

ELIJAH'S THEOPHANY AT MOUNT HOREB

1 KINGS 19:9-18

JENNIFER WYMAN

JUNE 2, 2017

Elijah's flight from Jezebel and the subsequent theophany at Horeb in 1 Kings 19:1-18 is often used to illustrate the similarities between Moses and Elijah. To list but a few: through Moses, God gives the people food and water during the 40 years in the wilderness; God gives Elijah food and water for 40 days in order to sustain him; God appears to both on the top of Mt. Sinai; both lament that they have suffered enough asking God to take their lives; both are faced with the apostasy of Israel; and, both experience a theophany on Mount Sinai.¹ At the same time, some scholars point out that while Moses's is a victorious ascent to establish a covenant between God and the newly freed nation of Israel, Elijah's is one of despair as he laments Israel in apostasy as breakers of that sacred covenant.²

Both the witness of the covenant ratification at Sinai and the witness of its ultimate rejection are present as the divinity of the Son, he who would usher in the New Covenant, is made manifest at the Transfiguration. It is no stretch, then, to connect all three figures with covenant ratification, rejection, and renewal, a theme that plays itself out again and again in the Old Testament economy to be ultimately elevated, fulfilled, and perpetuated in Jesus Christ.

The first part of this analysis will unpack the narrative itself, looking at exegetical components such as genre, language, and structure. Part 2 will compare and contrast it with Exodus 19. In the third section, I will show how the Transfiguration of Jesus brings the cycle of covenant ratification, rejection, and renewal to its triumphant conclusion.

PART 1

1 Kings 19:1-18 describes a scene in which Elijah, fleeing from Jezebel and certain death, escapes to the wilderness, pleading with God to take his life. Two times, an angel appears with food and water and instructs him to eat. He arrives at a cave where he encounters the voice of the Lord who commands him to ascend Mt. Horeb. After a violent wind, an earthquake, and a fire, the Lord speaks in the stillness in a soft voice. Elijah bemoans his circumstances as the Israelites have forsaken their covenant with Yahweh and are seeking to kill him. The Lord tells him that he is to return the way he came and anoint new kings over Israel and Aram as well as a prophet,

¹ Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel According to Elijah and Elisha*, edited by Tremper Longman III and J. Alan Groves, *The Gospel According to the Old Testament* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1999), 55.

² Rousas John Rushdoony, *Chariots of Prophetic Fire: Studies in Elijah and Elisha* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2003), 35.

Elisha, to succeed him. He then tells Elijah that those whom the king of Aram does not kill, the king of Israel will, and those that the king of Israel does not kill, Elisha will. However, the Lord will spare 7000 righteous people who never succumbed to Baalism.

Micha Roi hypothesizes that this pericope belongs to the ‘Departure on a Journey’ genre which is made up of seven elements: 1) an uncertain protagonist sets out on a journey; 2) he is often frightened or worried; 3) the destination, usually unplanned, is a sacred place; 4) he enters into prayer; 5) he receives a divine response that includes a promise of blessing; 6) the Lord responds directly to the individual’s prayer; and, 7) a description of the journey follows.³ It is important to note that, in Departure on a Journey narratives, the divine response often includes return and continuity.⁴ Specifically, the Lord tells Elijah to return the way he came and the Lord will exact punishment on the unfaithful Israelites and spare the righteous. In this case, the Lord seems to be directly addressing Elijah’s complaint that the people have forsaken the covenant oath. In what seems to be an otherwise sobering and disheartening narrative, God promises to spare 7000, a glimmer of hope that the covenant might not be beyond repair.

This narrative stands in contrast to earlier chapters that portray an uncompromising Elijah as the clear champion of the Lord delivering punishment and judgment to Ahab and the recalcitrant Israelites. In their analysis, Alan Hauser and Russell Gregory highlight this as they examine the differences between the Elijah of chapter 17 and the one of chapter 19. In 17:1, the prophet, as Yahweh’s representative, confronts Ahab, threatening drought for the continued worship of Baal. The sacred writer emphasizes a dramatic shift in Elijah’s attitude in chapter 19 when he writes that it is Jezebel, Baal’s advocate, who is the aggressor, threatening Elijah and sending him fleeing for his life.⁵ Where is the Elijah of chapter 18, the confident spokesperson for Yahweh who slays the worshipers of Baal at the Brook Kishon, an act that demonstrates God’s victory over death?⁶ In 19:1-3, Jezebel’s threat essentially paralyzes Elijah infusing him with an overwhelming fear of death, a fear he did not earlier seem to possess. “Elijah’s instant flight from Jezebel after he is told her oath suggests that he is not at all sure that Yahweh has the power to deliver him from death.”⁷ Hauser and Gregory suggest that the writer of 1 Kings emphasizes this stark turn in Elijah’s character by accelerating the pace of the narrative. He moves quickly through vv. 1-3 giving the scene a sense of urgency.⁸ In v. 3, the writer uses three verbs in

³ Ibid., 26-27.

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Alan Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb Elijah in Crisis* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 61.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁸ Ibid.

succession: “and he saw, and he arose, and he fled” adding to the sense of immediacy of Elijah’s flight and the panic that seizes him.⁹

Escaping into the wilderness, Elijah’s desperation quickly turns to fatalistic defeat. Rousas John Rushdoony believes that it was not primarily fear that propels Elijah into the wilderness but despair.¹⁰ Israel’s apostasy is the ultimate betrayal of the covenant with God and, as Rushdoony tells us, covenant and the covenant nation are sacred to the prophets.¹¹ The grief-stricken Elijah is overcome with hopelessness at his failure to keep the people from apostasy.

Dejected and alone, Elijah lies down in the wilderness and falls asleep, waiting to die. He is awakened by a messenger who gives him food and drink. Dan Epp-Tiessen writes that, while most translations render the Hebrew as “angel,” a closer rendering is, in fact, “messenger.”¹² He points out that this is the same term used in 19:2 when Jezebel delivers her message of death. Here, Yahweh appears to be countering Jezebel’s threat of death with a promise of life.¹³ V. 8 begins with a series of verbs that suggest Elijah is beginning to get his strength back.¹⁴ This rapid-fire sequence is much like that in v. 3, except that in this case, Elijah is no longer running away from Jezebel but moving towards the Lord.

Upon his arrival to Mt. Horeb, the Lord demands to know what he is doing there. The fact that the Lord repeats his question may indicate that it is a rebuke.¹⁵ A prophet is meant to be in the world delivering God’s message, not in isolation on a mountaintop.¹⁶ Elijah’s words to the Lord give the reader the sense that he is merely being querulous. His complaint is not commensurate with the events of chapter 18. In v. 10 he says, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” However, Elijah forgets that just a few verses earlier, in 18:39, the people repent and worship the Lord. And, he is not truly alone. There are 100 prophets of the Lord taking refuge in a cave (18:4). It appears as if the immediate threat is only Jezebel.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rushdoony, *Chariots of Prophetic Fire*, 35.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dan Epp-Tiessen, "1 Kings 19: The Renewal Elijah" *Direction* 36, no. 1 (2006): 36.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The literary structure of vv. 10-14 may shed some light on Elijah's lament. Epp-Tiessen points out the obvious chiasmic structure here:

A 19:9b-10 "What are you doing here Elijah?" "I have been exceedingly zealous ..."

B 19:11a Elijah is told to "go out and stand"

C 19: 11b-12 Yahweh passes by

B¹ 19:13a Elijah goes out and stands

A¹ 19:13b-14 "what are you doing here Elijah?" "I have been exceedingly zealous ..."¹⁷

These verses seem to point to a renewal of Elijah's prophetic call. In v. 10, Elijah's words evoke despair and condemnation. This is punctuated by the fact that even after the Lord's command to ascend the mountain, Elijah appears to stay where he is. It is only after the Lord passes by that Elijah emerges from the cave alluding to an "enormous change [that] has come over Elijah, and indicates that the focus of the story is the renewal of a fearful and burned out prophet."¹⁸

God responds in a definitive way, dissembling no preamble as he tasks Elijah with three objectives. He is to anoint Hazael king of Syria, Jehu king of Israel, and Elisha shall be anointed prophet in the place of Elijah. Whoever Syria does not destroy, Jehu will. Whoever is left will be slain by Elisha. However, the Lord will leave alive 7000 righteous Israelites. These three commands indicate that God is reestablishing his sovereignty over both the Northern Kingdom and the Gentile nations.¹⁹ His directive to Elijah to return the way he came is "a command that calls Elijah back into active service of the Lord."²⁰ The Lord's mandate to anoint Elisha as well as his reassurance that 7000 righteous will remain sends a clear message. God's word remains intact and it will continue to empower and protect the righteous remnant.²¹

Section 2 will examine Elijah within the larger context of the Old Testament as both a second Moses and the witness to the judgment of Israel in apostasy.

PART 2

How do we interpret Elijah's attitude? Why is the Elijah in ch. 18 so much more determined and zealous than the fatalistic, querulous one of ch. 19? Reflecting on this, Epp-Tiessen submits that

¹⁷ Ibid., 34.

¹⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁹ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, vol. 8, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group 1995), Kindle Locations 4499-4505.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Elijah is suffering from a sort of ministerial burnout that can “lead to both pessimism about the life of God’s people and an exaggerated sense of self-importance.”²² Maybe, but it seems out of character for a man so consumed with his mission to succumb to defeat so easily. To answer this, we must look at the pericope within the larger context of the Old Testament economy.

Perhaps no two narratives in the Old Testament more closely resemble each other than that of Moses’s and Elijah’s flight from tyranny, wilderness wanderings, and ultimate ascension of Mt. Sinai. Both escaped from a foreign monarch, Moses from Pharaoh and Elijah from Jezebel; both subsisted on heavenly bread in the wilderness, Moses for 40 years, Elijah 40 days; both came to Sinai, Moses as covenant mediator, Elijah to lament its ruin; both experienced a theophany atop that mountain. From this, we see how Elijah fits into a Moses typology; he is a second Moses.

Timothy Sandoval appropriates the ‘prophetic call’ genre for Elijah’s experience at Horeb. 1 Kings 19:9-18 includes many elements of a typical prophetic call scene: a theophany (v. 11), introductory words from the deity (vv. 9, 11), a commission (vv. 15-18), the prophet’s objection (not specifically an objection but a charge or complaint in vv. 10, 14), and a sign (not present).²³ Making it clear that this narrative does not precisely conform with other prophetic call scenes, he nonetheless hypothesizes that 1 Kings 19 might be thought of as the prophet’s “re-call,” a sort of “midcareer crisis or evaluation of his location ... which perhaps allows him to reflect upon where he has been and what he has done and where he will be going and what he will be doing in the future.”²⁴ Noticeably absent from Elijah’s story is his first prophetic call, an event which is highlighted in the lives of other major prophets. So, when was it?

If we allow ourselves a broader scope, it may be possible to make the case that, as the second Moses, Elijah’s first call is prefigured in the theophany in Exod 19 and culminates in the Blood of the Covenant narrative in Exod 24. Let’s look at the evidence. Is there a theophany? Yes, at 19:16-18; introductory words from the deity—vv. 21-22; a commission—chs. 20-24; an objection—20:18²⁵; a sign—24:1-8. I am not asserting that this is Moses’s prophetic call, which took place at the burning bush in Exod 3. However, is it possible that this narrative could serve as Elijah-as-the-new-Moses’s prophetic call, the call of a man sent to safeguard the Mosaic covenant, the first call of a man heartbroken at that covenant’s demise? If 1 Kings 19 is in fact Elijah’s “re-call,” his despair and anger make sense, they stem from the grief of the first Moses at witnessing the ruin of the covenant and the anger of the second Moses as he witnesses God’s judgment.

²² Epp-Tiessen, “1 Kings 19,” 38.

²³ Timothy J. Sandoval, "A Prophet’s (re-) Call and Recollection: The Case of Elijah in 1 Kings 19," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 94, no. 2-3 (2007): 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁵ probably not an objection, per se, but it is a concern raised by the people.

In both theophanies, the Lord descends during the natural phenomena of smoke, fire, and an earthquake. John Currid notes that the phrase “like the smoke of the kiln” (Exod 19:18) is present in only one other narrative, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.²⁶ He writes that in both instances this is the sign of judgment. “Israel must be made to realize that if the people break the covenant they will face a God of judgment.”²⁷ Now, many generations later, Israel is about to face that judgment. For Rushdoony, the natural phenomena in Elijah’s theophany are the harbingers of the pending judgment.²⁸ The condemnation promised in Exod 19 is finally coming to pass. What’s more, the God that delivers this divine sentence speaks not in fire nor in thunder, but quietly, in the stillness. Joseph Ratzinger proposes that this is the voice of the third Moses, the Messiah. We will explore this idea in Part 3 of this analysis.

Leithart argues that rather than being a complaint, Elijah, acting in his official capacity as an officer of the court of Yahweh, offers an indictment against Israel. As a prophet, Elijah is obligated not only to stand before the Lord’s judgments but also to “offer briefs on behalf of the people.”²⁹ As further evidence of this, in v. 11, Elijah is told to “stand before the Lord,” an official command to Elijah by his superior. Yet, unlike Moses who mediates for the people begging God to pardon their iniquities (Exo 33:17-34:9), Elijah inculcates them (v. 10, 14).³⁰ How far Israel has fallen. Their offenses have been so great that the new Moses no longer wishes to preserve them, but to punish them.

It will take a third and superior Moses to bring about the redemption of Israel once and for all. How fitting that present at the revelation of the divine identity of Jesus, this third Moses, are the giver of the Law and the one who sets forth the judgment of the Law.³¹ It is to this Moses that we now turn.

PART 3

In the New Testament, Peter, James, and John are witnesses to another theophany, the divinity of Jesus revealed at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-13; Lk 9:28-36). His clothes become

²⁶ John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 19–40*, vol. 2, EP Study Commentary (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rushdoony, *Chariots of Prophetic Fire*, 37.

²⁹ Peter Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), Kindle location 2815, he uses Jer 23:18, 22 as scriptural evidence of this. "Now, who has stood in the counsel of the Lord, to see him and to hear his word? Who has heeded his word so as to announce it?" And, "Had they stood in my counsel, they would have proclaimed my words to my people, they would have brought them back from their evil ways and from their wicked deeds."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rushdoony, *Chariots of Prophetic Fire*, 36.

dazzling white and his face shines like the sun. Moses and Elijah appear next to him talking with him about his upcoming passion. The most common explanation for the appearance of these two great prophets is that the first represents the Law and the second the Prophets, symbolizing the witness of the entire Old Testament economy to the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God.³² This interpretation goes back to the early church fathers. Quoting John Chrysostom, Thomas Aquinas gives several more reasons for the appearance of Moses and Elijah:

As Chrysostom says on Matth. 17:3: *Moses and Elias are brought forward for many reasons. ... Moses gave the Law ... while Elias ... was jealous for the glory of God. ... [Another] reason was to show that He has power of death and life, and that He is the judge of the dead and the living; by bringing with Him Moses who had died, and Elias who still lived.*—[Another] ... reason was because, as Luke says (9:31), *they spoke with Him of His decease that He should accomplish in Jerusalem—i.e., of His Passion and death. Therefore, in order to strengthen the hearts of His disciples with a view to this, He sets before them those who had exposed themselves to death for God’s sake: since Moses braved death in opposing Pharaoh, and Elias in opposing Achab.*³³

Brant Pitre, however, believes there is yet another explanation. He points out that both Moses and Elijah experience theophanies and that neither is able to see the face of God.³⁴ It is true that they experience God in the natural phenomena and they are witnesses to his power, but they cannot look directly at him. What is happening here is a profound reversal. “On the mountain of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah are finally allowed to see what they could not see during their earthly lives: the unveiled face of God. How is this possible? Because the God who appeared to them on Mount Sinai has now become man. In Jesus of Nazareth, the one God now has a human face.”³⁵ Moses and Elijah, witnesses to the glory and mercy of God yet unable to look upon him, are now allowed to behold God in his fullness as both human and divine.

Joseph Ratzinger explains that Jesus is an eschatological prophet who is the realization of what Elijah personifies, the future restoration of Israel.³⁶ He cites H. Gese who holds that the Transfiguration must be read against the backdrop of Exod 24, the ratification of God’s covenant

³² Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2016), 132.

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q.45, Art. 3, ad.3

³⁴ Pitre, *The Case for Jesus*, 132.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 290.

with Israel.³⁷ Here, as in 1 Kings 19, the mountain serves as the “locus of God’s particular closeness.”³⁸ Now, at the Transfiguration, 1 Kings 19:11 can be fully interpreted in light of the now visible Lord. “Elijah was granted a transformed version of the Sinai experience: He experienced God passing by, not in the storm or in the fire or in the earthquake, but in the still small breeze (1 Kings 19: 1– 13). That transformation is completed here. God’s power is now revealed in his mildness, his greatness in his simplicity and closeness.”³⁹ Through a New Testament lens, we can see how God quietly chastens his prophet in vv. 11-12. Elijah experiences all the powers of nature yet God is not in any of them. Like the first century Jews, the “evil and adulterous generation,” he seeks a sign but will find none beyond a gentle whisper.⁴⁰ That whisper is more powerful than any earthquake, it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Heb 4:12-13).

As officers in Yahweh’s court, Moses and Elijah are present as witnesses to the dawning of the New Covenant. The guardians of the Old Covenant are yielding to the New. There seems to be a ceremonial element here, a formal witnessing of the transfer of guardianship. Aquinas quotes the Law to support this claim noting that two or three witnesses must be present in order for evidence to be substantiated.⁴¹ As covenant mediator and covenant judge, it was fitting that Moses and Elijah were the chosen witnesses. John of La Rochelle asserts that it was only during the lives of these two individuals that “salvation was prophesied explicitly with some indications as to how that salvation would be effected.”⁴² Many generations later, that promise has been realized in the new and superior Moses, Jesus Christ. Elijah, as the second Moses, stands between the Old Covenant and the New. As judge of the Mosaic covenant, he stands with Moses as he bears witness to he who would fulfill that covenant. As a prophet, it was revealed to him that a righteous remnant would be spared. And so, on the Mount of Transfiguration, he would behold the God-man who delivers up a new and eternal covenant so that we may all be part of that righteous remnant.

³⁷ Ibid., 307.

³⁸ Ibid., 308.

³⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁰ Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy*, 55.

⁴¹ Aaron Canty, *Light and Glory: The Transfiguration of Christ in Early Franciscan and Dominican Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 238.

⁴² Ibid., 115.

CONCLUSION

In part one of this exegesis, I analyzed the pericope in 1 Kings 19:1-18. I discussed how the narrative falls within the parameters of the Departure on a Journey genre. I highlighted how the passionate Elijah we see in ch. 18 has been transformed into the defeated, sullen one of ch. 19 breaking down some of the salient textual elements. I noted that the chiasmic structure of vv. 9-13 suggests a renewal of Elijah's spirit in the presence of Yahweh. I then discussed how the Lord's command to Elijah calls him back to his prophetic office. In part 2, I showed how Elijah belongs to a Moses typology and pointed out similarities in both prophets. I speculated that 1 Kings 19:8-18 may fall into the 'prophetic call' genre serving as Elijah's re-call. I then hypothesized that Moses's theophany on Mt. Sinai, the giving of the law, and the Blood of the Covenant narrative prefigure Elijah's initial prophetic call. I argued that Elijah is acting in his official role as a member of Yahweh's court, bearing witness to the impending judgment of Israel. In part 3, I focused on the appearance of Elijah and Moses at the Transfiguration of Jesus detailing traditional views about their presence. I showed that this third theophany allows both prophets to do what they could not before, behold the face of God. Finally, I discussed the how the third theophany represents the culmination of that which began at the first, covenant restoration, covenant elevation, and covenant glorification.

Elijah's theophany in 1 Kings 19 is a pivotal element in the divine economy and represents the second component in the cycle of covenant ratification, rejection, and renewal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, n.d.
- Canty, Aaron. *Light & Glory: The Transfiguration of Christ in Early Franciscan and Dominican Theology*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011.
- Currid, John D. *A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 19–40*. Vol. 2. EP Study Commentary. Darlington, England; Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2001.
- Dillard, Raymond B. *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah & Elisha*. Edited by Tremper Longman III and J. Alan Groves. The Gospel according to the Old Testament. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999.
- Epp-Tiessen, “1 Kings 19: The Renewal of Elijah” *Direction*, 31, no. 1 (2006): 34-43.
- Hauser, Alan J., and Russell Gregory. *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*. Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990.
- House, Paul R. *1, Two Kings: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. Nashville: B & H Publishers, 1995. Kindle Edition.
- Leithart, Peter J. *1 & 2 Kings*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006. Kindle Edition.
- Pitre, Brant. *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ*. New York: Crown Publishing, 2016. Kindle Edition.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. New York: Doubleday, 2007. Kindle Edition.
- Roi, Micha. “1 Kings 19: A ‘Departure on a Journey’ Story.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 1 (2012): 25-44.
- Rushdoony, Rousas John. *Chariots of Prophetic Fire: Studies in Elijah & Elisha*. Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2003.
- Sandoval, Timothy J. “A Prophet’s (re-) Call and Recollection: The Case of Elijah in 1 Kings 19.” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 94, no. 2-3 (2007): 12-16.