

# The Biblical Elijah: A Model for Spirituality

Tony Mazurkiewicz, O.Carm.

People have interpreted the Old Testament prophet Elijah in a variety of ways throughout the ages. The early Church Fathers claim Elijah as a model for monastic life. They point to his purity of heart, solitude, fasting and silence to justify this position. In one of the most powerful events of the New Testament, Elijah appears with Moses at the transfiguration of Jesus. The Letter of James says, "Elijah was a human being as frail as ourselves" (James 5:17). Different titles of Elijah as prophet, mystic, and avenger have also evolved over the years. Therefore, a deeper look at the Elijah that appears in 1-2 Kings is necessary to gain the most accurate and grounded understanding of this prophetic figure. While a variety of themes emerge about Elijah, the three major issues that will be analyzed here are Elijah's relationship to silence, solitude and prayer. Each of these themes reveals Elijah as a prophet who possesses a deep and intense relationship with the Divine Will at the centre of his being.

Prayer, the dialogue between human and Divine lovers, can reveal much about a person's motivations, beliefs and character. It serves as the essence of our relationship with God and unearths our deepest sense of self. A glance at Elijah's life of prayer reveals a deeply trusting prophet who time and again allows his will to be led by the Divine will, exemplifies the epithet man of God and reiterates through his faith and his action that Yahweh is God. The role of prophet as pray-er helps us understand how Elijah relates to this issue. Several sources that deal with ancient cultic customs claim that the priest and the prophet were seen as having two distinct responsibilities. Whereas the Near Eastern pattern makes no distinction between the two, the Israelite reality reveals an important difference. "The Israelite priesthood was hereditary and hierarchical, whereas prophecy was charismatic."<sup>1</sup> While the priest performed certain duties the prophet functioned as a pray-er. "Just as the priest became the specialist in sacrifice, so the prophet was a specialist in prayer; he was peculiarly qualified to act in this way as an intercessor."<sup>2</sup>

Elijah consistently relies upon intercessory prayer as he communicates with Yahweh. "Yet it is undoubtedly true that the 'prophet', as a professional figure, was as much a representative of the people as the spokesman of Yahweh; it was part of his function to offer prayer as well as to give the divine response or oracle."<sup>3</sup> The verses concerning the widow's son who was raised to life (1Kings 1:17-24) illustrates how the issue of prayer gives credence to Elijah as a man of God. When Elijah meets the widow whose son has died, she attributes her misfortune to his visit. "What quarrel have you with me, man of God?" she laments, "Have you come here to bring my sins home to me and kill my son?" (1Kings 17:18). She blames herself or assumes that her son's death is somehow her fault. She believes that Elijah's presence and witness draws God's attention to her household and now God is punishing her sinfulness. Studies show that the people of the ancient world saw a close connection between sin and any calamity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond; Fitzmyer, Joseph; Murphy, Roland. *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Prentice Hall, NJ. 1990. p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Aubrey. *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel*. Cardiff. University of Wales Press. 1963. p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Murphy, Roland. *Experiencing Our Biblical Heritage*. Hendrickson Publishers, Massachusetts. 2001. p. 28.

Yet, in the face of this challenge, Elijah immediately takes her son upstairs. In private he cries out to Yahweh, stretches out his hands in prayer over the boy, begs Yahweh to heal him and suddenly the boy is cured. Elijah immediately returns downstairs and declares to the woman that her son is alive. The movement of the boy from public to private and back to public, places the attention on Elijah and his dealings with God in prayer. Moreover, the motion of Elijah going up (to an upper room) to communicate his will with the Divine Will reveals a very intimate and important moment of prayer. Elijah demonstrates passionate, intense and heart-felt intercessory prayer to Yahweh. The woman's change in attitude becomes the final and most important revelation in this story. The mother shows doubt as she initially questions Elijah as to how he is a man of God. "What quarrel have you with me, man of God?" (1Kings 17:18). She is sceptical about this man and the issues surrounding Elijah's presence in her home. In the end, however, she declares, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Yahweh in your mouth is truth itself" (1Kings 17:24). Both she and the reader have come to realize Elijah's special link to God.<sup>5</sup> The role of prayer in this story reaffirms several key points about Elijah. It solidifies that Elijah is a man of God and that the word of Elijah is the word of Yahweh. Moreover, Elijah's actions and openness to Yahweh leave no doubt that Yahweh is God.

Scripture scholars provide varying opinions about the prayer of Elijah as he stretches himself upon the child three times and invokes the power of Yahweh.

This is the case of contactual magic, such as is well known in the ancient East in Mesopotamia and in Canaan, where the Ugaritic Legend of Kit mentions the transference of the sickness of the king into a clay image.<sup>6</sup>

The claim that this is magic places Elijah in the role as a performer. Someone who carries out magic follows a certain set of guidelines and rules and the outcome depends on how well this is done. This leaves no room for the interpretation that Yahweh is the source of this healing. Instead, contactual magic claims that the health of Elijah transfers to the corresponding organs of the invalid boy and cures him. On the other hand, another interpretation claims, Elijah's prayer shows him as feeling some responsibility for the woman's distress. His intercession achieves its effect; the decisive fact is not the seemingly magical action of stretching himself three times upon the child's body but the Lord's gracious hearing of Elijah's prayer.<sup>7</sup>

The argument that this is not magic asserts that it is Yahweh who cures the boy. Elijah's prayer creates the opportunity for Yahweh to be seen as God. Another source claims that this story is a common folktale.<sup>8</sup> For example, in the following chapter Elisha cures a boy in a similar manner (2Kings 1:3). He lowers himself in prayer onto a boy several times and eventually the boy is cured. While different sources exist for the story of the widow's son, the fact that they do not refute the potential of these healings grants the reader the space to discern this issue and in the end, embrace Elijah as a pray-er, a man of God and one who

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<sup>5</sup> Balentine, Samuel E. *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue*. Fortress Press, MN. 1993. p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, John. *I & II Kings: A Commentary*. The Westminster Press, Philadelphia. 1963. p. 342.

<sup>7</sup> Conroy, Charles. *1-2 Samuel 1-2 Kings. Old Testament Message. A Biblical Theological Commentary*. Michael Glazier, Inc. 1983. p. 178-9.

<sup>8</sup> Laymon, Charles. *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Abingdon Press, NY. 1971. p. 193.

helps reveal that Yahweh is God.

This theme of Elijah as a man of God appears again at the end of his public ministry. The angel of the Lord sends Elijah as a messenger to Ahaziah to condemn his faith in Baal-Zebub and not the Lord (2Kings 4:32-37). This story reminds the reader that the prophet takes his direction from God and not false idols. Elijah relies upon this intimate dialogue with God as he engages in this conflict. He embodies the epithet, a man of God, and invites Yahweh to send fire from heaven to destroy the messengers and the additional men. Yahweh carries out this task and then eventually says to Elijah, “Go down with him and do not be afraid of him” (2Kings 1:15).

Elijah allows his will to be led by Yahweh’s Will and responds immediately to this instruction. He does not waver or question this command. Elijah approaches the king and declares to the king that he is going to die (2Kings 1:4). Ahaziah dies soon thereafter which reveals yet again, the power of the word of Elijah. Elijah’s constant call upon the name of God in prayer solidifies his prophetic title as a man of God. The high point of Elijah’s prophetic role as prayer appears in the story of his slaying of the 450 false prophets of Baal (1Kings 18:19-40).

At the time when the offering is presented, Elijah the prophet stepped forward. ‘Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,’ he said, ‘let them know today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, that I have done all of these things at your command. Answer me, answer me, so that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God and are winning back their hearts’ (1Kings 18:36-37).

Elijah draws strength from his deep connection with God. He allows the Divine Will at the centre of his being to come forth as he initiates this intimate dialogue with Yahweh. “What is decisive is Elijah’s prayer; in his case there is no need for noisy activity.”<sup>9</sup> Through his prayer, he creates the space and the opportunity for Yahweh to act.

Elijah offers prayer rather than the performance of miracles. He is the opposite of the striving Baal prophets. The climactic acclamation is not that Elijah is a man of God but that Yahweh is God.<sup>10</sup>

Elijah’s actions do not point to himself but to God. In the end, Elijah, through his prayer, becomes the vehicle through which the hearts of others are led back to God. While his prayer reveals many deeper insights about Elijah, the theme of silence surrounds several stories, interpretations and commentaries on Elijah. Through his experience of Yahweh on Mt. Horeb, silence becomes the avenue through which the will of Elijah meets the Divine Will yet again. This silence leads to a place of greater awareness for Elijah where he continues the process of transformation as a prophet. In fear of his life, Elijah walks for forty days until he reaches Mt. Horeb (1Kings 19:8). He seeks out this special place with the knowledge that Yahweh established his covenant with Moses here. While in a cave on the mountain, Elijah does not hear the normal command from Yahweh to go to Cherith or to go to Zarephath or to go to Ahab. Elijah is familiar with this command and respond dynamic. Instead, Yahweh’s first words to him are “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1Kings 19:9). The unique situation that Elijah faces leads him to answer with an account of his trials and words of distress. Fr.

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<sup>9</sup> Conroy, p. 184.

<sup>10</sup> Gray, p. 342.

Killian Healey, O.Carm., and former General of the Carmelite Order states:

It is the encounter of the loyal servant with his heavenly father, a meeting in which the prophet expresses his bitter sorrow for the defection of Israel and his own failure. Still, in a personal, moving expression of faith he declares his undying loyalty to Yahweh.<sup>11</sup>

Yahweh continues with a familiar command. This time he tells Elijah to leave the cave and go out onto the mountain before Yahweh. These words are similar to the command to Moses on Mt. Horeb to stand on the rock and await the Lord's passing (Exodus 33:22). The experience of Moses helps us understand the significance of this event for Elijah. Moses had received the Ten Commandments on this same mountain (Exodus 20:2-17) and then upon his descent to the people of Israel he found them worshipping a golden calf (Exodus 32:1-6 and ff). In utter dismay and disillusionment, Moses shatters the tablets and approaches Yahweh in search of direction. Yahweh answers through his renewal of the covenant and Moses continues his prophetic work. Elijah experiences a similar state of confusion surrounding his situation and seeks direction from Yahweh. A textual analysis provides a brief interlude. Although it appears that Elijah responds accordingly and leaves the cave, (1Kings 19:11) he does not go to the entrance until after the last of the theophanies (self-revelations of God) has taken place (1Kings 19: 13). The text reveals that it is possible that verses 19:9b-11 are a later addition to the original story.<sup>12</sup> One makes this conclusion based on the repetition of verses 10 and 14, each repeating the famous line: "I have been most zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they seek to take my life." With the omission of the supposed added texts, the story would flow much smoother.

The story of Elijah's encounter with God continues as a hurricane, earthquake and fire appear successively before Elijah (1Kings 19:11-13). However, he does not find Yahweh in any of the three. These traditional events allude to the various theophanies that the chosen people of Israel experienced. It makes sense that Elijah would wait for Yahweh in each of these highly charged events with the hope that Yahweh would speak to him. After a very intimate moment when he shares his frustration and humanness before Yahweh, he waits in hope for an answer. The prophet who previously prayed for death on his way to Mt. Horeb now seeks direction and strength from Yahweh. "Then he encounters a uniquely real presence of God – beautifully captured in the phrase 'a sound of sheer silence,' the only occurrence of this phrase in the Old Testament."<sup>13</sup> A variety of translations exist for this mysterious experience including a "light murmuring sound" (NJB), "a still small voice" (KN), "the sound of a sheer silence" (NRSV), and "the sound of fine silence" (NJBC). Furthermore, there are numerous explanations of this event. One author describes it as "a divine rebuke of Elijah for his handling of the prophets of Baal."<sup>14</sup> The Anchor Bible says, "The intimation seems to be that this is the desired mode of discourse between the prophet and the divine presence."<sup>15</sup> Another author claims that the "revelation of God in an intelligible communication rather than in the spectacular phenomena described marks an advance in man's conception of God

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<sup>11</sup> Healey, Killian. *Prophet of Fire*. Institutum Carmelitanum. Rome, Italy. 1990. p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Laymon, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Farmer, William R. *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*. The Liturgical Press, MN. 1998. p. 627.

<sup>14</sup> Conroy, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Cogan, Mordechai. *I Kings. The Anchor Bible*. Double Day. New York. 2001.

as personally accessible.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, another writer says “this incident represents a transition from the spectacular theophanies witnessed by early Israel to the quiet transmission of the divine word to the prophets.”<sup>17</sup>

While one can develop arguments about all of these interpretations, it is important to look at what Elijah does immediately after this experience of the Divine presence: “And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave” (1Kings 19:13). Elijah’s veiling his face parallels the theophony assured to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 33:20). This flashback appears to raise the stakes of this event even more. In the past anyone who had seen God or heard God’s voice would perish (Exodus 20:19; Deut 5:24-26; 18:16). Now Elijah is faced with the opportunity and challenge to integrate this new experience of God’s presence. Yahweh asks him the same question from their first encounter: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Again, Elijah offers the account of his trials and tribulations along with his loyalty (1Kings 19:10-14). Yahweh answers this time with three specific commands for Elijah to complete (1Kings 19:15-18). In the end, Elijah is in the same place as before this theophonic experience. He does not make any major changes or come to any deep realizations as a result of this experience of the Divine presence. The three major experiences of the earthquake, hurricane and fire do not have an immediate effect on Elijah. According to the Scripture they do not result in Elijah leaving the cave. It’s not until these events subside and the “light murmuring sound” passes by Elijah that he approaches the entrance of the cave. The calm after the storm has arrived and Yahweh is in the calm ready to call forth Elijah yet again (1Kings 19:12). The stillness and the simplicity of silence create the space for Elijah’s will to connect yet again with the Will of the Divine. Only this time, the call takes on a totally different form and meaning. The stillness and the silence that beckon Elijah parallel the change of intensity for the next command that Yahweh gives. Yahweh no longer needs the Elijah who swaggers on the top of Mount Carmel and slays the 450 false prophets of Baal. These powerful and extraordinary actions in Yahweh’s name have come to an end for Elijah. The time for this face of Elijah’s remarkable courage and zeal has passed. This new mission for Elijah will help settle his fears and strengthen the faith of Israel. His actions, now grounded in silence, will once again reiterate to Israel that Yahweh is God. Elijah’s prophetic office is coming to an end so Yahweh gives him the task of anointing Hazael and Jehu and selecting Elisha as his successor. These two kings will essentially crush Israel to pieces but Yahweh declares, “I shall spare seven thousand in Israel; all knees that have not bent before Baal, and all the mouths that have not kissed him” (1Kings 19:18). Those who encounter God in silence never see or experience the world in the same way. Their old wineskin is often replaced with new wineskins. They inherit a new set of eyes as they reconnect with society. They call others to new living based on God’s covenant and word. Elijah, in his brokenness turns to God for answers. Yahweh, before he commands that Elijah go and anoint three others, decides to appear in the silence. Kilian Healy says:

Yahweh’s answer to Elijah is the key to the understanding of the passage. It shows that the prophet was mistaken in believing he alone in Israel was faithful to the Lord. It also points out that faith in Yahweh was not about to be exterminated. Israel surely will be chastised from within by Jehu and from without by Hazael, but in the end an Israel faithful to

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<sup>16</sup> Gray, p. 365.

<sup>17</sup> Mays, James L. *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*. Harpers and Row, San Francisco. 1988.

Yahweh will survive. Yahweh is in command, not Elijah.<sup>18</sup>

Could Elijah have heard this message if he had not experienced the presence of Yahweh in the silence? While the revelation of the Divine presence in the silence is quite different from the hurricane, earthquake and fire, so too is this command unlike the previous instructions that Elijah fulfils. In the end Yahweh's presence in the silence guides Elijah's towards his transformation as a prophet and thus, reiterating that Yahweh alone is God. While silence is definitive in Elijah's life, the issue of solitude surrounds him as well. The passages in 1 & 2 Kings show that he spends little time around other human beings. He spends many days, including forty in the desert, alone and in communion with the Divine. This solitude reveals a commitment to God first and foremost. It demonstrates an exclusive relationship that proclaims the absolute autonomy of Yahweh. The solitude in which Elijah lives his life exemplifies the connection of his will with that of the Divine Will. When we meet Elijah we first learn that he is a Tishbite from Gilead (1Kings 17:1). While genealogies exist for many figures in the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear very little about Elijah's origins, roots or ancestors. Furthermore, many figures of the Old Testament work together. Abraham and Lot travel together and Abraham provides support at times. Moses and Aaron share a certain level of intimacy as they lead the Hebrews out of the desert and into the Promised Land. Throughout the Scriptures however, Elijah relies solely on himself as he relates to God. He acts alone. His dedication as a solitary figure draws attention to the Divine Will that dwells at the centre of his being. Yahweh commands Elijah quite often to go and seek a place of solitude. "Go away from here, go east and hide by the torrent of Cherith, east of the Jordan" (1Kings 17:2). In this place, Elijah drinks from the wadi and the ravens feed him plentifully. The Hebrew Scriptures regards ravens as unclean and birds of prey (Lev 11:15; Deut 14:14; Prov 30:17). Yet, these unclean birds feed Elijah and nourish him very well with bread and meat twice a day. Eventually, the wadi dries up because of a lack of rain. It cannot sustain Elijah. Baal, known as the Canaanite god of rain, should be able to supply ample water but he cannot perform the one action that defines him. His autonomy and greatness is not like that of Yahweh. In solitude, Yahweh miraculously provides for Elijah and Baal proves inept.<sup>19</sup> Later Yahweh tells Elijah, "Up and go to Zarephath in Sidonia, and stay there" (1Kings 17:8). When he arrives, he asks the widow for water and food and she tells him that she does not have enough provisions. However, the Lord abundantly produces yet again. "The jar of meal was not spent nor the jug of oil emptied, just as Yahweh had foretold through Elijah" (1Kings 17:16). The message is clear: Yahweh lures Elijah in solitude where he must exhibit a total trust, perseverance and willingness to be led by Yahweh. As a result, Yahweh can reveal His total autonomy and overflowing ability to sustain and to nourish.

After Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel, he flees for his life from Jezebel into the desert and prays for his death. "Elijah no longer sees himself as the bearer of a special relationship with Yahweh and, in utter despair, asked that he die, as do all men."<sup>20</sup> Solitary life can eat a person alive if his or her focus is not rightly centred. It can lead to utter dismay. Elijah appears to be in turmoil and his faith challenged. However, the angel of Yahweh appears to him several times telling him to get up and eat. "He looked round, and there at his head was a scone

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<sup>18</sup> Healy, p. 165.

<sup>19</sup> Keck, Leander. *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume III. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 1999. p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Cogan, p. 451.

baked on hot stones and a jar of water” (1Kings 19:6). Furthermore, while the first angel does not make it evident, the second appearance of the angel reveals that it is Yahweh who provides. Strengthened by this food, Elijah spends forty days wandering in the desert and finally arrives at Mt. Horeb (19:8). Both in the desert where Yahweh sustains through food and in the cave where Elijah experiences the Divine presence in the “light murmuring sound,” Yahweh provides abundantly. Elijah accomplishes the majority of his triumphs in solitude as well. When he challenges the 450 prophets of Baal, he acts alone. When he heals the widow’s son he brings him upstairs in solitude and prays over him. Elijah triumphs over his other human opposition including Ahab and Jezebel. This triumph in solitude parallels that of Yahweh. Jane Ackerman writes:

While Baal was unable to control the rains, did not manifest himself, and had nothing to say to his devotees, Yahweh spectacularly moved both the natural and supernatural realms, spoke through his prophet, and most certainly manifested his will.<sup>21</sup>

Elijah’s ability to act without human assistance and to prevail over human opposition points to God’s independent greatness. Elijah’s relationship with Elisha also demonstrates his attempt to maintain this solitary life. He is seen several times trying to separate himself from Elisha. When Elijah and Elisha set out for Gilgal, he tells Elisha, “You stay here, for Yahweh is sending only me to Bethel” (2Kings 2:2). This happens two more times as Elijah claims that Yahweh is sending him to Jericho and to Jordan (2Kings 2:4 and 2Kings 2: 6). Eventually a chariot of fire takes Elijah bodily away from Elisha into the heavens (2Kings 2:12). His ascension severed his contact with other human beings. There could be no more powerful demonstration of Elijah’s adherence to God alone than the miracle that ended his story in 2 Kings.

The Spirit of Elijah dwells in our modern world today. Often times, people only talk about Elijah as the prophet of courage and of zeal. His willingness to take a stand in the name of Yahweh and to challenge those who straddle the fence speaks loudly and clearly. This voice of Elijah needs to be shared and heard by others. At the same time, the image of Elijah as a mystic who embodies silence, solitude and prayer in order to live out his role as a prophet must be recognized. The role of Elijah in 1 & 2 Kings reveals the depth, the breadth, the height and the width of this path. This model must be held up for others as a path towards an authentic and transparent way of life. In the words of Fr. Killian Healy:

“Each time that Carmel returned to its eremitical spirit, and gave itself more generously to its contemplative dimension, the Order was blessed with holiness that gave new life to the Church. Therefore experience is teaching us again that the only safe route to follow is to renew the eremitical ideal of the Order. We must return in Spirit to Elijah living in silence, solitude and prayer at Cherith. The prophet is still a relevant model.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ackerman, Jane. *Elijah: Prophet of Carmel*. ICS Publications, Washington, DC. 2003. p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Healy, p, 61.

## An Elijan Bibliography

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