1 Kings 19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Kings chapter 19. Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow. Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my father's. And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him and said, Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you. And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights, to Horeb the mount of God.

There he came to a cave, and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? He said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. And I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away. And he said, Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord.
But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak, and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, What are you doing here, Elijah? He said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword.
And I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life to take it away. And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Haziel to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshai you shall anoint to be king over Israel. And Elijah the son of Shaphat, of Abel-Meholah, you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Haziel shall Jehu put to death. And the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. So he departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him. And he was with the twelve.
Elijah passed by him, and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you. And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him, and took the yoke of oxen, and sacrificed them, and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose, and went after Elijah, and assisted him.
[3:41] In 1 Kings chapter 19, right after Elijah's apparent moment of great victory over the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, he is driven out. He is plunged into despondency, and he wishes for death. The richness of scriptural meaning can often be seen through the interplay of the melody of a given narrative, and the various counter-melodies that play off against it, in a way that produces rich harmony. Most people are only reading the text at the level of the melody of the narrative, and they don't consider what counter-melodies might be present in a text, and what they might mean.

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For instance, in 1 Kings chapter 17, and the story of Elijah declaring the drought, the counter-melody is primarily the story of Noah, which is played in a transformed way in the background. When the melody of the surface narrative of the chapter is read alongside it, a remarkable harmony emerges. A harmony which will likely change the way that we hear and understand the melody. A similar thing happens here in chapter 19, and the counter-melody that we hear here is quite surprising. If we have been listening carefully, it won't have been the first time that we have heard it. Back in chapter 17, we met a Gentile widow and her son. Their supplies were on the point of running out, and the woman was gathering sticks and preparing for her son to die. This might remind us of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis chapter 21 verses 14 to 21.
So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water and the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bow shot.
For she said, Let me not look on the death of the child. And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy. And the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up, lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived, in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. In Elijah's story, Elijah visited the widow of Zarephath, much as the angels had visited Abraham and Lot. The widow and her son were blessed for their hospitality, and Elijah, by making them provide for him, saved their lives. However, the widow's son died, and Elijah had to take up the son to the upper room, laying him out before the Lord, and praying that the Lord would raise him up. It is a sort of binding of Isaac, in reverse.
In chapter 19, however, Elijah finds himself in a rather different sort of position. Jezebel, the wife of his master Ahab, the king, seeks to kill him, and he has to flee. He comes to Beersheba, and he leaves his servant there, literally the lad. This is the same language that is used of Ishmael. He then wanders in the wilderness, and gives up on life, and wishes for death.
[6:58] He sits down under a broom tree, as Ishmael was placed under the bush. The broom tree is associated with the territory of Kadar. In Psalm 20, Kadar was one of Ishmael's sons. He is provided with water, as Hagar was in the wilderness. He is raised up from the point of death, as was Ishmael. He is provided for by the angel. He is given a cake and a vessel of water, which is exactly what he requested from the widow of Zarephath. However, now, in many ways, he is in their position. He is identified with the Hagar and the Ishmael characters. While he might have expected, after the events of Carmel, to be the victor, to be the champion, in fact, he is more like Ishmael and Hagar, expelled from the land. He travels for 40 days and 40 nights, and he comes to a cave and lodges there. This might remind us of Lot. That's where Lot ends up after the destruction of Sodom. In chapter 17, Elijah was more like the messenger angels, declaring the judgment. But now he finds himself more in the position of Lot after the destruction of the city of Sodom. This was not what his great victory was supposed to look like. His story is also a bit like Moses. He is pursued by the king on his chariot, threatened by the falling waters, which occurs after the great demonstration of God's power against the false gods in the previous chapter. And now he flees into the wilderness, traveling 40 days and 40 nights, much as Moses went 40 days and 40 nights on the Mount of Sinai. He meets with God at Sinai, and he intercedes against Israel. Moses interceded for Israel in chapter 32-34 of Exodus, and it seems that Elijah is both taking up the pattern of Moses, and in certain respects inverting it as well. He is a man of zeal, like the characters of Moses and Phineas. Both of those men were zealous for the Lord, but both of those men enacted that zeal in a way that protected people from the full force of the

Lord's wrath. In Moses' case, in chapter 32-34 of Exodus, he told the Lord not to be angry against his people, and enacted the anger of the Lord against his people himself. He breaks the tablets of the covenant. He destroys the golden calf, grinding it down to dust, which he scatters on the waters. And makes the Israelites drink it. He rallies the Levites to himself, and kills 3,000 in judgment for their sin. All of this, however, is designed to prevent the full wrath of the Lord breaking out against the people. He enacts zeal so that the Lord won't have to. Phineas does the same thing.

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He stops the plague against the people with his act of zeal. He kills Cosbi and Zimri in order that the whole people might not suffer God's wrath. Elijah, however, who speaks of his zeal for the Lord as the motivating factor for his actions, is working very differently, rather than being a man of zeal who saves the people. In many respects, he is a man of zeal who seeks the destruction of the people. The story of Noah played in the background of the story of Moses interceding for Israel as well.
He was not prepared to be the only one left. He was committed to gather the people to himself, to identify with them, so that the Lord would not destroy them. There might be some irony to be seen in the fact that Elijah has ended up in a cave, which is exactly where Obadiah hid the prophets in the preceding chapter. The Lord is determined that Elijah will not be the only one left. He has determined to save a larger remnant. Elijah was preserved in his cocoon for a while, but the Lord wants to use him to save more people. He brought the widow of Zarephath and her son into Elijah's cocoon of protection, and now he's going to use Elijah to spearhead a movement of judgment, but also of protection for his people. He appears to Elijah on the mountain in ways that might remind us of the theophany of Exodus chapter 19 and 20, with wind, earthquake and fire. In his zeal, Elijah has focused upon these sorts of elements, these great dramatic judgments of God.
[10:55] He has looked for this great drought upon the people, and then he has also looked for fire to come down from heaven. But God's presence is found primarily in the sound of the low voice.

God's purpose in the history of Israel and Judah will be achieved not so much through dramatic displays of strength and natural power, but through the persistent voice of the prophets.
The Lord charges Elijah to anoint successors. Haziel, the king of Syria, Jehu, the son of Nimshi, as king of Israel, and Elisha, the son of Shaphat, as prophet in his place. Elijah will only anoint one of these people in this chapter itself, Elisha, the son of Shaphat, who will replace him. In many ways, the Lord might be preparing to bench Elijah here. Elijah's zeal is remarkable. He is truly a man of God, but he also has a few lessons to learn about the way that God deals with the world.
The Lord had passed by Elijah earlier in the story when he was at Mount Sinai, and now he passes by Elisha and casts his cloak upon Elisha, the same cloak that he had covered himself with when the Lord had passed by him. Elisha is ploughing with twelve oxen, representing Israel we must presume. He will be the one that places Israel under the yoke of the Lord once more.
He will plough the land and plant the seed. In time, Elisha will later replay many of the key miracles of Elijah in a significantly different form. A question to consider. What lessons about zeal might we learn from the story of Elijah?

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