

ELIJAH THE ZEALOT: A FOIL TO MOSES

MOSHE REISS

Elijah appears in only six chapters in Scripture (I Kg. 17-19, 21; II Kg. 1-2). Yet, he is one of the stars of Judaism, and especially of the kabalistic or mystical constellation. And through one passage in Malachi 3:23 he has become the prophet who ushers in the messianic era.¹ Maurice Samuel describes him as: ". . . a flame and a fury, a portent and a fugitive, like a human comet . . . knight errant righter of wrongs armored in prayer shawl and phylacteries . . . [traveling around the world] until he announces the Messiah himself."²

As Elijah is shown in the text, he is a true legendary character, more in the nature of a Greek legend than in that of a Hebrew prophet. He is an avenging destroyer. He performs miracles, and so does his disciple Elisha; a sequence comparable to only one other pair, Moses and Joshua. He defies Ahab, described as the most evil King of Israel (I Kg. 16:33) and his even more evil wife Jezebel, who introduced the pagan cults of Baal and Asherah into the Northern Kingdom and killed many of the prophets of Israel.

Elijah is suddenly introduced into the text, described only as "the Tishbite" and as an inhabitant of Gilead. He confronts the King, to announce, *'By the life of the Lord God of Israel, whom I serve, there will be neither rain nor dew unless I give the word'* (17:1). The word will come from Elijah, not from God. It is clear that Elijah, the zealous messenger of God, is to counteract the evil King Ahab and his wife Jezebel.

ELIJAH AND OBADIAH

In the third year after the announcement of the drought, God tells Elijah to confront Ahab again (18:1). Before the prophet finds the King, he encounters Obadiah, a high-ranking minister. Obadiah held God in great reverence.

Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut, is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, and assistant to the rabbi of Yale University. He is now a resident of Israel, where he writes and lectures. His book Messengers of God appears on his website: www.moshereiss.org. He was recently a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium.

ELIJAH THE ZEALOT: A FOIL TO MOSES

At the risk of his own life, he saved 200 of God's prophets from being murdered by Jezebel (18:4). (Despite knowing this, Elijah will soon state *'I alone am left as a prophet of the Lord'* [18:22]. Perhaps declaring this in a public assembly was a ruse to protect prophets still in hiding, but later on Elijah repeats the claim during the theophany at Horeb [19:10,14]).

When Obadiah meets Elijah he addresses him as *'my lord Elijah.'* Elijah responds, *'Go and tell your lord Elijah is here,'* – "your lord" here meaning King Ahab. Obadiah fears the wrath of Ahab, but Elijah insists. Why is Elijah so dismissive toward Obadiah? We are being told that Elijah believes he is the only zealot prophet and no other prophets matter; *'I am full of jealous zeal for the Lord'* (19:14). Zealots do things their own way.

ELIJAH, AHAB AND JEZEBEL

God instructs Elijah to tell King Ahab that the drought shall end, and Elijah decides to make the announcement with dramatic flair. He tells Ahab to come to Mount Carmel, with Jezebel's 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. (The prophets of Baal come, but the prophets of Asherah are not heard of again.)

Elijah gathers Israel to Mount Carmel (18:19) as Moses gathers all Israel to Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:17). He then sets up a contest between the Lord and Baal, to see which will consume an offering by fire. The pagan prophets accept the challenge, and call on their god repeatedly, hour after hour, with no response. Elijah says sarcastically, *'Call louder, for he is a god, perhaps he is talking or he has gone aside [for a call of nature]³ or he has gone on a journey, perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened'* (I Kg. 18:27). After several more hours, Baal still does not respond.

Then Elijah builds an altar with 12 stones, a parallel to Moses building an altar with 12 stone pillars (Ex. 24:4), arranges the sacrificial bull on the wood, and dramatically pours three jars of water over the wood and over the carcass. Elijah then asks God to ignite the offering, so the people will know that *'You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant'* (I Kg. 18:36). The name Elijah (in Hebrew "Eliyahu") means "My God is the Lord." In his introductory words he says, *'The Lord lives, the God of Israel'* (17:1), a play on words of his own name. He now tells God to show the world that he himself is God's servant.

When Elijah prays to God to bring down the fire, he creates a new formula of prayer in addressing *'The Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel'* (18:36). Never before has God been referred to as the God of "Israel" rather than of "Jacob." Elijah then says, *'The Lord is God.'* This is understandable, but it is a new terminology, almost a new doxology. Elijah actually seems more zealous than God.

God grants Elijah's request. He sends fire to consume the offering, as He does for Moses and Aaron (Lev. 9:22-24). The power of the Lord is seen, in contrast to the dead silence of Baal. It is the victory of the living power of the Lord in contrast to the lifeless Baal. Elijah then slaughters the false prophets, as Moses kills 3,000 idolaters (Ex. 32:25-29). And then the great rains fall.

In some sense, the contest is pathetic. Baal is implored all morning to send fire from heaven. His prophets do a hobbling dance around the altar, gashing themselves until they bleed, and they fail. All the while, Elijah mocks them and their deity. When his own term comes, he succeeds and the fire descends. (Later he will twice use God's fire to light up 50 messengers from King Ahaziah.) God, who never requests this contest and may well have been embarrassed by it, has little choice but to respond to Elijah.

Moses destroys only when it was necessary to destroy, and he continually seeks repentance from and forgiveness for the people. Elijah acts like a god-like representative of the God (of fire), to prove that his God is greater than Baal. After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses gathers the Levites and the people and kills only the ringleaders (Ex. 32:26-28). Elijah gathers the 450 false prophets, takes them down to the brook Kishon and slaughters them (I Kg. 18:40). We have already seen that Elijah believes he is the only righteous prophet. Do we need his dramatic fireworks to prove the power of God? Was not the bringing of the drought and its ending, both announced in advance, sufficient? Elijah needs to prove not only God but also, by his own zealotry, that he is the only representative of God. Moses, with his awesome charisma, did not.

MOSES AND ELIJAH AT SINAI

Jezebel suddenly reappears at the start of I Kings 19:1. Her own name includes the element "baal" and her father's name was Ethbaal, and she worshipped both Baal and the goddess Asherah. After the contest on Mount

ELIJAH THE ZEALOT: A FOIL TO MOSES

Carmel, Ahab tells his wife what transpired, and she sends a message to Elijah promising to kill him. The Septuagint text adds to the message the words: 'If you are Elijah, then I am Jezebel' – a play on words with the theophoric elements of their own names: I, Jezebel, will oppose you, Elijah. She throws the gauntlet at him.⁴ This can be seen as similar to Pharaoh hardening his own heart, setting himself up against God.

Elijah, the triumphant victor over Baal, dramatically drops his fearlessness, runs away and goes into hiding. He is afraid . . . wishing he were dead (19:3-4). He is now, to quote Hauser, a "whimpering defeatist."⁵ Why is he consumed by self-pity? He has just had a great victory over the prophets of Baal. He has recently been able to restore a dead child to life. His God represents life – "The Lord lives" – and has miraculously fed Elijah for years. Why does he now fear death? Jezebel did not send her prophets of the Asherah cult to Mount Carmel. Does Elijah for some reason fear them? In fact, Elijah is never to meet or talk to Jezebel.

Numerous scholars have suggested that Elijah is psychologically depressed by fear as a result of the manic state he experienced at Carmel.⁶ Let us recall that God never tells Elijah to arrange the competition on Mount Carmel.

After two encounters with an angel, Elijah travels on a journey of 40 days and 40 nights to Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai). Elijah is in a cave, and God asks him, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" Elijah responds, *'I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant . . . and I have remained alone, and they seek my life to take it'* (19:13-14). God then tells Elijah to go up to the top of the mountain. There, He grants Elijah a theophany similar to that of Moses:

A strong wind splits the mountain and shatters boulders . . . but the Lord was not in the wind. And the after the wind an earthquake – but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came fire but God was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still small voice . . . a voice came to him and said, 'What are you doing here Elijah?' And he said, 'I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant . . . and I have remained alone, and they seek my life to take it' (19:9-15).

Elijah is the only Hebrew prophet other than Moses to have a theophany. There is an obvious comparison to Moses, but what is the essence of the

comparison? While Moses is on the mountain after the theophany, the people sin with the Golden Calf. God threatens to destroy the people and begin a new people with Moses. Moses pleads with God to change His mind. He knew that God's people are a stiff-necked people, so God must change His intent if this people is to survive.

Elijah hears and experiences a theophany, and complains to God that the people have broken *Your covenant* – as they did with the Golden Calf. In contrast to Moses, Elijah does not plead with God to change, but instead implicitly expects the people to change. We are told that God is not in wind, earthquake or fire, but in a *still small voice*. Elijah is a zealot and a fundamentalist. He does not hear still small voices. After the theophany, God asks him exactly the same question – *'Why are you here, Elijah?'* – and he responds in exactly the same words he had used before the theophany, *'I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant . . . and I have remained alone, and they seek my life to take it.'* Moses was changed for the better; in fact his face was illuminated (Ex. 34:29). Elijah heard nothing, learned nothing and did not change!

There are some other significant differences between Moses and Elijah. One is the contrast between Moses' handling of the Golden Calf incident and Elijah's contest between the Lord and Baal. Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to bring the Ten Commandments and the law to the recently freed Hebrew slaves. While he is communing with God for 40 days, the frightened people build the Golden Calf as a substitute for Moses. When Moses comes down and sees it, he smashes and burns it and kills the ringleaders. In this, he acts out of concern about God's anger and for forgiveness of the people.

Another difference between them is in preparing a successor. Moses gives Joshua several tasks in his training; to lead the fight against Amalek (Ex. 17:9), to watch over the people while Moses is on the mountain (24:13; 32:17), to lead the spies (Num.13:16), and appoints him as successor in the presence of the people (Deut. 1:38). God tells Elijah to go and anoint Elisha as his disciple (I Kg. 19:16). According to Rashi, God was saying "You shall anoint Elisha to be prophet in your stead, I do not want your prophecy since your prophecy does not plead for the prosecution of My children." Does Elijah accept that his prophecy is over, or does he believe he is re-commissioned, and if so what is his new mission? This can be compared to

ELIJAH THE ZEALOT: A FOIL TO MOSES

the reluctance of Moses at the Burning Bush to become God's spokesman, when God though first angry at Moses, grants his request and appoints Aaron to speak for Moses (Ex. 4:13).

Elijah does not anoint Elisha, but throws his cloak to him – a symbol of succession which he later takes back – and walks away. Is this like Joshua learning from Moses the trade of being a prophet, or more like Samuel anointing the ill-fated Saul?

There are some obvious comparisons between Moses and Elijah, in the 40 days, in their miracles and in the special nature of their deaths. Moses is the first redeemer, and has some messianic status. Elijah is the forerunner of the Messiah (Mal. 3:23). But in terms of personality, as we have seen, they are very different. Moses is known for his humility, his refusal to allow God to destroy the people and his continual praying for the people. Elijah is not humble and prays for and uses the power of God, sometimes for his own aggrandizement.

ELIJAH'S DEATH AND ELISHA'S SUCCESSION

At the end of Elijah's life, he goes to the Jordan River, and his disciple Elisha with him. But before Elijah crosses river he tells Elisha, his God-ordained successor, not to come with him, to stay away (II Kg. 2:2,4,6). Is Elijah reluctant to accept a successor? He rolls his cloak and strikes the river; the river then splits and the two walk across. (This, of course, reminiscent of Moses splitting the waters of the Sea of Reeds.) Elijah asks Elisha, 'What do you wish before I depart? Elisha asks for a *'double share of your spirit.'* Elijah says it will be difficult, but if Elisha sees him depart, the wish will be granted. But God has already commissioned Elisha as a prophet, so why is Elijah setting up a test? Elijah drops his cloak. Elisha sees a chariot of fire descend from heaven with horses of fire and Elijah goes up to heaven in a whirlwind. It is almost a Greek-like departure. When Elisha sees the chariot coming for Elijah he says, with great respect, *'My father, my father.'* Elijah has not blessed Elisha nor laid on his hands. Elisha picks up Elijah's cloak and strikes the water. He asks where is God, strikes the water again, and only then does it split for him.

And what does "double his spirit" mean? Elisha does see the chariot, and goes on to perform double the number of miracles that Elijah had

accomplished. He heals the waters at Jericho, which were causing miscarriages (2:19). Some boys call him "baldy" so he curses them and bears savage all 42 of them (23-25). Is he attempting to be like Elijah, who had called down death on hundreds of the king's soldiers, in order to prove that he also could use God's power to kill? Elijah produces food for a widow (I Kg. 17:8-16). Elisha does it twice (II Kg. 4:2) and cures a poisoned stew in a pot (4:38-41). Elijah raises a young boy from death (I Kg. 17:17-23). Elisha blesses a barren woman and she bears a son (4:14-17); when he is struck down, Elisha restores his life (32-37). He blinds soldiers (6:18-23). He makes iron float (6:5-7). After Elisha's death, a dead man is resurrected by the touch of his bones.

Does Elisha believe that the importance of his master Elijah is in his performance of miracles? And if he can perform double the miracles, is he doubly as important? The Talmud tells us of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who performed miracles to prove a halakhic point. In spite of the miracles, he was excommunicated for going against the majority decision of the court.

NOTES

1. Rabbis and sages of old told tales of meeting with Elijah to learn mystical lore. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the reputed author of the 14th-century *Zohar* learnt it from Elijah. There was a school during talmudic times named after him - Tanna de Vei Eliyahu.

At Passover, the most popular of the three major pilgrimage holidays, representing both liberation and redemption, he is a key figure, the cup of Elijah is filled and we open the door to welcome him. He is in this sense a precursor of the Messiah. At a circumcision, the covenantal sign of the Jews, the chair on which the child is held during the circumcision is called Elijah's chair. At the close of the Shabbat Jews sing two songs about Elijah; 'Elijah the Prophet' and 'I will bring you Elijah' from the last sentence of the Book of Malachi.

The blessing for the Haftorah starts with: Give us happiness our Lord, in the name of Elijah your servant and the kingdom of the house of David's Messiahship. Only Abraham, Moses and David are called God's servants; Elijah calls himself God's servant.

Maimonides says that prophecy will be re-instituted before the Messiah by the arrival of Elijah. Elijah is an important prophet in both Christianity, where he is compared to John the Baptist, and in Islam, where he is mentioned in the Koran as a righteous one like Moses and Jesus.

2. Maurice Samuels, *Certain People of the Book* (New York: Knopf, 1967) pp. 241-243.

3. A.J. Hauser and R. Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb* (Almond Press, JSOT, 83, 1990) p. 43.

4. In the later Book of Chronicles, God is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (I Chron. 29:18 and II Chron. 30:6).

5. Phillis Tribble, in C. Buchman and C. Spiegel, eds. *Out of the Garden* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994) p. 172.

6. Hauser, p. 60.

ELIJAH THE ZEALOT: A FOIL TO MOSES