BENEDICTUS contemplative church

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Elijah the Tishbite (1 Kings 17: 1-16)
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Into the middle of the Book of Kings, the figure of Elijah the Tishbite drops from nowhere. He arrives without introduction or preamble to pronounce the beginning of an indefinite drought. Ultimately he'll leave in similarly abrupt fashion by ascending into heaven in a whirlwind, while his startled successor Elisha looks on. In between, in a series of vivid and memorable episodes, Elijah will champion the cause of Yahweh and secure a central place in the Judaeo-Christian imagination. Over the next few weeks, we're going to be exploring his story.

Let's start by giving Elijah some canonical context. In the Hebrew bible, the books of scripture are divided into three main sections – the Torah or Law, the prophets and the writings. The prophetic canon is itself divided into two parts – the 'Former' and the 'Latter Prophets'. The book of Kings, together with the books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel fall into the category of 'Former Prophets', while Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Book of the Twelve constitute the 'Latter Prophets'. So – that's where the story of Elijah is located – among the 'Former Prophets', in a text compiled between the mid-sixth and eighth centuries BCE. Elijah himself is portrayed as having been active in the reign of Ahab and Jezebel in the 9th century BCE.

One further bit of background is important. The history told in the Book of Kings purportedly encompasses the period beginning with the death of King David and the reign of Solomon, through the splitting of Israel into two kingdoms, the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 at the hands of the Assyrians and finally the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the deportation of its leading citizens to Babylon. Notably, though, its main purpose is not to provide an exhaustive history of these events. The text often

refers readers to other accounts – saying things like, ‘Now the rest of the acts of so-and-so and all that he did, are these not written in the Book of Annals of the Kings of Israel?’[1]

So the main interest of this biblical history is in the theological interpretation of Israel’s past. It is and intends to be, says scholar Walter Brueggemann, ‘a theological and interpretive commentary upon the history that can be otherwise known’.[2] What’s significant about the fundamental theology of this history is that it involves two commitments which are perennially in tension. On the one hand, the writer trusts in Yahweh’s election of Israel and promise to be faithful, in Yahweh’s determination to sustain the monarchy and the people in the land they have been given. And on the other hand, he insists on the need for Israel’s faithfulness to Yahweh’s law and command. Disobedience, on his view, will provoke Yahweh’s anger and judgement.[3] And ultimately this is the theological explanation offered for why both kingdoms suffer defeat and exile. The people have done wrong and provoked the judgement of the Lord. But along the way the story holds open the possibility of repentance and so of a different trajectory for Israel’s national life. This brings us to the significance of the prophets, and the space they create for what might yet be. It brings us to Elijah whose name means, ‘My God is Yahweh’.

The appearance of Elijah in the text comes as something of a surprise. We’ve been trundling along with a fairly tedious enumeration of the reigns of the kings in Israel and Judah. ‘In the third year of King Asa of Judah, Baasha son of Ahijah began to reign over all Israel at Tirzah; he reigned twenty-four years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord … (1 Kings 15:33-34); In the twenty-sixth year of King Asa of Judah, Elah son of Baasha began to reign over Israel in Tirzah …’ (1 Kings 16: 8). ‘In the thirty-eighth year of King Asa of Judah, Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two

[1] Two further sources, the Book of the Acts of Solomon and the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah, are also mentioned in 1 Kings. Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.146.
[2] Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.146.
[3] Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.148.

years' (1 Kings 16:29-30). And so on … Then suddenly, the story of Elijah begins and it feels as though we're in a completely different kind of narrative. Rather than a boring catalogue of royal succession, the Elijah cycle appears to be a pre-existing folk narrative which has been incorporated into the history.[4]

Despite its different style, however, Elijah appears at first to share the theology of the narrative as a whole. He too is concerned with apostasy and disobedience – and specifically the apostasy of King Ahab who is not only continuing in the sin of previous kings, but has taken 'as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and [gone] and served Baal, and worshiped him' (1 Kings 16: 31). He has erected an altar to Baal and made a sacred pole, doing 'more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him' (1 Kings 16:33). Cue Elijah. 'As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word' (1 Kings 17: 1).

This is no random prophetic threat. Baal was the Canaanite god responsible for fertility and particularly with reference to weather – rain, thunder, lightning, and dew. So Elijah is directly denying the power of this foreign god to affect anything in his supposed portfolio of interest. It is not Baal, but Yahweh, whose word is sovereign and whose provision is the source of life. And indeed, the prophet himself must rely utterly on Yahweh's provision as his word takes effect. For he too is vulnerable to this drought. First, he's guided to the Wadi Cherith where he will find water and be fed by ravens. And then, when the wadi dries up, he's directed by 'the word of the Lord to Zarephath which belongs to Sidon', and the widow who will feed him.

This introduces, however, an interesting theological complication. Elijah's word has performed a drought in the land because Ahab has gone running after Baal, the god of his wife Jezebel who is the daughter of the king of the Sidonians. Yet it's to another woman of Sidon – the widow of Zarephath – that Elijah is sent by Yahweh to survive the

[4] Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p.153.

ensuing famine. It's not even as if this widow is a foreign follower of Yahweh – when she replies to Elijah's request for bread, she says: 'As the Lord *your* God lives, I have nothing baked' (I Kings 17: 12). In the midst of a narrative that seems to be all about royal power and tribal identity – our God is bigger than your God, our purity is conditional on not being like you – a complication is introduced. The survival of Yahweh's prophet turns out to rely on one of 'them'. This lowliest of women – a widow, a foreigner – has a part to play in the fulfilment of Yahweh's purpose. And not just as a patsy – not despite *her* concerns and best interests. While Elijah is with her, her son dies, and she complains to him such that he pours his own life breath through prayer into the boy, and Yahweh responds. This non-Israelite widow's son is raised to life – the first rising from the dead in the Scriptures. She is a three-dimensional character, whose trust, generosity and feistiness are necessary for Elijah's survival and so a condition of Yahweh's word continuing to be spoken in that time and place.

Sometimes I wonder why we continue to read these stories. They are so culturally remote from us, and seem to have so little to do with us. But then I see their power to complicate and subvert a too neatly packaged concept of God. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath subverts the theological framework of Israel's royal historian – God keeps being bigger than even the text is tempted to assume. And by retelling this story, the text of Scripture keeps itself honest and, almost despite itself, non-tribal. And I see also the power of such stories to nourish our spiritual and prophetic imaginations. How might Elijah's willingness to be so radically vulnerable to his hearing of the word of God give us courage, and call in question the depth of our listening? Could it be that we, like him, are called to take a stand in relation to business as usual in our land? A prophet is one who creates, through listening and faith, an alternative way of living in the service of an alternative future. In a context where we desperately need an alternative way of living, opening into an alternative future, perhaps the story of Elijah the Tishbite is not such an anachronism after all.