

“It craves but silent nearness, so to rest,
No sound, no movement, LOVE not heard but felt.”
Frances R. Havergal, *The Ministry of Song*, 1881

I. Text

⁹And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

1 Kings 19:9b-14, TNIV

II. Introduction

1 Kings 19:9b-14 depicts a very moving encounter between the prophet Elijah and Yahweh on top of Mt. Horeb. It is in this meeting that a distinct revelation of Yahweh’s character is manifested. The typical theophanies of the Old Testament, namely fire and earthquake, pass by without an inkling of Yahweh’s presence. His presence, subsequently, is found in the “still small voice,” or what John Wesley deems the “powerful, but sweet and gentle gale.”¹ The meaning and significance of Yahweh’s presence in the still small voice is illuminated as the historical, literary, and canonical context of 1 Kings is studied. The meaning is further clarified through

¹ John Wesley, *Wesley’s Notes on the Bible*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.html> (accessed July 5, 2009).

consideration of what the still small voice meant for Elijah personally, as Yahweh's presence and love in that moment was not seen or heard, but felt.

III. Historical Context

1 & 2 Kings are considered to be a part of the theological history genre within the Old Testament. With the classification of "historical" literature comes certain presuppositions: that the events are true, that they happened in real time, and that they are reliable. Some question has been raised in regards to the historical validity of the dates found in Kings. Robinson states, "The numbers do not add up and the author as a historian must be careless or incompetent."² While the author of Kings was meticulous in his recounting the reign of each king in Israel and Judah, there are obvious inconsistencies in the dating of different events. Chronology is a significant element in historical writing; however, the confusion in chronology does not take away the reliability and value of what the author wished to convey. Instead, as Longman suggests, the value in studying the historical events of the Bible is in the fact that they "bear witness to God's acts in the past."³ The Mt. Horeb narrative of 1 Kings 19 bears witness to a unique encounter between Yahweh and Elijah; it is also positioned in a very unique place, both historically and literarily.

The life and ministry of the prophet Elijah is situated in perhaps one of the most tumultuous time periods in Old Testament history. The historical account found in 1 & 2 Kings begins with a significant shift in Israel's monarchy: David passes on his kingship to his son, Solomon in approximately 931 B.C.⁴ (1 Kgs. 1:28-53). It is a moving account in which Solomon is anointed by a prophet, a priest, and a king⁵ to lead a people who rejoice in the streets in honor of

² J. Robinson, *The First Book of Kings*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 16.

³ Tremper Longman, *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 101.

⁴ Tremper Longman and Raymond D. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 171.

⁵ Nathan, Zadok, and David

the succession. Later, Solomon's death marked the beginning of yet another volatile time period in Israel's history. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, succeeded his father. Like his father, however, Rehoboam experienced a great deal of rebellion from the Israelites (1 Kgs. 12:1-24). The rebellion leads to a split in the kingdom, a major turning point in Israelite history. The schism gives way to two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, led by kings Jeroboam and Rehoboam respectively (1 Kings 12). From this point on, chaos, change, and unfaithfulness characterize the monarchy in both Israel and Judah. Longman notes that the rest of 1 and 2 Kings is primarily devoted to the schism, its rippling effects, and the history of the divided kingdom.⁶

This is the context in which the Elijah narratives are located. Elijah lived during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah (874–852 B.C.) of the northern kingdom, Israel. The narratives immediately preceding the Horeb narrative account for Elijah's dealings with King Ahab. In this encounter, Elijah acts as a "lawyer of the covenant,"⁷ as he confronts Ahab on the abandonment of the LORD's commands and calls him to return to the covenant fidelity. Elijah incites a contest of power and sovereignty between Baal and Yahweh (1 Kings 18), in which the followers of Baal are humiliated at the lack of response from their "god." This scene atop Mount Carmel provides not only the historical backdrop for the Horeb narrative, but also has significant implications for the literary context of 1 Kings 19 and more specifically Elijah's meeting with God on the "mountain of the Lord."

IV. Literary Context

The first element of the literary context that will be considered here is the structure of the passage. Close inspection of the structure reveals both parallel narrative elements in chapters 17, 18, and 19, as well as a chiasmic structure in chapter 19. Both of these observations reveal the climax of the Elijah narratives to be the theophany on Mt. Horeb. Robert Cohn identifies the

⁶ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 179.

⁷ Tremper Longman, "Reading Prophecy" (lecture, BTI 503, Mars Hill Graduate School, Seattle, WA, June 12, 2009).

parallel structure in the three chapters which serves to unify this section of 1 Kings. Some of the more well known narratives of Elijah, the scene on Mount Carmel in 18 and the meeting with God on Mount Horeb in 19, are found in this section. Cohn says of these scenes, “However stunning these scenes are in isolation, their meaning is truncated when they are lifted from the narrative contexts into which the biblical author has placed them. Their placement within the narrative as a whole determines the perspective in which the author meant them to be viewed.”⁸

Cohn asserts that the narrative elements that are paralleled in each of the three chapters provides a unity that only enriches the meaning of the text as a whole. The elements identified by Cohn include⁹:

- A : An announcement by Elijah (17:1), by God (18:1), and by Jezebel (19:2)
- B : A Journey from Israel (17:2-5), to Israel (18:2), and from Israel (19:3-4)
- C : Two encounters with ravens (17:6-7) & widow (17:8-16), Obadiah (18:7-16) & Ahab (18:17-20), and an angel (19:5-6) & an angel of the Lord (19:7)
- D : Miracles in the form of resuscitation (17:17-23), fire (18:21-38), and theophany (19:9-18)
- E : Conversion/transformation of the widow (17:24), Israel & Ahab (18:39-19:1), and Elisha (19:19-21)

Denise Herr further develops Cohn’s arguments by observing a doubling of these narrative elements in chapter 19, which emphasizes the story line of that chapter and identifies it as a climax in the story of Elijah.¹⁰ Herr identifies the doubling effect in three of Cohn’s narrative elements: announcement, journey, and encounter. In chapter 19, two announcements are made by Jezebel (19:2) and then by the angel (19:7). Two journeys are taken by Elijah, one to Beersheba (19:3) and one to Mount Horeb (19:8). And finally, there are two sets of double encounters: two with the angel (19:5, 7), and two with Yahweh (19:9, 13). Herr asserts that this literary device serves

⁸ Robert L. Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 3 (1982): 349.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁰ Denise Dick Herr, “Variations of a Pattern: 1 Kings 19,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 293.

to “retard” the narrative as it reaches its climax in the account of the theophany atop Mount Horeb.¹¹

In addition to the structural parallels found in chapters 17-19, a distinct chiasmic structure can be identified in chapter 19. The chiasmic structure centers around the theophany as well, strengthening the the climax in this narrative and strengthening its main point. The chiasm, adapted from Epp-Tiessen’s article, “1 Kings 19: the Renewal of Elijah,” can be demonstrated in this way:

A (19:1-4) Elijah flees from his ministry
B (19:5-9a) Elijah’s desolation
C (19:9b-14) Mount Horeb narrative, God passes by
B’ (19:15-18) Elijah’s renewal
A’ (19:19-21) Elijah returns to his ministry

Furthermore, the specific passage upon which this paper is focused (verses 9b-14) is organized in a chiasmic structure. The dialogue between God and Elijah in verses 9b-10 is repeated at the end of the scene (13b-14). The Hebrew in these verses is identical. This is perhaps the most obvious chiasmic feature in chapter 19. After the the dialogue in 9b-10, Yahweh tells Elijah to “go and stand” at the mountain making use of two Hebrew verbs¹² which are repeated again in verse 13a. At the center of these parallels is the theophany. The wind, earthquake, and fire (manifestations of Yahweh’s presence found elsewhere in the Old Testament) all pass by as Elijah stands in the cave; yet Yahweh is not present in any of them. Instead, His presence is said to be in the gentle whisper (TNIV), the still small voice (KJV), the sheer silence (NRSV) of the moment following the loud and clanging elements. This distinction will become increasingly important as the theological meaning of this passage is considered.

¹¹ Ibid., 292.

¹² In the chiasmic structure, the author uses the verbs, אָצַף and עָמַד in vs. 9b-10 and 13a to show both God’s command for Elijah to “go and stand” and also Elijah’s obedience as he “goes and stands.”

As indicated above, the narrative elements of 1 Kings 17-19 funnel into one main scene: Mt. Horeb. The parallels between chapters 17, 18, and 19 to a climax in this meeting between Yahweh and Elijah; the chiasmic structure of chapter 19 directs the reader's attention to the theophany. The center of the chiasm serves as a center point, the most significant portion of the passage. Thus, God's presence in the "still small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:12) becomes the focal point in understanding the significance of this meeting on Mt. Horeb, as well as points the reader to important theological themes. Some of the theological themes are developed further as the canonical context of 1 Kings 19 is considered.

V. Canonical Context

The scene of Elijah's encounter with Yahweh on the "mountain of God," Mt. Horeb, has several narrative elements which allude to Israelite history and the experiences of Moses. Martin Buber describes Elijah's journey as a return "on Israel's tracks to the mountain of revelation."¹³ There are many parallels between the history and geography of Israel, Moses and Elijah's encounters with Yahweh, including the setting on Mt. Horeb ("Sinai," Ex. 3:1 & 1 Kings 19:8), standing on a rock and hiding in a cave (Ex. 33:21-22 and 1 Kings 19:8, 11), the time frame of 40 days and 40 nights (Ex. 24:18, 34:28, and 1 Kings 19:8), use of the Hebrew verb "avar"¹⁴ to describe God "passing by" (Ex. 33:18-23, 34:6, and 1 Kings 19:11), and similar theophanies of God on the mountain (fire and earthquake, Ex 19:16-18 and 1 Kings 19:11-12). A main difference between the Moses and Elijah narratives, as Cohn notes, is that though in the Exodus account the voice and presence of God is in the fire, "here it is emphatically claimed that the sequence of elements does not contain Yahweh."¹⁵ These parallels all serve to connect Elijah's meeting with Yahweh into the larger context of Israelite history, specifically in the wilderness wanderings and Exodus narratives.

¹³ Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), 77.

¹⁴ Hebrew meaning "passing by," עבר

¹⁵ Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," 342.

But Elijah's encounter is distinct because of the way Yahweh chooses to reveal Himself, in the still small voice.

The allusions and parallels to the Exodus in 1 Kings 19 also identifies Elijah with Jesus, the One in whom the Exodus will come to culmination. Tonstad states, "there is continuity with the Horeb experience of Moses and the later Horeb theophany of Elijah on the level of characters and context, but there is also the heralding of an exodus that at best could only be vaguely anticipated by the earlier accounts."¹⁶ The history of Israel, the law, and the prophets all come to fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

Many of the narrative elements of Moses and Elijah's mountain experiences are recounted in Luke. The transfiguration narrative in Luke 9 has several of these parallels: Jesus goes on a mountain to pray (Lk. 9:28), both Moses and Elijah are present (Lk. 9:30-31), and God spoke to Christ (Lk. 9:34-35). In addition, other elements of Jesus' story in the gospels recall Exodus themes; Jesus' ministry beginning in the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11) and the time frame of 40 days and 40 nights (Mt. 4:2), among others. The Exodus experiences of Jesus point to Him as the one in whom the Exodus culminates. Moses and Elijah are on the mountain at the time of the transfiguration as those who have experienced this type of encounter with Yahweh before. But Christ comes as the one who fulfills the law and the prophets, making Him greater than both Moses and Elijah.

VI. Theology and Contemporary Application

In addition to the Exodus themes, one of the most fascinating theological themes found in the Mt. Horeb narrative surrounds the phrase, the "still small voice." The Hebrew words¹⁷ here are literally translated as "thin, calm voice." There is a vast number of translations of this particular

¹⁶ Sigve Tonstad, "The Limits of Power: Revisiting Elijah and Horeb," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19, no. 2 (2005): 265.

¹⁷ Hebrew meaning, "thin, calm voice", קוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה

phrase. As noted above, this phrase has been translated “the gentle whisper,” the “still small voice,” the “sound of a gentle blowing,” and the “quiet, gentle sound” among others. The exact meaning is ambiguous. The impreciseness of the translations does not diminish the focus here; in the exact moment following the theophany, Yahweh passed by in a manner and presence that denotes both quietness and stillness. Epp-Tiessen states, “The implication is that the voice/sound through which God speaks is barely audible, in stark contrast to the phenomena which precede the voice.”¹⁸

Many analyses have been made concerning the fashion in which God chooses to make His presence known to Elijah. There are two claims which warrant attention here; first, Epp-Tiessen’s assertion that it is through Yahweh’s presence in the gentle whisper that brings Elijah from a state of desolation and vulnerability in his ministry to a place of renewal. Second, Cohn contends that the Mt. Horeb narrative speaks to the conflict among the followers of Yahweh and the followers of Baal; ultimately demonstrating Yahweh’s power and sovereignty over the impotency of Baal.

I maintain that there can be a harmonious synthesis of these two analyses; one in which a contemporary application is both viable and enriching to our current understanding of this narrative. Epp-Tiessen’s argument for the “renewal of Elijah” as the main thrust of the Horeb narrative is one of great interest for pastors, church leaders, and laypersons alike. Epp-Tiessen uses the chiasmic structure of chapter 19 to substantiate that Elijah’s transformation from a desolate, burnt-out prophet (19:3-4) to a revitalized prophet with a new task (19:19) is a result of the presence of God found in the gentle whisper (19:12). As stated previously, the gentle whisper, the presence of Yahweh passing by, is the center of this chiasmic structure.

This carefully shaped narrative focuses on Yahweh’s presence as the very thing that gives life, breath, vision, and determination back to Elijah to continue his earthly ministry. This is especially important for pastors and leaders as they engage in ministry of any sort. The physical,

¹⁸ Dan Epp-Tiessen, “1 Kings 19: the Renewal of Elijah,” *Direction* 35, no. 1 (2006): 38.

mental, and spiritual demands of ministry can often drain the life and breath out of those who have lost sight of their purpose in God. Elijah's story is hopeful; it necessitates the presence of God in all that we do, especially when we are in need of renewal. It also bears witness to God's grace in that renewal.

Cohn maintains that the Elijah narratives all center around the conflict between Yahweh and Baal. From a literary perspective, the author makes some interesting contrasts between the scenes on Mt. Carmel and Mt. Horeb. Upon Mt. Carmel, Yahweh demonstrates his sovereignty and power over Baal by bringing fire down on the mountain, rendering Baal silent and impotent (1 Kgs. 18:16-46). Elijah then retreats to Horeb in a condition of fear and despair, continuing on to Horeb with the hope that God will meet him there. In many ways, the text sets the reader up to expect God to exercise His control over nature again in the theophany. However, the text is very clear that the LORD was not in those elements. Yahweh, in a similar to way to Baal in chapter 18, is virtually silent. The contrast, however, is that Yahweh still exerts power and presence in the silence and stillness.

Cohn's argument, combined with the theme of renewal, paints a very important picture about the nature of God. God's power, while capable of being expressed in the loud, mighty wind, earthquake, and fire, is equally as compelling and captivating in the gentle whisper. Rice, as quoted in Epp-Tiessen, notes, "God's presence in the stillness can be 'just as real and powerful as [in] the cosmic forces of nature.'"¹⁹ The challenge to contemporary Christians is to slow down and listen enough to hear and feel His presence.

Christ promised the presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-31) as an advocate for us. The still small voice that Elijah's narrative bears witness to is the "soft voice of God speaking to the conscience,"²⁰ and anticipates the stirrings of the Holy Spirit in the church and individuals. This

¹⁹ Epp-Tiessen, "1 Kings 19: the Renewal of Elijah," 38.

²⁰ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, edited by D. J. Wiseman (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1993), 173.

is an especially challenging concept, given our current psychosocial realities. Dallas Willard remarks, “Today we unfortunately do not have on hand an adequate, common vocabulary to discuss the movements of God within and upon the soul. We are now without a psychology of the spiritual life.”²¹ Our understanding and acknowledgment of individual experiences of God is much different than in the time of Elijah. It is an understatement to say that discerning the still small voice is an arduous task. Indeed, it is not without complications. However, as is demonstrated in Elijah’s experience on the mountain, it is the very presence of God that heals, renews, and excites our soul, body, mind, and spirit.

V. Conclusion

In the context of the narrative of Scripture, Elijah’s encounter with Yahweh on Mt. Horeb connects with both the broader history of Israel, as well as anticipates Christ who will fulfill and ultimately has fulfilled all of history and prophecy. It is Jesus Christ who gives us the Holy Spirit, inviting us to encounter the still small voice and asking us to consider the power and presence of God in our own lives, no matter how small or quiet it may seem. We are asked to slow down and begin to look for God in places where we typically would not look. It asks us to feel the very presence of God in both the big and the small things of life. It reminds us of God’s power to enter in and rejuvenate our souls. Perhaps most importantly, it asks us to be captivated by the quiet love that is not seen or heard, but felt.

²¹ See footnote #6 in Dallas Willard, “The Still Small Voice & It’s Rivals,” in *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downer’s Grover, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 226.

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