

ELISEUS (IX cent, B. C.) Saint, prophet

Eliseus («God is my salvation») is a dominant figure of the IX cent. before Christ. We know the name of his father, Saphat, a native of Abel Meholah, to the south of Bet-Shan, and we know that his family was well off (I Kg. 19: 16-19). The object of a special and direct choice on the part of God (I Kg. 19: 16), he was called to follow Elias (I Kg. 19: 19 ff.). He succeeded Elias after the latter's mysterious disappearance, and he inherited the spirit of Elias in the measure established by the Law for the first-born (double that of the other heirs) (II Kg. 2: 1-15). That he merited the name «man of God» is revealed, above all, in the prodigies of every kind with which his life is woven. He worked them on his own behalf, on behalf of individuals and of entire communities.

To his own advantage, he used the mantle left him by Elias to separate the waters of the Jordan, which he crossed dry-shod (II Kg. 2: 13 ff.). Moreover, he had two bears tear into pieces a group of young rogues who mocked his baldness as he was going to Bethel (II Kg. 2: 18-24).

He worked many prodigies for individuals: he saved the widow of a prophet from her creditor by multiplying oil miraculously for her (II Kg. 4: 1-7); by his intercession he obtained a son for a prosperous lady of Sunam, from whom he had received hospitality, and then made him come back to life after he had died of sunstroke (II K. g. 4: 8-37); for a disciple of the schools of the prophets, he caused an axe fallen into the Jordan to be returned (II Kg. 6: 5 ff.); finally, he commanded a Syrian general, Naaman, to wash in the Jordan seven times, in order to be cured of a leprosy which subsequently afflicted Eliseus' own servant Giezi, who was guilty of avarice (II Kg. 5). The miraculous activity of Eliseus also benefited whole communities: for the citizens of Jericho he purified the unwholesome waters of their spring and made them drinkable (II Kg, 2: 19-22); in favor of the followers of the prophets, he made poisoned food eatable and multiplied bread for them (II Kg. 4: 38-44).

Eliseus also took an active part in the political events of his country, exercising a profound influence upon them by his oracles and his prodigies. In the war of Joram, the king of Israel (853-42 B. C), who was allied with Juda and Edom against Mesa, king of Moab (ab. 850 B. C), Eliseus slaked the thirst of the army and foretold victory (II Kg. 3), because of his regard for Josaphat (ab. 870-49).

In the wars that Ben-Hadad II, king of Damascus, waged against Israel, Eliseus intervened a first time by revealing the plans of the enemy to King Joram and also by using an artifice to capture their soldiers (II Kg. 6: 8-23); another time, during the siege that the same Ben-Hadad II laid to Samaria, the prophet foretold the end of the resulting famine and of the siege itself (II Kg. 6: 24-7: 20). Then, when Ben-Hadad became sick, Eliseus foretold his death and indicated his assassin would be Hazael, who, in fact, suffocated the king and reigned in his stead (II Kg. 8: 7-15). Through a disciple, Eliseus had Jehu (ab. 843-16 B. C.) secretly anointed, in Ramoth Galaad, as the future king of Israel, with the task of exterminating the house of Achab (II Kg. 9: 1-10).

A short while before his death, which occurred about 790, Eliseus made his last appearance upon the political scene, to predict three victories against Syria to Joas (ab. 801-786), the second successor of Jehu (II Kg. 13: 14-19).

Contrary to Elias, Eliseus remained in close contact with the «schools of the prophets» /sons of the prophets/, upon whom he exercised a strong influence (II Kg. 2: 3, 15 ff.; 6: 1 ff.). A hymn of praise of Eliseus is given in Eccli. 48: 12 ff.

A wonder-worker in life, Eliseus remained such after his death by bringing a dead man who had been buried in Eliseus' tomb back to life (II Kg. 13: 20). The empty tomb was still seen in Samaria in the time

of St. Jerome. Julian the Apostate had desecrated it, but some bones had been saved; some of them were transferred to Alexandria, others to Constantinople. In 718 some were brought to Ravenna, where they were lost. Later the relic of a head, said to be his, was shown in the church of St. Apollinaris Nuovo. The general chapter of the Carmelites in 1369 authorized funds to obtain the body of Eliseus.

In the ancient martyrologies the liturgical feast is assigned to Aug. 29. Among the Ethiopians it is celebrated on Oct. 16; among the Greeks and Latins it is assigned, instead, to June 14. At Constantinople, besides the feast of June 14, there existed a common commemoration with Elias, Moses and Aaron on July 20.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Acta SS. Iunii* II, Venice 1742, pp. 784-86; E. Mangenot, in *DB*, II, coll. 1690-96; *Synax. Constantinop.*, coll. 747-49, 831-32; T. Schermann, *Propheten und Apostellegenden*, Leipzig 1907 pp. 112-14; *Acg*, I 66; J. Hastings, *The greater Men and Women of the Bible*, III, Edinburgh 1914, pp. 409-57; E. Tobac-J. Coppens, *Les prophètes d'Israël*, I, Malines 1932; A. Pohl, *Historia populi Israel*, Rome 1933 pp. 64-66. 70 sg.; *Comm. Martyr Rom.*, p. 237; H. Cazelles, in *Catholicisme*, IV coll. 24-26; *Vies des Saints*, VI, pp. 230-33; P. Spadafora, in *Enc. Catt.*, V coll. 253-54; D. Baldi *Enchiridion locorum sanctorum*, Jerusalem 1955.

Tarcisius Stramare

CULT. The Roman Martyrology for June 14 reads: «*In Samaria in Palestine, /the death/ of Saint Eliseus the prophet, whose tomb, as St. Jerome writes, the devils dread, and in which Abdias also rests.*» In their eulogies, Bede, Floras and other Latins refer to the notice of St. Jerome regarding the tomb of Eliseus in Samaria and the miracles he worked there (see *Ep. CVIII*, in which Jerome describes the visit of Paula to Samaria; *In Abdiam*, in *PL*, XXV, col. 1099). The Greeks celebrate the feast of Eliseus on the same date. In regard to the origin and the diffusion of his cult in the West, see what has been said regarding the cult of Elias. In fact, even though the cult of Eliseus preceded that of Elias and was propagated by the Carmelites — because of his connection with Elias, who at first did not have a liturgical cult in their Order — it is much less diffused than that of Elias.

The oriental church, besides celebrating the feast of Eliseus separately on June 14, associated his cult with the feast of Elias on July 20. This fusion of the feasts of the two saints existed in the oriental tradition already in the VIII cent. In fact, we find, in the Greek Meneum and in the contemporary Slav one, verses of St. John Damascene and of the Emperor Leo the Philosopher which glorify the two prophets together; these verses were used on the vigils of both the prophet Elias as well as Eliseus. Moreover, at Constantinople, there was a church consecrated to the memory of both saints together. This common celebration is explained not only by the biblical account, which joins the two prophets in a unity of place and of activity, but also by the circumstances that surrounded the origin of the feast of Elias. Some of the relics of the prophet Eliseus, saved from the profanation of Julian the Apostate, were brought to Constantinople and placed in the basilica of the Holy Apostles, where the prophet Elias was already being honored. According to some indications (see Sergius, *Menologium Orth. d'Orient.* II, s. d., June 14), July 20 was the precise date which commemorated the translation of the relics of Eliseus. Thus the two prophets were commemorated together at Constantinople in the VIII and IX centuries in the same basilica of the Holy Apostles.

In the West, the feast of St. Eliseus was propagated by the Carmelites. Their general chapter of 1399 introduced it to the Order, even before that of Elias. About a century later, Robert Bale (d. 1503) composed a first office in honor of Elias, using as his model the two different offices in use for St. Eliseus. On a folio used by the Carmelites between 1462-95 for the reading of their martyrology, where nine saints are listed as holy protectors of the Order, after Peter Thomas, Andrew of Florence, Cyril the priest, Angelus and Simon, in the sixth place we read for June 14: «*In Samaria of Palestine, which is also called Sebaste, /the death/ of Eliseus, foremost of the Prophets... Even in death his sacred body became particularly glorious by the raising of a dead man to life and is venerated with merited honor at Ravenna.*»

The relics of St. Eliseus were carried to Ravenna in 718 and placed in the church of St. Lawrence, in the very ancient chapel (of the year 425) of SS. Gervase and Protase. In 1603 the church was destroyed, and nothing is known of the fate of the aforesaid relics. In the church of St. Apollinaris Nuovo the head of Eliseus is shown to the faithful.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Acta SS. Iulii*, II, Venice 1742, pp. 784 egg.; *Synax. Constantinop.*, PP. 747 Egg., 831 sgg.; T. Schermann *Propheten und Apostellegenden* Leipzig 1907, pp. 102 sgg.; Acg, I, 124; *Élie, Le Prophete. Les Spades carmilitaines*, I Bruges 1966, pp. 216-19 sgg.

ICONOGRAPHY. As disciple and heir of the prophet Elias, Eliseus was joined with him in everything. Like his master, he performed great miracles: he divided the waters of the Jordan, he multiplied the oil of the widow, and brought the son of the Sunamitess back to life. He also prefigures Christ: the ovation with which he was received at Jericho prefigures the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem; the mockery he was subjected to by the youngsters is a prelude to the derision endured by Jesus in the palace of Caiphaz; the healing of the leper Naaman, whom Eliseus ordered to wash in the waters of the

Jordan, is the image of Baptism; the resurrection of the son of the Sunamites prefigures that of Lazarus; the miracle of the axe-blade floating to the surface of the water is a symbol of Christ leaving the tomb.

Contrary to the greater number of the prophets, Eliseus has a precise and almost invariable typology: he is represented bald, since the Bible narrates that the boys mocked his baldness; like Elias, he is clothed in the habit of the Carmelites; his attributes are: a vessel of oil, recalling the multiplication of the widow's oil, and the axe which he caused to be recovered from the waters of the Jordan. Sometimes a dove with two heads is placed on his shoulder, recalling the double spirit inherited from Elias: this alluded to the double part of an inheritance which, among the Israelites, belonged to the firstborn. Among the Carmelites, he often holds a staff (with reference to II Kg. 4: 31), or a pitcher from which he pours (or sometimes does not pour) water (alluding to II Kg. 3:11: «*who poured water on the hands of Elias*») or with which he waters the plant of the Order founded by Elias.

Among the isolated images of the saint, there should be mentioned the statue on the side door of the cathedral of Chartres; the window of Lincoln College at Oxford (XIII cent.); the bas-relief of Berruguete on the stalls of the choir of the cathedral of Toledo, where, at the feet of Eliseus, are the bears which devoured the mocking boys (XVI cent.)

But especially numerous and important, in the iconography of Eliseus, are the scenes and the cycles which tell of the principal events in the life of the prophet. The scene of his calling (see I Kg. 19), in which Elias cast his mantle on Eliseus while the latter was working in the field with a pair of oxen, called him to follow him, and chose him as his successor, is represented in a fresco of the monastery of St. Elias in Romania (XVI), in the painting of Jean Matsys in the Museum of Anvers, and in the engraving of the *Speculum Carmelitanum /Carmelite Mirror/*, the work of Abraham van Diepenbeke (XVII cent.).

In a homily to the people of Antioch, St. John Chrysostom affirmed that he saw, in the succession of Eliseus to Elias, who left his mantle to Eliseus (II Kg. 2: 13), a prefiguring of the powers given by Christ to the apostles and, particularly, the giving of the keys to St. Peter. It was, therefore, a transmission of powers by investiture, which is represented in a miniature of the Bible of Souvigny (XII cent.), preserved in the museum of Moulins, and in a painting of Gaspard Dughet in the church of St. Martin of the Mountains in Rome.

On the way to Jericho Eliseus repeated the miracles of Josue and Elias by dividing the waters of the Jordan with the mantle of his master (II Kg. 2: 14); this scene is found on a sarcophagus of the IV cent. preserved in the Lapidary Museum of Aries and on a tapestry of *La Chaise-Dieu* dated 1515. One of the most dramatic scenes in the life of the prophet is certainly that of the derision of the boys: artists seem to have felt that drama, because the works which record that scene are numerous. Among others, we mention the picture of Louis Toeput in the Fournier-Liberton College at Chateau d'Ezy,

the fresco of the XIV cent. in the choir of Emmaus in Prague, and the fresco in the church of St. Elias at Jaroslav in Russia. In the two latter works are represented also the miracles of the multiplication of the oil for the widow and of the resurrection of the son of the Sunamitess. This latter episode, considered as the prefiguring of the resurrection of Lazarus, is also recalled in the triptych of Alton Towers (XII cent.) of the Victoria and Albert Museum, in the *Book of Hours* of the Constable of Montmorency (XVI cent.) in the Conde Museum of Chantilly, and in the painting of Benjamin West in the Grosvenor Gallery of London.

The miracle of the poisoned food restored to its natural goodness for the prophets is illustrated on the frontal of the Carmelite church at Bruxelles, the work of a Belgian master of the XV cent., and in the painting of Vasari in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence. The healing Of the leprous Naaman in the waters of the Jordan, which alludes to the baptism of Christ, appears in an enamel figure attributed to Godefroy de Huy, now in the British Museum of London (XII cent.), in a fresco of the cupola of St. Mary Lyskirchen of Cologne (XIII cent.), in the windows of Mulhouse and of the charterhouse of Cologne (XIV and XV cent.), and also in the frescos of Jaroslav. The posthumous miracle of the bringing back to life of a corpse placed next to the dead prophet is represented in the above-mentioned triptych of Alton Towers and in a xylograph of the Bible of Cologne of 1479.

Only some of the many works which enrich the iconography of Eliseus have been recorded here. However, they are sufficient to show how the figure of this prophet has remained ever alive in tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: H. Leclercq. s.v. *Élie-Blisie*, in DACL, IV, 2, coll. 2670-74; N. Pervoukline, *Tserkov Ilii Prozoka v Jaroslavlé*, Moscow 1915; Künstle I, p. 300; L. Bréhier, *L'art chrétien*, Paris 1928, p. 94; L. Reau, *La dérision du prophète Elisée par des enfants qui sont dévorés par des ours*, in *Miscellanea Leo van Puyvelde*, Bruxelles 1949; G. Carcopmo, *Le mystere d'un symbole Chretien: Vascia*, Paris 1955; Réau, II, pp. 359-64; Emond, I, pp. 79-87 e passim.

Francis Spadafora