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REL 113 – Old Testament Faith and History

28 March 2013

Return to Mt. Sinai

The story of Elijah winning a contest with the prophets of Baal with Yahweh sending down fire is considered by many to be the peak of Israelite history as contained in the Book of Kings. Many, however, fail to take into account the larger literary context and the perspective of the author. Careful examination of 1 Kings 18-19, along with some other Biblical texts, reveals a deeper meaning of this text which is made evident by the presence of parallels in the narratives. Specifically, the author intentionally parallels much of the events and concepts from the Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt. Thus, the author uses the events of 1 Kings 18-19 to condemn the Kingdom of Israel by using parallel language to illustrate a need for spiritual and religious revival, which Elijah answers on a personal level, but the Kingdom of Israel rejects on a national level.

The events recorded in 1 Kings 18-19 are set in the first half of the ninth century B.C.E. The army of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had placed Omri on the throne (1 Kings 16), and he established a new capital for his kingdom, Samaria. He began a new period of relative prosperity for his kingdom, which lasted through the reign of his son, Ahab. For example, 1 Kings 16:27 adds, "and the power that he showed," to the usual refrain of "Now, the rest of the acts of...are they not written..." for Omri's epitaph. Furthermore, Israel's rising prominence on the Levantine

scene is evident from Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a princess of the wealthy Phoenician state north of Israel. However, the people of Israel's desire to "be like other nations" (1 Samuel 8:20) also led to widespread pagan practices and beliefs among them. In particular, the cult of the Canaanite deity Baal, which was also the favorite of Jezebel, became popular among them. In fact, Jezebel provided for four-hundred and fifty prophets of Baal to stay at her court (1 Kings 18:19), and Ahab began to follow her gods, including Baal (1 Kings 16:31-32). It was on this stage that Elijah, the zealous prophet of Yahweh from Tishbe in Gilead, appeared.

There are many aspects of 1 Kings 17-18, the rising action and climax of Elijah's prophetic career, which call to mind the Israelites' time in Egypt, as described in Exodus 1-13. They both include an Israelite, Moses and Elijah, performing wonders and miracles in foreign territory, Egypt and Zarephath respectively. They both perform them in the name of their God, Yahweh, and the foreigners acknowledge His power (Exodus 10:7, Deuteronomy 34:11-12, 1 Kings 17:24). In Elijah's case especially, the foreigner, a starving widow, shows a faith which is unparalleled in Israel by giving her last scraps of food to Elijah, and then, after he restores her deceased son's life, declares to him, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth," (1 Kings 17:24). Pharaoh too obviously recognized Moses as a true prophet of Yahweh and that he is speaking truth, for example when he admits he is wrong (Exodus 9:27) and by his repeated requests that Moses pray for him (one example being Exodus 8:28). Now justified as a true prophet of Yahweh, he must face a larger mission: like Moses and Nathan, prophets of Yahweh who confronted Pharaoh and King David respectively, he must go and admonish King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in the name of the Lord (1 Kings 18:1). He must stand before the most powerful man in the kingdom, who has the power to kill him, and deliver an unfavorable message.

The couple of Queen Jezebel, a Phoenician, and King Ahab, whom she has led into Baal worship, parallel the oppression the Israelites suffered in Egypt, as a foreigner now has joint rule of Israel. Joseph had brought his father's entire family down to Egypt to dwell there (Genesis 46:1-28). However, they soon became so numerous that a new Pharaoh, "who did not know of Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and his accomplishments and success as Pharaoh's second-in-command, made them slaves and oppressed them (Exodus 1:7-14). Deuteronomy 17:15 prohibits putting a foreigner on the throne, for reasons made clear by Jezebel. She persuaded Ahab to support and promote idolatry and to follow pagan gods, and she even tried to kill one hundred prophets of Yahweh (though Obadiah successfully hid them, 1 Kings 18:4). All of this goes against the law as set forth in Deuteronomy.

So, Elijah now must confront Ahab, as Moses had once stood before Pharaoh to declare God's demand that His people be set free (Exodus 6:10). In 1 Kings 18:17-19, Elijah challenges Ahab's court prophets of Baal to a contest between their gods. Likewise, the Ten Plagues which are sent upon the land of Egypt (Exodus 7:14-12:30) are actually demonstrations by Yahweh of his superior power over several deities in the Egyptian pantheon. One example is the ninth plague, darkness, which makes clear that Ra has no power over Yahweh. There is a further parallel regarding the result of the tenth plague. After the first-born of the Egyptians die that first Passover night, Pharaoh sends forth a decree that the Israelites may go out to worship Yahweh (Exodus 12:29-32). Similarly, the spur which drove Elijah to flee for his life (his personal "exodus") was Jezebel's threats after the slaughter of the prophets of Baal (who were Jezebel's personal court prophets) which he had ordered after Yahweh proved his superiority in the contest by raining fire upon Elijah's offering (1 Kings 18:38, 19:2-3).

Ahab, who in this instance is a synecdoche for all of the Kingdom of Israel, may best be compared to Pharaoh when God, through Moses and Aaron, wrought the plagues upon his kingdom: namely, when he “hardened his heart” (Exodus 14:8, among others). Even after the climactic events on Mt. Carmel, Ahab refused to accept Yahweh. It is clear from the condemnations of Ahab, by an unnamed prophet in 1 Kings 20 and by Elijah in 1 Kings 21, that he had not abandoned his idolatrous practices. He only humbles himself when he is threatened with total destruction of his dynasty (1 Kings 21). What’s more, he attributed Yahweh’s victory to Elijah, as he “declared to Jezebel all that *Elijah* had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword” (1 Kings 19:1, italics mine). Not only that, but Jezebel swore that he would share the prophets’ fate. She was willing to lift her hand against the Lord’s prophet, contrary to David, one of the greatest kings in the Deuteronomistic historian’s view, who refused to kill Saul, the Lord’s anointed (1 Samuel 24:6, 2 Samuel 1:13-15). The near death of the Lord’s prophet is reminiscent of Exodus 2:1-10, as Moses was almost murdered as an infant by the new Pharaoh, who acted out of fear of the Israelites. A further Exodus-Kings parallel is that Queen Jezebel presumably sent men to kill Elijah and thus drove him into the wilderness (1 Kings 19:2), as Pharaoh had ridden out with his chariots to bring back the Israelites (Exodus 14).

Elijah, on the other hand, heeds Yahweh’s call for spiritual and religious revival, unlike the Ahab who continued to lead the Northern Kingdom of Israel into sin, and sets about accomplishing God’s plan for him, as Moses and the Israelites had centuries before. The parallelism is perhaps clearest in 1 Kings 19:1-21, with many similarities between Elijah’s journey and the Israelites’ wandering in the desert under Moses. According to 1 Kings 19:3-4, Elijah flees to the wilderness, even farther south than Beer Sheba (the southernmost location of tribal Israel as elicited from expression, “from Dan to Beersheba”), as the Israelites fled to the

desert. Elijah spent forty days and forty nights travelling to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8), as the Israelites spent forty years in the desert preparing to enter the Promised Land. Additionally, Elijah was supernaturally fed in the wilderness (by ravens and then by an angel, 1 Kings 17:6, 19:5-8) while the Israelites received manna and quail supernaturally in the desert for sustenance (Exodus 16, Numbers 11:31-32). Moses complained of the burden of leading the people and asked to die (Numbers 11:14-15), as Elijah did after believing he had failed in his mission since his message went unheeded and Ahab did not repent (1 Kings 19:4).

Like Moses on Mt. Sinai, Elijah has a theophany on Mt. Horeb (an alternate name for Mt. Sinai) and emerges from his wilderness retreat stronger and more determined, as had the Israelites as a people. Elijah and Moses both covered their face before God (Exodus 3:6, 1 Kings 19:13) as He passed by a cave there (Exodus 33:19-23, 1 Kings 19:11-13). Elijah is strengthened by being told that God is with him and that God has a new mission for him. Elijah is then appointed a disciple who will also become his successor, Elisha. Moses of course was given a disciple and successor as well, Joshua, who completed Moses' work by bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. Elisha, too, completed Elijah's new mission, as he is the one who anointed Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu as king of Israel.

Now, having analyzed these chapters, it is obvious that the Deuteronomistic historian included many parallels between Elijah and Moses and between the events of 1 Kings 17-19 and Exodus. This allows the author to weave a deeper meaning into the narrative that should be noticeable to his readers. The parallelism is a caustic commentary on the Kingdom of Israel in many ways. It attempts to convince readers that Elijah was on Moses' level as a prophet, which is especially meaningful as the author of Deuteronomy concluded that, "there has not since arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:10). It is also worth noting that Elijah

fulfills Moses' prophecy of a later prophet who will be as great as him (Deuteronomy 18:15-22) on at least two criteria. First, as the widow of Zarephath testifies in 1 Kings 17:24, the Lord "put [His] words in the mouth of the prophet" (Deuteronomy 18:18). Second, though perhaps not as clear, it is likely that Elijah's miracle of calling upon God to rain down fire is the fulfillment of the cry of the Israelites at Horeb regarding the "great fire," which is one of the signs that the new prophet has arrived (Deuteronomy 18:16). If the Northern Kingdom would reject a prophet like Elijah, they have rejected Yahweh in their hearts. That is why, "the incessant recollection of Moses is best explained as an attempt to identify Elijah as *the* prophet of his time, the special intermediary of Yahweh, as Moses was in his time" (White, pg. 5). Through its co-rule by a non-Israelite, widespread paganism, and oppression of the poor (as Amos decries in his prophetic career about one hundred years later), the Northern Kingdom is associated with the oppressive Egyptians, who are often cited as an example of how *not* to treat foreigners/each other, and consequently not very popular in the minds of the author's Israelite audience.

Yet, the author does not stop at merely portraying them as enemies of Yahweh, as he even condemns the kingdom to fall. In fact, he indicates that, although Jeroboam started it down the slope from the start, this is the point of no return, from which it is doomed. On the other hand, it can be argued that this is not very clear from the passage. Indeed, Elijah is called to anoint Jehu as the new king of Israel—a mere dynasty change, which may be best for the kingdom, considering Ahab's sins. However, the anointings of Jehu and Hazael lead to a series of wars and alliances which ultimately ends with the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom in 721. According to Gray, "in the Syrian wars, as an instrument of divine discipline, we have a foretaste of the view of the hand of God in history which...was to help the faith of the people to survive the shock of the Assyrian conquest" (pg. 367). Therefore, it is possible that the

author connects the later Syrian wars to this event in order to demonstrate the coming collapse of the kingdom. That is to say, the immediate punishment the Lord brings on the Northern Kingdom through Elijah (anointing Hazael who will attack the North) foreshadows the greater punishment for the rejection of Yahweh following Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal (the Assyrian invasion and ultimate fall of the Northern Kingdom).

It should be noted that these parallels are not linguistically paralleled in the Hebrew text. This is strong evidence that the Book of Exodus was not written or edited into its final form. One would certainly expect the author of Kings to more precisely parallel Exodus through linguistic parallels if it were an option. Yet, these manifold parallels are accurate and, in many cases, unique to the Book of Exodus, which suggests that some form of the Exodus tradition was known at the time of the composition of the Deuteronomistic History. It is possible that the Deuteronomistic historian had access to a more primitive form of the Book of Exodus that did not use the same language as the final form. Exodus is believed to be a combination of the J, E and P sources, but, although no single one contains all of the events and concepts that are paralleled in 1 Kings 18-19, most of the Exodus narrative is from E or J, with the laws and Tabernacle description coming from the P source. According to Friedman, the E and J sources were both written before the Northern Kingdom fell, and they may have been combined before P was written. If this is the case, it is plausible that there was a written account of the exodus before the Book of Exodus was compiled. However, the language of the Exodus-Kings parallels is not remotely similar. The most likely option is that the Deuteronomistic historian was relying on a loose oral tradition, or perhaps traditions, as his source from which to parallel this Elijah narrative, in which case one wouldn't expect similar language being used in both books.

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