

RETELLING THE STORY OF ELIJAH

It's the 9th century BCE and Elijah is an *ish elohim*, a man of God, filled with spirit and power and at times a bit crazy with it. The prophets of this time in the history of Israel are somewhat different from the likes of Isaiah and Jeremiah, who turn up a couple of centuries later. A prophet from this early phase is a person who goes into an ecstatic trance and becomes known for achieving wonders – a seer.

There were many prophets in the land at that time, but what was significant about Elijah is whose prophet he is. There are prophets of Baal, prophets of Ashteroth, prophets of others besides, and there were prophets of *Yahweh*, the God first known to Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel (and assorted other women). This is the God that got Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. This is the God that set them up as a people with instructions (the torah or Law of Moses) for living together as a community, instructions that were taught and recorded over the forty years of wandering in the wilderness (as the story goes).

Elijah hears the voice of this God and knows Yahweh's teaching for just and peaceful living together as a community with the land. But he sees the king of Israel¹ taking no notice of Yahweh or the Law of Moses. Other gods, other life options, are taking precedence, especially when the king, Ahab, marries Jezebel, a Phoenician woman, who understandably sticks with her own gods, but goes so far as to kill off as many prophets of Yahweh as she can track down. Some scholars see traces in the Elijah stories of a battle for hearts and minds between the God who came with the more recent arrivals in the land – the Israelites – and the Gods of the original residents, the Canaanites. Also in conflict are the rural life and values of the immigrant Israelites and the economic and political power of the Canaanite city states (e.g. Phoenicia). The worship of Baal and Ashteroth seems to focus primarily on fertility and production, with rites and rituals to celebrate and encourage the return of life with each new season. Yahweh, in contrast, is a singular God of community, bringing rules for right relationship, social organisation and land use. There is also a reflection here of the transition in time from many Gods, to one God. This birth of monotheism provides the roots for the three monotheistic religions that persist today – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – each of which has a significant place for Elijah in their scripture and tradition.

The theme is drought. Elijah sees the signs of a drought, no doubt the physical signs (he would know the usual patterns) but also the signs that all is not well in the land and he speaks to King Ahab about it. His perspective as a person whose God is Yahweh is that how people live their lives, how their society treats the least and the land, is reflected in the way things pan out, be it enemy invasions or in this case the weather. Ahab doesn't at all like what Elijah has to say and calls him "you troubler of Israel".

After his challenge to King Ahab, Elijah goes away on retreat and lets himself be total dependent on the land and his God. This is his way of being sure he can hear clearly the call on him to act as God's prophet. He trusts himself to God and the land to look after him and to show him what to do. Ravens come and feed him. They are his care-givers, his hosts, and in accepting their hospitality Elijah lets the ethic of relationship, of giving and receiving, take charge of his life.

When the drought begins to bite and he can no longer survive out there, Elijah trusts his instincts and calls on a widow who lives in Zarephath, again handing himself over to the hospitality of another. Zarephath is in Phoenician territory. That is, this woman is one of Jezebel's kind, a foil to her character in the tale. The woman is very concerned, not antagonist but simply fearful and embarrassed because she only has enough food for one more meal for her son and herself. When Elijah persists and promises that Yahweh will keep replenishing her supplies, she takes him in. Her food jars keep refilling and she is saved from starvation.

¹ This is after the split in two that followed the reign of Solomon: Israel is the northern kingdom based on Samaria, Judah the southern kingdom based on Jerusalem.

When her son becomes ill a few days later and dies, Elijah calls on Yahweh and the boy lives. The woman is rapt – understandably – and recognises Elijah to be a true ‘man of God’.

After three dry years it is time for Elijah to prove to the king and all the people that Yahweh is God. For the true God will be the one who breaks the drought. Elijah invites a contest on Mount Carmel between Queen Jezebel’s prophets of Baal and himself as lone prophet of Yahweh. Whichever side can call on their God to set fire to the sacrifice set out on an altar will be the winner, and their God the true God.

The prophets of Baal work in vain, with cries and songs and dances, and Elijah taunting them relentlessly. Eventually they have to give up because no fire from their God appears. Elijah then sets up his altar with stones, wood and bull and gets some people to pour twelve jars of water over it all. He prays, and fire strikes to burn up everything on the altar. The people see it, announce that Yahweh is their God and, at Elijah’s instigation, they drag away the prophets of Baal and slaughter them.

Then comes the rain and the drought is broken.

However ...

Queen Jezebel is not happy. She is in a rage. She has never liked Elijah and his campaign for Yahweh as God of Israel, and now, for his victory over her prophets, he must die. Elijah is warned by the court prophet Obadiah and, terrified, flees into the back country. He wants to die, but miraculously there is food nearby so he’s encouraged to hang on. He is then travels on the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights and comes to Mount Horeb (called Sinai in some scriptural sources), Yahweh’s mountain. This is a time of despair for Elijah. He is alone, he feels helpless and hopeless.

Resting in a cave on the mountain Elijah Yahweh asks him what he doing there. God wants Elijah to come out of the cave and talk constructively about the future. But Elijah won’t budge: he keeps saying the same old thing: “I’ve been your passionate prophet and now they’re after me and I want to die.” Elijah wants to give up his work as a prophet.

But God wants him to continue and asks him to go out and stand on the mountain. Something’s going to happen so that Elijah can change his tune. It seems that Elijah still doesn’t move. So there’s a big wind, but no sign of God. An earthquake, but no sign of God. Fire, but still no sign of God. Then in contrast to all this fireworks, and it seems it is the contrast that jolts Elijah out of his extreme ennui, there is “a sound like sheer silence”. Elijah gets up, wraps himself in a cloak and goes to the mouth of the cave and finally gets into a conversation with God that doesn’t end with his litany of ‘I don’t want to be your prophet anymore.’ He at last hears God calling him to new action.

For it’s time for Elijah to get political and help begin the process of ending Ahab’s reign. Also he’s to prepare to hand over his prophet’s mantle to Elisha.

But life in the palace has continued much as before. It gets worse in the eyes of Yahweh and Yahweh’s prophet Elijah when Ahab decides he wants a vegetable garden. There’s an echo here of Egyptians, as it was said that Egyptians were vegetable growers, while the land of promise is a place for agriculturalists and pastoral farmers. Now there is an ideal paddock right beside the palace. It belongs to Naboth so Ahab offers to buy it from him at a fair price.

Naboth refuses because it is his family land and he cannot in good faith let it be alienated from his people. Ahab goes into a bit of a sulk over this and Jezebel asks him what’s bothering him. He tells her about his garden plans and Naboth’s turning down of the offer. Jezebel’s response is something like: ‘Are you a man or a mouse?’ From her perspective as a Phoenician, the king has total authority. That’s a contrast of course to the idea that Yahweh is king and the human king is always second to Yahweh and Yahweh’s code of practice. That’s what Elijah stands for.

Jezebel knows useful details of Yahweh's code, including the law that says that when there is trouble in the land, the trouble-maker is flushed out by calling a fast and a people's assembly and inviting those present to speak up and name who and what has broken the law of Yahweh. Jezebel arranges in Ahab's name for a fast to be called and she finds two ratbags to make charges against Naboth. This they do, claiming that he has cursed God and the king. Naboth is condemned and stoned and his property, according to the law, reverts to the king.

Elijah hears of this and goes to Ahab and tells him the consequences of his blood-spilling injustice – disaster for all of his family, worst of all for Jezebel whose body will be eaten by dogs. Ahab feels remorse to the extreme and turns to Yahweh for forgiveness. Ahab therefore lives – disaster is postponed until his son Ahaziah's reign.

Elijah's work is done and God's ultimate authentication of Elijah comes with the means of his departure. No ordinary end for this person: a fiery chariot carries him away in a whirlwind. Elisha is there when it happens, having refused to leave his side so that he can take up the mantle and continue the work.

Elijah's passion for his God makes him act with purpose and despite the risks. He is challenging the social status quo. Elijah's priorities reflect the priorities of his God: care for the least in society and respect the land, its seasons and its ability to provide. For Elijah, life is a gift to receive in trust, not something to be grasped and possessed regardless of the needs of other people or the land. This is Elisha's inheritance.

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