

ELIJAH'S FLIGHT TO HOREB
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The Elijah-Traditions. The stories about Elijah in 1-2 Kings are best considered to reflect traditions about this “man of God” (1 Kgs 17:18, 2 Kgs 1:9,10,11,12,13) and prophet (1 Kgs 18:22; cf. 19:10,14,16; cf. the anonymous prophet/man of God in 20:22,28). Mystery surrounded him from beginning to end. He appears suddenly in 1 Kgs 17:1 as [↩]הַתְּשֻׁבִי אֵלֶיָּהוּ, and disappears in 2 Kgs 2:11-12. Indeed, he is prone to being transported far and away by “the spirit of Yahweh,” 1 Kgs 18:12, or by “the hand of Yahweh,” cf. 18:46.¹ In fact, every narrative about Elijah has him being ordered by God to go somewhere. In 1 Kgs 17,² with the formula לֵאמֹר אֵלָיו יְיָ, Elijah is told to “go לֵךְ and direct himself” to the east, and to *conceal himself* in a brook. In 17:9, he is told to “rise and go” קוּם לֵךְ to Zarephtha of Sidon. In 1 Kgs 18,¹ with a different formula אֶל-אֵלֶיָּהוּ הָיָה וַיְדַבֵּר-יְהוָה הָיָה, Elijah is again commanded to “go” לֵךְ show himself to Ahab. In 1 Kgs 19:15, with yet another phrase וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵךְ שׁוּב, Elijah is sent on yet another mission trip. In 21:17, with still another formula, וַיְיָהוּי דְבַר-, Elijah is sent off again. In 2 Kgs 1:3,15 it is “the angel of Yahweh” who gives similar orders to Elijah. He is clearly always “a man on the go.”²

The recurring themes of “the Elijah cycle” are: “the word of Yahweh,” 1 Kgs 17:2,5,8,15,16,24;18:1;19:9 (a “voice” in v. 13), 21:17,28; 2 Kgs 1:17. There is a constant concern over food and nourishment, and the drought which imperils this: 1 Kgs 17:4,6;7-16;18:2b-5,13,41-42;19:5-8,21. Another theme is that of the prowess of Elijah

¹ Elijah himself has the spirit, 2 Kgs 2:9,15; cf. Luke 1:17.

as wonder-worker, having infallible influence with the Almighty. He can shut up the heavens “according to his mouth,” 1 Kgs 17:1, which really conveys the word of Yahweh, v. 24, who listens to him, v. 22. He is confident he can best the prophets of Baal in the contest on Mount Carmel; he is sure Yahweh will answer by fire his invocation (cf. 2 Kgs 1:10-14). He goes to great lengths to make sure there is no doubt about the divine, miraculous nature of the holocaust, 1 Kgs 18:34-35. His prayer is not just that Yahweh be thus recognized as the God of Israel, but that Elijah be jointly acknowledged as his servant, v. 37. He is likewise certain that it will rain, vv. 41-45, and, with the power of Yahweh (and probably feeling rather euphoric with the thrill of his victory), ran the seventeen miles³ from Carmel to Jezreel in a sort of Marathon. With the uplifting nourishment provided by the angel, 19:8, he walked forty days and nights. With his mantle, he can divide the waters of the Jordan, 2 Kgs 2:8, which feat Elisha, using the same mantle, can reproduce, v. 14, invoking “Elijah’s God.” Elijah is fearless in the face of King Ahab, 1 Kgs 18:17;21:17-22, kills the 450 prophets of Baal (since the verb is in the singular, the passage can be interpreted as indicating that Elijah single-handedly performed the slaughter). Indeed, those were violent times; Elisha is to be anointed by Elijah basically to oversee the massacre of idolaters: 19:16-18, 2 Kgs 9-10.⁴

Finally, appearing almost as a refrain, is the theme of Elijah’s plight: he is *alone*, 1 Kgs 18:22;19:10,14 in his struggle for Yahweh (no mention is made of the one hundred Yahwist prophets hidden by Obadiah, 18:13), amidst a people who have broken the covenant and torn down Yahweh’s altars, 19:10,14 (no mention is made of Elijah’s

² Elijah also gives order to move, to Ahab in 1 Kgs 18:41, and to his attendant in vv. 43,44.

³ Cf. *NJBC*, 172.

rebuilding *the [one?]* altar of Yahweh which had been demolished, 18:30 or of the apparent renewal of the covenant, vv. 31,39, buttressed by the elimination of Baal's prophets, v. 40.

The legend of Elijah was such that, after his phenomenal "assumption," 2 Kgs 2:3 (cf. LXX ἀνελήμφθη; Sir 48:9 Greek, and the same use in regards to Jesus, Acts 1:1§), he was expected to be back playing a significant eschatological role, Mal 3:23-24, Sir 48:10, Mark 9:12. Therefore, how do we explain the account of his despondency in 1 Kgs 19?

Elijah's Flight, or The Straw That Broke the Camel's Back. Ahab, whom Elijah does not fear (and who has not overtly threatened Elijah's life, despite the animosity between them that is apparent in certain passages), is directly threatened by Jezebel⁵ (through a messenger, מַלְאָךְ), that she will make Elijah's life נִפְשׁוֹ as that of *one* of the prophets *he* has slain, v. 2. Indeed, one has to be able to "receive as good as one gets:" "if you can't stand the fire, get out of the kitchen!" The Masoretes apparently balked at the vocalization of וירא in v. 3, making it say "saw" instead of "feared" (the rabbinic tradition keeps the "saw," at times musing on its object).⁶ Given the context, and the words which follow, it seems that Elijah became afraid, got up and fled (lit., "went") for his life אֶל-נִפְשׁוֹ וַיֵּלֶךְ. He went south, to Beersheba, the very southern border of Judah, still Yahweh's land, but beyond Jezebel's reach.⁷ There he left his lad

⁴ Cf. *NJBC*, 178, which says, in regards to 2 Kgs 9:1, that Elisha, "rather than the nameless 'son of the prophets,' is the true initiator of all that follows."

⁵ Jezebel is depicted in the Naboth's Vineyard story as more ruthless and cunning than Ahab, and her punishment as more horrible, 1 Kgs 21:23; 2 Kgs 9:30-37. Ahab is said to have repented, 1 Kgs 21:27-29.

⁶ Cf. e.g., A. Maller, "Elijah's Recovery," 35.

⁷ Cf. S. DeVries, *1 Kings*, 237.

(attendant) behind, walked in the desert for a day and came and sat under a broom-bush or shrub. He wanted to die.⁸

Fleeing from a pursuer into another jurisdiction is common in the Bible, e.g. David from Saul, into the kingdom of Gat, 1 Sam 21:11. Even Jesus was in hiding during his final days in Jerusalem; cf. Matt 21:17; Luke 21:37; John 18:2. But the background to Elijah's flight to the desert is Gen 21:14-19,⁹ which is attributed to the Elohist, a source "genetically related to the Dtr," according to J. Blenkinsopp (*The Pentateuch*, 1992).

Elijah at this point is not really fleeing for his life;¹⁰ he wants to die, like Hagar, who goes to the desert of Beersheba with her son, likewise expelled with her (v. 10), in order to die. Without water in the desert, death is the only possible outcome.¹¹

Hagar wanders (תעה) in the desert of Beersheba and, when there is no water left, also sits near a bush שיח, under which she places her child. Death is mentioned (v. 16), and the angel of God asks her almost the same question Yahweh (or the voice, in 1 Kgs 19:13) asks Elijah: מַה-לָּךְ, "what is the matter?" (without the פה). The angel likewise says "rise" קוּמִי to her, and God lets her see a well of water.

Another prophet who sat alone and bitter due to his people's lack of response and persecution was Jeremiah (Jer 15:17). For different reasons, Jonah (4:5-6) also sat under

⁸ J. Gray, *I & II Kings*, 408 translates "he required his life to die," which indicates the Semitic conception that life (nepeš, lit. 'life-breath') proceeded directly from, and belonged properly to, God, so that, though a man might wish to die, he was not at liberty to commit suicide, which was quite exceptional among primitive Semites." Cf. Jonah 4:3; 2 Macc 14:41-46.

⁹ See cross-reference in *BJ*; cf. J. Steinmann, "Élie dans l'Ancien Testament," 107.

¹⁰ Against A. Hauser, "Elijah in Crisis."

¹¹ That the desert can only be a "camino de muerte" is stated by J. Alonso, "El derrumbamiento," 152, who considers the dismissal of the servant as the rejection of the "presencia amiga." However, this explanation is a bit superficial. Elijah is on a dire existential journey, which he must make alone. The accompaniment of anyone not viscerally-engaged would not only be superfluous, but absurd. Thus Abraham also dismissed his servants in the Aqedah, Gen 22:5.

a bush קִיקְיוֹן desiring death, v. 3. This is all imagery of despondency, anger and despair.

Another, very contemporary (and American!) way to describe it is “burn out.”¹²

enough now yah take my soul for I am no better than my fathers

Elijah says to Yahweh: רַב עֲתָה יְהוָה קַח נַפְשִׁי כִּי לֹא־טוֹב אֲנִי מֵאֲבֹתַי. The basis for his desire to have his life taken is that ‘he is no better than his fathers.’ Implicit in this pronouncement is that Elijah’s continued existence is only justified by his having the ability to offer something more than those who are dead; Elijah despairs of being able to do anything more with apostate Israel, and Jezebel’s threat was the final straw. He is basically saying, “I’ve had enough! רַב עֲתָה. “It’s not worth it.” In the background, there may also be some notion of generational progress, where each successive generation should be an improvement over the previous. Elijah, in short, considers himself a failure. This, however, is symptomatic of a depressive state.

The Biblical text allows the modern reader to discern elements which indicate that Elijah possessed a cyclothymic temperament. He is capable of great, fearless feats, and when euphoric, can perform acts requiring superhuman stamina. But when something triggers his depression, he can become suicidal. This is what is transmitted in the pertinent events of the Elijah cycle. It may well go back to authentic recollections of this great man.

A. Hauser¹³ has described many of the features of Elijah’s state. He was fearless before angry king Ahab, whose “ominous words in 18.17 [...] seem to intensify the ardor of Elijah’s devotion to Yahweh” (61). Hauser feels that Jezebel’s quick and decisive action instilled in Elijah the fear of death, which caused him “to lose sight of

¹² Cf. R. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, 122: “Elijah Burns Out and is Recommissioned.”

¹³ “Elijah in Crisis.”

his mission as a prophet of Yahweh and to become consumed by self-pity and a powerful sense of defeat (19.4, 10, 14)” (60). Elijah becomes unable to act.

Elijah’s path back into action is gradual. First of all, he falls asleep.¹⁴ An angel touches (or strikes נגע) him and tells him to get up and eat (i.e., get back to living!). He eats, but goes back to sleep (the state as close to death as he can enter).¹⁵ But the angel (now identified as Yahweh’s, v. 7) persists, and this time rouses him with the same instructions to rise and eat, but adding now what will turn out to be a suggestion: כִּי רַב מִמָּוֶדֶד הַדֶּרֶךְ. It is suggested to Elijah that there is a journey he must go on. Contrary to his feeling that he had had enough רַב (v. 4), if he eats, the journey will not be too רַב for him. This is the start of Elijah’s mental recovery.

Elijah, with the strength of his God-given food, walked forty days and nights to Horeb. The number is symbolic, evocative of Israel’s forty-year journey through the desert from Sinai. Israel was also fed by God there (cf. Deut 8:3-4). Elijah is returning to the place where it all started for Israel, to the mountain of God, Horeb (cf. Exod 3:1;24:13, where the expression is the Elohist’s).¹⁶ He is seeking to be close to God. He wants contact with the “roots,” with the source. He is on a personal pilgrimage.¹⁷ If he is not simply to die, he must attempt to reconnect with God. But more than due to a

¹⁴ In the words of J. Alonso, “se hunde en un pesado sueño de modorra,” “El derrumbamiento,” 152.

¹⁵ A. Hauser, “Elijah in Crisis,” 65, notes that “There is a direct parallelism between the two verbs at the beginning of v. 5, וַיִּשְׁכַּב, ‘and he lay’, וַיִּישָׁן, ‘and he slept’, and the two verbs at the end of v. 6, וַיִּשָׁב, ‘and he (re)turned’, וַיִּשְׁכַּב, ‘and he slept’. This parallelism indicates that Elijah continues to be unresponsive even after Yahweh’s attempt to encourage him through the giving of food and water.”

¹⁶ R. Coote, “Yahweh Recalls Elijah,” 117, points out some similarities (at times stretching it!) between Elijah and Moses: both fled to a bush, “and there encountered a genie;” both asked to die (cf. Num 11:15), the word “alone” is used of both (Num 11:14), both experienced a theophany from a place of safety (Exod 33:22).

¹⁷ Cf. J. Steinmann, “Élie dans l’Ancien Testament,” 107.

decision of Elijah's, "Era la Gracia Misteriosa la que conducía a Elías a un íntimo encuentro sin saberlo él."¹⁸

Elijah enters a cave to pass the night.¹⁹ It is there that "Yahweh's word" addresses him. Many have interpreted the question as indicating that Elijah should be back in Israel being a prophet, not off on some escapist trek.²⁰ Elijah's response, v. 10, repeated in v. 14, seems to be a tradition-transmitted formula. It indicates Elijah's famous zeal, using the infinitive absolute of Piel²¹ to emphasize the main verb: קָנָא קָנָא־חַיִּי. The root קָנָא indicates the color red, as happens in the face from deep emotion, and connotes jealous anger.²² This is quite in keeping with Elijah's traditional character, and may even be related to his pyrophilic propensities. What follows is likewise formulaic, and seems to be a summary of Elijah's life, somewhat anachronic in this context, as indicated above: "the Israelites have abandoned your covenant — Elijah tells Yahweh — have thrown down your altars and killed your prophets with the sword; I alone am left, and they seek my life to take it." This formula constitutes the leitmotiv of Israel's idolatry or apostasy, and Elijah's solitary stance before the people and their leaders, who persecute him.

Yahweh again gives Elijah an order to move somewhere: צֵא וְעַמַּדְתָּ בְּקֵדָר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה. God is telling him to get out of the cave and to *stand before him*. Elijah had proudly defined himself as a servant (prophet) of Yahweh in the same terms in 17:1 and

¹⁸ J. Alonso, "El derrumbamiento," 153.

¹⁹ Some have seen in this a echo of Gen 19:30, where Lot and his daughters, fearful of staying in Zoar, flee to a mountain and dwelt in a cave; cf. Mark 13:14.

²⁰ *NJBC*, 172; A. Hauser, "Elijah in Crisis," 71.

²¹ Cf. *GKC*, 520

²² Cf. *BDB*, 888.

18:15 (cf. Elisha's own use in 2 Kgs 3:14,5:16). Now Yahweh is ordering him to return to such status.

E. Nordheim²³ has argued the thesis that at this point Elijah has abandoned his office as prophet and will not regain it; Elisha must therefore take his place. Indeed, others have focused on the absence of the word "prophet" in the formulas of vv. 10,14 in 1 Kgs 19, contrary to 1 Kgs 18:22, when Elijah addressed the people on Mount Carmel.²⁴ This, coupled with the fact that he does not seem to have much more to do after the theophany except to anoint Jehu and Elisha (to succeed him), has led several authors to surmise that Elijah's mission as prophet is over.

It may be that there was a tradition that after Elijah's Jezebel-triggered despondency, he did little else as a prophet. His brief reappearances in 1 Kgs 21:17ff., 28ff. and 2 Kgs 1:3ff. are re-introduced with the identification *אלהיה החשבי*, as if 1 Kgs 17:1 and each of these other accounts were part of discrete traditions. But be this as it may, it seems clear that the purpose of the theophany (and the fact that it was transmitted), is to relate how Elijah finally did have an unusual experience of God in Mount Horeb, where he had gone on pilgrimage at a most difficult point in his life and ministry. Whether it preceded more or less extensive (earthly) prophetic activity, or was somewhat analogous to Thomas Aquinas' mystical (embolismic?) experience which made further

²³ "Ein Prophet kündigt," 161-162: "Eine weitere Tätigkeit als Prophet in Israel ist also nach den Worten Elias unmöglich. Es ist anscheinend gar nicht so sehr die Lebensgefahr, in der er schwebte, die Elia bedrückt, sondern die offenbare Sinnlosigkeit, weiter in einem Volk als Prophet auszutreten, das weder Gott noch von seinen Propheten mehr etwas wissen will." And in 167: "Die Reaktion Gottes ist konsequent: Elia kann und darf jetzt auch nicht mehr länger Prophet sein." This is quite overstating the case, even disregarding Elijah's eschatological role.

²⁴ *NJBC*, 172; R. Coote, "Yahweh Recalls Elijah," 117.

writing of the *Summa* anticlimactic, is difficult to say. Perhaps Elijah's subsequent important role as prophet would be "only" eschatological.

The theophany is enclosed by the two identical sets of divine question/Elijah's formulaic reply in vv. 9f., 13f. There may be more than a grain of truth in A. Hauser's suggestion that Elijah "is not at all sure that Yahweh has the power to deliver him from death."²⁵ The purpose of the theophany would then be not only to demonstrate Yahweh's awesome power to split mountains and shatter rocks, to make the earth tremble and bring down fire, but to tell Elijah to "cool it," to calm down, communicating his divinity in a "sound of fine silence."²⁶ It is only after this takes place that Elijah does leave the cave (v. 13); he had been told to get out and stand before Yahweh in v. 11, but there is no indication in the text that he had immediately done so. Elijah's covering his face in v. 13 recalls Moses' similar action in Exod 3:6.

The question-answer *inclusio* may also be interpreted as bracketing the theophany as a mystical, ahistorical hiatus, after which the colloquy between Yahweh and Elijah must immediately pick up where it had left off. This being the case, Yahweh now gives Elijah new "marching orders:" לך שוב לדרךך מדבריה נמשק, "go, return to your way of the desert" Many have seen in this phrase a similarity with Jer 15:19 (which comes after the above-cited reference to his sitting alone and bitter (v. 17):

אם-תשוב ואשיבך

²⁵ *From Carmel to Horeb*, 62.

²⁶ E. Nordheim, "Ein Prophet kündigt," 166, opines that "Es ist interessant, daß damit der Theophanie nicht nur die Funktion einer Machtdemonstration zukommt, sondern daß sie auch einen Gerichtaspekt enthält. Sie tritt damit an die Seite der prophetischen Gerichtstheophanien 1 Kön 22 und Jes 6. Die Schilderung der Theophanie in v. 11b-12b im Verein mit der Anklage Elias in v. 10.14 ist aufs engste mit der Gerichtankündigung in v. 17f. verbunden." This is unconvincing. Was the purpose of the theophany on Mount Sinai in Exodus to announce a judgment, or to show Yahweh's awesome might? However, see Sir 48:7.

לְפָנַי תִּעֲמֹד , “if you return and I restore you (or ‘because I make you return’, cf. *BJ ad loc.*, 17:14), before me you shall stand (i.e., you will [continue to] serve me [or return to my service]). Elijah is being given new duties by his Lord. DeVries may be right in saying that “Yahweh still has work for Elijah to do [...] Doubts will cease and misgivings vanish when God puts him to work.”²⁷

However, are we seeing here Elijah’s final acts? E. Nordheim observes:

“Allgemein geht man davon aus, daß Elia getröstet und ermutigt zu weiterem Wirken den Horeb wieder verlassen habe; denn er sei von Gott ja neu beauftragt worden. Dieser Auftrag beinhaltet jedoch die Einsetzung des Nachfolgers im Amt und wird damit zur Absetzung des Vorgängers, zur Amtsenthebung Elias. Was Elias letztlich noch zu tun beauftragt wird, ist nicht viel mehr, als seinen Schreibtisch aufzuräumen und zu übergeben. Für Israel, das eigentliche Gegenüber eines jeden Propheten, bekommt er keinen Auftrag mehr.”²⁸

It is indeed unique to Elijah that he was made to anoint a successor, who will be the one to carry out these last-mentioned acts of 1 Kgs 19. Coming as it does after the story of Elijah’s depression and flight out of Israel, one can get the impression that his prophetic mission was over, and all he needed to do was to “clear out his desk!” However, all one can really deduce from the text is that Elijah, rather than being deposed, must have a successor, since his earthly life will be over in the near future. This is indicated by what is said of Elisha in v. 21: וַיִּקַּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרַי אֵלֵיהֶוּ וַיִּשְׂרָתְהוּ , “and he got up and went after (i.e., followed [became a disciple of]) Elijah and ministered (served, attended on) him.” Elijah is not over and done with; he is training his successor as an apprentice, not because of any clear abdication or removal from his prophetic office (how could he thus have an important eschatological role?), but because he is to

²⁷ *1Kings*, 237.

²⁸ “Ein Prophet kündigt,” 167.

be “taken up and away” (Hiphil of עלה) by Yahweh to heaven in a סערה, 2 Kgs 2:1,11 (the whirlwind from where God addresses Job [40:6], and in which Ezekiel experiences the divinity, 1:4). At the end of his earthly existence, Elisha wants a double-*portion* of Elijah’s spirit, 2 Kgs 2:9, and calls him “father” (twice), “a religious title accorded prophetic leaders; cf. 2 Kgs 6, 21; 8, 9. [and] Israel’s chariots and drivers: Elijah was worth more than a whole army in defending Israel and the true religion. King Joash of Israel uses the same phrase of Elisha himself (2 Kgs 13, 14).”²⁹ These are not terms used of a man who was “finished.”

Concluding Summary. In the “Elijah Cycle,” we have a series of stories about a prophet legendary for his power and zeal. His origins were wrapped in mysterious obscurity, and his departure was as portentous as that of the antediluvian patriarch Enoch (cf. Gen 5:24). His miraculous feats exceeded those of the other prophets (cf. Sir 48:4), with the possible exception of Moses, and his *zelo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum* became emblematic. It is thus interesting to note that included among these traditions of a hero, a superman, was one about his fear and despondency, and what he experienced in relation thereto. And it is possible that he overexerted himself and “burned out,” and could thereafter do little else besides anoint someone to take his place.

Indeed, rare is the holy man of God in the Bible who ends his life as a triumphant success; the usual fate is martyrdom (Isaiah?, the Zechariahs), exile (Jeremiah), failure to enter the promised land (Moses), persecution (Amos), etc. Elijah may have been a victim of a very modern ailment: job-related stress, and of mood

²⁹ *The Catholic Study Bible*, note ad 2 Kgs 2:12.

changes like Saul which disposed him toward depression, following perhaps manic stages. And so we may say with the Preacher: “quid est quod fuit, ipsum quod futurum est; quid est quod factum est, ipsum quod fiendum est; nihil sub sole novum” (Qoh 1:9).

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