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Bible study ***1***

Jakub FORMANEK (CZ)
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Translation: Kathy WEBB-PEPLOE

Elijah at Horeb: God Who Is Not in the Earthquake

A Bible study on 1 Kings 19

1. After victory comes collapse

The text begins after a great religious victory. On Mount Carmel, Elijah has stood his ground in the confrontation with the prophets of Baal; the LORD has appeared in fire, and Elijah stands as a prophet of zeal and struggle. Yet immediately afterwards comes a breaking point: Jezebel threatens him with death, Elijah flees, and in the wilderness, he says: 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life.'

This is not ordinary tiredness, but the outpouring of a person in crisis. The remarkable thing about the text is that God does not begin with an explanation. He does not instruct Elijah or reproach him for his weak faith. First there is sleep, bread, and water. Then again sleep, bread, and water.

For crisis intervention this is powerful: in acute distress, interpretation is not usually the priority; stabilization is. The body needs to stop being in alarm mode; the person has to regain the capacity to be present. God does not first persuade Elijah. God stabilizes him.

2. Horeb as a second Sinai

Elijah travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God. Horeb is Sinai: the place of Moses, the covenant, the Decalogue, and the Divine Name. This is why Elijah can be read as a second Moses: the mountain of God, forty days, the covered face, God passing by, and a new commission [2].

In Exodus 3, Moses hears at the burning bush the mysterious 'I am who I am' / 'I will be who I will be.' God does not allow himself to be grasped as an object or a definition; he gives the promise of his presence. In 1 Kings 19 something similarly profound happens: God reveals himself as something which can't be viewed as a thing to worship such as fire and storm were for worshippers of Baal in the East. He reveals himself as Person, as non-objective reality. AI cannot replace God. God is Person, not infinite calculus, not a super smart computer. God is a silent voice of meeting, of encounter.

3. ‘The LORD was not in it’

On the mountain a powerful wind comes, tearing the mountains apart and shattering the rocks. But the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind comes an earthquake. But the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake comes fire. But the LORD was not in the fire.

Wind, earthquake, and fire are not random natural events. They are classic biblical signs of divine manifestation. That is why it is so surprising that the text repeats the negation three times. God refuses to be identified with an element, a force, an effect, a catastrophe, or a religious drama [3].

This does not mean that God can never act through fire or storm. It means that no fire, no tremor, and no intensity is God in itself. The LORD is not simply a bigger fire. He is not a stronger Baal. He is not the greatest force among forces.

4. The voice of delicate silence

After the fire comes the Hebrew qōl dĕmāmāh daqqāh. Qōl means voice or sound. Dĕmāmāh means silence, stillness, quieting, motionlessness. Daqqāh means delicate, thin, subtle, fragile. That is why translations vary: a still small voice, ‘a gentle whisper,’ ‘a voice of silence,’ ‘the sound of sheer silence’ [2,5].

The phrase is paradoxical: a voice of silence. The text does not merely say that silence occurred. It says that within the silence there was communication. Silence here is not emptiness, but a space in which a person can again be addressed. Here, God is not a thing among things. He is not something that can be pointed to, possessed, displayed, or used. He comes as a discourse that can only be heard.

Here the non-objectifying dimension of the text reveals itself: God cannot be identified with an objective phenomenon. He remains free in relation to all manifestations that would try to capture him as an object. He reveals himself as the voice of delicate silence.

5. A voice that is not merely information

This ancient text touches in a striking way on the present age of artificial intelligence. We live in a world in which technical, media, digital, and algorithmic voices multiply. AI can generate sentences, answers, summaries, and connections. It can create the impression of understanding. It can speak.

And yet we must ask: is every voice a message? Artificial intelligence works with object-like material: collections of texts, patterns, statements, probabilities, and connections. It can handle language, but it does not enter into relationship as a person. It can answer, but it does not bear responsibility. It can imitate dialogue, but it has no face.

This is precisely why 1 Kings 19 can sound new: not every sound is revelation, not every piece of information is truth, not every answer is encounter. Intensity is not yet presence. Performance is not yet wisdom. Language is not yet relationship. Information is something I can have and use; communication happens to me and changes me.

6. A modern echo: ‘The Sound of Silence’

As a cultural echo, one might hear Simon & Garfunkel’s song The Sound of Silence. It is not a biblical commentary, but it is a modern image of a world in which there is much speech and yet little real encounter. The song was originally released in 1964 and later became one of the duo’s key songs; the Library of Congress included it in the National Recording Registry as a recording of cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance [9,10].

It is important to be clear: the biblical voice of delicate silence is not the same as the empty silence of alienation. For Elijah, silence is not the absence of meaning, but the space allowing communication. In the song, silence is rather a sign of emptiness between people who have lost the ability truly to hear one another.

And precisely in this contrast between the two types of silence, the text of 1 Kings 19 can sound new. There is a silence that is empty, because no one listens. But there is also a silence that is replete, because in it a person stops confusing noise with truth.

7. Elijah may not receive the lesson

After the voice of delicate silence, the question sounds again: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ And Elijah answers almost exactly as before: I have been very zealous for the LORD... I alone am left... they seek my life.’ It is as though he has heard something new yet still remains inside his old fire.

This is profoundly human. Even a great prophet can experience revelation and still hold on to his original interpretation. Elijah’s zeal is not wrong in itself; the problem comes when zeal becomes the only language through which he understands God, himself, and the world. Some Jewish interpretations see this as the precise moment where Elijah does not fully receive the lesson of the ‘still small voice’ [6,7].

This matters for the caring professions as well. We may be zealous for good, for truth, for the patient, for justice, for healing, or for faith. But even good zeal can become a fire that no longer knows how to hear the delicate silence.

8. Conclusion

Elijah’s story is not simply a story about silence. It is the story of a person in crisis who returns to the place where faith began and has to learn again who God is.

God is not in every earthquake. Not in every powerful force. Not in every fire. He is not automatically wherever intensity, drama, or religious effect is greatest. At Horeb he reveals himself as the voice of delicate silence: as an unpossessable word that cannot be owned, displayed, or used.

And perhaps that is why it is so difficult to hear him: because we cannot use him to confirm our own fire. Yet God does not abandon Elijah. He sends him back, shows him that he is not alone, and gives him Elisha. Everything does not depend on Elijah. That too is grace.

Questions for the group

1. Where in my life or work do I confuse truth, God, or meaning with force, performance, or intensity?

2. How do I recognize the difference between genuine revelation and mere tremor?

3. What sentence do I repeat like Elijah — even after life or God has already shown me something else?

4. What is my ‘zeal’? When is it faithfulness, and when does it prevent me from hearing?

5. Where today do I first need bread, water, and sleep before I am capable of spiritual interpretation?

6. What is the difference between a voice that gives me information and a voice that truly speaks to me?

7. Where in our time do we hear much talking but little relationship?

8. What does artificial intelligence evoke in me: wonder, fear, usefulness, emptiness, or a question about what is truly human?

9. What might the ‘voice of delicate silence’ mean for me — not as escape from the world, but as a new word spoken to me?

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