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DRAMA AND SILENCE: THE STORY OF ELIJAH THE PROPHET

KARYN KEDAR

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

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Referee: Professor David Weisberg

DIGEST

The Biblical account of Elijah the prophet recorded in the Book of Kings is among other things a story. Its purpose is like many a story--to amuse and delight and to teach a lesson. A close literary analysis of the narratives helps us to better understand the lessons to be learned enhancing our enjoyment of the stories. In the pages to follow I will apply the tools of literary analysis to the narratives in I Kings 17-19 and II Kings 1-2, unraveling the meanings and morals embedded in the stories.

In Chapter One, I discuss the basic assumptions of literary analysis and how it compares to the approach taken in other disciplines. I then mention the dimensions particular to Biblical literature and how literary analysis reveals the Bible's didactic goals. In Chapter Two I explore the theological assumptions which form the backdrop to the narratives. I explicate the opening episodes and demonstrate their role in establishing the theological basis to the narratives. In Chapter Three I move on to explicate the two predominant metaphors of the narratives. I show how these metaphors function in revealing character and the relationships between characters and God. In Chapter Four I utilize the literary tool of juxtaposition in an attempt to understand the unique aspect of prophetic succession found in the narratives of Elijah. In the fifth and final chapter

I use the episode of The Chariot to draw certain conclusions about the narratives of Elijah. This episode forms an aggregate of the previous components and serves as an appropriate summary to the method of literary analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe an enormous debt to all my teachers of literature, Bible, and rabbinics whose desire to teach cultivated my desire to learn. Among my many teachers I make special mention of Dr. David Weisberg whose skill and knowledge guided me through this work from start to finish. I thank him for his patient insistence which urged me to reach beyond my limits. I am also grateful to Rabbi Chanan Brichto. During the years I have studied with him I have experienced the utter joy of Torah. For sharing his method, ideas, and love of Torah with his students, I thank him.

We are wisely advised by our tradition to "let the honor of your friend be like the reverence due to your teacher" (Pirke Avot 4:15). It is in this spirit I mention the following people. I am grateful to Edna Ora for the many hours of provocative conversation we enjoyed. I offer a warm thanks to Ellen Sher whose steady hand kept me steady. And to dear Charisse Kranes, my colleague, my friend: I embrace her with my affection and gratitude as she embraced me with love and song.

I thank Talia, my daughter, whose life provides me with balance and perspective.

Perhaps my most primary debt is to my parents. Their very souls taught me a love of God and the value of Torah.

It is in their honor that I began this work, and it is in their honor I continue in pursuit of understanding.

To Ezra,

Who shelters me in a tent

of never ending love

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I

AN INTRODUCTION TO METHOD AND METAPHOR

> *Most of us are so used to the idea that interpretation is something we do to literature, that we forget the extent to which it is the other way around: that literature interprets us.*
>
> Joel Rosenberg
> "Meanings, Morals and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to Torah."

The character of Elijah obsesses the imagination of many generations of readership. The biblical depiction is the catalyst for elaborate folklore in rabbinic and secular Jewish literature. Yet despite the popularity of the character very few studies of the Biblical text have been presented. It is an odd literary fact that most of the fascination with Elijah has been manifested through writing the continuation of the story. It is as if those involved with his character prefer to concentrate their creative speculation by writing the end of the story which is not included in the Biblical text. They muse about the events following Elijah's translation, inventing Elijah's whereabouts, developing his persona as it would function in our lives today. What little has been written about the Biblical text is spread conspicuously thin among several disciplines. Countless studies are done in the name of a literary approach to the text, only to disappoint the serious student of literary analysis. While the title of an article may read "The Bible as Literature," the content of the article may reveal any number of approaches ranging from historical to psychological. A literary approach to Biblical text is a specifically defined approach which I will explain in this chapter. First let us explore what it is not.

To begin, let us turn to two fields whose basic assumptions and tools of analysis differ greatly from literary analysis and yet are often confused to be components of the latter: anthropology and psychology. My

purpose is not to exhaust the literature but rather reveal the approach of the two disciplines and show how they differ from our approach. In an attempt to narrow my study, I would like to focus on two areas; first the overall view of magic exhibited by the different schools and second the applications of their assumptions to the narratives of Elijah.

The appearance of Sir James G. Frazer on the scene of comparative literature has had an irreversible impact on subsequent scholarship. His approach is based on the discipline of anthropology, and his critics claim, bad anthropology. Indeed, it is difficult to read Frazer without being distracted by his cultural bias and extreme disdain of what he calls "savage peoples." Frazer's approach to the subject of magic in primitive societies illustrates this point. As his basic premise, Frazer assumes that the belief in magic represents a naive world view which has since developed into the sophisticated knowledge of science. In fact he states that the belief in magic is fundamentally based on logical fallacies, "all pretensions are false and only deceive the dupes who trust in them." [1] Such opinions and language offend the contemporary reader's sense of objective research. Theodor Gaster, a faithful student of Frazer's, attempts to smooth the jagged edges of his teacher in his book Myth, Legend, and Custom. He admits that Frazer is at times offensive and "disjointed"[2] and condenses his scholarship to a study of the Bible.

Gaster begins his section on Elijah with the following comment: "Few stories in the Old Testament can be more amply illustrated by comparative folklore and religion than that of the contest between Elijah and the prophet of Baalim on Mt. Carmel."[3] It is important to emphasize that Gaster's concerns are anthropological. He sees the stories involving Elijah, as windows through which to catch a glimpse of ancient culture and its practices by comparing many cultures. The stories of Elijah are not a unified whole but vignettes revealing ancient custom and practice. This is illustrated beautifully through Gaster's reading of the issue of rain-making. All cultures are possessed with issues of weather. In fact, Frazer notes that one of the most important functions of magic is its use to control weather for the good of the tribe by causing the rain to fall.[4] Because weather control is so important to a culture, the one who controls weather has an important function and status in the community. Elijah is indeed important. Gaster continues this school of thought by interpreting the incident on Mt. Carmel as the acting out of rain-making techniques. He assumes that the writer does not understand what he is writing about but somehow manages to record ancient practices: "Each side employs standard, established rain-making techniques, but by the time the traditional story came to be written down the true significance of these techniques had long been forgotten."[5] Gaster then analyzes various components of the story comparing them with numerous

examples from comparative literature. For example, Elijah rebuilds the altar placing twelve stones on the altar. Gaster notes that "rain-stones" are a common device used among cultures to bring rain. Then there is the number twelve. Gaster writes, "the Biblical writer explains the prophet's action as the renovation of an altar of Yahweh which had been overthrown and interprets the twelve stones as symbolic of the twelve tribes."[6] The author is ignorant of what he does, according to Gaster. In ancient cultures, stones are common devices which are meant to bring rain. The number twelve is a common number, a round figure in ancient Israel. What we see here is "simply an interpretatio Israelitica of a more ancient practice."[7] Also present in the Biblical account is another hint of ancient rain-making techniques. It is a common custom, Gaster claims, to pour water into a ditch in hopes of producing rain. He then brings several examples from various cultures. Gaster even goes so far as to claim that the image depicting a cloud as small as a man's fist is a mere borrowing from Finnish and Estonian cultures; "a little man with a copper hand who, rising from the water, becomes a giant."[8]

Many aspects of the Frazer/Gaster approach bear criticism. For example, their basic assumption is that the Biblical writer was stupid and unaware of what he was doing and writing. That assumption crosses all boundaries of objective reading into areas of cultural bias and prejudice. Building on that assumption, Frazer/Gaster do not see the

text as a coherent unit but rather as a conglomeration of cultural traces of past behavior.These two points are contrary to the very basis of literary analysis. We will see that the fundamental assumption of literary analysis is the genius of the writer and the coherency of the text. On this we will elaborate in a moment. Thirdly, they misunderstand the ancient use of magic and ritual. Two scholars, Ludwig Wittenstein and Mary Douglas elaborate on this last point.

Wittenstein devotes an entire essay to a critical analysis of Frazer's assumptions, "Frazer's account of magical and religious notions of men is unsatisfactory: these notions appear as mistakes." [9] Wittenstein is reacting against the idea that performers of magic rites are mistaken in their perceptions of what really is going on. "It never does become plausible that people do all this out of sheer stupidity." [10] In seeming defense of their stupidity, Frazer claims that it is difficult, after all, to find error in magic. What is desired will happen eventually. If a magical rite is performed in order to cause rain, it can always be said that it was the rite that caused the rain; rain does fall sooner or later. Wittenstein notes, "But then it is queer that people do not notice sooner that it does rain sooner or later." [11] What seems to be missing in Frazer/Gaster is an appreciation of symbol. The acting out of magic is symbolic. That is the nature of ritual. It is a symbolic dance of an idea or principle. The dancer does not take his/her motions literally. Wittenstein illlustrates

this beautifully:

> Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on the belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It does not aim at anything; we act this way and then feel satisfied. [12]

Or, to bring the example back to Elijah, would he or anyone really believe that stones can bring rain? Magic is not physics gone wrong but symbolic language in the form of action.

Mary Douglas, also utilizing the field of anthropology, is also opposed to Frazer. One of her main criticisms of Frazer is his misunderstanding that "magic resulted from early man's inability to distinguish between his own subjective association and external objective reality." [13] Once again he is criticized for assuming that he has greater perceptive abilities than those before him. Mary Douglas also recognizes the symbolic nature of ritual. Ritual formulates experience just as language does. We understand a concept by expressing it in words or actions. Ritual "modifies experience." [14] Almost in direct discourse with Frazer, Douglas writes:

> Once when a band of !Kung bushmen had their rain rituals, a small cloud appeared on the horizon, grew and darkened. Then rain fell. But the anthropologist who asked if the bushmen reckoned the rite produced rain, were laughed out of court.[15]

It seems that only the observer has a primitive view of the

nature of ritual and objective reality. For the performer ritual is simply the ordering of experience, it is symbolic language. The basic thesis of Douglas' book relates to our topic only on the level of philosophical attitude.

> In this book I have tried to show that rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience...by their means symbolic patterns are worked out and publically displayed. Within these patterns disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning.[16]

Douglas is an anthropologist and her subject is not Elijah. But her refutation of Frazer/Gaster, who do deal with Elijah, is relevant. She dramatically demonstrates his cultural bias and even disdain and his misunderstanding of symbol. Her study is interesting and does credit to the field of anthropology. Before we contrast anthropology's approach to the text with the field of literary analysis let's review psychology's treatment of the Elijah narratives.

Psychology also renders the written text in its own image. Aharon Wiener provides an excellent example of the psychological approach. He begins his analysis of Elijah as mere explication of text. Then he further interprets, utilizing the tools of psychology, the confrontation between Elijah and Jezebel is "the struggle of the male-consciousness for its independence from the female-unconsciousness."[17] Elijah's sleep in the desert is "the impulse to return to the unconscious."[18] When Elijah is

in the cave of the mountain it represents "the female aspect of God united with the male."[19] And so Weiner weaves a psychological interpretation of Elijah.

Let us turn to literature and its approach to the analysis of the written word. The process of writing literature is at best the manipulation of words, grammatical structures, and thought in such a way that its total effect explains the ineffable in experience. The writer creates a poem which upon reading elicits an emotional response producing an understanding of the unexplained in our universe. It is therefore the task of the reader to see the literary work as a structure which can be analyzed, using the tools of literature, in its form and content. The reader examines word against word, scene against scene, concept against concept. Once analyzed, the parts are reconstructed into a tapestry where true meaning is understood, and the ineffable explained. It is the assumption that the work is one complete tapestry that separates this approach from others:

> "Literary criticism is impossible when a story is divided into fragments, each of which is claimed to have been written by a different writer writing at a different stage in the historical development of Biblical religion."[20]

A narrative such as we find in Kings must be viewed as a unit which, at its initial conception was purposefully designed as a unit and had as its purpose to convey meaning. Once we recognize a specific work as a unified story, then

we can apply the many tools of literary analysis. First, a definition of literary analysis:

> Literary analysis as the student of imaginative literature understands it, is the critical study of the ways in which language, structure, and motifs, for instance, contribute to a stories meaning.[21]

Language is of course an essential element. As we will see, a single word repeated in key moments can provide an important clue as to the meaning of the text. In a broader sense of the word, language is the heart of character. What is significant about a character, "can be manifested almost entirely in character's speech."[22] We will also see that structure is a vital element behind the meaning of the text. For example, Biblical narrative sets up relationships.[23] First there is narrative analogy. One story is understood in relationship to another. For example, in the Elijah narratives the story involving the widow is understood in relation to the story involving the ravens. Second there is the relationship between characters. Characters in the biblical narrative are not absolute but their nature is revealed through comparison. We could understand the character of Elijah, for example, by comparing him to Ahab or the prophets of Baal. Third the Biblical narrative includes repetition. The purpose of repetition is not redundancy or esthetics. Meaning emerges through the comparison of the similarities and differences of the repeated events. For example, when the messengers come to

order Elijah down from the mountain the events are repeated three times. A comparison of the repetition reveals further meaning. This is part of the way that understanding the structure is the key to understanding the text.

Recurring motifs and metaphors are also vital to the understanding of the story. For example, the motif of the barren woman or the metaphor of rain draws upon convention. The reader is aware of these conventions and waits to see how they are used in a new and fresh way.[24]

Frazer looked at the text and saw through a foggy window into the past culture of people who did not understand their own actions and customs. Weiner looked at the text and saw the psyche expressed in images of dream, neurosis, and wish. We look at the text and see a story. Yes, the story reflects the society and person who gave it life: but "whatever else the Hebrews were they were a race of writers."[25] Their form was literature utilizing plot narrative forms. Their subject was the human condition and God. The stories represented the very content of human experience not abstract thought.[26]

As we read and study the Biblical text we become aware of its didactic purposes. Each story sets out to teach a truth, a moral lesson.[27] No matter the story, we notice a unity of thought, one theological point of view. For the writer of our text is not merely a poet, but also a theologian whose concern is humanity and whose message centers around God. With this in mind we proceed to the

story of Elijah the prophet. We proceed with the tools of literary criticism in one hand and the power of a theological point of view in the other.

If you are dreamer, come in
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer...
If you are a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
Come in!
Come in!

Shel Silverstein

FOOTNOTES

[1] Theodor H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom on the Old Testament, (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p.1.

[2] Ibid, p.xxi.

[3] Ibid, p. 504.

[4] Sir George Frazer, Aftermath: A Supplement to the Golden Bough, (New York: AMS Press, 1937), p.68ff.

[5] Theodor H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom on the Old Testament, (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p.504-505.

[6] Ibid, p. 509.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid, p. 511.

[9] Ludwig Wittenstein, Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough, (England: Brynmill Press Ltd., 1971), p.1.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, p.2

[12] Ibid, p. 1

[13] Mary Douglas, Danger and Purity, (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1978), p.23.

[14] Ibid, p. 64.

[15] Ibid, p. 58.

[16] Ibid, p. 2.

[17] Aharon Weiner, The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 23.

[18] Ibid, p. 24.

[19] Ibid, pp. 25-26.

[20] L. Ryken, "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York:

Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 33

[21] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 333.

[22] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981). pp. 49-58.

[23] Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, (England: The Almond Press, 1983), p. 136ff.

[24] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), pp. 49-58.

[25] Samuel Sandmel, "The Bible as Literature," CCAR Journal, (Spring, 1973), p. 70.

[26] L. Ryken, "Literary Criticism of the Bible: Some Fallacies," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 24-25.

[27] A. Rofe, "Classes in the Prophetical Stories: Didactic Legenda and Parable," Supplement to VT, 26 (1974), p. 153.

II

THE THEOLOGY OF FRAGILITY

May He that answered Elijah in Carmel answer you and hearken to the voice of your crying this day. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hearest prayer.

Mishnah Taanith 2:4

The ultimate meaning behind the actions, contemplations, and confrontations of Elijah the prophet is that Yahweh is the one supreme God who is all powerful, all knowing, all responsible. The way in which the narratives make this point is by revealing the fragility of humankind. The opening scenes of the narratives repeatedly reveal human vunerability to the supreme will of God. Drought, famine, sickness all threaten life and are all controlled by God. This is not a mystery to the characters of the story. Everyone knows that the gods control the life and fate of humans. Elijah's mission is not to reveal the mystery behind human fragility but to remind the people through persuasion, through miracles, and by force that the mystery has but one name--Yahweh.

The wanderings and contacts of Elijah through the first three episodes of the narratives serve to elaborate and detail the extent of human fragility while demonstrating the omnipotence of Yahweh. These episodes are a progression in Elijah's career and form the pattern on which the subsequent episodes will be based. I will explicate these three episodes, "The Ravens," "The Woman of Zarephath," and "The Son" revealing the theme of human fragility and God's omnipotence. Then I would like to detail the same theme through the use of the recurring symbol of food.

THE RAVENS

Drought which is determined and caused by God begins the narratives, initiates the action in this first episode. Elijah proclaims to Ahab that there will be no rain, not even morning dew unless he (Elijah) presumably at God's prompting says so. Initially we do not know the reason for the drought. We do know that the drought will leave Israel a wasteland. Put in these terms a drought is an apropos punishment for Israel which is a spiritual wasteland. A king sins, a queen imposes her religion on the state, and the prophets are in hiding. Israel has become a physical and spiritual wasteland.[1] Elijah's proclamation leaves the time frame of the drought open ended. We do know, however that God controls the extent of the drought's effect from the sentences following Elijah's proclamation. "The word of the Lord was upon Elijah," telling him detailed directions to a secret wadi still flowing with water. The drought was to leave the population thirsty, hungry, in danger of dying. The prophet must be protected from such dangers, he must know the location of secret waters. Many scholars ponder the whereabouts of Wadi Cherith[2] speculating on its linguistic connection to Wadi Kelt. On one aspect of Wadi Cherith the scholars agree: its location is not definitively known. It is possible that that is the point the writer is trying to make. Wadi Cherith may not be an exact geographical location but may have metaphysical significance. It perhaps is an

unknown place, a place over the rainbow, the single place in all Israel that water can be found and only God and Elijah know the way.

The elusive ravens support the notion that Wadi Cherith is a mythical, metaphysical place. In addition to running waters, God says, birds have been commanded to provide food to Elijah. Those ravens terribly disturb the sensibilities of the rational scholar. Rashi declares ravens to be Arabs. John Gray who is concerned with the historicity of the text prefers, like Rashi, to read *orebim* as *Arabim*.[3] This reading allows us to cross from the realm of story to the realm of history. But in a narrative which depends on miracle to convey its message, why is this miracle fantastic and unlikely? Indeed, Wadi Cherith is the realm of wonder and miracle, the realm of God. Elijah drinks from its waters, the ravens bring him all types of food from bread to meat. Instead of being distracted by questions of real and true geographic location, let us turn to meaning. What is the meaning of Wadi Cherith and its ravens?

The theme that provides the framework for the three episodes is established in this episode. The drought is a real threat to Ahab as it threatens his very life. His future is in the power of Yahweh who is the only God that can end the drought. Ahab and his followers are still in doubt however and so the episode of Mt. Carmel is necessary. The framework for future episodes is clearly revealed by Elijah's proclamation that a drought will be upon the land.

The story of the wadi and its ravens illuminate the nuances that make the tale of this prophet intriging. First, the miracle of the ravens immediately establishes the tone of the narratives. Mystery envelops Elijah. There is a faraway, mysterious tone introduced by this spring of water and its ravens. The reader knows that there is something unusual about Elijah. The mystery of this opening story prepares us for the mystery of the closing story of the chariot. A second nuance that is revealed is that despite his uniqueness, Elijah is obedient. In verse three God says to Elijah in command language: "Leave this place; turn eastward and go into hiding by the Wadi Cherith." In verse four Elijah obediently goes to the Wadi. This provides the context for a future episode in which Elijah experiences doubt and despair and wishes to die. The drama of the despair is emphasized in light of this early established relationship between obedient servant and his Master. Furthermore, the wadi and ravens show us that even the prophet, or perhaps, especially the prophet is dependent upon God for sustenance and survival. The drought reveals the fragility of human life and the dependency of humans upon their God. The prophet is not exempt.

THE WOMAN OF ZAREPHATH

"After sometime the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land." (v.8) This is the sentence that begins the second episode. It is parallel to the thought that began

the first: There is no water--Go. Verse eight initiates the action which begins the second story. The theme is the same, clothed in different plot, with different characters, and with three different details. The writer gives us a semantic clue that the theme in both stories is the same. In both stories the phrase "I have commanded...to sustain you" is used (v.4 and v.9). God commands the ravens and then the woman of Zarephath to sustain Elijah. The wording is lofty. The word "command" is used not the word "told." Elijah is "sustained," not "fed." The vocabulary is lofty because the deed is important and not to be underestimated. The vocabulary used is crucial as it is in all literature. God commands which is a phrase that is a justification for the theology of God as sustainer. The word used for sustenance, *kalkalah,* illuminates another facet of this theology. The word is used four times in the narratives. Twice in our episode and twice in conjunction with Obadiah (I Kings 18:4,13). Jezebel threatens the life of the prophets of Yahweh and Obadiah hides them, sustaining them in a cave with food and water. In all four instances, the word is used in life and death situations. It is not merely feeding that is implied but the sustaining of life itself. Of course God sustains life, but in a fundamental sense that is so basic that without the sustenance, life would end. This is what is meant by the fragility of life, this is the theology of fragility. Though the theme is repeated, the woman of Zarephath uncovers added detail and nuance with its

different approach to the theme.

This unnamed woman is identified by her residence and marital status. Her residence tells us that Elijah must make another journey for continued sustenance. The travelling prophet is identified as such as early as these first two stories. It will become his trademark that he comes and goes quickly and elusively. The woman is a widow. Given the attitude of the time toward women and marital status, it is possible that this designation of widow has metaphoric meaning. Both the land and the woman are in an unnatural status, devoid of the means for fertile activity; "a woman and a land were widowed."[4] With this introduction to Elijah's new sustainer and God's new agent, we prepare to meet the woman of Zarephath.

How do we recognize God's agent? This question is asked in regard to prophets. Is this prophet a true prophet, does he or she really speak for God? The rabbis give an answer; we know a prophet to be true if he or she gives us a sign.[5] This principle seems reasonable and is the same logic which will govern Elijah, for Elijah must require a sign from the widow to know whether or not she is the designated one. The action begins. God instructs Elijah to travel on to the town in which the widow resides:

> So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the entrance of the town, a widow was there gathering wood.

The text does not say "the widow" but rather "a widow."

At this point, Elijah must discover if the woman before

him be the woman designated by God to feed him as the ravens did. To know, he requires a sign and so gives the woman a two-fold test. Each part of the test has an allusion elsewhere in the first episodes; the first part has its allusion in the past and is used to reiterate Elijah's purpose in being in Zarephath. The second part has its parallel in the future and is used as foreshadowing. The first part of the test: Elijah calls out to the woman, "Please bring me a little water in your pitcher." This test is apropos of the context of story. There is severe drought in the land and only the one appointed by God would have water to share. The allusion is clear; we are reminded that Elijah is in need of water, that there is drought, and that Israel is in spiritual trouble. He then tests the woman a second time, before she can even respond fully to the first test: "Please bring along a piece of bread for me." This test alludes to the future. Her food supply is limited, a situation which will be rectified by the miracle of flour and oil. Noting the two-fold test A. Rofe searches for meaning in the repetition. He writes "first her good nature is tested, then her faith."[6]

To search for meaning in the test we look to a parallel in Genesis. Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant sets out on his journey. As he nears the outside of the city he sees women drawing water. Notice that Elijah also concludes a journey and also meets a woman at the entrance of the city. The servant in Genesis then

conjures a double test and the one who passes is designated by God for Isaac. Rebecca passes both tests--she offers the servant water and then offers water for the camels and then offers her home for him to sleep (Genesis 24:10-27). Having passed the test, the servant knows that Rebecca is the chosen one. Another example of multiple testing is in the Book of Judges concerning Gideon. Here the parallel is not as elaborate as with Rebeccah but it does point out the convention of the multiple test. God speaks to Gideon saying "Go in this strength of yours and deliver Israel from the Midianites. I herewith make you my messenger." (Judges 6:14). Gideon is skeptical and asks God for a sign (v. 17). God gives him a sign but Gideon asks for a second sign (v. 36) and still not satisfied asks God to repeat this second sign (v. 39). We see here a literary parallel involving multiple testing in determining God's appointed one. In the Elijah narrative this test is a literary device which serves to remind us of the context for his visit to Zarephath and foreshadow the next miracle.

But does the woman of Zarephath pass the test? Her response seems to put her in danger of failing:

> As the Lord lives, I have nothing but a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am just gathering a couple of sticks, so that I can go home and prepare it for me and my son; we shall eat it and then we shall die."

The woman's objection serves several functions. Her last statement, "we shall eat and then we shall die" alleviates

any doubt in the readers mind as to the severity of the drought. Do not be misled, the writer tells us, by Elijah's request for water. This is merely a test, the drought is indeed severe. This statement also serves as a peg grounding us in our theme. Life is fragile and the fragility is controlled by God. There is another function to her objection: it necessitates the need for the miracle of the flour and oil. Robert Cohn notes, "in order to be fed, Elijah must feed."[7] This is an important detail which was absent in the first story. To receive food from the ravens Elijah need only go to the wadi. Here in the second episode he must first provide for the widow. A third aspect to her objection also resonates to the earlier story of the ravens. Here Elijah first asked for water and then for food. The woman only responds to the request for food. In the first story, the ravens bring only food. The author subtly provides this detail to show us that in both stories God directly provides for water and uses a messenger to provide for food.

In response to the woman's fear and objection, Elijah offers comfort and then food:

> Do not be afraid, Elijah said to her, Go and do as you have said: but first make me a small cake...Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: The jar of flour shall not give out. The jug of oil shall not fail. (I Kings 17:13-14)

Two interesting points in Elijah's reply bear noting. First, the widow does not know that she is designated by God to

feed Elijah. She sees only enough food for one last meal for herself and her son. Here we are to make the observation that it is possible for a person to be designated by God to perform an urgent task without knowing it. The widow is designated to feed Elijah and yet seems to be unaware of the fact. This insight reveals the basic reality of the human relationship to God. God acts, wills, commands; humans, not knowing God's will, suppose, assume, do not see to feed a prophet. But Elijah does not keep her in the dark. Elijah's miracle informs the widow of at least two things. First is that God is in control of this show. God is responsible for the drought and is conversly sustainer of life. Second, that she is appointed to feed Elijah. Elijah after all, instructs her to feed him first, then herself and her son. First pay homage to God the sustainer of life, by obeying His command to feed the prophet, then enjoy similar rewards:

> First make me a small cake from what you have there, and bring it out to me; then make some for yourself and your son.(I Kings 17:13)

There are still a few questions left unanswered. How could Elijah perform the miracle of the flour and oil when God didn't command him to do so? Does the prophet act independently of God? And, why does the writer clearly state in verse 9, "I (God) commanded a woman to sustain you" when clearly the woman knows of no such command? A possible answer is as follows. Who commanded Elijah to perform the miracle--God did. Did He command the widow to feed Elijah?

Yes. The latter command was revealed through the miracle of flour and oil. The widow was first to feed Elijah and the flour and oil would be endless until the rains. Until the drought would end and Elijah would no longer need the widow to feed him. God commands Elijah to perform the miracle--"Thus said the Lord, God of Israel" (17:14)---thereby making the widow aware of her role.

THE SON

We now proceed to the third episode. Once again we confront the same theme robed in different details. This story begins with irony:

> After a while, the son of the mistress of the house fell sick and his illness grew worse until he had no breath left in him. (I Kings 17:17)

The woman earlier declared that food was so scarce that she and her son would die. This was remedied by the miracle and yet the next episode begins with the death of her son. This represents a shift in the role Elijah plays in revealing the theme of the stories. The ultimate in human fragility is revealed--death occurs, seemingly without reason. The woman's theology remains consistent. She immediately assumes that she is being punished by her son's death by God. Elijah must take the initiative with the next miracle to show us that death is not the point of the episode but rather life is the point. The theology has been consistent and clear. God caused the drought, God has caused the death of the son.

But with each negative manifestation of God's power is a positive. Despite the drought, unlimited food is provided for our hero. Despite death, the son can live. What follows is a dramatic display of this theology.

At the climax of her son's condition the woman exclaims:

> "What harm have I done you, oh Man of God that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?" (I Kings 17:17)

Her statement reveals a dramatic aspect of the human condition. She has recognized and acknowledged Elijah as a prophet. Her tragedy, no matter how great does not permit her instincts to reject Elijah or God. Instead she blames herself. What have I done to you to provoke your anger? Her question is a good one. The narrative constantly notes her cooperation. She knows that God is sustainer of life because God fed her and her son, which kept them alive. It follows therefore that she assume that her son's death is also God's will. What sin have you recalled? This reaction stems from the same instinct that makes a person exclaim to an approaching policeman "I didn't do it!" The ghosts in our closets are the source of even unwarranted guilt. In fact, she has done nothing wrong to Elijah, committed no sin which caused the death of her son. This is a story whose purpose is instruction. The son dies and with Elijah's plea--God restores his life. The message thus is not the son's death, but the restoration of his life. The Midrash also sees the

positive aspect of this miracle. The woman of Zaraphath is rewarded for her maintenance of Elijah by the resurrection of her son," not punished by his death.

Through these three episodes, the theme has been well established: the fragility of life depends on God's sustaining and renewing gifts. In each episode Elijah is the primary character through which the theme is literarily demonstrated. The progression is interesting. In the first episode "The Ravens" Elijah is a passive recipient of food and water. Then in the second epsiode he enables the widow to act as provider with the aid of a miracle from God. He is no longer passive. He actively transmits God's will to the widow by convincing her to act as provider through his performance of the miracle of flour and oil. In the third episode, "The Son" Elijah is directly involved. He takes initiative as he directly carries out God's role of renewer of life, by reviving the son." Through this progression we see an increasingly significant interconnectedness between prophet and God. It is as if each story is a thread woven into a single tapestry. All are needed to complete the picture. With each episode, Elijah participates to a greater degree in God's plan. He goes from the recipient of a miracle which involves sustaining life to the initiator of a miracle which resurrects lost life. This interconnectedness is subtly demonstrated through the repetition of one theme through three separate episodes in which Elijah is the major character.

FOOD AS SYMBOL

We now move from the broad device of a story to the narrower device of symbol. Food has a significant role throughout the narratives. It is elevated as a symbol that connects humans with the theological ideal of God as sustainer. Beyond physical sustenance it "signifies sponsorship."[10] All significant moments in the narratives either begin or conclude with somebody eating. This detail is a brilliant subtlety which serves to reinforce the theme of God as sustainer. By eating, humans acknowledge God as "sponsor" which is made clear by the fact that major events coincide with eating.

The first two instances of the symbolic use of food we have reviewed in great detail with a slightly different point of view. The opening episode involves the ravens feeding Elijah. If food is symbolic of a human's acknowledgement of God as supreme and the single source of sustenance then our prophet establishes his credentials as a true prophet of Yahweh when he eats the food that God provides for him. In the next episode, the widow agrees to feed Elijah and is granted unlimited food in return. She accepts the task being God's agent by providing food. Her son then falls deathly ill and Elijah revives him. The sequence of these events is no accident. Through food she symbolically acknowledges God which allows for the opportunity of having her son revived. This perspective

gives new meaning to the widow's statement, "What harm have I done you, oh Man of God?" (I Kings 17:18). Her statement implies that after she accepted God as sustainer by providing food to Elijah and receiving food from God, why should she experience punishment. The answer to her question is in the reviving of her son. God grants life to her son. The episode is not to be seen as a punishment, but rather as reward.

The next instance involving food includes Ahab and the prophets of Baal. By comparing the story of Ahab and the prophets of Baal to the story of the widow and her son, we see clearly the function of food as a symbol. Elijah prepares for the great event at Mt. Carmel. He speaks to Ahab telling him to assemble all the prophets of Israel, the prophets of Baal, the prophets of Asherah at Mt. Carmel. Then Elijah uses an idiom: "Those who eat at Jezebel's table." The statement is an idiom which translates "Who are maintained by Jezebel" (New JPS note). Once again, the writer's skill for detail is recognized. The writer wanted to identify the prophets with Jezebel and did so by use of this idiom. Any number of alternatives for identifying the prophets are available. Yet the choice of this particular idiom contains further information on the nature of the symbol of food. Eating at Jezebel's table is in sharp contrast to Elijah and the widow eating food provided by God. This contrast is made to point out that to accept Jezebel or any other provider of sustenance or maintenance

(as that idiom translates) is to reject God. Indeed, the great event at Mt. Carmel vividly reveals the scorners and rejectors of God. After Elijah's offering ignites in flame, the people cry out, "Yahweh is God, Yahweh is God." Explicit in their cry is , yes, we accept Yahweh as the one supreme God, we reject the house of Jezebel. Those who do not accept God as sustainer and maintainer of life are appropriately killed: "They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the wadi Kishon and slaughtered them there" (I Kings 18:39-40). The message is clear and consistent: The fragility of life is supported and maintained by God--rejection of this means death. The next use of the symbol food involves the leader of the people.

Ahab is told by Elijah to eat and drink "Because of the sound of the rain rumbling" (my translation of I Kings 18:419). Why is the sound of the rain reason for Ahab to eat? Elijah's opening statement is that "there will be no rain until I, (as God's prophet) say so," is a statement which expressly states that God is the source of all--rain, nourishment, the staff that supports life, even life itself. Eat Ahab, says Elijah, acknowledge the one God. Ahab's response is to eat--his life is maintained. He has in a sense turned from forsaking God by going after Baalim (I Kings 18:18) to accepting God's supremacy in the symbolic act of eating. Robert Cohn points to a parallel in Exodus 24:4-11 where the people swear allegience to Yahweh and eat and drink.[11] John Gray points out that Ahab's eating may

signify the end of a fast occasioned by the drought. The "meal symbolizes renewed communion between Ahab, Elijah and Yahweh."[12] Again the sequence of events is not an accident. After Ahab eats, symbolically acknowledging God, the rain comes.

In the next episode involving food, Elijah has become despondent. He runs to the wilderness and cries, "Enough, now O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!" (I KIngs 19:4). In utter despair, Elijah falls asleep. He is awakened by a *malach* who tells him to eat. He looks around and right next to him he finds water and food. Elijah's emotional energies are completely drained as if his life source has left him. He wants only to make the final step and die. But even in his despair he knows that only God controls life and death however fragile so he prays to God for his death. Why does God provide him with food? The first time God provided him with food he was in physical danger of starvation due to drought and famine. God sustained Elijah's physical existence. However he is not completely fortified. He lies down again to sleep (I Kings 14:6).

> The angel of the Lord came a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat or the journey will be too much for you."(I Kings 19:7)

Here Elijah's life is in emotional danger, his will to live is completely gone. Again God sustains Elijah's life by providing food. In its symbolic sense it is truly food for the soul. Elijah eats and drinks and therefore shows an

acceptance of God. He eats twice thus being physically and spiritually sustained for a journey of immense significance. This journey is very important. It culminates in an intimate revelation where God "passes by" Elijah. Elijah must be fortified by God's food twice in order to be adequately prepared for such a significant journey.

The last episode involving food involves the meeting between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah begins to appoint Elisha by throwing his mantle around him. Elisha responds by saying, "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye and I will follow you" (I Kings 19:20) But Elijah's response is odd: "Go back what have I done to you?" To the reader the dramatic swinging of his mantle appears to be an overt gesture beckoning Elisha to come as an attendant. Some scholars, as well as the traditional commentators interpret Elijah's response to be a reaction to Elisha's mundane earthly concerns. After all, at the very moment the great prophet appoints him successor, Elisha's thought is to kiss his mother and father goodbye. However, after Elijah tells Elisha to go away, what does Elisha do?

> He turned back from him and took the yoke of oxen and slaughtered them; he boiled their meat with the gear of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate.

Not only does Elisha eat, but he provides food to the people. The narrator shows us that Elisha accepts the theological system previously elaborated and naturally falls into the role of God's prophet. Eating food symbolizes

Elisha's readiness and ability, and he is then ready to rise "and follow Elijah and become his attendant" (I Kings 19:21). His meal is "his rite of integration with Elijah and his way of engaging his people in his new enterprise."[13]

We have demonstrated the symbolic use of food in the narratives as another piece in an overriding theme. The question arises, what justification is there for interpreting food as a symbol for something beyond its literal meaning? A symbol can be used in two different ways by the writer. In a literary sense, a symbol is defined as "words (which) refer to something which suggest a wide range of reference beyond itself."[14] In this context, the writer can use conventional/public symbols or private/personal symbols. A conventional symbol might be "the Star of David" or "the Red, White, and Blue." A private symbol would be a symbol developed by the writer for use in a particular work or group of works. Is food a private symbol developed for the Elijah narratives or is it a conventional symbol? The answer is yes to both cases. We look to other narratives in the Bible to see why.

We learn immediately in Genesis 2:16-17 that food has symbolic value.

> The Lord God commanded the man saying, of every tree of the garden you are free to eat but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad you must not eat for as soon as you eat you will surely die.

The metaphor is clear and well known. Food becomes charged

with meaning beyond the literal level. Just what the metaphor means has been a major preoccupation of Western civilization for years and beyond the focus of this work. Another obvious example of investing symbolic meaning into food is the book of Leviticus. This is a vast and complicated subject but the minimum observation can be made that there is an obvious and consistent use of food as symbol. In the story of Abraham and the three *malachim*, food becomes a symbol for hospitality. The examples of the symbolic use of food are endless. But is there another instance which has the same meaning as it does in the Elijah narratives? The closest we can find is I Samuel 1:8-20. In this passage Hannah is praying to God for she is barren and wishes to conceive. She is so deep in prayer that Eli accuses her of being drunk. She explains her situation to him and he understands and then sends her off. Then the text states

> So the woman left and she ate and was no longer downcast. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her. Hannah conceived and at the turn of the year bore a son. (18-20)

In light of our previous analysis of the Elijah narrative we are alerted to a parallel. Eating is connected in detail to a fantastic event--God gives life. It is as if her eating signifies "inward reconciliations."[15] Hannah does conceive; for her it is a theophany paralleled to Elijah's desert encounter.

The symbolic use of food is repeatedly demonstrated

throughout the Bible. If we assume that the Samuel passage is parallel, then the use of food in Elijah can be called "conventional" in its technical sense. It is very possible however that the Elijah narrator used a "private" symbol. What is clear however, is the symbolic value of food in the Elijah narratives repeat the theme of the first three episodes. God provides sustenance for people. Parallel to this is the metaphoric message of food which is continued sustenance. Yahweh is the one and only God for the spiritually hungry. Elijah's task is to persuade the people to partake.

A FINAL THOUGHT

At the center of the three episodes is a miracle, fantastic and unbelievable as miracles tend to be. The miracles have the maintaining of life as their purpose and goal. The maintenance of life via miracle is necessitated by the drought. The drought is God's punishment for Ahab and his people's disregard and disobedience to God. That is what the narratives are about. Elijah's ultimate mission is to bring the poeple back to Yahweh, the ultimate and omnipotent God. Though the central theme of these opening episodes seem to stray from the ultimate message of the narratives they are in fact metaphorically interconnected.

There is hunger in Samaria caused by a drought. Yet the stomach of our prophet is full. Similarly, there is spiritual hunger in Samaria caused by a turning away from

Yahweh.[15] Yet the spirit of Elijah is filled with zeal for God (I Kings 19:10).[16] In order to alleviate the spiritual hunger which is pervasive, Elijah must establish his credentials and does so by being the recipient and instigator of miracles whose sole purpose is physical survival. To add to the aura of authenticity, the writer continually repeats the phrase "the word of God."[17] In fact this phrase structures the three episodes and is used as a framing device. The first episode begins with "the word of the Lord was upon him" (17:2). The second episode, the woman of Zarephath begins "the word of the Lord came to him" (17:8). The third episode of the son and the final episode in this sequence end in the widow's acknowledgement that "the word of the Lord is truly in you mouth" (17:24). With her affirmation, the woman of Zarephath has told us that the miracles of these first three episodes have succeded in authenticating Elijah as prophet of God.

The stage is set, its backdrop in place. The theology of fragility has been acted out in the first three episodes of the Elijah narratives. Through the remaining episodes, Elijah declares God's name as the single answer to the mystery of human fragility. Yet despite the antiquity of the message, the fragility of our lives is still an obsession. Drought, famine, sickness remind us that our lives are at times beyond our control. We struggle with the mystery of our fragility; Elijah struggles with making us understand its name. We then have concluded the introduction to Elijah

as we conclude our analysis of the three episodes and the symbol of food. With the woman of Zarephath's acclamation of Elijah as true prophet, we begin the main body of the narratives.

Footnotes

[1] Louis Gros, "Elijah and Elisha," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 179.

[2] John Gray, I and II Kings, Old Testament Library,(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970)..

[3] Ibid, p.375.

[4] Sheldon Blank, Understanding the Prophets, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1969), p. 15.

[5] Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b.

[6] A. Rofe, "Classes in the Prophetical Stories: Didactic Legenda and Parable," Supplement to VT, 26 (1974), p. 149.

[7] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 335.

[8] Songs of Songs Rabbah, 2:5.

[9] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), pp. 335-336. Robert cohn has also noted this progression in Elijah's character.

[10] Ibid, p. 346.

[11] Ibid, p. 341.

[12] John Gray, I and II Kings, Old Testament Library,(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 403.

[13] R.P. Carroll, "Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession," VT, 19 (1969), p. 414.

[14] M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971).

[15] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), pp. 84-85.

[16] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 338.

[17] Sheldon Blank, Understanding the Prophets, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1969), p. 16.

III

RAIN, FIRE, AND CHARACTER

All the data of experience must be included as at least the raw stuff of revelation.

Rabbi Chanan Brichto
"How Does God Speak in the World"

As the theology of fragility forms the larger context of the narratives, we turn to the elements of poetry which create the alluring substance of plot. The sophisticated use of imagery and metaphor expose such complexities as the nature of God's presence, character and relationship of humans to each other and deity. With this in mind I will analyze the leitmotifs of rain and fire and show how they introduce and reveal the characters of Elijah and Ahab.

THE METAPHOR OF RAIN

Throughout the Bible, rain is a metaphor for the different manifestations of God. Rain is one of the metaphors used for God as creator of nature and of all the universe:

> Are there any among the vanities of the nations that are rainmakers or can the heavens give showers? Oh God...You have made all these things. (Jeremiah 14:22)

In addition to being the creator of nature, God is also in control of the functions of nature:

> Does the rain have a father who begot the dew? Can you send up an order to the clouds for an abundance of water to cover you? (Job 38:28)

Notice that both of these passages connect the ideas of creator God and God who still participates in, indeed

controls the universe. Here, the metaphor of rain establishes the theological bedrock of the entire Bible which includes the narratives of Elijah.

Building on this bedrock the metaphor of rain functions on several other layers of meaning. For example, in Ezekiel 34, God promises that he will "save the flock" (v.22) and in this future time all will go according to God's prescribed order: "I will cause rain to fall in its season/there shall be a shower of blessing." (26) The metaphor speaks of God's goodness, God's order--this is a blessing as rain is when it nourishes and sustains life. In a larger category under which blessing falls is the category of reward. An obedient people receives rain at its season or to explicate the metaphor, God is the source of all reward, of which nature is a part.

> If you walk in my ways, in my statutes and keep my commandments and do them then I will give you your rain in its season. (Leviticus 26:4)

Conversly, rain and drought are metaphors for God's wrath and punishment. Too much rain, as in the flood (Genesis 7:12,8:2), is punishment provoked by disobedience. Idolatry is often the reason given for drought. One clear example can be found in Amos:

> Come to Bethel and transgress... I therefore withheld rain from you (4:4,7)

To summarize: rain in the Bible is a metaphor of multi-meanings. It expresses God's creative powers and

continuing presence which is made apparent in reward, punishment, or merely the continuation of the natural order. In the Elijah narratives all these levels of meaning function at the same time. The text clearly expresses that only God controls nature:

> There will be no dew or rain except at my bidding. (I Kings 17:1)

The text clearly states that the drought is punishment for disobedience and idolatry:

> It is not I who have brought trouble to Israel but you and your fathers house by forsaking the mitzvot of Yahweh and following Baalim. (I Kings 18:18)

In the context of example after example from elsewhere in the Bible, the usage of rain in the stories of Elijah, is consistent and expected. Yet, as we analyze the metaphor through the various stories in which it appears, we begin to question if indeed its usage is consistent with the numerous Biblical examples. We do receive the message that drought is the result of punishment for sin, and at the same time the text denies the effectiveness of the drought. As we saw from other places in the Biblical text, drought is taken very seriously. In Jeremiah 14:1-9, for example, the anguish of drought is beautifully expressed:

> The word of the Lord which came to Jeremiah concerning the droughts. Judah is in mourning, her settlements languish. Men are bowed to the ground; and the outcry of Jerusalem rises. Their nobles sent their servant for water; they come to the cisterns, they

> found no water. They returned, their vessels empty. They are shamed and humiliated, they cover their heads. Because of the ground there is dismay, for there has been no rain on the earth. The ploughmen are shamed, they cover their heads. Even the hind in the field forsakes her newborn fawn, because there is no grass. And the wild asses stand on the bare heights, snuffing the air like jackals; their eyes pine because there is no herbage. Though our iniquities testify against us, act, O Lord, for the sake of Your name; though our rebellions are many and we have sinned against You. O Hope of Israel, its deliverer in time of trouble, why are You like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who stops only for the night? Why are You like a man who is stunned, like a warrior who cannot give victory? Yet You are in our midst, O Lord, and Your name is attached to us--Do not forsake us!

The poet expressed an awareness of the cause of the drought and the shame and agony it brings. But here, in the Elijah narratives not only is this anguish ignored but continually denied. Two examples of this appear in the opening episode of "The Woman of Zarephath" which we have examined. Elijah is driven from his wadi because of the drought: "After sometime the wadi dried up because there was no rain in the land," (17:7) which, as we noted initiates action. God sends Elijah to Zarephath where he will command a widow to sustain him. Elijah encounters the woman and he asks her for water. Immediately she goes to fetch water. We noted that this is an appropriate test in light of the drought; only God's agent could produce water at this time. All true on one level. Yet on another level there is a question. It is implicitly stated in the text that the effects of the

drought had reached the woman of Zarephath, hence her reluctance to share food and the need for the miracle of flour and oil. But what of water? Water is not mentioned. We assume that they drank for the period of time they were together before the drought's end. It seems that the drought has been denied effective in this situation. The rabbis pondered the same problem deciding on a practical solution. The famine in the days of Elijah, they claimed, was one of scarcity; one year yielding, one year not.[1] We need not accept their conclusion while agreeing with their question. Why this suspension of the drought?

Perhaps this one instance would not be indicative of anything if it weren't for a second instance on Mount Carmel. Here we see another example where the effectiveness of the drought is questioned. To accentuate the greatness of igniting the altar with fire, an enormous amount of water is poured, drenching the altar:

> He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it over the burnt offering and the wood." Then he said, "Do it a second time;" and they did it a second time. "Do it a third time," he said; and they did it a third time. The water ran down around the altar, and even the trench was filled with water. (I Kings 18:34-35)

Where did they get the water? The writer has greatly detailed the extent to which water was used, a departure from the usually clipped, abbreviated style. What point is the writer trying to make? Again, the rabbis ask our question. Their answer,although it is not ours, nonetheless

bears noting. The water flowed from Elijah's fingers.[2]

This is the second instance of the suspension of the drought's effectiveness. In the Bible, drought is treated with anguish and fear. Here, in contrast, the reaction is muted. We see it has no effect on Elijah and the woman of Zarephath, it has no effect on Mt. Carmel. Yet the text says "the famine was severe in Samaria" (18:2) and Ahab sends Obadiah looking for "springs where grass still grows." The contradiction has purpose and makes a simple point. God controls this drought--its length, the degree to which it is felt and to whom. God's agents are exempt, God's enemies are in constant search for food. The writer has expressed this commonly expressed truth in a new and fresh way. The metaphor of rain is a consistently used convention in the Bible. It is so common in fact, that its usage elicits a stock response.[3] To avoid our expected reactions to the drought, the writer raises questions in our minds. First, he suspends the drought in three places (ravens, widow, Mt. Carmel). Second, he declares a drought in the first sentences of the narratives but does not give the reason for the drought until much later (I Kings 18:18). Not until just before the incident on Carmel do we learn the reason and person responsible for the drought. The writer plays with our expectations. The result is a reiteration of an old and often used idea, packaged in a new and fresh way.

THE METAPHOR OF FIRE

Like rain, fire is a metaphor for the various

manifestations of God. At times, fire is the phenomenon which signifies God's presence such as the burning bush (Exodus 3:2) or the theophany at Mt. Sinai; "God came down to Sinai in fire" (Exodus 19:18). Fire is also used as a metaphor for God's anger:

> See the Lord coming with fire
> His chariot is like a whirlwind
> To vent his anger in fury
> His rebuke in flaming fire. (Isaiah 66:15)

Once again we see the common usages of the metaphor utilized in the Elijah narratives, though in a simpler way than rain was used. Fire is the metaphor for God's presence in the episode on Mt. Carmel and it is the metaphor for wrath in the episode of the messengers.

On Mount Carmel, to maximize the drama, water is poured on the altar. The metaphor tells us that though fire cannot ignite from water, God is above all impossibility. God's reality is declared and undeniable. Two opposing elements in nature do not cancel each other but unite to bring God's presence before disbelievers. And it works. Upon seeing the miracle the people cry: "The Lord alone is God: The Lord alone is God!" (I Kings 18:39) In addition to a metaphor for God's presence, the fire is a symbol for purging, for purification of sins. Just as Moses purges the sins of the people by burning the Golden Calf, Elijah purges the sin of idolatry by fire on the altar of God.[4]

The fire on Mt. Carmel serves another function. It joins with rain foreshadowing the theophany in the desert.

Rain and fire are metaphors for manifestations of God. They are not to be mistaken as God. The people see the fire on the altar and convert. Ahab sees the end of the drought and Baal worship ceases to be a factor in the relationship between Elijah and Ahab.[5] The extremes of rain and fire convince the people of Yahweh's supremacy and yet, we will learn, God is not in the forces of nature just in control of them. In fact, the sounds and lights of nature preceed God and herald his coming.[6]

The metaphors of rain and fire serve a function beyond poetic meaning. They are intricately woven into the story line of Elijah's escapades and become a major element in the plot. We find characters responding, reacting, and interacting to events which have rain and or fire as their focus. It is for this reason that aspects of character are revealed while analyzing the events which have the metaphors of rain and fire at their center.

THE CHARACTER OF ELIJAH

Intregal to the character of Elijah are his mood shifts, his inner emotional state as it manifests itself in his actions. Though not sequential, there is a progression to the inner life of the character. This progression is revealed through events concerning rain and fire.

The first step in this progression follows the great

event at Mount Carmel. The prophet is victorious. Through the miraculous displays of water and fire God proves to be supreme and omnipotent. The people repent, Ahab presumably is convinced and the drought can now end. However, the portrayal of the prophet's reaction is not what we would expect, though it is tender and revealing. Elijah wanders off by himself and reaches the top of the mountain. Notice that the miracle of the flaming altar took place on the side of the mountain, below the top. With Elijah's ascent to the mountain top, the writer tells us that the climax of the story is yet to come. Elijah ascends, our expectations rise we wait for the rain. The image of the prophet is striking. Crouched low to the ground with his head in his hands he appears distraught and concerned. He sends a messenger to the edge of the mountain which overlooks the sea to spot a sign of rain approaching. With drama building the report comes back: no sign. Seven times he is sent and not until the seventh time does he bring the news "a cloud as small as a man's hand is rising in the west." (I Kings 18:44) Elijah's despondancy seems out of place, incongruent with his victory. It is clear that despite the rain signifying God's supremacy Elijah is left unsure, not convinced of something. The rabbis comment on this by saying that Elijah tells God that there is no merit in Israel and for the sake of the covenant the drought should end.[7] The rabbis' observation points to the aspect of foreshadowing. This passage foreshadows Elijah's despondancy in the desert

which is greater and more severe. There he expresses the thought that God's advocates are limited to the prophet. Here, on Mt. Carmel, we can only speculate at the source of his despair.

The transition between the Carmel episode and the desert is almost a miracle of comic relief:

> Ahab mounted his chariot and drove off to Jezreel. The hand of the Lord had come upon Elijah. He tied up his skirts and ran in front of Ahab all the way to Jezreel. (18:45-46)

The interpretations of this passage are numerous. It is possible that Elijah's victory was not decisive and so in fear he runs from Jezebel.[8] This interpretation draws on the despondent mood that preceed and follows this miracle. It appears Elijah is afraid for his life. A different interpretation focuses on the phrase "the hand of God." This is a "synonym for the manifestation of his (God's) strength and power."[9] This line of reasoning is drawn from the understanding of metaphor. Just as rain signified God's strength in the world, this miracle signifies that God's strength is with Elijah. Yet another interpretation claims that this transitional miracle is the reestablishment of the rightful order: king follows prophet.[10] All of the above interpretations are strongly supported by text. The brilliance of the writer and the complexity of the narratives can support several levels of meaning. What strikes this reader is the silliness of the image of Elijah racing before the chariot of Ahab. That it serves as a

transition if not comic relief is apparent. The rabbis capture the absurdity and turn it into profundity: I have seen servants upon horses and princes walking as servants."[11] Yes, how true!

Elijah's escape to the desert is the second step in the progression of his inner character. His mood darkens and he is immobile from despair. It is now clear that for Elijah the fire on a water-drenched altar and the rain breaking the drought are not strong enough symbols. They do not suffice as proof that as the poet Robert Browning put it "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." Here we see the metaphors of rain and fire jump to another level of meaning as the character of Elijah rises to new insight. Though rain and fire are symbols manifesting attributes of God, they are not God. Metaphor is likeness not reality. To illustrate this the writer describes the desert theophany. God exhibits control of nature and nurtures Elijah[12] but the truth of God's reality is beyond metaphor and all tools of description, it is in the silence.

THE CHARACTER OF AHAB

The second major character to be revealed by his response to the plot where rain and fire are central elements is Ahab. Ahab is the sinful king who makes Elijah's mission necessary. The extent to which Ahab has strayed from God's path is the backdrop to the narratives of Elijah. The sins of Jeroboam "hang heavily over the

narratives of Elijah and Elisha."[13] And Ahab follows his path with a marriage to Jezebel. In fact in the prologue to the narratives we read "Ahab did more to vex the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel that preceeded him." (I Kings 16:33)[14] This introduction to Ahab gives us an insight to the character before the narratives begin. Not only does he follow the sins of Jeroboam, the prototype of a wicked king, but he surpasses him.

Yet, Ahab does not quite live up to his reputation. When Elijah first confronts Ahab (17:1) we see no reaction. The second time the two meet, Ahab does not respond with force and fury but with a meager retort, "Is that that you, Troubler of Israel?" (18:17) Elijah responds with accusation and then the order to assemble all the prophets of Jezebel. In light of his reputation, it is surprising that Ahab follows Elijah's order.[15] And then there is Mt. Carmel. During the contest of the prophets Ahab is absent. He does not play cheerleader nor foil; he simply is not mentioned. At the conclusion of the event, Ahab continues to take orders from Elijah (18:42,45) ultimately returning to Jezebel. Ahab is pursued, showing the king's impotence.[16] The nature of Ahab's character is thus revealed. The metaphor of rain and fire dramatically prove the power of God and his prophet. In sharp contrast, Ahab is shown to be impotent and ineffective, until the incident of Naboth which reveals further aspects in the dynamic of the two characters.[17]

In contrast to Ahab's weak character, Elijah shines as a strong personality. We have discussed above the inner life of the character of Elijah which shows moodiness and despondency. But the character also has a public side. He is a man of action and accusation; "unlike prophets who counterbalance their threats with prayers for divine mercy, Elijah is all accusation."[18] Elijah is a Man of God, protector of the widow, defender of God. This more public side of Elijah is also addressed in chapter three. Here, by way of contrast to Ahab I would like to focus on the part of Elijah they call Man of God.

MAN OF GOD

Thus far, we have reviewed several elements in the narratives which paint the picture of a unified theme. In Chapter One we have seen a progression involving Elijah's role in understanding and accepting God as sustainer and renewer of life. We have seen the consequences of accepting and rejecting this function of God. We have seen how aspects of God and his prophet are manifested as powerful through the use of metaphor. In contrast we noted that Ahab is a wicked but impotent king. By way of further contrast, we review the circumstances under which Elijah is called Man of God.

In two separate episodes, Elijah is designated Man of God. Perhaps this designation can be the key to revealing several layers of meaning. Does the title give us an insight

to the nature of Elijah? What prompts people to call Elijah Man of God? What relationship does the prophet who bears this title have with God? Let's begin by reviewing other instances in the Bible where the title Man of God appears.

Man of God is a distinction rarely given to anyone. It is always said about someone rather than by the person himself. Moses, Samuel, and Elisha are all called Man of God by way of description by a second party. Twice we hear of otherwise anonymous Men of God prophesying the death of a person or dynasty (I Samuel 2:27, I Kings 13:1). The use of the title in these latter cases prevent us from making the assumption that a Man of God must have the stature of Moses or Samuel. Moses has the distinction as the only prophet who spoke face to face with God. Samuel is called trustworthy, a man who has all his prophecies come true (I Samuel 3:19). The designation of Man of God falls under three major catagories: anonymous, *navi*, and King David.[19] Just what it means is a question of debate. Some claim it to be equivalent to the term *navi*.[20] Still others say it is a term which denotes "the manic messengers."[21] Yet others reject those designations and say that Man of God is "an honorific title conferred on certain worthy men."[22] In addition to, or perhaps despite the discussion of the modern scholars we see the designation as having a literary function.

The circumstances surrounding the use of the title in the Elijah narratives seem to be very mysterious. We first find the term used in the story involving the woman of

Zarephath. Elijah has already performed the miracle of the oil and flour and the woman's son dies. After he is revived and the woman's only remark is, "Now I know you are a Man of God and that the word of the Lord is with you." Why does the woman say this now? Didn't the miracle of the oil and flour prove and demonstrate to her that Elijah is a Man of God? Apparently it did not. On one level, this designation frames the episode of the son. First he is accused as being the cause of the death and then acknowledged as possessing God's truth.[22] The full answer to the appropriateness of her remark lies in the comparison to the other instance in which Elijah is called Man of God.

In II Kings 1 we learn of the events following Ahab's death. Ahaziah is injured and sends messengers to Baal-Zebub, god of Ekron, to divine whether or not he will recover. Elijah is informed of this by an angel of God and intercepts Ahaziah's messengers with the prophecy that Ahaziah will die. Angered, Ahaziah sends a group of fifty soldiers. The captain shouts to the mountain top: "Man of God, by order of the King, come down." Elijah's response:

> If I am a Man of God let fire come down from heaven and consume you with your fifty men. And fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty men.

This response is at the very least odd if not extreme. It seems that the captain would get credit for acknowledging that Elijah is a Man of God. Instead, he and his men die. The story repeats. Another fifty men die. The repetition

tells us that this is not chance. There is something in the address of the captain that warrants his death and the death of his men. A third group approaches Elijah and this time the captain's approach is quite different. The text reads,

> The third captain of men climbed to the top, knelt before Elijah and implored him saying, "Oh, Man of God, please have regard for my life and the lives of these fifty servants of yours (*avdecha*). Already fire has come from heaven and consumed the first two captains and their men. I beg you, have regard for my life.

An angel of God then tells Elijah to follow him. The third captain uses the language of supplication--as if the captain appears before God. He "bends his knees" and "implores." Then the captain begs for his life, recognizing that his destiny is in the hands of Elijah. Then the captain refers to his army as "servants" of Elijah. Again, in a display of utter humility he begs for his life. This is in sharp contrast to the first two groups of men who literally ordered Elijah to follow. To order a Man of God is a conflict of concepts equal to blasphemy. This Man of God, as the third captain recognizes, represents God who is all powerful and the sustainer of life. Elijah takes his orders from God, and a captain does not order a Man of God. Once the third captain acknowledges that life itself is controlled by God through his prophet Elijah, then his life is granted. The story with the widow supports this. Elijah is not recognized as a "Man of God" because of just any miracle. He is recognized as such only after he restores

life to the boy. A Man of God in our story is one who participates in the ultimate role of God as giver and taker of life.

In this chapter, we have demonstrated the power of metaphor. Rain and fire signified the manifestations of the various aspects of God. Beyond their metaphorical meanings, as a result of being an integral part of the narratives, they went beyond their metaphorical meanings to help reveal aspects of the characters of Elijah and Ahab and their relationship. We now proceed to a different relationship: that of Elijah and Elisha.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Genesis Raba, 25.3

[2] Babylonian Talmud, Erubim 17,87.

[3] M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p.
A stock response is "a habitual and stereotyped reaction in place of one which genuinely and aptly responds to a given stimulus."

[4] Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, trans. by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 106

[5] Ibid, p. 273.

[6] Ibid, p. 70.

[7] Song of Song Rabah, 7:6

[8] Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, trans. by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 273.

[9] Abraham Heschel, The Prophets Volume II, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 224.

[10] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 341.

[11] Ecclesiasties Rabbah, 10:7.

[12] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 342.

[13] Louis Gros, "Elijah and Elisha," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 178-179.

[14] Abraham Heschel, The Prophets Volume I, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 334-335.

[15] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 340.

[16] Ibid, p. 335.

[17] The murder of Naboth is an important and complex element in the character of Ahab. It is background for the narratives of Elisha and a topic for another study.

[18] Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, trans. by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 106

[19] Jay A. Holstein, "The Case of *Is Ha Elohim* Reconsidered," HUCA, XLVIII, (1977), pp. 69-70.

[20] Robert Gordis, Poets, Prophets, and Sages, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 18.

[21] Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, trans. by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 106

[22] Jay A. Holstein, "The Case of *Is Ha Elohim* Reconsidered," HUCA, XLVIII, (1977), p. 75.

[23] Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of I Kings 17-19," JBL, 101(September, 1982), p. 336.

IV

THE TRANSFERENCE OF COMMAND

Silence is all we dread
There's a ransom in a voice--
But silence is infinity.
Himself hath not a face.

Emily Dickenson

The institution of prophecy contains within it an aspect of mystery, of elusiveness. We do not read of the Biblical school of prophecy, or of a dynasty of prophets, or of a master/disciple relationship except for a few minor exceptions and in the narratives of Elijah. How does a prophet become a prophet? Pondering this, the Midrash tells of Baruch's anguish as he cries to Jeremiah, "Why can't I become a prophet like you are?"[1] Is prophecy voluntary? Example after example shows the reluctant prophet bemoan his gift, his privlege. The mystery and elusiveness of the institution lies in part with the fact that there is no institution of prophecy; there are no rules, no consistent profile of a member, no concept of voluntary participation, no recognizable connection between first and second generations. Yet the Biblical record paints the portrait of the prophet as a recognizable character. Many scholars detail the portrait taking from the prophets common attributes.[2] What is common to prophets including our Elijah? They are commanded to "go" by God, they are reluctant to do so, they know they speak for God and yet communication is always difficult.[3] Despite their common features, by the way in which the Bible records the career of the prophet we get the impression that there are merely prophets; individual and solitary. They seem to appear when

a message is in need of transmission. This is the case with Elijah. His appearance is sudden and seems to have the purpose of transmitting a message. He is alone, imparting a message though his life exists in the larger context of kings and wars. An interesting aspect of Elijah's career is that it is passed on to a second generation of prophet. Unlike Isaiah or Jeremiah, prophecy and its authority is transferred to a disciple, Elisha. In this chapter I will focus on the transference of command from one prophet to another.

Is prophecy transferred from one prophet to another on a regular basis? In Amos 7:14 we read of an allusion to the possible existence of a discipleship: "I am not a prophet nor a disciple of a prophet." Moses and Joshua are one example of a master/disciple relationship. "Deuteronomy 18:15-18 is the locus classicus of prophetic succession."[4] One of the most beautiful portraits of their relationship is their descent from Mount Sinai. Joshua hears noise coming from below and says to Moses:

> There is a cry of war in the camp but he answered, It is not the sound of the tune of triumph, or the sound of the tune of defeat; It is the sound of song that I hear! (Exodus 32:17-18)

Their perceptions are in sharp contrast. Joshua's observation foreshadows his future role as God's warrior, Moses' heir. Indeed, Joshua does take over command which is made necessary by God's decree that Moses will never cross over to the land of milk and honey. The account of the

ritual in which Moses hands the leadership over to Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:14,23 and 34:88-9) is moving yet quite different from the account of Elijah and Elisha. It does not provide a parallel in its content.

The transference of command from Elijah to Elisha seems to be quite unique and is a complicated detailed process. It involves a two part symbolic ritual in which each part is separated by a period of training. To understand this process, the technique of analyzing through juxtaposition can be utilized. I will juxtapose four sections. First I will compare section one "*Qol D'mama Daka*" with section two "The Mantle." Then I will compare section three "The Messengers" with section four "The Chariot." And lastly I will juxtapose the findings in one and two with the findings in three and four.

QOL D'MAMA DAKA

SECTION A

One sentence intiates the action in this episode. Its content is a death threat to Elijah from Jezebel. Presumably she is motivated to send a hit team to Elijah because of the preceeding events at Mt. Carmel which resulted in the murder of Jezebel's prophets. The narrative describes Elijah's response in one short abrupt comment: "frightened, he fled at once for his life." Continuing to build the drama, the text states that he went to Beersheba. The desert locale conjures images of mystery, of Moses-like theophanies of

wild unknown.[6] The writer emphasizes our images and associations with the desert as he includes the detail "and he left his servant there; he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness." Elijah is alone, solitary and travels to a remote, isolated place. Heschel notes that "superiour instances of a lifetime occur when the soul is alone."[7] Knowing this, the skillful writer has accomplished a sense of drama and suspense in two sentences. With continued swiftness the stage is completely set by the next two sentences:

> He came to a broom bush and sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "Enough," he cried, "Now O Lord take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." He lay down and fell asleep under a broom bush (19:4-5).

There is an ironic sense to Elijah's despair. On one hand the image of Elijah's moodiness is in character. The previous picture of him sitting on a hill, head in hands, anxiously waiting for rain is still fresh. On the other hand, why should a great prophet, continually defended by God be afraid and despair? Because prophets, however privy to Divine will they may be, are still human. This passage illustrates Elijah's humanity. Yet the Biblical author hints that there is more to Elijah's despair than fear of Jezebel.

Elijah seemingly runs away in fear of Jezebel. If that were the case, we would expect his prayer to be "Save me." Instead it is the complete opposite "Take my life." The reason follows the plea "for I am no better than my

ancestors." He, like his ancestors, has not ended idolatry. He, like his ancestors has not saved Israel from sin. In verse ten Elijah elaborates this point, and I paraphrase: After all the extreme measures I took in the name of God, the Israelites still forsake you, defiling and killing. I am the only one left who honors you and they want to kill me.

What follows is one of the most intriguing passages found in literature. God says to Elijah: "Stand on the mountain before the Lord." Upon reading this passage the echo of Moses resonates in our memories. The rabbis and modern scholars[8] have detailed the parallels between the two prophets (see appendix A for an abridged chart touching on the points which are particularly interesting to our subject). Both prophets have a desert theophany of which the exact geographic location is unknown. We do know that they both stand at a cave. The rabbis noting this parallel claim that the cave of Moses and the cave of Elijah were the same.[9] On one significant level, the rabbis were right: they stood at the cave of theophany which is anywhere and everywhere a person meets God.[10]

Despite the echo to Moses in a manner not duplicated elsewhere in the Bible, God appears before Elijah:

> And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind--an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake-fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire--a still small voice.

The passage is written with a poetic rhythm--not in the wind--after the wind, earthquake--not in the earthquake--after the earthquake, fire--not in the fire. The three-fold repetition of the particle "not" creates a progression, an "escalation" of phenomena which culminates in *qol d'mama daka*.[11] The rhythm is broken, jarring our expectations--after the fire--a still small voice. The last phrase breaks the pattern by using three words instead of one. The words are followed neither by "God is not in the voice" nor by "God is in the voice." Breaking a pattern which is so firmly established makes the reader stop and take notice. The effect on the reader is similar to the effect of a listener of music upon hearing a unresolved chord--we search for the resolution. The next line, then, is assumed to be the resolution: "When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle around his face and stood at the entrance of the cave." Does this action imply that awestruck Elijah realizes that God is in the voice? Most scholars assume that it does imply that. But the question misses the point. The point can be found in the contrast between this section and the contest on Mt. Carmel. The connection between these two sections is the word *qol*, the point of departure is also the word *qol*.

In the Mt. Carmel section the word *qol* is used four times in regard to the god Baal. The prophets of Baal are imploring their god to respond to the offering with fire. They "invoked Baal by name from morning to noon shouting 'O

Baal, answer us!"(I Kings 18:26) The pagan prophets are crying to Baal to bring them a sign, a devouring fire and yet they receive "no sound, and none who responded." The writer uses the word *qol*, foreshadowing the contrast with the appearence of Yahweh to Elijah. To be sure we do not miss the connection, the writer uses the word *qol* three more times. With a touch of irony Elijah says to them make more noise (v. 27) and then the writer tells us that indeed they cried louder (v. 28). Both times the word *qol* is used. And then to emphasize one more time we again read "there was no sound and none who responded or heeded."(v. 29) What follows is Elijah's success, Yahweh devours the offering with fire. When this section is contrasted to the section of the desert theophany we are puzzled by an apparent contradiction. Is God in the fire as would seem on Mt. Carmel or isn't God is the fire as stated explicitly in the desert? There is no contradiction. The answer is simply yes. On Mt. Carmel the fire was proof of God's presence, of God's superiority and it proved that Baal was an illusion not to be worshipped. Baal hath not a voice. In the desert, God was beyond the spectacle of a destructive wind or earthquake, God was beyond fire. For Elijah, God was the *qol* that was absent on Carmel. The people on Carmel were not capable of hearing soft sounds so they witnessed flashes of fire. In the desert Elijah could comprehend more than the flash of miracle, he could hear the silence of God's reality.

What is the function of wind, earthquake, and fire? Why

pick those three? Wind, earth, and fire are three of the four elements--missing is water. Each of these three are distinguished in our passage for their destructive force. The element of water has been used in the narratives as an element of nourishment. Water/rain allow for food and thematically provide proof for God as sustainer of life. A contrast is established. But as we have seen with fire, nothing is an absolute. It's not that God is absolutely never revealed to humans through fire--witness Carmel. The reverse is true with water. Though rain is a symbol for God's presence and blessing, it does not mean that God is rain or exclusively is the God of rain. While the point is made that though God is the controlling force of nature, it is also made that God lives outside of nature. Natural forces herald God's presence but are not to be mistaken for God. In our narratives such a mistake can be made. Episode after episode has had at its center grand exhibitions of God communicating to human through aspects of nature such as rain and fire. This passage serves as a balance in our perception of God--God is not wind, fire, earth. However, this does not diminish God's power as we will see in the episode of the chariot.

One last question concerning this episode must be addressed. What is the function of the following dialogue between Elijah and God and why is it repeated:

> Why are you here Elijah? He answered, I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your

> altars and put your prophets to the sword and I alone am left and they are out to take my life. (I Kings 19:9-10, 19:13-14)

The repetition of this passage is not mere redundancy. "Repetition plays a diverse role in the Old Testament. It serves for one thing, to center thought, to rescue it from disparateness and diffusiveness."[12] By repeating this passage, the writer freezes it from the fast moving action telling us to take notice, read carefully.

One scholar, Louis Gros, has focused on the question from God "What are you doing here Elijah?" The first time God asks the question the emphasis is on the word "here." What are you doing *here* instead of being out there with the people. The question is really a rebuke. The second time God asks the question really is--How could you be so depressed. Then Gros focuses on Elijah's claim that he is the only one left. He is not the only one left. God says that there will be 7,000 left in Israel (v. 18). Elijah simply feels isolated.[13] Brevard Childs also focuses on Elijah's statement that he is the only one left. Childs claims that this is the climax of the story not, as others think, "a still small voice." Elijah feels sorry for himself. His successor has been appointed, 7,000 men remain, "Elijah is clearly redundant."[14]

There is yet another understanding of how this passage functions which involves the reappearance of the word *qol*. Let us review the context in which it appears. Preceeding

the first appearence of this passage we read of Elijah's despondency, how he slept, and twice ate. Then he journeys to Mt. Horeb and spends the night in the cave. Our passage is then introduced with the phrase "then the word of the Lord was upon him." What follows this passage is the passage of "a still small voice." After the theophany, Elijah and God continue. Elijah once again is seen standing at the cave(v.13) and the dialogue is repeated, this time beginning with the words "Behold a voice (*qol*) was upon him." The use of different introductions--the word of God was upon him vs a voice was upon him--shows the reader that the still small voice is not superfluous. Again the word "voice" is repeated, somehow there is a connection between the still small voice and the voice that says, why are you here Elijah?" Then God responds to Elijah's cry by ordering him to appoint Hazael King of Aram, Jehu King of Israel, and Elisha to replace him as prophet. The order from God is a response to Elijah's plea on two levels.

On one level, this order from God is God's answer to Elijah's despair and his wish to die. The prophet can not resign. Elijah wants to quit and God responds by saying "Get back to work." Throughout the Bible we see prophets such as Jeremiah and Jonah wishing to resign from their job as prophet. Consistently we see God responding as He does here with Elijah--you aren't done until God says you're done.

On a second level, God's order to appoint two kings and

a prophet to replace Elijah is a direct answer to Elijah's cry that all Israel has forsaken God and he is the only one left. To appoint the two kings is to instigate revolution which ultimately wipes out idolatry, at least temporarily. Elijah complains that he is the only one who is for God and God answers him by saying that the new appointees will rectify this through war. God's prophecy is as follows:

> Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael shall be slain by Jehu and whoever escapes the sword of Jehu will be slain by Elisha. I will leave in Israel only food--every knee that has not knelt to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him (19:17-18).

God will see that the idolators perish and that Elijah is not the only one "zealous for God" but is joined by seven thousand righteous. But what of Elisha? Why is Elijah commanded to appoint Elisha? Nowhere in the Bible do we find a prophet passing on his or her prophetship to another (with the possible exception of Moses and Joshua, as previously noted. See appendix A). The answer lies in the command to appoint Hazael as King of Aram and Jehu as King of Israel.

Elijah does not appoint those two men as king. During Elijah's life Ahab, Ahaziah and Jehoram are the Kings of Israel and Ben Hadad is the King of Aram. Elijah ascends to the heavens before Jehu and Hazael ascend to the throne. It is in fact Elisha who is responsible for their appointment. God orders Elijah to Damascus to appoint Hazael. Elijah never makes it. Instead we read "Elisha arrived in Damascus

at a time that Ben-Hadad was ill."(II Kings 8:7). In what follows, Elisha reveals to Hazael that Ben-Hadad will die, Hazael will become king and slaughter the Israelite people. This is in complete agreement with God's prediction to Elijah. Elisha then commands his disciple to go and anoint Jehu (II Kings 9:1-13). This begins a revolution in Israel which overthrows the Omri dynasty and begins the Jehu dynasty. Once again God's prediction is realized. Indeed Jehu attempts to kill all the followers of Baal (II Kings 10:18-30).[15] Elisha is appointed as prophet to succeed Elijah in order to respond to Elijah's cry that all Israel have forsaken God.

THE MANTLE

SECTION B

In light of what was just noted therefore, it is not at all odd that immediately following God's order to anoint kings, Elijah goes to meet Elisha: "He set out from there and came upon Elisha son of Shaphat."(I Kings 19:19) This begins section B, "The Mantle." The very first image we have of Elisha is of him plowing. This image resonates nicely with the previous themes where food and sustenance were crucial. The next image also resonates of previous imagery: "There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him." We remember the twelve stones Elijah placed as he built the altar of Yahweh. Through these two images, the story tells the reader that Elisha is connected in a fundamental way with Elijah.

From this moment on the two men are inseparable. Indeed Elisha's career echoes Elijah's in many ways. This impression begins with the images of plowing and twelve oxen echoing imagery in Elijah's career.

In the next sentence, Elijah begins a two part transference of command: "Elijah came over to him and threw his mantle over him." (v.19) This is one of the several appearances of the mantle. Let's consider just what is involved in the symbol of the mantle. Many times the Biblical narrative seems abrupt, lacking in descriptive depth to the modern reader. We are often not given the details of personality traits, inner thought and motive. "Feeling, attitude, or intention are rather minimal"[16] Yet we seem to know the character well enough to identify ourselves with him or her. One way this is accomplished is through the symbolic use of clothing and accesories. For example, Moses' staff represents his leadership, Joshua's sword tell us that he is a warrior of God, or sackcloth tells us of mourning or repentance,[17] as in Jonah where the King removes his robe which is a symbol of royalty and puts on sackcloth to show a state of repentance(Jonah 3:6). In the Elijah narratives the mantle signifies three things. In I Kings 19:13 Elijah's gesture of wrapping himself in his mantle tells us of his inner thoughts. He is moved, humbled and struck with awe by his encounter with God. This is a good example of how the text reveals thought through prop(mantle) and gesture. The text does not read "Oh my God,

I am struck with awe and humility by your presence." But it does communicate the sense of such a thought through use of the mantle.

Secondly, in II Kings 1:8 the mantle is once again used as a distinguishing mark. Elijah is identified as a "hairy man with a leather belt tied around his waist." A description in Zecharia 13:4 which reads: "He will not wear a hairy mantle" which ostensibly alludes to Elijah, and therefore ties together the hairy man and the mantle. Elijah is described in terms of clothing, not personality or deed. A third level of the symbol of the mantle is found in this episode. As Elijah begins to anoint Elisha, he does so by a symbolic gesture involving the mantle. Here the mantle represents the power of prophecy which Elijah possesses, a power which he is turning over to Elisha.

The first part of our task is completed. By juxtaposing sections A and B, we have made several observations. First, we have noted the backdrop to the appointment of Elisha is Elijah's despondency and theophany. This shows us that although God will not let Elijah quit, at the very moment he wants to we see Elijah's career coming to an end. To mark this end, his personal quest for God's truth climaxes in theophany and his last major assignment is to appoint a successor. This sets the stage for the transference to begin. We also noted that such a transference is unusual in the Bible and showed why it was necessary in this case. Our hypothesis involves a two part transference of command. We

now proceed to the second part by juxtaposing two more sections; section C entitled "The Messengers" and section D entitled "The Chariot."

THE MESSENGERS

SECTION C

The section "The Messengers" is filled with hyperbole. A large group of men (fifty) order Elijah to come down from the mountain and are put to death by a fire bolt. In Hebrew the words "fire of God" alliterate with the words "Man of God."[18] This happens a second time and the third time Elijah is urged down by an angel of God. The wrath and extreme behavior of Elijah is detailed and exaggerated. Yet the reader senses that this is somehow in character for the prophet. Part of this sense stems from section A, In this section Elijah twice admits that he is "zealous for the Lord." In section A this statement is in the form of a quiet confession to God in the midst of despair. In section C, this sentiment is acted out in hyperbolic drama. Elijah has a mad flare, an exaggerated sense of loyalty to God. This character trait is important in understanding the stories surrounding Elijah. The *Mechilta D'Rabbi Ismael*[19] has great insight to this aspect of Elijah. The text reads as follows:

> It is possible to say that there are three (types) of sons. One insists on honoring God and honoring the people. One insists on honoring God and not honoring the people. One insists on honoring the people and not honoring God. Jeremiah insists on honoring both God and the people...Elijah insists on

> honoring God and not the people, as it is written, "I am zealous for the Lord, God of Hosts" etc. Why does it say in the text: "God said to him, Go back the way you came, on to the wilderness of Damascus...and Jehu son of Nimshi anoint as king over Israel and Elisha son of Shaphat anoint as prophet to succeed you." The purpose of scripture is to say: a prophet to succeed you because I don't want your prophecy. Jonah insists on honoring the people and not God....

The Midrash asks the same question we asked--why is it necessary to appoint a successor to Elijah? Their answer teaches a lesson. Elijah was zealous for God at the expense of the people which is not the kind of prophet God desires. The Midrash's point is illustrated in section C where in his zeal for upholding God's truth, Elijah kills one hundred men. This is the backdrop for section D in which Elijah executes the second part of the transference of command.

THE CHARIOT

SECTION D

This section has in it various elements which will be analyzed in detail in Chapter Five. However several aspects of this section are relevant to our subject of the transference of command. One prop and one sentence link this section to the previous sections. The prop is the mantle and the sentence includes the words *pi shnayim*. Lets first address our attention to the mantle as it appears in section D.

The word has been buzzing that the day of Elijah's

translation has arrived. Elijah and Elisha stand at the Jordan and fifty disciples stand at a distance watching. Suddenly Elijah stands still and:

> Thereupon Elijah took his mantle and rolling it up he struck the water: It divided to the right and to the left.(IIKings 2:8)

Thus the mantle of I Kings 19:19 reappears. The reappearence of the mantle is not an accident or a mistake but rather it is the deliberate usage of a prop to link two separate episodes into one. This link is important because it signifies the continuation of the transference of command. In section B, Elijah throws the mantle over Elisha, thus beginning the transference. In section D this transference is completed through a series of occurrences involving the mantle.

The first occurrence is the one cited above. First Elijah takes off the mantle never again putting it back on. As we saw, the mantle symbolizes something beyond clothing. It is a symbol for prophecy. Therefore, as Elijah removes the mantle from upon his shoulders he is performing a symbolic act; he is stripping himself of his authority, he is derobing himself of his prophetic persona. This is the beginning of the second part of transferring command to Elisha.

What follows is Elijah's last miracle. With the mantle, which symbolically possesses the prophetic spirit he parts the Jordan reminiscent of Moses. Elijah and Elisha pass

through the parted Jordan on to the shore. Their walk through Elijah's last miracle are the last steps the two take together. Yet the ritual of transference is not yet completed. After Elijah's translation the mantle appears again singeling that one last gesture is needed before the transference is completed. Elisha picks up the mantle which is twice identified as Elijah's so that the reader not mistake it for just any piece of clothing. He picks up the mantle and imitating Elijah's gesture strikes the waters of the Jordan while saying "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" With this gesture and question Elisha receives prophecy. The ritual is then completed as he walks across the parted Jordan River, this time alone, this time as prophet.

Through the use of a prop, the mantle, the writer has woven together two episodes which united, give us a visual depiction of a two part transference of command. As we follow the appearance and repeated reappearance of the mantle, we understand its symbolic value and its power as a prop to tell the story of how one prophet passes prophecy on to another.

In the beginning of this section we mentioned a sentence which provides a link to the previous section. This section C, "The messengers," where we see the zealousness of Elijah described hyperbolically. The utter exaggeration of his zeal strikes us as odd. Why exaggerate? What is the function of the hyperbole? How does this episode provide the

backdrop for section D? The answer lies in the sentence, "Let double of your spirit pass on to me."(II Kings 2:9) *Pi shnaym* is usuallly translated "a double portion." However, based on Zecharia 13:8 which reads "two thirds shall perish, shall die/and one third of it shall survive," it is clear that "double" is not the first part of one third by rather two times one third which is two thirds.[20]

Let's review the context of this sentence. As they cross the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you, before I am taken from you?" Elijah is asking Elisha for a last request. Elisha knows that the authority of prophecy is being transferred to him. But just how much? To what extent will Elisha be able to take over. The successor does not automatically command the same authority and ability as his predecessor. So Elisha answers--give me twice of what you had. For us his answer has meaning because of the previous section.[21] Elijah's zeal was exaggerated. What exactly will pass on to Elisha is yet unknown. But Elisha has the sense that if he only had twice the zeal of his master, he would be able to carry on the command. The future of Elisha's success is unknown. Elijah answers:

> You have asked a difficult thing. If you see me as I am being taken from you, this will be granted to you; if not, it will not.(II Kings 2:10)

The text continues with the description of Elijah's departure. It is unclear if Elisha succeeds in seeing Elijah as he is being taken away. It is therefore unclear if

his wish is granted.

Elisha's request provides the answer to several questions. The exact nature of what is being transferred from one prophet to the next is unknown. It is not exact. It is purposely ambigious. The fact that we don't know if Elisha's request is granted makes us curious. We begin reading Elisha's career with the questions: How does it compare to Elijah's career? Did Elisha receive two times more of Elijah's spirit? Our curiosity urges us on. The ambiguity urges us on until we see Hazael and Jehu annointed. A comparison of the two prophets is a topic for further study. Elisha's request provides the resolution to the previous section. Elijah's zeal gives definition to the desire for twice as much spirit. Elisha's request tells us that the nature of prophecy is not quantitative. He compares himself to Elijah and Elijah refuses to be used as a standard. We do not know if two times of Elijah's spirit can be measured "you have asked a difficult thing." We do not know if Elisha's request is granted.

We have utilized the literary tool of juxtaposition. We have analyzed section B in light of section A. Then we analyzed section D using section C as its backdrop. Through the use of juxtaposition we have understood the transference of command from Elijah and Elisha.

Footnotes

[1] *Mekhilta, masechet d'pischa bo, parasha aleph.*

[2] Abraham Heschel, The Prophets Volume I, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 3-26.
Heschel's description of the prophet is particularly concise, complete, and insightful.

[3] Sheldon Blank, Understanding the Prophets, (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1969), p. 37-40.

[4] R.P. Carroll, "Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession," VT, 19 (1969), p. 401.

[5] J. Lust, "A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound?," VT, 25 (January, 1975).
Lust maintains that when *demmah* is used in connection with *qol* it signifies a theophany. Despite his translation "a roaring thunderous sound" I will use the new JPS "still small voice" acknowledging that *qol* is better rendered as sound.

[6] Many scholars have noted that in the north God communicated with humans via an altar while in the south direct discourse between God and humans was more common.

[7] Abraham Heschel, The Prophets Volume II, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 179.

[8] *Pesikta Rabbati*, trans. by William Braude (USA: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 409ff.

[9] *Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 19b.*

[10] Brevard S. Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," Interpretation, 34 (April, 1980), p. 135.
Childs claims what is interesting in the paralleled is their differences. Elijah hears silence-it is as if to say that Elijah is no Moses. I'm not sure that the text supports such a conclusion, though we are not privy to the mind of the Biblical writer.

[11] J. Lust, "A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound?," VT, 25 (January, 1975), pp. 114-115.

[12] J. Muilenburg, "Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," VT,(Supplement One, 1953), p. 99.

[13] Louis Gros, "Elijah and Elisha," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 188,190.

[14] Brevard S. Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," Interpretation, 34 (April, 1980), p. 135.

[15] The resolution of this sequence of the literature does not mean the history has stopped and that idolatry never again appears. The writer has concluded an aspect of one story and then may go on to tell another tale in which idolatry is once again central.

[16] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), p.114.

[17] Abraham Heschel, The Prophets Volume II, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

[18] John Gray, I and II Kings, Old Testament Library,(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970),p. 464.

[19] *Mekhilta, masechet d'pischa bo, parasha aleph,* translation is mine.

[20] The rabbis as well as modern commentators translate *pi shnaym* as double portion. Rabbi Herbert C. Brichto pointed out to me that it does not mean double but twice as much as others. Sanhedrin 41 addresses this subject.

[21] Louis Gros, "Elijah and Elisha," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative, ed. by Gros Louis with Ackerman (New York: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 185. Gros claims that Elisha's answer gives us insight into his personality. He stands firm and solid as he does as he refuses to leave Elijah's side.

V

THE CHARIOT: AN AGGREGATE OF CONCLUSIONS

This is my tale which I have told,
If it be sweet, if it not be sweet,
Take somewhere else and let some return to me.
This story ends with me still rowing.

Anne Sexton
"Rowing"

Like a richly woven tapestry, the narratives of Elijah contain a variety of colors and textures of thread and yet manage to create one beautiful picture. To understand the message of the picture we have looked closely at each important thread examining it for its uniqueness and its function in the larger picture. The episode "The Chariot" (II Kings 2:1-15) shines with all the aspects of theme and technique which we have discovered throughout the narrative. Because it is an aggregate of form and content used consistently in the narratives, an examination of this section serves as an appropriate summary. By imploying the literary techniques used by the writer as a framework, let us then examine "The Chariot" in light of the episodes which precede it.

THE IMAGERY: ENTRANCES, TRANSITIONS, EXITS

Imagery is the magic of the written word. It communicates through mental pictures conjured up in the mind of the reader. One image may associate with another, or one picture may trigger other pictures from other parts of a work. Such is the case in the opening scenes of "The Chariot." We see a clear picture of Elijah here which we associate with other pictures we have seen. Let us examine this opening imagery in "The Chariot" noting associations it brings to mind.

We see Elijah and Elisha together for the first time since their initial meeting in the beginning of this

episode. The picture is somewhat comical. It seems that Elijah is trying to escape the companionship of Elisha. He tries to lose Elisha by claiming that he has work to do first in Gilgal, then Bethel, then Jericho, then the Jordan. Each attempt to get away is met with Elisha's insistance "as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." Elisha's statement is ironic. On one hand it assumes Elijah's death as the time when Elisha will no longer follow Elijah. Yet, Elijah's death is never conclusive and Elisha continues to follow the "spirit" of Elijah by receiving prophecy and continuing his mission. In this opening scene Elijah tries unsuccessfully to rid himself of Elisha. He is almost like a dying elephant trying to wander away to some mysterious place so that he may die in peace. What is odd here is not that Elijah is trying to escape Elisha but that he is temporarily unable to do so. Elijah's elusiveness is one of the characteristics that make him intruiging and mysterious.

What is elusive in Elijah is his entrances, transitions, and exits. This section, where Elijah tries to escape Elisha's grasp, dramatizes this aspect of Elijah. As we read it, we make associations to other sections of the narrative where Elijah appears or disappears abruptly or in a unique fashion. We have noted in a previous chapter that our introduction to Elijah is abrupt. In the midst of the annals of Kings our writer introduces Elijah as deeply involved in his work, "Elijah, the Tishbite, an inhabitant

of Gilead, said to Ahab...(I Kings 17:1)." That is our introduction. No geneology is provided, not even "the son of.." is given. We get the impression by what follows that we have begun in the middle of the story. Contrast to Isaiah, where although not elaborate, we see a definite introduction to the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 1:1). Or contrast to Jeremiah, whose introduction is elaborate. We have geneology, a detailed geographic location, detailed dating, and poetry describing the origin of his prophetic spirit. Through our own sense, and through comparison, we see that Elijah's initial entrance is abrupt and mysterious. The text continues to support this impression.

In I Kings 18 Elijah meets Obadiah and tells him to summon Ahab. Obadiah's response is one of fear that Ahab will kill him. He says that a great search for Elijah concluded that he was nowhere to be found. The elusive nature of the prophet is noted. Obadiah knows that Elijah appears and disappears suddenly: "When I leave you, the spirit of the Lord will carry you off I don't know where; and when I come and tell Ahab and he does not find you, he will kill me(v.12). "Obadiah's lengthy, clumsy repetitive speech is in sharp contrast to Elijah's precise response."[1] The prophet's persona is controlled and distant, and our impressions are confirmed by the text. Elijah mysteriously enters and exits.

Again to support this, the text supplies a detail by way of transition which serves only to confirm the mystery

of Elijah. In I Kings 18 Elijah is victorious over the prophets of Baal and succeeds in ending the drought. The rain is pouring down and Ahab sets out to Jezreel to tell Jezebel of the events that insued. The text then reads "the hand of the Lord had come upon Elijah. He tied up his skirts and ran in front of Ahab all the way to Jezreel."(v.46) This ostensibly provides a transition, yet it more successfully supplies another link in the chain of mystery which surrounds Elijah.

This brings us back to the episode the "The Chariot." Elijah tries to be elusive as he is described by Obadiah. He is only temporarily unsuccessful because the narrative concludes in the most elusive, mysterious exit of all. It is in the context of the fiery chariot that Obadiah's words ring of foreshadowing. God does take Elijah away. This final exit filled with the vivid imagery of fiery horses, chariots, and a whirlwind captures the imagination. Elijah is appealing, continually drawing our attention because of the mystery of his entrance, transition and exits. "The Chariot" elaborates this aspect of Elijah through imagery of his attempted escape of Elisha and through his grand ultimate escape of the world.

SYMBOL: THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

This topic has been addressed in great detail in the previous chapter. By God's command, prophecy is transferred from Elijah to Elisha. The exit via the chariot is the

Bible's most vivid account of a heavenly ascent. Yet the narratives main focus is not this ascent. It seems to be more concerned with prophetic succession.[2] The ascent has symbolic value which sheds further light on the transference. All along our focus in regard to prophecy has been on Elijah and Elisha. The chariot diverts this focus to God, the real source, the more appropiate focus. In the midst of the episode which is the climax of the transference of prophetic authority we see the flash of a miracle whose source is undeniably God. The chariot, on this level, is a symbol for the command of God. God is the commander, God is the source of prophecy. Integrally related to the transference of command is this strong symbol. The original order from God was to anoint Elisha(I Kings 19:16). The ultimate occurrence shows us something quite different. Fiery horses and a fiery chariot separate the two prophets. So great is the event that Elisha can only cry "Father, Father! Israel's chariots and horseman." The repetition carries with it a sense of urgency as in the Song of Deborah, "Awake, Awake utter a song." (Judges 5:12).[3] Following this urgent exclamation Elisha acquires the prophetic spirit. The chariot as a symbol for God as the source of prophecy is confirmed. Ultimately God has the power to decree who shall be prophet.

THE METAPHOR OF MIRACLE

Perhaps what first catches the reader's attention in

the narrative are the miracles connected with Elijah. The writer tells a fantastic tale of miracle after miracle. To the reader who dares to ask--but is this true--a most fantastic miracle ends the stories jarring our sense of real and logic. The miracles in the Elijah narratives are metaphor. They stand for something beyond the literal. They repeatedly give us one message: God is omnipotent, God is supreme, God is the source of life and death. God decides who shall live as we saw with the widow's son. God decides when humans shall be sustained as we saw in the metaphors of rain and fire. God alone controls life giving and sustaining powers as we saw on Mt. Carmel. God is the source of life and the source of death. The chariot encompasses this message most dramatically. Elijah was the one that God provided for in time of drought. Elijah is the one whose death is orchestrated by a display of ultimate power by God. Does Elijah die? The disciples doubt it as they search mountain and valley for him. Does Elijah die? Elisha thinks so as he rents his clothing in mourning and tells the disciples that their search will prove futile. Does Elijah die? The reader is not sure. The text is ambiguous--purposely ambiguous. We may conclude that the metaphor of the chariot tells us that ambiguous death is another term for immortality. God controls life, controls death, God can make the prophet immortal.

The metaphor of miracle is repeated and its message is clear. The writer does not want us to believe in ravens

delivering food, boys rising from death, altars consumed in heavenly fire, or even a chariot with fiery horsemen. The writer in fact asks us not to believe in fantastic winds, earthquakes and fires. We are asked to believe in the silence of a voice that is God. We are asked to believe in the metaphor that proclaims God's supremacy and power over life and death itself.

HYPERBOLE AND UNDERSTATEMENT: DRAMA AND SILENCE

We have seen an abundance of hyperbole in the narratives. Once again we find that the chariot is a good example of a common element. The scene of Elijah's disappearance is nothing if not hyperbolic. In the midst of the parted Jordan River two men, one excessively hairy and the other bald are talking when suddenly out of the sky a fiery chariot pulled by fiery horsemen pass between the men and before the bald one can finish a sentence of shock the hairy one is whisked heavenward in a whirlwind. The scene is exaggerated, dramatic and rather comic. One of the functions of hyperbole is to provide a contrast to understatement. Many parts of Elijah are understated and would go relatively unnoticed if they were not set in contrast to outrageous hyperbolic moments.

To illustrate, we can glance at the two sides of Elijah's character--the private and public. His public appearances stand out. We see a wild-eyed man on top of Mt. Carmel proving to all the supremecy of his God. Mt. Carmel

is unquestionably a public appearance of Elijah. It is also unquestionably a scene which utilizes hyperbole. At Mt. Carmel, Elijah is tough, singleminded, and bit of a fanatic. His religious zeal cannot be denied. He has declared war on idolatry and will not stop until he wins. And he does win. This is a public moment, this is a moment in which details are exaggerated, in which hyperbole succeeds in imparting a grand message. Contrast this to the next scene. Elijah runs off to the desert. He is now alone. We catch a glimpse at the private Elijah. One who is scared, given to despair. One who cries in almost a whisper, I alone am left in my zeal for God. How different from the man who just yelled from a mountain top, "How long will will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him."(I Kings 18:20) Here we see two Elijahs: the public persona described in the language of hyperbole and the private persona described in hushed tones, understated. This contrast repeats itself in various ways. We see the public Elijah with the messengers. He is again crazed, fanatic, declaring war. Contrast that to a previous scene in I Kings 18:42-43) Elijah is alone in a pose of despondency, head in hands, waiting for rain, waiting for God. A quiet moment, an understated moment characteristic of the private Elijah.

One last illustration: the ultimate moment of quiet solitude contrasted to the ultimate moment of public spectacle. The ultimate public spectacle is obviously the

chariot. How fitting for the public Elijah, fanatic in zeal for God to ultimately be carried away before a crowd by the same God. The ultimate moment of quiet solitude is his desert theophany. This is the episode where the writer tells us in plain language that hyperbole serves only as a device by which to illuminate understatement. God is not in noisy displays of wind, earthquake, and fire. God is in the silent voice. Listen to the silences.

The message of the hyperbole lies in the concept of decoy. The dictionary defines decoy as a thing or person used to lure or tempt into a trap. Hyperbole is flashy, obvious, distracting. We are drawn to the moments in which hyperbole is used in the narratives. We remember Mount Carmel, the chariot--for centuries we remember them. But if to remember these moments means to forget the quiet scenes of Elijah, then we have fallen into the trap, we then have been successfully decoyed away from the essence of the narratives. For despite the noise of miracles, it is the silence of a still voice that should resound in our memories. There is a danger in falling into the trap. If we think that God participates in our world only through grand miracle we will soon be non-believers. Our text tells us not to believe in the noise of miracle. The real miracles are in quiet moments like another sunrise, another child born, another person falling in love. These are the miracles. The grandeur of God is in the mundane, and we meet this grandeur in the silence of a desert voice.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), p. 73.

[2] Mary Dean-Otting, Heavenly Journeys in Hellenistic Jewish Literature (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion, 1983), pp. 12-13.

[3] J. Mullenburg, "Hebrew Rhetoric: Repitition and Style," VT,(Supplement One, 1953), p. 102.

APPENDIX A

Moses	Elijah
THEOPHANY:	
Exodus 33:21-23	I Kings 19:11-13.
Takes place near Mount Sinai	Takes place near Mount Horeb
"Station yourself on the rock"	"Stand on the mountain"
God's presence passes by	God's presence appears in a soft murmuring sound
God's hand covers Moses' face	Elijah covers his face with a mantle
TRANSFERENCE OF COMMAND	
Transference needed because God fires Moses	Transference needed because Elijah wants to quit
Joshua completes the task and leads the children of Israel to the Promised Land	Elisha finishes the job anoints Hazael and Jehu to end idolatry
Detailed ritual of transference	Detailed ritual of transference
DEATH	
Mysterious	Mysterious
Obsession for future speculation	Obsession for future speculation

APPENDIX B

DEFINITIONS

The Bible: I use this term to refer to the Pentateuch, Prophets, and Writings. It is a literary document with a consistant theological point of view and a consistant attitude toward the multi-aspects of the human condition. It is therefore possible to make comparisons and analogies between the different parts of the Bible.
The new JPS translation is used unless otherwise indicated.

The Writer: By using this term I do not mean to imply that the writer of the Bible was one male writing in one time period. However all Biblical recorders had at their disposal literary conventions, a common vocabulary, and a concept of metaphor which renders the text intelligible, and its interpretation possible.
I use the pronoun "he" while acknowledging that the writer could be either male or female.

God: The pronoun "he" is applied to God to make clear written expression possible. The proper noun "Yahweh" is rendered "Lord." In both cases the assumption is not that God is male, but that human expression of God is limited to metaphor.

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