

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Forty-Fifth Week - Saturday

ELIJAH AND THE RAVENS

"And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As Yahweh God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.' Then the word of Yahweh came to him, saying, 'Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.' So he went and did according to the word of Yahweh, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and met in the evening; and he drank from the brook" (1 Kings 17:1-6).

This is a very startling statement when we consider the habits and nature of ravens. It deserves our thoughtful attention.

At the outset, it should be observed that the text does not require us to suppose that the ravens, with purpose and forethought, brought victuals intended solely for Elijah and laid them before him or presented them to him. This was not required for the objective in view and therefore was probably not done, for God does not work needless miracles. Yet it is hard to judge when or in what degree miracles are needless; and in this case a degree of miracle may have been necessary to show forth the miraculous nature of Elijah's subsistence, that is, how he was cared for out of the special bounty of God and not by fortunate accidents.

Apart from the consideration, and supposing that Elijah's subsistence was the only objective sought--and that by the simplest and safest means--it may suffice to suppose that the place to which he had been directed to go was the chosen resort of ravens, who had their nests among the trees that grew on the banks of the stream. That the ravens were *commanded* to feed him implies no more than that constraint was laid upon them to become the unconscious instruments of the Divine will. These ravens brought home, morning and evening, to their nests as much animal and vegetable food as sufficed not only for their own needs but for those of Elijah, who took what he required and cooked it with the dry wood which abounds in such places. However, there are some objections to this view.

First, the male brings food only to the female, and both only to the young, until the young are able to provide for themselves. At all other times ravens simply devour their food on the spot

where they find it. Second, the natural food of the raven was that which an obedient Israelite could not touch, namely, carrion. He could not eat that which had died of itself, and yet it is generally the case with ravens that carrion is their primary source of food. Some would argue that the raven's diet is not exclusively carrion, and that is true. They do not scruple, especially in times of comparative scarcity, to attack ducks, chickens, and small quadrupeds. It even assaults young lambs and sickly sheep.

Now this, at the first view, seems to relieve much of the difficulty and appears to offer an ample range from among which Elijah might obtain proper food for him as an Israelite. But we are to remember that although the raven may slay animals of some size, it cannot *carry* them entire to its nest or other location. And this presents a new difficulty. An Israelite was not only prohibited from eating anything that had died of itself, but he was also prohibited from eating that from which the blood had not been drained. Hence he could not eat what was "torn by beasts." Therefore, if what the ravens provided was in accordance with their own instincts and habits, then it is difficult to see how the ravens could have brought any meat fit for Elijah to eat.

It is therefore impossible to suppose that the prophet was supplied from the ordinary sources and operations of the ravens. But if we concede that ravens were the agents through whom subsistence was given to Elijah, then we must hold this agency to have been miraculous in all its aspects--that suitable and adequate food was twice daily presented by miracle to the notice of the ravens, and that they were impelled to bear it away to Elijah's hiding place and to drop it there. And if this is so, where did they get it from on so regular a basis?

We have made the above observations on the hypothesis most generally received that ravens are really intended. But on this point differences of opinion are warranted, seeing that the word translated "ravens" may have other meanings.

Originally all Hebrew consisted of consonants only and was written without vowel points. This is also the case in Arabic and other oriental languages. When Hebrew was a living language, men supplied the vowels orally in reading that which was written without them. Usage made this easy to those to whom Hebrew was a native tongue. The differences between words of like consonants was, of course, brought out by the interposed vowels, just as the common consonants *g r n* can be rendered *grain*, *groan*, or *grin* when the appropriate vowels are inserted.

After the Hebrew language had for ages remained without the vowel marks, or indeed without such marks being known, vowel marks were at length (in the seventh century after Christ) invented and inserted throughout by the Jewish doctors in order to fix the pronunciation of the words, and with them the sense. This insured uniformity of interpretation, for it was feared that the true understanding might be lost through the dispersion of the people and the neglect of the language. This bestowed a permanent written form to much which had hitherto rested in the memories of men and had been distinguished only by vocal usage.

But Christian scholars do not conceive that they are in every case bound to the decisions of the Masoretes (as they are called), while some (fewer now than formerly) reject their authority altogether and feel at liberty in every case to take that sense of a word which agrees best with the context. The text before us is one of those on which that question is raised.

If we look at the Hebrew, the consonants are the same as the word which means "raven," and may be made plural by the usual masculine ending *im*. But by inserting different vowels the word may also be rendered "Arabians." Now the Masoretes settled on the sense of "raven" to the word in this case by affixing the vowel points which "raven" required in preference to any other sense. But this perhaps is the last of all the senses which would occur to anyone reading the Bible without the vowel points and without a previous knowledge of this interpretation. Remembering that these vowel points were added in an age when the Hebrew mind had gone astray after prodigies [things extraordinarily significant] and which had given birth to the monstrous creations of the Talmud, we might expect that in such a case the most amazing interpretation would be adopted in preference to any of the others.

To us nothing seems more likely than that encampments of Arabs, who still set up their tents at certain times of the year upon the borders or into the unappropriated pastures of settled countries, would have at the season of drought been forced within reach of the brook Cherith. Knowing the increasing scarcity of water, they would have remained there as long as its stream afforded sufficient water--that is, as long as Elijah himself remained there. From their condition and habits of life, they were the very persons to whom the secret of his retreat might be most safely entrusted. They were the least likely to know who he was or that he was sought by the king; or if they did know, they were less than any others to be open to any inducements to betray him. Besides, when Elijah had once eaten of their bread and meat, the great law of Arabian honor made him secure of continued support and safe from betrayal. No temptation that might afterward be presented could have any force against the solemn obligation thus incurred, and the breach of which would cover the tribe with scorn and shame for many generations.

Under these circumstances, it seems to us that "I have commanded the Arabs to feed you there" is a more probable and natural interpretation.