

Elijah and Elisha – The Book of Kings, Part 3

Prophetic Authority

The prophets Elijah and Elisha are not characters that obviously fit within the Deuteronomistic History. It could be that the Deuteronomistic Historian was pulling from and adapting stories from much older source material. Elijah's name means "YHWH is my God" and his character is similar in many ways to Moses. His most important role is to counter Israel's practice of worshiping other gods introduced by Jezebel and Ahab. To this end, a showdown occurs between Elijah, a single prophet of YHWH, and 400 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19-29).

Ancient kings had prophets on call for advice. Here, Elijah appears to be the only prophet willing to tell Ahab that what he's doing is wrong. Elijah reacts strongly against injustice and royal abuses of power. In his book *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Robert Wilson theorized that some ancient prophets were "central" while others were "peripheral." Central prophets told the king what he wanted to hear, while peripheral prophets dared to push back. The prophets whose names we know today, like Elijah, were almost always the ones who challenged the king's authority.

Prophetic Miracles

Prophets were understood to be capable of channeling divine power. This was primarily expressed through miracles—miraculous healings or by producing natural phenomena (e.g. rain, fire, animals, etc.). In Elijah's case, the miracles he performs tend to help individual people and communities rather than demonstrate a larger theological message (i.e. "... and therefore follow the Torah").

The Hebrew Bible leaves room for other prophets to channel other gods' divine powers to their own ends. When Moab is losing its fight with Israel, for example, their king sacrifices his own child to a Moabite god as a last ditch effort to avert defeat (2 Kings 3:27). After this, Israel retreats. There is some archaeological evidence related to this story found on the Moabite Stone, which describes Moab's victories over Israel by King Mesha. While the Bible credits other gods with *some* power, Deuteronomistic theology reinforces the point that YHWH always has *more* power. This is clear when the 400 prophets of Baal call out to their gods, "but there was no voice and no one answered" (1 Kings 20:26).

'Anointed Ones'

Elijah is perhaps most famous for his grand exit in XXX. This kind of miraculous exit is rare in biblical texts. This indicates something about Elijah's status as a prophet. If he has been taken to heaven, the assumption is that he must come back. Over time, his character comes to be interpreted as the herald of the messiah.

Elijah's story raises questions about the kinds of power that prophets had during this time. The fact that Elijah has the power to anoint others like Jehu could shift our ideas about what being a prophet entailed. There were also multiple prophets called "anointed ones" (messiahs). Elijah's final act is one of slaughter. Jezebel falls to her death and his earlier prophecy is fulfilled: "dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (1 Kings 21:19, 23).