

7 Easter A / 1 June 2014 ✠ Pusey House, Oxford
2 Kings 2.9-15 / Ps 68.32-end / 1 Peter 4.7-11 / John 15.26-16.4a

And as they still went on and talked, behold,
a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah
went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen.

Part of the *excitement*, part of the *glamour* of the life of biblical scholarship comes from texts such as this passage about the assumption of the prophet Elijah into heaven. Glamour and excitement, that is, not in the technical labour of parsing and analysing — though these are amply rewarding exercises — but glamour and excitement in the opportunity to join our imaginations with those of the saints and doctors among our predecessors here and in cathedrals and monasteries and synagogues and studies through the ages. This morning's readings — guided by our recent observance of the Feast of the Ascension — invoke the scene from 2 Kings in which Elijah makes his farewell tour of the theological colleges he founded (the "sons of the prophets," or "the goodly fellowship of the prophets" as we sing in the *Te Deum*), and at last bids farewell to his successor Elisha. This morning, Elijah mounts the divine chariot, the scriptural version of another well-known vehicle that transports through space and time, bigger on the inside, and Elijah prefigures Jesus' ascent into heaven with his own departure.

The grammar and vocabulary of the story don't present much of a challenge. Elijah and Elisha (Elias and Eliseus, as the Latin Church knows them) are conversing about one thing and another, when lo and behold, Elijah seems to have been caught up by a brilliant, blazing, thunderous vehicle and taken up to the skies. The Hebrew text (to which I refer this morning in honour of Dr Pusey) identifies this vehicle as a רֶכֶב־אֵשׁ וְסוּסֵי אֵשׁ *rekeb esh vasusay esh*, very simply "a chariot of fire and horses of fire," whether *made of fire* or *fiery in appearance* we cannot say. Several *modern* observers note that the blazing vehicle and whirlwind may simply refer to a patch of *particularly bad weather*; perhaps Elijah met with the same adventure as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, only without the musical numbers and small people.

The simplicity of this story tempts a reader simply to breeze on along to Elisha's miracles (the vengeful she-bears are just a few verses ahead); Elijah makes a dramatic exit, and Elisha moves into the spotlight. That chariot of fire, though, stuck in the saints' imaginations, especially when a few years further on in the story Ezekiel begins his ministry with a vision of God's chariot *also* attended by whirlwind and fire, the famous vision with the four beasts and the wheels within wheels. These two prophets' encounters with the fiery chariot of God took hold of the saints' imagination and *would not let go*.

Those chariots belong together in the spiritual imagination, even though our academic vocation requires us to note that they appear in separate prophetic visions, they come from different regions at different times, and even if Ezekiel's vision (surprisingly) doesn't even mention a chariot. And once these chariots are understood to belong together, what a marvellous subject for contemplation — a fiery, omnidirectional chariot powered by angels, propelled by four amazing creatures, and driven by the Spirit.

Some holy interpreters of Scripture meditated on the fiery chariots, deliberated about their constituent beasts and angels, and most of all reasoned out the implications of the chariot for the whole of time and space, ultimately developing into *Merkabah* mysticism (from the word for chariot, *rekeb*), a dangerous esoteric wisdom that the rabbis forbade to mere casual inquirers. By the chariot, by the *Merkabah*, you could rise up into heaven. By the *Merkabah*, you could be protected from all evil (as Elisha was protected by army of divine chariots filling the mountain of Dothan). By the secrets of the *Merkabah*, you could understand all the hidden mysteries of God and creation. And so by the secrets of the *Merkabah*, all of Scripture could be recognised and understood. And so some of their deliberations led to the system, or perhaps better the *conventions*, of interpreting a text according to its grammar, according to its pointing toward Christ, its relevance for our own way of life, and of its relevance for our eternal end — the fourfold figurative hermeneutic known as the *quadriga*, named for Elijah's and Ezekiel's four-wheeled chariot that reveals the presence and activity of God.

None of this can be found just by reading through 2 Kings. As we saw before, the story from Kings described Elijah bidding sad goodbyes to the companies of prophets, and talking with Elisha, and *boom!* disappearing into this maelstrom of fire and whirlwind. Nor can Ezekiel's vision of the *merkabah* by itself disclose these advanced mysteries. A strictly literal reading of 2 Kings 9 or of Ezekiel 1 offers nary a clue toward the innumerable esoteric enigmas that the mystic discerns in the chariots of fire.

That may suggest to some that our interpretive tradition is all smoke and mirrors, an elaborate charade to disguise the fact that we're making it all up as we go along. Others may suppose contrariwise that

this in fact discloses the *real meaning* of Elijah and Ezekiel, the hidden divine truth to which the secularists and unbelievers lack access. It strikes me as more likely, though — more in keeping with God’s generosity and with the way things go in this world — more likely that the fiery chariot and the beautifully monstrous creatures represent the best way that the biblical narrators found for telling us what they had heard and seen. Ezekiel’s vision, after all, is larded with the qualifier “like”: “something *like* gleaming amber,” “something *like* four living creatures.” And although the narrator of Elijah’s ascension states straight out that he was taken up by “a chariot of fire and horses of fire,” even these characterisations seem more to describe the *manner* of Elijah’s departure than to itemise a transport manifest. We would be mistaken to treat this chariot as a regular wooden wheeled cart that you or I could construct from parts (then set ablaze), and we would equally err to imagine that this is *just* a metaphor, as though one could dispose of the extraordinary bits of Elijah’s story to arrive at a credibly prosaic, scientific explanation that a lightning-struck tornado swept Elijah away.

Whatever else is true, this morning’s lesson wants us to see *more* than a meteorological anomaly; and the holy scholars who meditated on the Merkabah want us to see more; and the saints and doctors of the church who proposed figurative interpretations of our Scripture want us to see more. They want us to mount up with Elijah to the heights of heaven; they want us to see the fantastic, perplexing non-Euclidean chariot of Ezekiel; they want us to receive the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, in whose power we can exercise gifts far beyond our own capacity to muster or control. They want us to venture interpretations that go beyond identifying triliteral Hebrew roots or parsing Greek verbs. They want us to listen to the church’s teaching, to

imagine with the visionaries, to learn from the doctors (and even from your *tutors!*), “to be present in the chariot of contemplation among Prophets, among Apostles, among the choirs of Martyrs and Confessors”¹, and then cautiously, courageously, to perceive more than just isolated verses about a random raggedy ranter who vanishes into a blazing tempest.

In so doing, we do not endeavour to pin God down to a manically-detailed conspiracy theory of a secret biblical code, where nothing is as it appears and everything has an arcane symbolic referent. We’re just reading Scripture as though the same God who created heaven and earth and all that lives, moves, and sits like a rock thereon leaves fingerprints, traces, clues of what sort of God we’re dealing with. We’re looking for the tracks of that fiery ride —

On Horeb, with Elijah, let us lie,
Where all around on mountain, sand, and sky,
God’s chariot-wheels have left distinctest trace...²

We’re living and reading as Christ taught us to live and read, trusting in God’s promises and guided by the Holy Spirit, “speak[ing]... as one speaking the very words of God.”

And here lies the true glamour, the true excitement: that having baked the daily bread of our lessons in Hebrew and Greek, we come together here to share a sacrament of *supernatural* sustenance after the manner of Elijah, who “was miraculously fed by ravens in concealment,

¹ Peter of Blois, from Sermon 53, on “Manifold Wisdom” in Neale, J. M. *Mediaeval Preachers and Mediaeval Preaching: A Series of Extracts, Translated from the Sermons of the Middle Ages, Chronologically Arranged: With Notes and an Introduction*. London: J. & C. Mozley; J. Masters & Co., 1856, p. 211.

² Keble, John. *The Christian Year, Lyra Innocentium and Other Poems*. London; Edinburgh; Glasgow; New York; Toronto; Melbourne; Bombay: Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press, 1914, p. 115.

then liv[ed] on the oil and meal miraculously increased.”³ Here we gather at the altar, joined by angels and archangels, the very *Seraphim* and *Ophanim* who drive Elijah’s fiery carriage; here gather all the company of heaven: St Elias, St Eliseus, our Oxford godparents Dr Keble and Blessed John Henry Newman, Bishop King and Dr Pusey himself. Here swings low the chariot that brings the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and all our sisters and brothers around the world who confess with us this morning, even a visiting student of the Bible, testifying together on behalf of our Saviour that “the Flesh of Christ is the provision for our journey; His Spirit is our chariot. He is the Food, He is the Chariot of Israel, and the Horseman thereof.”⁴

AMEN

³ Newman, John Henry. *Sermons Bearing on Subjects of the Day*. London; Oxford; Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1869, p. 165f.

⁴ Gueric of Igny (“Guarric of Igniac”) in Neale, *Mediaeval Preachers*, p. 143.