

The Days of Elijah

by: Ronald L. Dart

If you happen to enjoy contemporary praise music, you more than likely have heard "These Are The Days of Elijah." It happens to be one of my favorites. It is very sing-able and I can really get into it.

I happened onto a video of the performance of this song, done before a large, enthusiastic group, who were also really getting into it. It was an elaborate production with a procession carrying large banners and people dancing in the aisles and performers on the stage, laying it out.

But as I watched, I wondered a little how it might differ from a pep rally during the football season at a major university. The words were different of course, but for a person who spoke no English, it would merely have been a show. The intent of the people there, though I'm sure, was worship.

The Liturgical Fidget

But I couldn't help wondering how much God was on their mind and how much the performance was on their mind? Now God forbid that I should criticize that sort of display, but I recall something that C.S. Lewis said about what he called 'the liturgical fidget'. When he went to church, he said, he wanted to have his mind on God, not the latest innovation in service or performance to the people who were there. And all of this conspired to call to memory from the words of the song, 'These are the days of Elijah' and I wondered how many of the performers and the singers knew what that was all about? What exactly are 'The Days of Elijah' and why are they singing about them?

Elijah

Elijah for those who don't know, was the archetype of all prophets. He wasn't the first, he wasn't the only, but he was major.

The song begins, 'These are the days of Elijah, declaring the word of the Lord and these are the days of your servant Moses, righteousness being restored, and though these are days of great trial of famine and darkness and sword. Still, we are the voice in the desert, crying, prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

Now what does all this mean? Why Elijah? Why Moses? It is clear to me that the person who composed this song was driving at something important, but what exactly?

Well, the place to start is naturally, 'The days of Elijah'. He may be not only the archetype of all prophets, he also may be the most blunt.

He is described in the Bible as a hairy man wearing leather. I guess if he were to come to your town today, he might come riding in on a Harley. He was a man of few words. He is introduced to us this way in First Kings 17 and verse 1 "And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be no dew nor rain these years, but according to my word."

Then he left.

This must be one the most brief and to the point prophecies in the entire history of the Bible, and it comes out of the blue for most of us, I guess, but not if you have read the context that led up to this. This was the last time that anyone in Israel heard from the man for 3 1/2 years, and more important, there was neither dew nor rain for 3 1/2 years. But where did this come from, why such a dire prophecy?

Well, Ahab, to whom it was directed probably knew, but for the rest of us, we have to go back and read the story.

Bad Leadership

What Elijah is on about has to do with the governance of the nation of Israel, the leadership. Ahab was king and for anyone who knows the history of the house of Israel, that says it all.

The story is in the previous chapter, First Kings chapter 16 and in verse 28, "Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria: Ahab his son reigned in his stead. And in the thirty eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel: he reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty two years. And Ahab did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him." And believe me that is saying a lot.

The kings of Israel are just a bad lot from beginning to end. That's all one can say about them. Ahab though appears to have been the acme. He is the highest point of evil that ever existed in the northern tribes.

"And so Ahab did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. He made an altar to Baal in the house that he had built in Samaria. He made an asherah pole and he did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."

Baal-ism and Asherah-ism, if I may call them that, I started to call it Baal worship, but what they did wasn't really worship in any definition of the term.

It involved child prostitution and even child sacrifice. Now this was the part and parcel of the worship invented by humans from the first civilization over in Mesopotamia, and it died hard. It permeated the Middle East in ancient times and King Ahab, who ought to have provided leadership to the contrary, married into that and became wholly absorbed in it. He was a weak man and Jezebel was the wrong woman.

Well, there came a time when God had had enough of this louse and his wife, so He sent Elijah. I think Elijah was selected because of the kind of man he was.

Toolbox Theory of God

I have a toolbox theory of God, that He has this toolbox down here full of people that fit the job at hand. So what about Elijah? This was a man who never used two words when one would do. He was a man who would not dress to kill. He was a man who dressed roughly. He was a hairy man. He wore leather and I have a vision in my mind about what this man looked like.

Now if these are indeed 'The Days of Elijah', what should we be expecting to see in society at large? Well, moral corruption at the highest level, child abuse, even child sacrifice from an appalling scale for that was rampant in Israel.

Now you know, I don't know how much those people of old really believed in God, or how much they just enjoyed killing children? I honestly don't know. In our case, we do it a little bit differently, we call it abortion. We do it before the child is actually born, but nevertheless we have child sacrifice in a way.

Elijah didn't address the sins of the nation directly. He merely said that the coming disaster was from God, and he just dared them to ask why would God do that to us? The truth is, they knew!

Are these 'The Days of Elijah'?

Are these, then, 'The Days of Elijah'? Well if so, the song goes on. 'These are the days of the harvest. The fields are as white in your world, and we are the laborers in your vineyard, declaring the word of the Lord.'

Well, if indeed we are the ones declaring the word of the Lord, what does the Lord have to say to a society like ours?

The story of Elijah is important. It is part history and partly something that is to be repeated again in the future.

Well it came to pass, First Kings 18, and verse 1, "After many days, (three and one half years in fact), the word of the LORD came to Elijah in the third year of the drought, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth."

Now, it is not that anyone had repented over there, it is just that God had administered His punishment and now we have to go forward from here to see if they were really going to change.

"So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. And there was a sore famine in Samaria." Meanwhile, back at the Palace, King Ahab called in a man named Obadiah, who was the governor of his house. (Now Obadiah was a good man and feared the LORD greatly): For it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, (that was a polite way of saying that she was killing them off) but Obadiah took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water."

That is chilling. People in power don't cotton to being criticized. Jezebel was apparently not above killing a few of her critics, and not just a few of them.

John the Baptist

The parallel with what happened to John the Baptist cannot be overlooked because John the Baptist is in a sense Elijah before Jesus came.

Guess what happened. A woman's saw to it that John the Baptist's head was taken off just like Jezebel did to the prophets in her own time.

Obadiah

Ahab said to Obadiah "Let's go look for water all over this place. You go one way and I will go the other. They divided the land and took off. As Obadiah was in the way, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him immediately and fell on his face and said in verse 7, "Is that you, my lord Elijah? He answered him saying, "I am. Go tell your Lord, behold, Elijah is here." Normally this would be good news. It meant maybe some rain, but Obadiah was nobody's fool. When a prophet of God shows up, it is not to tell us how well we are doing!

Poor Obadiah! Elijah scared the daylights out of him. I can visualize him in this next passage with the speech that he makes walking around, pacing, waving his hands in the air. He's afraid. He said, "What are you trying to do get me killed?" That is essentially what he is saying in the modern vernacular. He says, "I will go tell Ahab that you're here, but then if we go looking for you and we do not find you, you know what is going to happen to me, he'll take my head off. So Elijah swore with an oath, and he said, "As the Lord of Hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today."

Ahab

So Obadiah went to meet Ahab (1 Kings 18:16), and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. That would've been something to see, this confrontation. And just as Elijah came into sight, Ahab probably put out his hand and pointed to him and said, "Are you he who troubles Israel?" Isn't that the way of it? It was Ahab's leadership that had brought this nation to ruin,

and he blames Elijah for it. It never crossed his mind that Elijah could not have stopped the rain on his own without God's hand being in it. It was a miracle. And God had spoken to him through that. But Ahab didn't get it.

Elijah answered and said, "I haven't troubled Israel, but you, your father's house, in that you have forsaken the Commandments of the Lord and you have followed Baal, now send and gather to me all Israel unto Mount Caramel and all the prophets of Baal 450, the prophets of the Asherah 400, who eat at Jezebel's table." So the confrontation on Mount Caramel will be 850 prophets to one. Elijah seems to have thought that was fair. The amazing thing is, Ahab did what he was told to do.

Everyone Gathered at Mount Caramel

So everyone gathered at Mount Caramel and Elijah came to the people (1 Kings 18:21) and said, "How long are you going to halt and waver between two opinions? If the Lord be God, if Jehovah is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people didn't answer a word." Which in itself speaks volumes.

This is all fascinating. These people hadn't let go of Jehovah entirely. But serving Baal was more fun, sexually speaking. So there was a kind of a mixed religion. Jehovah had been there national God in all their history, but other kinds of worship had crept in and corrupted, not only their worship, but society right to its very roots. The people wouldn't answer. What could they say?

Then Elijah said the people (1 Kings 18:22) "I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord. Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let them give us two bullocks; let them choose one bullock for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood and put no fire under it. I'll dress the other bullock and I will put it on the wood and will not put a fire under it. Now you call upon the name of your gods, and I will call upon the name of Jehovah and the God who answers by fire, let him be God. And all the people said, "Well, okay, fair enough, we will go along with that." So Elijah told the prophets of Baal, "You pick which ever one you want. You dress it. There are lots and lots of you. You should be able to do this quickly. Call upon the name of your gods, but don't put any fire under it." So they took the bullock, they dressed it, they called upon the name of Baal from morning till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us."

Baal Chorus

This is the famous 'Baal Chorus' like Mendelson's 'Elijah'. What a rip snorting chorus it was. I don't think I could have brought myself to sing it.

So they said, "O Baal, hear us. But there's no voice, and none that answered. They danced around the altar that was made and what a spectacle they were putting on. And it came to pass at noon (verse 27), Elijah made fun of them and he said, "Cry louder, he is a God. Maybe he's talking. Maybe he's gone hunting. Maybe he's on a journey, well I know, he's

taking a nap and you need to wake him up." Well, now that is not very nice is it, making fun of someone else's religion. But he did. Are these the days of Elijah?

Well, they cried aloud and began to cut themselves. They had a fashion of cutting themselves, and bleeding all over their offerings. That was a part of their religion.

"It came to pass, when mid-day was passed, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, and there was no voice, nor any answer, nor any that paid attention."

Elijah's Turn

And finally, at the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah said to all the people, in verse 30, "Gather around." And he repaired the altar of the Lord that was broken down. He took 12 stones according to the number of the tribes of Israel and with these stones he built an altar in the name of Jehovah. He made a trench around it, and he put the wood in order and he cut the bullock in pieces and laid it on the wood and said "Now fill four barrels with water and pour it on the sacrifice and on the wood." They did. He said "Do it another time." They did it again. He said "Do it again" and they did it a third time. The water ran all around the place and he filled the trench with water, just to demonstrate to everyone that "What I am doing here is no trick. This is not an illusion. I'm not some magician, we have to show what's happening here is real."

"So it came to pass (1 Kings 18:36), at the time of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet approached and said "Jehovah, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and I have done all these things at your word, hear me, Lord, hear me, that these people may know that you are Jehovah God and you will turn their heart back again."

Man, that's a short prayer. How long did it take me to read that? And then when he said the word 'again', "then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up all the water that was in the trench and when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and they said "Jehovah, he is God, Jehovah, he is God."

I think this is where the conclusion of 'These are the days of Elijah' comes in as the people sing, "There's no God like Jehovah, There's no God like Jehovah." They are playing that role at that time.

Elijah said to them (1 Kings 18:40), "Take the prophets of Baal and don't let any of them escape, and Elijah brought them down to the brook of Kishon, and slaughtered them there."

Now These Are The Days of Elijah!

Now these are the days of Elijah! What do you think about them? And why do we sing saying "Ours are the days of Elijah?" Are we anticipating a great revival of a whole people turning to God, and saying "There's no God like Jehovah?" How did it all turn out in the

original days of Elijah. Well, in a very short time, Elijah was fleeing for his life from the woman Jezebel.

I don't know what Elijah expected. I doubt that he had much in the way of expectations of these people, because he was a realist, and word came to him, even in spite of all the things that people said that Jezebel had sworn to kill him (1 Kings 19:2-4). He took off, he went a days journey into the desert and he came and sat down under a juniper tree and he ask God that he could die, and he said "It's enough. Oh, Lord, take away my life. I am not better than my fathers." Mendelssohn pulled that out and made it a part of the song Elijah. It is a great air. I did it once myself in recital.

In the days of Elijah it was rough going. Elijah thought he was the only one left that served God (1 Kings 19:10) and they were trying to kill him. I think he came to the place where he figured that the jig is up. He thought that the worship of God was just about gone and they are headed toward something worse like the days of Noah were.

Then God spoke to him (1 Kings 19:18) and said "No, I have reserved for myself 7000 men in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So there were people out there that Elijah did not know about and they may or may not have known about him and even with that, if these are the days of Elijah as the composer of the song seems to have grasped, He grasped what perilous times that the days of Elijah were.

For example, the first verse concludes this way, "Though these are the days of great trial, of famine and darkness and sword still we are the voice in the desert crying, prepare ye the way of the Lord," but boy if these the days of Elijah and if we are that voice, then it is not going to be easy for us. It wasn't easy for Elijah. He went on foot all way down to Mount Sinai to get his message from God.

Do you ever feel a little lonely in the world? Like a persecuted minority. Well, the days of Elijah were like that for the people of God, but the voice crying in the desert is a necessary part of the story.

But where do we get off thinking that these are the days of Elijah? Well, there's a funny thing about that. The last prophet of the Old Testament, long after Elijah was dead and buried, brought him back into the story. It is the last chapter of the last book, down to the last verses in the Old Testament.

Malachi 4:1 reads this way, "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them."

Boy, if I've ever read an incentive not to be arrogant or to do evil, I have read it right there.

I Will Send You the Prophet Elijah

He said, "Then for you who revere my name, the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its wings and you will trample down the wicked and they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things. Remember the law of my servant Moses. The decrees and laws that I gave to him in Horeb for all Israel. Don't forget the law of Moses. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes, he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

So, I have to assume that the composer of "These are the days of Elijah" knew this, and he knew the prophecy that God would send Elijah again and frankly it has been something, it is a theme that has persisted remarkably down through all generations that Elijah is going to come again.

You might recall that a group of people came to John the Baptist once and said, "Are you Elijah?" What did that mean? Well, they assumed that Elijah, in some form or another, would come prior to the coming of the Messiah, and there were strong expectations for the Messiah coming in their day. John said, "No I am not." Later, Jesus would say, "Oh yes, he was. (Matthew 17:11-13)"

Well, what Malachi could not have seen was that Elijah would be sent not once more, but twice more. Twice? Yes! The first time he was sent in the person of John the Baptist. John said, "He wasn't Elijah" Jesus said "He was."

But then, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus appeared glorified before his disciples talking with Elijah and Moses (Matthew 17:1-3). How are those two going to play out in the last days?

Remember how the song begins. "These are the days of Elijah, declaring the word of the Lord, and these are the days of your servant Moses, righteousness being restored." Now I will tell you, not much righteousness was restored in the days of Elijah, nor in the days of Moses, for that matter.

The only restoration of righteousness in Jesus' time was what He Himself accomplished by the shedding of His blood, by His death, by His burial and His resurrection.

Well, when Elijah shows up the next time, Moses will be there too. Do you know where to find them in the Bible? In Revelation Chapter 11, they are the two witnesses that stand before the God of the whole earth. They're not named there. How can I say that one is Elijah, and the other one is Moses? Well because of what they do. One is to strike the earth with plagues, as often as they will, which is what Moses did in Egypt and the other one is to call down fire from heaven and destroy their enemies, which is precisely what Elijah did when

the king sent men out to bring him in. He said, "If I am a prophet of God, let fire come down and destroy you and your company," and it did (2 Kings 1:10).

So when Elijah shows up the next time, Moses will be there too, and they will be on the cusp of the new world.

Are these the days of Elijah?

"Behold, he comes," as the song goes, "Riding on the clouds, shining like the sun as the trumpet called. Lift your voice, it is the year of Jubilee and out of Zion's hill, salvation comes. These are the days of Ezekiel, whose dry bones will become flesh. These are the days of your servant David rebuilding the temple of praise. These are the days of harvest, the fields are as white in your world. And we're the laborers in your vineyard, declaring the word of the Lord."

Okay, I guess that's the job and we had best get about it. Don't you think?

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Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net