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Neil Glover

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## **Elijah versus the Narrative of Elijah: The Contest between the Prophet and the Word\***

NEIL GLOVER

103 Overton Road, Glasgow, G72 7XA

### **Abstract**

The Elijah narrative centres on the themes of presence and absence. The narrative undermines the apparent and uncomfortable identification of Elijah with the presence of YHWH by staging a contest between Elijah and the words that tell his story. These words meticulously minute Elijah's speech and draw him into unfavourable comparison with other characters in the story, particularly Obadiah. Despite such an exacting contest, Elijah emerges from the narrative unbowed. This article asks why, of all Old Testament/Tanakh characters, is it Elijah that is allowed to cheat death through flight to heaven. In addition, it suggests the prophet's fiery charisma as reason for his evasion of death.

The Elijah stories are unruly pieces of literature. They shift and writhe under close examination, ultimately eluding many attempts to schematize the narrative.

The most common approach to the Elijah narratives is to view them as the tale of some kind of conflict. However, there is no unanimity regarding

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the identity of the contestants. Proposals include YHWH vs. Baal, YHWH vs. Death, Elijah vs. Jezebel and Male vs. Female.<sup>1</sup>

There have also been attempts to tease out some overarching theme or intention to the narrative. Gregory proposes the theme of decision, Olley detects intimations of grace and Weiner discovers an account of human psychological progress.<sup>2</sup>

This article will follow both of these approaches. First, it will search for another of the text's themes: presence and absence. Secondly, it will identify a previously unpublicized contest: that between Elijah and the narrative.

## 1. Presence and Absence

Only in 1 Kings 19 does the Elijah narrative dare to locate the presence of YHWH: in the quiet voice of Horeb (vv. 11-13).<sup>3</sup> However, prior to this there are strong hints as to where YHWH may or may not be lurking.

The text is never explicit, but supports the suspicion that where Elijah, life or speech are, YHWH is never far away.<sup>4</sup> This connection is suggested at the beginning of the narrative.<sup>5</sup> YHWH is bound up with life (17.1); Elijah stands before YHWH (17.1) and YHWH speaks (17.2). The text goes no further: never do we read 'And Elijah and Life and Speech and YHWH went everywhere together'. However, their appearance and disappearance

1. For 'YHWH vs. Baal', see Nelson (1987: 112) who writes of 1 Kgs 17, 'These are only preliminary rounds; the main bout with Baal will follow in chapter 18'. For 'YHWH vs. Death', see Hauser 1990: 11-12. For the opposition between Elijah and Jezebel, see Trible 1995. Trible holds the Deuteronomistic theologians responsible for 'severe rubric of opposing concepts' in the text. In the Elijah narratives Elijah and Jezebel emerge as 'quintessential opposites' (Trible 1995: 3). The Male vs. Female antagonism is one that Weiner brings from outside the text (from Jungian psychoanalysis, see Weiner 1978: 18-22).

2. For the theme of 'decision', see Gregory 1990: 119-35; for 'grace', see Olley 1998: 50-51; and for human psychological progress, see Weiner 1978: 174-98.

3. Robinson (1991: 520-21) is correct to note that YHWH is not explicitly related to the 'still small voice' of 1 Kgs 19.12; however 19.13 surely underlines that YHWH is present somehow in the voice; certainly more so than the earthquake, wind and fire.

4. Particularly speech as *דבר*, which is particularly associated with Elijah (1 Kgs 17.1, 15; 18.24) and YHWH (17.2, 5, 8, 16, 24; 18.1, 31, 36; 19.9). The only other character to be associated with *דבר* is the widow (18.24), although there is the sense here that she is operating at the behest of YHWH (18.9).

5. Even if Robinson (1991: 515-16) is correct to suggest that the first verse of the narratives may be 1 Kgs 16.29, 17.1 remains the first verse to contain Elijah, Life, Speech and YHWH.

at similar points in the narrative reinforce the sense of connection.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to read these stories without inferring that life, Elijah and speech are somehow entwined with the presence of YHWH.

We begin with life. The tale of Elijah is scattered with the symptoms of life: dew, rain, bread, meat, oil and water.<sup>7</sup> These, however, are substances under threat. They are not threatened by Jezebel's pogroms or Baalist proselytization; rather their chief enemy, and therefore the chief enemy of life, is absence.

Absence hunts after life in 1 Kings 17–19: be it absence of rain, absence of breath, absence of meal or absence of grass (17.1, 7, 12; 18.5). Death is no impersonal force, or personified god; it is the absence of life. Similarly, the opposite of YHWH is not Baal, it is the absence of YHWH. The summit contest of Carmel hinges on the absence of Baal and the presence of YHWH;<sup>8</sup> the Horeb theophany underlines the presence of YHWH in voice and his absence in wind, earthquake and fire.

This is where many of the attempts to create a central contest in the Elijah narratives founder: they pit Elijah or YHWH against an entirely absent opponent. Rather, nothingness itself is the enemy. How can Baal be the opponent of YHWH when Baal is an utterly speechless god? This story is of an entirely different quality to any Ugaritic 'Baal vs. Mot' epic. Similarly, Jezebel is too far away from the text to spar with Elijah. Elijah's enemies are darker, more shadowy entities than the oaths of Jezebel.

An analysis of the speeches in 1 Kings 17–19 underlines the inequality between Elijah and YHWH and their alleged opponents. While Elijah and YHWH are supremely present in the text, Jezebel and Baal are almost entirely absent (see the chart on the next page).

The speeches of the Elijah narratives further underline the connection of speech, life, Elijah and YHWH. Speech (קרא) is the instigator of life (1 Kgs 17.21); word (דבר) is the sole preserve of Elijah and YHWH;<sup>9</sup> and voice (קול) is where YHWH is.<sup>10</sup> It is this bond of speech which binds Elijah most tightly with YHWH, particularly in 1 Kings 17.

6. Elijah leaves Israel in 1 Kgs 17.5 and with him goes rain (a sign of life). When Elijah returns three years later (18.1), both rain (18.35) and signs of YHWH (18.38) return with him.

7. Dew and rain in 1 Kgs 17.1; bread and meat in 17.7; meal and oil in 17.16; bread and water 18.4; grass and water in 18.5.

8. Elijah's satire in 1 Kgs 18.27 is about the utter absence of YHWH.

9. See n. 4.

10. See n. 3.

<i>Character</i>	<i>Number of Speeches</i>	<i>Total Verses of Speech</i>
Elijah	30	35
YHWH	8	11
Obadiah	3	8
Widow	3	3
Ahab	2	2
Servant of Elijah	2	2
The People	1	1
Elisha	1	1
Jezebel/Messenger of Jezebel <sup>11</sup>	1	1
Baal	0	0

## 2. The Divine Binding of Elijah

The first chapter of the Elijah narrative is a portrait of prophetic utopia. Elijah appears from an unknown location<sup>12</sup> and (like a neo-Melchizedek) with no parents. Other than the need to eat (which seems incidental since even in a land of thirst and hunger, Elijah is never worried as to where his next meal is coming from) there seems to be little human about him. In the next 24 verses he will stride the earth like some Yahwistic *übermensch*, unperturbed by the droughts and distances of earth. He is the prophet who ‘stands before the Lord’.<sup>13</sup>

As I suggested above, the YHWH–Elijah co-existence is strongly articulated through speech. Elijah speaks (indeed אֵלִיָּהּ is the first word of the entire narrative) without the need for divine warrant or authentication. He establishes no credentials for himself, there are no miraculous birth narratives, no battles won, no patriarchal heritage: he is simply the man who speaks. This first utterance is brazen in its choice of addressee (he immediately commands a royal audience) and its scope (in halting dew and rain it exerts a claim over cosmic phenomena). Remarkably, Elijah does not add that rain will return by the word of YHWH, but that it will return by the word of Elijah (17.1).

11. It is not clear if 1 Kgs 19.2 is quoting Jezebel or her messenger.

12. The only mention of ‘Tishbe’ in the Tanakh is 1 Kgs 17.1. DeVries (1985: 216) argues that the word is not a location but a description, meaning ‘settler’. This confusion only adds to the mystery surrounding Elijah’s origins.

13. Up to this point the only figures in Israel who have stood before the Lord are Abraham (Gen. 18.22; 19.27) and Moses (Deut. 5.5). To stand before the Lord is, to the residents of Beth-Shemesh, an unlikely feat for any human to achieve (1 Sam. 6.20). In the New Testament, ‘the one who stands before the Lord’ will be a designation applied to angels (Lk. 1.19).

1 Kings 17 consists of three episodes: the raven banquet at Wadi Cherith (17.1-7); the unending provisions of Zarephath (17.8-16); and the reviving of the widow's son (17.17-24). The first two of these are inaugurated by the word of YHWH coming to Elijah, the third is inaugurated by the intervention by death. Each episode consists of tightly bound Elijah–YHWH action.

Both initial episodes contain utterances from Elijah and YHWH which determine events. Elijah's words precipitate drought (17.1) and the generosity of the widow (v. 15), while YHWH's words direct Elijah's travel (vv. 1, 9) and guarantee the fullness of kitchen containers (v. 14). The text twice makes the connection between speech and event: Elijah's flight is according to the word of YHWH (v. 5); the widow's hospitality is according to the word of Elijah (v. 15). The words of Elijah and YHWH share a common authority and ability to shape the future.<sup>14</sup>

The second and third episodes (both set in Sidon) each close by locating the words of YHWH within Elijah's anatomy: v. 16 places them (somewhat surreally) in his hand, v. 24 places them (more understandably) within Elijah's mouth. Verse 24 (about the truth of Elijah's utterance) forms an *inclusio* with v. 1 (Elijah's first words).

If the speech of Elijah and YHWH has a similar effect, so also does their presence. The story begins with an apparent association between YHWH and certain substances of nourishment—above all water.<sup>15</sup> Their abundance (e.g. in the widow's house, 17.14-16) points to the presence of God. Their scarcity (e.g. the drought, 17.1-7) is suggestive of divine absence. Elijah plays a similar role of 'sustenance locator'. When rain leaves the land, so must Elijah.<sup>16</sup> The reappearance of clouds in the Samarian sky is dependent upon his return (18.41).

The Elijah–sustenance alliance may underlie Ahab's search for the 'troubler of Israel' (18.17). Ahab does not wish to execute Elijah<sup>17</sup> (since he makes no attempt to harm him when the two eventually meet) but rather needs him to take up residence in Israel to ensure future rainfall.

14. As I shall go on to note, words are key to these stories. The first two stories contain near-identical verses (1 Kgs 17.2, 8) which announce the word of YHWH (דבר־יהוה) coming to Elijah. The third story begins 'And it was after these words (דבר־ים)' (17.17) and closes with a statement about the Elijah's closeness to the word of YHWH (דבר־יהוה).

15. Water features in 19 verses throughout the narrative.

16. The command for Elijah to leave in 1 Kgs 17.3 is not a security measure, since Israel was not short of hiding places (18.3).

17. The suggestion/obsession of Hauser 1990: 32-33.

Elijah is a troublesome subject, but his existence is less problematic than his disappearance.

The co-location of YHWH and Elijah also possesses a vertical dimension. In a story where YHWH is to be encountered at the top of mountains (Carmel, 18.42; Horeb, 19.11), it is highly significant (since we are so rarely given insight into prophetic dormitory preference) that Elijah stays in the widow's upper room (17.19).<sup>18</sup> This upper room is witness to the joint activity of YHWH and Elijah as they form a potent, anti-death partnership.

This partnership which effects the revival of the widow's son (17.18-23) is described in a tightly written chiasmic structure:<sup>19</sup>

(v. 18)	Widow's Accusation	A
(v. 18)	Death of Son (מוֹת)	B
(v. 19)	'Give (נָתַן) me your son'	C
(v. 19)	He brought him up (עָלָה) to the upper room (עֲלִיָּה)	D
(v. 20)	He cried (קָרָא) out to YHWH	E
(v. 21)	He stretched himself upon the child	F
(v. 21)	He cried (קָרָא) out to YHWH	E'
(v. 22)	God heard Elijah's voice	F'
(v. 23)	He brought him down (יָרַד) from the upper room (עֲלִיָּה)	D'
(v. 23)	He gave (נָתַן) him to his mother	C'
(v. 23)	'Your son lives (חָיָה), look'	B'
(v. 24)	Widow's affirmation	A'

This episode is about the widow's movement from anti-Elijah complaint to pro-Elijah affirmation;<sup>20</sup> and her son's movement from death to life. At the heart of the transformation (and the chiasm) are elements E, E', F and F'. Elements F and F' particularly illustrate the synchronicity of Elijah/YHWH activity. F is Elijah's contribution: stretching over the boy three times. F' is the activity of YHWH: restoring life in response to the voice of Elijah. Through a combination of Elijah's stretching and YHWH's returning, life is restored to the boy.

While Israel is ravaged by absence, YHWH is uniquely present with the prophet from Tishbe. Despite this presence, 1 Kings 17 is far from a safe piece of text for Elijah. He is forced to live in the wilderness (the kingdom of absence), drink from streams which run dry, lodge with fatalistic widows and asphyxiated sons. However, despite the lack of safety, there

18. The same word (עָלָה) is used of YHWH's celestial dwelling in Amos 9.6.

19. See Cohn 1982: 336.

20. The movement from 'You have come to bring my sin to remembrance' (1 Kgs 17.18) to 'the word of the Lord which is in your mouth is truth' (17.24).

remains a Utopian quality to Elijah's first chapter: though absence has hovered around him; he, the Yahwist *par-excellence*, has met its every challenge.

However, the narrative will not allow this pristine image of Yahwism to stand, and it will no longer support the tightly bound Elijah–YHWH activity of its first chapter. The narrative will now attempt what absence has failed to do: to prise apart Elijah and YHWH.

It is here, where the narrative begins to joust with Elijah, that commentators begin to take sides. Elijah's supporters include the Rabbis, Augustine and more recently Hauser and Nelson.<sup>21</sup> Olley, Gregory and Kissling take the side of the narrative.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The Prising Apart of Elijah and YHWH

Unlike Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kgs 16.31–34), Elijah is never condemned by the narrative. Instead, it conducts its attack on Elijah by more subtle means: it meticulously minutes Elijah's departures from the divine word; and it throws him into unfavourable comparison with the other characters of the narrative.

#### 3.1. Meticulous Minuting

Elijah's words are subject to greater scrutiny than those of any other Tanakh character.<sup>23</sup> The narrative hounds him with its faultless memory and its appetite for minutiae.

21. The Rabbis wrote that Elijah was perfect; see *Vay. R.* 27.4. However, this view is not universally held in the Rabbinic writings where he is criticized for, among other things, not raising his own parents along with the widow's son (*Shem. R.* 4.2). Augustine held that Elijah's slaughter of false prophets was justified, whereas Jezebel's killing of true prophets was not (Augustine, *Letter* 93.2152). Eslinger has attacked this tendency to assume the irreproachable virtue of characters in his attack on the 'canonized reading of the narrative' (Eslinger 1989: 228–29).

22. By the 'narrative' I mean the perspective of the narrative as identified by the narratological rules of dialogue, narration and repetition (see, e.g., Altar 1981: 63–113; Berlin 1983: 95–99; Kissling 1996: 17–20). Gregory's attention to irony (the gap between what is and what is presented—Gregory 1990: 94–118) and Kissling's focus on reliability (Kissling 1996: 17–20) are, in effect, an exploration of the gap between narrative and character. For a full view of Elijah's exegetical opponents, see Lasine 2004: 133.

23. Kissling examines the reliability of Moses, Joshua (both reliable according to the terms of Kissling's 'implied author'), Elijah and Elisha. By his analysis, Elijah's speech is less reliable than that of Elisha. However, my contention is that Elijah's speech is seen to be less reliable only because it is subjected to an unusually intense cross-examination.

The memory of the narrative becomes apparent in its use of ‘according to the word of YHWH’. Throughout the Elijah narrative, this affirmation acts as the standard of authentication, a narratological ‘gold star’.<sup>24</sup> In the idyllic 1 Kings 17 there are three such affirmations: when Elijah escapes to the Wadi Cherith; when he promises the Sidonian widow perpetual provisions; and after he has healed her son (17.5, 16, 24).<sup>25</sup> Even in these ‘according to the word of YHWH’ affirmations, there is a slight loosening. Whereas the first two of these come direct from the narrator, the closing affirmation is in the mouth of the widow: a character whose authority lies below that of the narrator in the league table of authorial infallibility.<sup>26</sup>

However, ch. 17’s constant affirmations only work for the prophet in the short term. When ‘according to the word of YHWH’ starts disappearing from the text, the contrast with Elijah’s impeccable first chapter becomes all the more marked. Neither Elijah’s victory on Carmel, nor his prophecy to Ahab are said to happen according to the ‘word of YHWH which he spoke by Elijah’.

In both these incidents the narrative could have affirmed the prophet’s actions. On each occasion the opportunity is declined. Atop Carmel, Elijah makes the request that it be publicly known that Elijah has acted according to YHWH’s bidding. Though fire will fall, and the people will acclaim YHWH, nothing happens (either from the shouts of the people, or the voice of the narrator) to confirm that Elijah has acted according to the word of YHWH. The narrative refuses to lend the prophet any assistance. Whereas ch. 17 gushed with pro-Elijah affirmation, here it is withheld.

The Elijah–Ahab confrontation of ch. 21 displays a similar paucity of authentication. This confrontation is initiated by YHWH, who tells Elijah to inform Ahab that his blood will be drunk by the same dogs who drank the blood of Naboth. Elijah decides that this oracle requires editing and embellishment, such that the eventual message to Ahab is considerably different. The king remains condemned, but only by intimation of more general disaster. The blood-drinking dogs are now let loose on Jezebel, and Elijah makes the entirely new pronouncement that Ahab’s house will also be cut off. Because the narrative has been so careful to minute YHWH’s initial oracle and Elijah’s warning, we are able to note the extent of the prophet’s improvisation.

24. Authenticated speech is the particular feature highlighted by Kissling’s emphasis on ‘reliability’ (see n. 22).

25. For a discussion of YHWH’s word authenticating Elijah, see Olley 1998: 30.

26. At least by the narratological hierarchy of narrator, trusted character, distrusted character (see n. 22, especially Berlin 1983: 95–99; Alter 1981: 80–81).

When the three prophecies of ch. 21 (the death of Ahab in Jezreel, the end of Ahab's house, the death of Jezebel in Jezreel) come to fulfilment, the narrative retains its memory as to which were prophecies of YHWH, and which were of Elijah's own creation.

When Ahab dies and has his blood licked by the dogs of Jezreel, the narrative remembers that this fulfils the word of YHWH, but also remembers to omit that this had anything to do with Elijah (1 Kgs 22.38). In contrast, when the blood-licking dogs of Jezreel taste the blood of Jezebel and Ahab's sons are murdered (2 Kgs 9.36-37; 10.10), Elijah's part in the prophecy is once again mentioned. However, the confirmation is slightly second rate since it does not come from the inerrant voice of the narrator, but from the slightly more suspect tongue of Jehu.

Through subtle gestures rather than bold declarations, the narrative reminds us that it can distinguish between the words of YHWH and the variations of Elijah.

By 2 Kings 1 there have been no Word–YHWH–Elijah affirmations for five chapters. In ch. 18 Elijah had acted independently of the words of YHWH;<sup>27</sup> in ch. 19 he had ignored the words of YHWH;<sup>28</sup> and in ch. 21 he had modified the words of YHWH. Only in 2 Kings 1 does Elijah actually convey the words of YHWH;<sup>29</sup> so only here can he be rewarded with the accolade that came so easily at the beginning of his career: 'according to the word of YHWH that Elijah had spoken' (2 Kgs 1.17).

If the narrative of 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2 were a sloppier piece, Elijah's verbal laxity would never have become apparent. However, the tales of Elijah are written with such editorial precision that Elijah's carefree delivery seems casual by comparison. 'Elijah', suggests the omni-observant narrative, 'does not keep to the necessary standards of discursive rigour'.

Elijah is damaged by one further omission: the narrative never reveals what it thinks of him. As I have already noted, it may occasionally be drawn into overt evaluation: Ahab did more evil in the sight of the Lord

27. The differences between the words of YHWH and the words and actions of Elijah is examined extensively in Kissling 1996: 113-47.

28. Elijah fails to obey YHWH's command: he makes no attempt to anoint Elisha and never goes near Hazael or Jehu (compare 1 Kgs 19.15-18 with 19.20). Hazael will have his monarchy foretold by Elisha (2 Kgs 8.12-13), but there will be no anointing. Jehu will be anointed by a disciple of Elisha (2 Kgs 9.6).

29. Even at this seemingly successful juncture is Elijah caught by the exacting standards of the text. The *אֵתָם הַלְבִּים* of YHWH (2 Kgs 1.3) becomes *אֵתָם שָׁלַח* (2 Kgs 1.6). Although this loss of accuracy may be the responsibility of Ahaziah's messengers, the fact that Elijah once again uses *שָׁלַח* (2 Kgs 1.16) throws suspicion back upon the prophet.

than all who were before him (1 Kgs 16.30); Obadiah feared the Lord greatly (18.3). However, nowhere are we given an assessment of the hairy Tishbite.<sup>30</sup> If we ask the narrative, 'What do you think of Elijah?', it replies, 'No comment'.

### 3.2. Twinned Words and Unflattering Comparisons

Words are what the narrative uses to throw characters against each other.<sup>31</sup> Occasionally minor characters are placed into juxtaposition: Jezebel and the Zarephath widow are linked by צִידֹן<sup>32</sup> (Sidonian woman of iniquity vs. Sidonian woman of virtue). Ahab and Obadiah are linked by בֶּרֶךְ אַחָד לַבָּדוֹ (1 Kgs 18.6).

However, it is Elijah who is most often glued to other characters by the connections of words. In 1 Kings the effect of these connections is to desingularize the prophet, and to undermine his claims to alone-ness (19.10, 14).

Through בָּלָל (1 Kgs 17.4, 9; 18.4) and מַעֲרָה (18.4; 19.9) Elijah is identified with Obadiah's hidden prophets: fellow provision receivers and cave dwellers. However, it is Elijah's claim to be the עֶבֶד (18.36) of YHWH which forces the richest comparison, that with Obadiah.<sup>33</sup>

Our relative sympathies in the 'Elijah vs. Narrative' contest will determine our reading of the Elijah–Obadiah confrontation in 1 Kgs 18.7–16. For supporters of Elijah, Obadiah is a poor alternative to the Tishbite. His speech represents the fearful whimpering of a half-hearted Yahwist, exposed by the calm resolve of YHWH's only true prophet.<sup>34</sup> However, supporters of the narrative will note its implicit bias in favour of Obadiah. As I noted earlier, Obadiah, unlike Elijah, receives explicit commendation

30. Unlike that other Israelite hero, the humble Moses (Num. 12.3).

31. Here I am concentrating on the links between Elijah and other characters in 1 Kings. For an exploration of the connections between Elijah and characters throughout the Old Testament/Tanakh, see Gregory 1990: 138–51. Gregory writes of a narrative which 'judges Elijah in the midst of his peers'. Negative comparisons are with Deborah (at the Wadi Cherith in Judg. 5, the victory is given to YHWH and not to Elijah), Hagar (at Beersheba she awaits death, Elijah begs for it), Jacob (he enjoys 'true solitude' while Elijah permits no other), Gideon (who followed YHWH's instructions to the letter) and Moses (unlike Elijah, Moses had compassion and mediated for the people).

32. צִידֹן in 1 Kgs 17.9, צִידָנָה in 1 Kgs 16.31.

33. עֶבֶד יְהוָה, that is, servant of YHWH.

34. See Hauser 1989: 28–30; Nelson 1987: 115. Hauser is even harsher, suggesting that Obadiah operates as a 'poor man's' Elijah. He is the theological commitment-phobe (the 'limper') alluded to in 1 Kgs 18.21.

(1 Kgs 18.3) and his speech receives written verification (compare 18.4 and 18.13). Thus, supporters of the narrative become supporters of Obadiah and the Elijah–Obadiah confrontation illustrates Elijah’s frequent failure to acknowledge any Yahwist other than himself.<sup>35</sup>

Obadiah, the narrative suggests, is the true hero of 1 Kings 18. While Elijah’s miracles have sustained three people, Obadiah has sustained a hundred (indeed a hundred YHWH prophets). Elijah has operated safely outside the borders of Israel (1 Kgs 17.5, 9); Obadiah has managed to stay loyal to YHWH in Ahab’s palace (18.3). To prefer Obadiah over Elijah is to prefer prophets who use courage to feed many, rather than miracles to feed a few; who act furtively at the centre, rather than boldly at the periphery; who express their fear of death, rather than conquer it. To prefer Obadiah is to prefer human prophets, unentangled with God.

Through colliding words, the narrative will not allow Elijah the uniqueness he hints at in 1 Kings 17<sup>36</sup> and explicitly claims in 1 Kings 19 (vv. 10, 14). It does not give a rationale for its antagonism towards any suggestion of Elijah’s singularity. Do the prophet’s claims of unrivalled Yahwism unfairly overplay the miraculous at the expense of the courageous (as in the comparison between Obadiah and Elijah)? Does his intolerable narcissism require puncturing?<sup>37</sup> Or do Elijah’s claims to uniqueness trespass on one of the sole prerogatives of YHWH? We are not informed.

Paradoxically, the narrative may also undermine Elijah’s alone-ness out of affection for Elijah. When Elijah runs to Horeb, it is his alone-ness which underlies his outburst to YHWH (1 Kgs 19.10, 14). Uniqueness is a lonely place where death is sometimes craved. By wounding Elijah (‘Elijah, you are not special’) the narrative is also protecting him (‘Elijah, you are not alone’).

#### 4. The Triumph of Elijah

The narrative contends with Elijah through divine separation, precise narration and human comparison. However, this is a contest which the narrative fails to win. The Elijah stories are about the prophet’s triumph over the narrative.

35. See Gregory 1990: 128–29; Olley 1998: 36–37.

36. Through the designation ‘YHWH, before whom I stand’ (1 Kgs 17.1). See also n. 13

37. For a portrait of Elijah’s narcissism, see Lasine 2004: 136–38. Lasine sees Elijah’s getting into the bed of a patient (1 Kgs 17.17–24) as classic narcissism.

Despite Elijah's unauthorized improvisation on Carmel (which falls short of narratological standards of YHWH-obedience), fire still falls from heaven and vindicates the Tishbite prophet; despite his improvisations in confronting Ahab, the king still repents and Elijah's self-authored prophecies are fulfilled. Elijah breaks the rules but receives no punishment for his prophetic ad-libs, only vindication.

Elijah further defeats the narrative by failing to reveal his secrets. Why is Elijah allowed to return to Ahab despite being sacked on Horeb?<sup>38</sup> Elijah and the prophets know that he is to ascend to heaven, but the narrative is last to be informed. It fails to provide any explanation for Elijah's ascension, or for why it is that Elijah is permitted to cheat death. On this, the narrative—the cheated, muted narrative—is silent.

And the narrative needs to be beaten. If the narrative wished to avoid defeat then it would only tell the story of Obadiah. However, well-behaved characters are the chief ingredient of dull prose. Elijah is about fire, not about slavish obedience to the grammar and expectations of the narrative. Elijah is the prophet who will not be corralled by explanations or verbal formulae. His ascension represents his permanent triumph over absence and over the narrative.

## 5. The Return of Elijah

Before concluding my examination of the Elijah narratives, it is worth asking one of the last questions these narratives pose: Why did Elijah ascend?

For some, Elijah's ascent is a mark of his sinlessness<sup>39</sup> or a vindication of his ministry (Olley 1998: 45). However, these explanations gloss over Elijah's many ambiguities. Too many of his actions compare negatively with the other heroes of the Tanakh.<sup>40</sup> If ascension is dependent on virtue, then why no fiery chariots for Moses, Deborah, Ruth, David, Saul, Elisha or even Obadiah?

38. This seems to be the implication of the 'in your place' of 1 Kgs 19.16. Commentators are divided on whether this episode represents Elijah's sacking (Gregory 1990: 124-25; Olley 1998) or his recommissioning (Nelson 1987: 129). Of those who understand Elijah's dismissal, few attempt to explain his reappearance in 1 Kgs 21. One explanation (Robinson 1991: 532) is that the Elijah stories of 1 Kgs 17-19 represent a different source from the accounts in 1 Kgs 21 and 2 Kgs 1-2: when the narrative eludes the reading, run to source criticism for cover!

39. See *Vay. R.* 27.4.

40. See n. 31.

Other commentators pass on questions of Elijah's virtue and understand the ascension as a ritual of prophetic succession; a means of commissioning Elisha and of drawing comparison with Moses and Joshua (Hobbs 1985: 19). Certainly these are powerful elements in the story, but a succession ritual does not require Elijah's ascent to heaven. Moses seems to manage without one.

There are perhaps two reasons for the ascension of Elijah.

The first is that someone had to ascend. In Kings, death is allowed too many victims: too many swords are drawn; too many graves are dug. If the books of the Kings are to preserve a hope that is not always destroyed, if life<sup>41</sup> is to be allowed some sort of potency, then death cannot have everybody. Elijah ascends because somebody had to.

A second reason for Elijah's ascension is that we want him back. Later Jewish and Christian literature frequently welcomes a returned Elijah.<sup>42</sup> We want the prophet back not for his virtue (for then we would have Moses), nor for his effectiveness (for then we would have Joseph or David). We want Elijah back for his flames. Elijah is dangerous, but he is also dazzling. Much has been said of his contests with absence, but he is also the enemy of monotony. Elijah is the fiery prophet whom the narrative never subdues and never lets die.

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41. The last word in the Kings corpus is 'life'—2 Kgs 25.30.

42. For the frequent returns of Elijah in Rabbinic and Christian literature, see Ginzberg 1913: 202–35; Weiner 1978; Jeremias 1964.

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