1 Kings 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Kings chapter 17 Now Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe and Gilead said to Ahab, 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.

And the word of the Lord came to him, Depart from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.
So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.
And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him, Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there.
Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.
[1:05] And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand. And she said, As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a jug.

And now I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die. And Elijah said to her, Do not fear. Go and do as you have said.
But first make me a little cake of it, and bring it to me. And afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.
And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.
After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill, and his illness was so severe, that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, What have you against me, O man of God?
[2:14] You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son. And he said to her, Give me your son. And he took him from her arms, and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed.

And he cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son? Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again.
And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him to his mother.
And Elijah said, See, your son lives. And the woman said to Elijah, Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true. In 1 Kings chapter 17, we are introduced to the character of Elijah, who bursts suddenly into the narrative in a very unexpected way.
Elijah and his successor Elisha are at the heart of the books of the kings, and their joint mission is very important for understanding the destiny of the kingdom, and also for considering something about the character of prophecy.
[3:32] Elijah begins by announcing a drought. The interesting thing here is that there is no mention of the word of the Lord coming to him. Rather, Elijah himself swears by the Lord that there

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will be no rain in the next few years, except by his, Elijah's word.

Looking closely, it seems that Elijah is taking something of an initiative here. This isn't just God's word that's come to him. Rather, the drought is initiated by Elijah's own zeal. Of course, this should not be understood as Elijah bringing anything about by his own power.
It is God who shuts up the heavens and prevents the rain so that there is the drought. However, God seems to do this in response to the prayer of Elijah. James chapter 5 verses 17 to 18 make this more explicit.
Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.
In Elijah, then, we see something of the initiative that the faithful prophet can exert. In his zeal and his fervency, the faithful prophet Elijah can call God to act, and God acts.
[4:41] In bringing a drought, God is fulfilling his curse that he gives in Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 22 to 24. The Lord will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought and with blight and with mildew.

They shall pursue you until you perish, and the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron. The Lord will make the rain of your land powder. From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed.
The power of a prophet like Elijah seems to involve acting with a certain initiative given by the Spirit of God. This is not a blank check, of course, but the prophet is entrusted with divine power to act on God's behalf.
Why a drought? It seems to me that the answer to this is found in the fact that Baal was, among other things, the god of the rain. And so the judgment of no rain is a judgment not just upon Israel for its unfaithfulness, but a judgment upon Baal the rain god.
Both the judgment and Elijah himself are reminiscent of the Exodus and of Moses. Now, of course, since Elijah is not merely a messenger, but one who initiates this judgment, he becomes public enemy number one.
[5:53] Ahab, the king of Israel, will want to seek him out and destroy him. And so, according to the commandment of the Lord, he flees to the brook Cherith, east of the Jordan, where he will be sustained by the Lord for a long period of time.

He is fed by ravens. This is a miraculous provision that shows God's power over birds and animals. They would not usually provide for a human being in that sort of way. And during this period of time, Elijah is cut off from the rest of the land.
He's cocooned, as it were, within this one particular wadi. While the rest of the nation is desperately searching for this prophet that brought this judgment upon them, he is safe and secure within this bubble of protection.
Now, if we're attentive, we should notice something here. What other story in scripture do we associate with God's power over animals and birds? What other story in scripture might we think of when we think about ravens coming to a person?
What other story involves a great judgment involving rain or the lack of it? It's the story of Noah. Noah, when the judgment comes upon the whole earth, is saved within his cocoon, his bubble of the ark.
[6:56] And the same thing happens in the story of Elijah. Elijah is saved from the drought within the cocoon or the bubble of the brook Cherith. In the story of Noah, he sent out a raven, but just flew round and round because it found nowhere to rest, because the land had not yet dried up.

In this story, the ravens keep coming back until the water dries up. Rabbi David Foreman, who points out a number of these things, also observes that Tishbe, the place that Elijah comes from, is the consonants used for the word in Genesis 8 verse 7, which refers to the drying up of the land, the verse concerning the raven.
In the case of Tishbe, those consonants are found in reverse order. The ravens coming in the morning and in the evening might remind us of the morning and evening sacrifices. The ravens might also make us think of the Gentiles.
The raven is an unclean bird, but it is the means of feeding and sustaining Elijah in the wilderness. As a prophet, much of Elijah's ministry will be either in the wilderness or in Gentile lands, like Moses, he is someone who has his ministry outside of the land or on the borders of the land.

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He never fully enters in. When the brook dries up, the Lord sends him to Zarephath, a place of Sidon. When he arrives in Zarephath, he meets a widow who is gathering sticks, and he asks for water, and he asks for a morsel of bread from her.
[8:16] In many respects, he's asking her to play the role of the ravens. What they have done for him in Cherith, he wants her to do for him in Zarephath. But the woman herself is in dire straits. She and her son are on their last rations and about to die.

Nonetheless, Elijah still asks her to prepare a little cake for him. As she gives the firstfruits of her last remaining flour and oil to him, she and her son will be saved.
If God has formed a bubble of protection or a cocoon around Elijah, by serving him, by playing the role of the raven, the woman and her son will be preserved. And they are preserved for many days. The jar of oil does not run out, and the flour does not run out. However, the son of the woman becomes ill. While the jar of oil is not running out, and the flour is not running out, his spirit runs out. There is no breath left in him. Rabbi David Foreman compares this to the raven or the dove that might be going round and round, and without anywhere to land, running out of strength. And the widow speaks in an accusatory way to Elijah.
[9:18] What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and cause the death of my son. The cocoon belongs to Elijah, not to the widow and her son.

They are, as it were, clinging on outside, being preserved as long as they are serving Elijah. But they are not being preserved in quite the same way as Elijah is. Elijah takes the son of the woman, and he takes the son into his own place, into his own cocoon, and he identifies with the son in a powerful way.
He lays the son upon his own bed. He cries out to the Lord for the life of the son, praying this time not for the judgment upon a people, but for deliverance of someone.
And he stretches himself out upon the child three times, his body pressed against the body of the child, so that the child might be identified with him, so that the protection that he enjoys might extend to that child also.
And the Lord responds to the fervent prayer of Elijah, and the child is raised up. He then takes the child from the upper chamber of the house, and delivers him to his mother, declaring that he lives.
[10:25] And the woman's response is perhaps a bit surprising. Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth. Elijah taking the young child into the upper room is like Noah taking the dove into the ark.

And as he takes that young child down to his mother, it is a sign of the end of the judgment. When the dove could leave the ark and survive outside of the ark, it was the great sign that the world was being restored.
And a similar thing is happening here. Rain is going to come in the next chapter. In a couple of verses' time, Elijah is going to be sent on a mission to proclaim it. The prophet who had been kept in a miraculous cocoon of life while there was death all around, is now spreading life out, and there is hope for a new beginning.
A question to consider. What lessons might the Lord have been teaching Elijah through these experiences?

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