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## **Elijah and the Promised Future (2 Kings 2: 1-14)**

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The manner of Elijah's leaving this earth is unprecedented in the Hebrew Scriptures. Well, almost. The 'single previous intimation' of Elijah's ascension is what Robert Alter calls the 'cryptic notation about Enoch's being "taken" by God in Genesis', chapter 5.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this hint, everywhere in the Hebrew Bible, the end of human life is death, a 'definitive end' which takes the once living person down to Sheol.<sup>2</sup> But with the story of Elijah separated from Elisha by a chariot of fire and taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, we have a new 'departure' (if you'll pardon the pun!). What are we supposed to make of it?

Well – as I've discovered reading the commentaries this week – it's not easy to say. At one level, of course, this story is about a transition in prophetic leadership – the passing of Elijah's mantle to his successor Elisha. The master and his disciple make a last journey together. It goes by stages, from Gilgal to Bethel, to Jericho, then to the Jordan and across the river in a 'small-scale reenactment of the miracle performed by Moses in parting the waters of the Sea of Reeds'.<sup>3</sup>

We already know, because the narrator has told us, that the Lord is about to take Elijah up and so it seems, do both protagonists. The journey is punctuated by Elisha's refusals to leave Elijah prior to the momentous happening, and by the various 'companies of prophets' who sidle up to him with their redundant information: 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' ... 'Yes, I know; keep silent' (2: 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets – Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p.737.

<sup>2</sup> Alter, *Ancient Israel*, p.737.

<sup>3</sup> Alter, *Ancient Israel*, p.736.

The crisis of the ascension gives Elisha the opportunity to ask for a final empowerment by Elijah. When he asks for ‘a double share of your spirit’, Elijah remarks: ‘You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not’ (2: 10). As it happens, Elisha does have ‘eyes to see’ and this proves his fitness to receive the gift. The Lord, the God of Elijah, is with him as he turns back for home and replicates the miracle of the parting of the waters (2: 14).

But none of this explains why Elijah is taken up to heaven. Couldn’t he just bestow a death-bed blessing like the patriarchs and prophets before him? And what is it about Elijah that so merits this extraordinary divine uplifting? Well – I don’t know. We’re not offered, in the text itself, an explanation or justification for this unprecedented intervention. We’re not told its meaning. Yet as this story has been received by the biblical tradition, it has become an immensely powerful imaginative resource.

I want to focus on two features of this resource. First, is the notion of ‘return’. What goes up, must come down. In a way, that’s the heart of it. Even within the Hebrew Scriptures, there’s the beginning of anticipation that Elijah will return – and that this return will signal the end of days, the eschaton. The book of the prophet Malachi concludes with these words: ‘Lo (says the Lord of hosts), I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes’ (Mal. 4: 5).

In later Jewish commentaries, when rabbis were faced with difficult legal or ritual problems, they would set aside any decision ‘until Elijah comes’. One such issue was whether the Passover Seder requires four or five cups of wine, so pending resolution of this question, there evolved the custom of leaving a fifth cup for the arrival of Elijah and reserving a place for him at the Seder table. Symbolically then, this cup represents the promised future redemption. And in the hymn sung to conclude the Sabbath day each week, an appeal is made to God that Elijah will come during the next week: ‘Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite. Let him come quickly, in our day with the messiah, the son of David’.

These messianic associations were picked up strongly in the New Testament. ‘When we hear the recital of Elijah’, writes Walter Brueggemann, ‘we are supposed to remember that the ongoing, still living character of Elijah hovered powerfully around the life of Jesus’.<sup>4</sup> John the Baptist is identified with Elijah – fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi – ‘He is Elijah who is to come’, says the gospel of Matthew (11: 14). ‘Let anyone with ears listen’; ‘With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him’, says Luke (1: 17), speaking also of John the Baptist, and Mark has John dressed like Elijah – in camel’s hair and wearing a leather belt (Mk 1: 6; cf. 2 Kings 1: 8). On the Mount of Transfiguration, Elijah appears with Moses; and at the cross, people say: ‘This man is calling for Elijah’ (Mt. 27: 47).

In other words, the gospel writers communicated the meaning of Jesus often in terms of the story of Elijah and the expectation of his return. In Jesus, they proclaim, the day of the Lord has finally dawned, the promised future redemption has arrived. Yet, as quickly became apparent, this redemption is itself not a finished story. It is still being worked out in and among us. And just as Elijah’s being taken up to heaven generated in the Jewish tradition an expectation of return, so too Jesus’ resurrection and ascension.

But how is this expectation of ‘return’ – the return of Elijah, the second coming of Christ – how is this a resource? I think it’s to do with the sense of time itself as held in God, of all the time there is encompassed by eternity. God is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega; there will be no time where God is not, and so although the future is at one level unknown, it is at another level already revealed. This means that in the Judaeo-Christian understanding, the future opens before us, not as trackless or meaningless expanse, but as *promise*. And this founds a particular kind of confidence and hope for living.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha* (St Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2001), p.38.

The second imaginative resource evoked by this story is an orientation to fulfilment. The return of Elijah, as with the second coming of Christ, is about the fulfillment of God's purposes, the reconciliation of all things. This orientation suggests that the basic task or vocation of our lives is to grow towards this fulfilment – to participate in our own and others' transformation, so that as the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, 'you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Eph. 3: 19). On this view, sin is essentially the failure to be responsive to this orientation and ever-deepening call. I like the way Gregory of Nyssa expressed it in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, 'Sin happens when we refuse to keep growing'. We are made for freedom and fullness of life, and it is this promised end that shapes and animates the character of the whole.

All this might seem a long way from the mysterious story of Elijah and the whirlwind! But I've been speaking of the imaginative resources that flow out of this tale, as it has been received and reflected upon in our tradition. I've been suggesting that the promise of a divinely initiated return as fulfilment creates the possibility of living in hope-filled anticipation. This is a distinctive space for being, a field or context where despite the difficulty and terrors of human life, we dare to believe that we're ultimately safe to play and invited to grow. Of course, there are other ways we might conceive of and so experience human life. Some think of it as hostile territory and ultimately pointless, in Thomas Hobbes' words 'nasty, brutish and short'. The biblical way of seeing it isn't verifiable in the abstract, by appeal to objective 'facts' of our condition. We prove its truthfulness, its lifegiving-ness, only as we discover for ourselves what it makes possible in our lives and our communities.

Elijah the Tishbite is about 28 centuries removed from us. He inhabited an almost unimaginably different world. Yet here we are, still reflecting on his story and his meaning, still nourished by his journey to God. As we give thanks for him and for the tradition that has carried him, we too turn our faces to God who was, and is and ever shall be, open like him to the unfathomable mystery of this promised future.