

November 3, 2013

## 1 Kings 19:1-18

Elijah at Horeb; the prophet in despair, God speaks in the silence

*(John 12:27-28, Jesus is troubled; What shall I say, Father save me from this)*

The text:

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup>Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

<sup>3</sup>Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. <sup>4</sup>But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." <sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." <sup>6</sup>He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup>The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." <sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>10</sup>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." <sup>11</sup>He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" <sup>14</sup>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." <sup>15</sup>Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. <sup>16</sup>Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. <sup>17</sup>Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. <sup>18</sup>Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

Questions for Reflection:

1. Read Exodus 32-34. What similarities do you note between the "mountaintop experience" of Moses and that of Elijah? What differences?

2. What do you make of the alternate translations of “still, small voice,” “sound of sheer silence,” and “A sound. Thin. Quiet.”? Which one speaks to you personally and why?
3. Reading the commentary, what is your reaction to Farris’ suggestion, quoted below, that “life is renewed” through “attending to the work at hand,” rather than through the direct encounter with God? Is this ever true in your own life? Why or why not?
4. How do you judge the legitimacy of Elijah’s complaint to God – as justified lament or childish bellyaching? What about God’s response – How does it address, or fail to address, the root of the prophet’s complaint?
5. The commentator suggests in the end that this passage has something to say about unanswered prayers. Can you think back to times in your life when your prayers seem to have gone unanswered? If so, what meaning or message do you find here?

Commentary from:

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By Brent Strawn

This Old Testament reading ranks among the most famous of Old Testament texts.

Elijah's flight to the wilderness and his encounter with God in "a still small voice" (KJV, NKJV) is well known. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt, however, so good preachers will need to guard against the well-known nature of the text leading to inattention on the part of the congregation (or the preacher herself!). The text is pregnant with theological riches when one takes time to sit with it and not assume one already knows what it has to say.

Verse 9 is split across two paragraphs in NRSV and so the preacher will need to indicate something of the back story (especially Elijah's conflicts with Ahab, Jezebel, and the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel; see 1 Kings 18) that leads up to the reading. In particular "that place" (19:9) will need to be specified -- that place is "Horeb, God's mountain" (19:8). The specificity of the location lends color and depth to Elijah's encounter.

This is the same mountain, after all, where Moses communed with God, saw God's backside, and received the Ten Commandments. This is the same mountain, too, where Israel entered into covenant with God. This is the ultimate back story behind the immediate back story and so it is not surprising to note several allusions and interconnections between 1 Kings 19 and Exodus 20 and following, especially Exodus 32-34.<sup>1</sup>

One of these allusions and interconnections may be an item that is lost in translation. In Hebrew, 1 Kings 19:9 says that Elijah came to "*the* cave." The

definite article is odd, which is why English translations ignore it in favor of an indefinite reference: "a cave." Surely there would have been many caves in a mountain like Horeb!

Such indefinite use of the definite article is not unknown in biblical Hebrew,<sup>2</sup> but it is possible that the specification of the cave is an echo of the cleft in the rock where Moses stands during his vision of God (Exodus 33:22, though a different word is used).<sup>3</sup> If so, "the cave" where Elijah experiences God is the very same site on the very same mountain where Moses experienced God.

Whatever the precise cave, Elijah is here confronted by "the word of the LORD" - a prophetic formula to be sure -- but not with a prophetic oracle to deliver, but with a divine question to answer: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (verse 9b). The question is repeated in verse 13 as is Elijah's answer (verse 10; cf. verse 14) that, despite his extreme zeal (an emphatic construction) for the Lord, Israel has abandoned God's covenant (the location at Horeb should be recalled), destroyed God's altars, and killed God's prophets (Elijah's repeated use of "your" referring to God should not be missed). Elijah claims to be the only one left but is quick to add that he is now public enemy number 1. His phrasing is striking and plaintive: "I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (verses 10, 14).

Why the divine question and Elijah's answer should be repeated and repeated verbatim is discussed below. For now, it is enough to note that the first instance of this exchange leads directly to the divine command that Elijah should go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, because the Lord was about to pass by (verse 11).

What follows are the stereotypical elements of God's appearance in the Old Testament: a great wind that splits mountains and crushes rocks, an earthquake, and a fire (see, e.g., Exodus 19:16; 20:18; Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:22-24; Judges 5:4-5; Isaiah 30:27; Nahum 1:3-5; Psalm 18:11-15; 68:7-8). In each case, however, we are told "but the LORD was not in" these things (1 Kings 19:11-12).

After the wind, earthquake, and fire comes "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12b) -- at least according to the NRSV. The KJV has "a still small voice." And the newest English translation, the Common English Bible, puts it this way:

"After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet." (CEB)

The different translations reflect the fact that the Hebrew can be taken in more than one way. Indeed, some scholars, appealing to the theophanic context, have suggested that the sound in verse 12b wasn't quiet at all but a thunderous and crushing sound.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to say for certain, though the flow of the imagery

suggests a contrast between the pyrotechnics of wind, earthquake, fire, and the sound thereafter.<sup>5</sup> That "sound" may be a "voice" -- the Hebrew word *qôl* can mean either -- and it seems to be soft and quiet.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of this, and the contrast between it and the earlier phenomena, is not entirely clear. What is certain is that the phrases "but the LORD was not in" is not reiterated with reference to the sound. Perhaps this is enough to suggest that the LORD was "in" this sound; at the very least, Elijah has taken his cue:<sup>7</sup> he wraps his face (to avoid seeing God?) and goes to the entrance of the cave. There he hears a voice or sound (again Hebrew *qôl*) that *speaks* to him (verse 13). The close parallel of this verse to verse 9 suggests that the *qôl* of verse 13, at least, is a *voice*, not just a sound. Perhaps it is not going too far to posit that the relationship of the two verses also suggests that the "sound" of verse 12, too, is a "voice" -- and a divine one at that. But even if that is correct (and it can't be said for certain), the Hebrew of verse 12 remains open and unclear -- ambiguous, yes, but no less inviting, and perhaps even more inviting precisely because of that.

The close relationship between verses 9 and 13 continues in the specific content of the voice. The divine question regarding Elijah's presence is repeated, word-for-word, as is Elijah's answer (verse 14). There is more than one way to interpret this repetition. Some speak of Elijah's "repeated, self-righteous lament";<sup>8</sup> but others note that "such repetition is well-known in the saga convention and may be deliberate, in order to emphasize the isolation of Elijah and his zeal for Yahweh and the measure of his frustration."<sup>9</sup> In my judgment, the latter sentiment is more likely to be accurate. Elijah is neither punished nor demeaned for his (repeated) answer, even if he is corrected on a point (one might contrast the dialogue here with the dialogue in Jonah 4).

But this correction comes at the very end of the divine reply (verse 18). So what Elijah mostly gets is not reprimand, but marching orders. He is not commended for his zeal, nor corrected about Israel's apostasy (at first), nor comforted about his precarious circumstances. Instead he is told to go on his way and get back to work. In Farris' words: "Remarkably, it is neither the experience of God's dramatic nor quiet presence, for which many so long in the midst of such feelings, but in attending to the work at hand and needing to be done through which life is renewed."<sup>10</sup>

This seems quite right, though the language of renewal isn't used in the passage. Moreover, "the work at hand" that needs to be done is not without difficulty and hardly seems life-renewing, at least in any individualized sense. Elijah's orders are threefold: (1) he must journey from the extreme south (Horeb) to the extreme north (Damascus) -- a risky trip with Jezebel looking to kill him (verse 15).

When he gets there he is to anoint a new king, but an Aramean one, and one that will ultimately do Israel harm (see 2 Kings 8:7-15). (2) Even more dangerous is the command to anoint a new king over Israel, Jehu (1 Kings 19:16a), who will put an end to Baal worship and overthrow the royal dynasty to which Ahab and Jezebel belong, but in a violent and bloody way (verse 17; see 2 Kings 9-10). The first item seems rather odd (given Elijah's lament), the second quite problematic (despite Elijah's lament), but the third is downright curious: (3) Elijah is to anoint Elisha "as prophet in your place" (1 Kings 19:16b).

To be sure, much more could be said about this passage, but it is worth reflecting on how Elijah's complaint that he is the last of God's prophets leads to God appointing a new prophet in his place. Elijah is no longer just the last prophet (his perspective), but in effect is on his way out and no longer necessary.

The coup de grâce may be verse 18, where Elijah is informed that God has (or "will preserve"; English translations differ over the past, present, or future interpretation of the verb) seven thousand persons in Israel who haven't worshiped Baal. This notice and the selection of Elisha are not divine reprimand proper, but they may sting Elijah nevertheless, serving as yet another reminder that one doesn't always get the answer one wants from God in prayer.

<sup>1</sup>See Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 232. <sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Ronald J. Williams and John C. Beckman, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax* (3rd ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 36-37 (§84). Not all grammarians agree on the details. <sup>3</sup>So, e.g., John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (2d ed.; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 409. <sup>4</sup>J. Lust, "A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring, Thunderous Sound?" *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 110-15. <sup>5</sup>Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 232 thinks that the failure of "a series of metaphors, all of which typically appear in theophanic texts...[demonstrates] the impossibility of describing YHWH's presence," and so the emphasis falls on "YHWH's holy, incorporeal character." <sup>6</sup>Sweeney argues that sound and silence "contradict each other in a metaphorical presentation of power through a combination of presence and absence" (*I & II Kings*, 232). <sup>7</sup>Lawrence W. Farris suggests that perhaps "only the quiet can pique his interest" ("1 Kings 19:1-4, [5-7], 8-15a," in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts* [edited by Roger E. Van Harn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 237), but if this is so, it goes unstated explicitly so preachers should beware of building too much on such an observation. <sup>8</sup>Farris, "1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a," 238. <sup>9</sup>Gray, *I & II Kings*, 405. <sup>10</sup>Farris, "1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a," 238.