not belong to the one who was using it. All that we have belongs to the Lord—it does not belong to us! We turned it all over to him when we made our consecration. However, he gave some of it back to us and appointed us stewards over these things. We must use all that we have received from the Lord—our talents and abilities, our material possessions, automobiles, our homes, etc.—in a way that would be in the best interest of the New Creature. All of these things over which we have been made stewards, if used properly, will contribute to the work of preparation of ourselves as a 'beam' for the house of the Lord.

We see a further picture here in our text. Elisha caused the axe head to come up from the bottom of the Jordan and to float on top of the water. Elisha took it out of the water and gave it to the one who was using it. Yes, our natural abilities, talents, etc., our worldly possessions, our homes and automobiles, all look more or less the same as those of our neighbors and friends. The difference is in the fact that our axe 'floats' while theirs does not. In other words, what we have has been given to us by the Lord, lifted up from the waters of the Jordan, out from under the curse, and sanctified for our use. We are told in I Corinthians 4:2, "It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." We must do all as unto the Lord.

STEWARDSHIP IS ALL-INCLUSIVE

Let us examine this matter of stewardship further. Stewardship means to be given charge over

that which belongs to another. The axe that the Lord has loaned to each one of us for our preparation as New Creatures involves more than just our natural talents and temporal possessions. In I Peter 4:10 we read, "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." The knowledge of the Truth is a gift over which we have been made stewards and Peter here tells us that to fulfill our stewardship in this respect means we must minister the Truth one to another, and thus build one another up in the most holy faith.

How all-inclusive our stewardship is! We see that everything which has to do with our lives has been provided by the Lord, and sanctified for our use in the preparation of the New Creature as a beam in the house of the Lord. Let us see to it that we use our axe properly—cutting off the bark of dross, getting rid of the rotten spots, cutting off the little branches of sin and smoothing out the sharp corners of our character.

LABOURERS TOGETHER

A final lesson that may be drawn from this little incident in the life of Elisha is that referred to by the apostle in I Corinthians 3:9, "We are labourers together with God." We see the sons of the prophets under the leadership of Elisha bending all their energies to the work at hand, each of them shaping and preparing their individual beams for the building of their house. While the primary concern of each one is their own beam which they are preparing, still they could never finish this construction

job if they were not working together all the way through.

We learn from this that our present work is primarily an individual responsibility—"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil. 2:12) Yet we must keep our spiritual eyes set upon the building as a whole and its final assembly on the other side of the veil. The Lord is pleased to have us manifest interest in all of the preparatory work of this spiritual house. What a blessed opportunity we have as ecclesias to work together one with another, and with our brethren in the Truth movement as a whole—the privilege of cooperating fully with our brethren throughout the earth and to have a share in the ministry of disseminating the Gospel message.

We are reminded of the apostle's word in Ephesians 2:19-22, "Now therefore we are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

Just as Elisha was there to oversee the construction of that typical house, so our High Priest and Advocate is with us, and with all those who are engaged in this work of preparation for a place in the spiritual house of God. Jesus has given us the blueprints in his Word, and we must follow these blueprints carefully. May our Lord help each one of us in this work. ■