

Elijah: a man just like us – a God just like his

Third of a series: 1 Kings 18: the insider and the outsider

TONY BAKER

Keywords: Covenant, courage, authority, confidence, prayerfulness

For the occasional visitor to an art gallery, it can be a real help to have some specialist guidance, so that we not only appreciate what has been painted, but why the artist painted a scene as he did. We may apply the same approach to 1 and 2 Kings: they are as a telling record of the religious and political history of God's people; but the underlying thread is that Israel is God's Covenant people (note 8:6, 9, 21 and 23). This Covenant is maintained through the revealed Word of the Lord **being** responded to in trust and obedience. The great **sadness** is that Israel breaks and rejects the Covenant: see 19:10, 14.

This underlying thread continues through the life and ministry of Elijah: we meet one man burdened by the people's covenant breaking, who has been raised up by the Lord, and whose life and ministry are controlled by that Word. Elijah is called to live out and to preach out the Word of God, to call king and country back to the Word, and to show them they cannot escape its authority. Nor can anyone in any generation: having heard the scripture which told him where the Christ was to be born, Herod sought to 'out wit' the Word of God (Matthew 2): not only did he fail but 'the child' (Matthew 2:8) will be his judge one day.

Note the emphasis as we move into this section of Elijah's ministry: '... the Word of the Lord came ...' (18:1). But it was 'after a long time, in the third year' that this decisive encounter came. What had Elijah been doing in the meantime? No doubt he had got on with being faithful to the Lord: praying and ministering the Word to the widow at Zapheth and to her son – and maybe other friends. In 'quieter' times in life (if such there are), there need usually be no lack of opportunity for service. What is needed, in Nietzsche's famous phrase, is 'a long obedience in the same direction'. Daniel so well illustrates this: he continues steadily in the background over many years, and so was always ready when necessary to step into the limelight.

When this fresh development arrived, Elijah's immediate reaction is to be as trustingly obedient (18:1-2) as he had been earlier (17:2-5), although the instruction is quite different. Nietzsche's famous phrase should per-

haps be rewritten as 'a long obedience in any direction', which the Lord prescribes.

Then comes a lengthy section on Obadiah, and we ask, 'Why has the author majored on this?' The obvious answer, 'because that's the way it happened' is of course true, but it may not be the full answer.

Obadiah – the 'insider'

Obadiah was a top courtier; presumably in the United Kingdom he would be 'Comptroller of the Queen's Household'! We are directed to his strengths:

a) He was a 'devout believer in the Lord' (v.3)

What a place to find such a man: we praise God for devout Christians in high places that are also tricky places. We think of Joseph in Egypt; we think of Daniel in Babylon; of Cranmer coping with Henry VIII in 16th century England, before being burnt at the stake by Henry's daughter. We think of Abraham Kuyper, the Calvinist Prime Minister of Holland in the early 20th century. Of Kuyper, his biographer Frank Vanden Berg, wrote, 'Dr Kuyper was indeed a controversial figure, in Holland at once the most devotedly loved and the most violently hated man of his day. Yet, out of the monumental labours and the bitter conflict of fifty years, he emerged a national figure of commanding stature.'

Such men need to be supported and prayed for by other Christians, especially in the local churches to which they still need to belong. We need to ask the Lord to raise up Obadias and Josephs and Daniels for the 21st century.

b) He was a dedicated servant of the Lord (v.4)

While Jezebel was about her murderous work, Obadiah went quietly about his rescue work 'within a yard of hell'. We are given an interesting insight into the number of prophets still around despite of massacre. Surely

not all these prophets were intended always to exercise the infallible ministry of those whose words form a part of Scripture, although particular events and insights were revealed to them (see 2 Kings 2). No doubt they had also an invaluable ministry of preaching and exhortation, which would have been inimical to Jezebel.

c) He was devoted to the Word of the Lord (v.7)

Why this respect from a well-dressed courtier for the countryman in the rough, hairy garment with the leather belt (2 Kings 1:8)? Because Obadiah knew Elijah brought the Word of the Lord. We live in an age which in England has rightly removed ministers from any pedestals they once fancied: but that must not lead to a loss of respect for the Word they bring, nor for the office of pastor teacher as such (see 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 and Hebrews 13:7).

There are, however, certain questions about Obadiah that we are entitled to ask, without our passing judgement, which God's Word does not do:

i) Did Obadiah compromise his faith (vv.7-8)?

With the worship of Baal all around, with Jezebel killing the Lord's prophets, should he have kept as silent as he seems to have done? We know that amongst Evangelicals today, some shift their stance, but others simply stay silent. We need to remember Lot, as well as Lot's wife (Luke 17:32); without 2 Peter 2:7-8 (cf. Genesis 19:1), it would have been hard to guess Lot tut-tutted over news items carried by the 'Sodom Sentinel'. 'We may be sugar, but we must also be . . . salt', wrote F.B. Meyer. Is there an edge to Elijah's praise in v.8, 'your master' after Obadiah has referred to Elijah as 'my lord . . .' (v.7)? Is Elijah asking, 'To whom are you looking first, Obadiah? To the servant of the Lord, or the servant of Baal?'

But not compromising does not mean being always only negative. Some orthodoxy can seem very arid or unattractive. One wonders how much such people stand in the presence of God (cf. 17:1).

ii) Was his personal comfort his first concern (vv.9-12)?

That would be our strong temptation if we were in Obadiah the courtier's shoes. Did he even see faith in the Lord as something of a personal insurance policy (v.12)? Contrast the reckless courage and obedience of Cambodian Christians recorded in Don Cormack's searching book *Killing Fields, Living Fields*.

iii) Did he feel he had done enough for the Lord (vv.13-15)?

Is Obadiah saying, 'You can't expect me to do any more: I've done my share.'? Supposing Jesus had said that before Calvary. This is a challenge for Christians as we move on in life, particularly perhaps for those in retirement. Our reading of the text leads to the conclusion that the question marks we have regarding Obadiah are answered by the robust, godly example of

Elijah: 'Whom I serve' (v.15 is literally, 'Before whom I stand') is an exact repetition of 17:1. What was true of Elijah then is still true of Elijah in his present situation. Obadiah stood in the presence of King Ahab; Elijah stood in the presence of the Lord, the King of Kings. So when Elijah prepared to meet Ahab again, he saw that pathetic tyrant in true perspective.

Elijah – the 'outsider'

Remember again that 'Elijah was a man just like us' (James 5:17): what the Lord has been working in this man's life and ministry, he can work into ours as well.

a) There is great courage in his ministry of the Word (vv.16-18)

What Obadiah it seems had apparently been unable to say, Elijah states without delay: are there areas of God's Word we dare not preach? Elijah goes to the heart of the trouble, which is disobedience to the Lord's revealed truth (v.18). In every generation that accounts for so many of the church's problems with the accompanying grieving of God's Spirit.

b) There is great authority in his ministry (vv.19-21)

There was an authority that drew many together. Why did Ahab agree to Elijah's request? Did he think Elijah might reverse the drought? Would the prophets of Baal win the day? I suspect there was a note of authority about the Word of the Lord through Elijah that was irresistible; and it drew the crowds. We think of the magnetic power of the Word of God in times of spiritual awakening: the crowds that will queue for a great sporting event or a great sale at the shops find they are queuing out of hunger for God's Word (see Luke 5:1). Elijah's God can bring such times again!

It was an authority that brought hearers to the point of decision and therefore the place of division (v.21). 'They thought to play on both sides', said Matthew Henry, but Elijah was too firm a referee to allow that! In gospel terms we must say that we all go one way or the other. The Cross is a crossroads. When we are preaching on John 3:16-17, we need in fairness to the balance of the Word, and in fairness to our hearers to include at least 3:18 and 36. But if preachers themselves 'waver between two opinions', what can we expect hearers to do?

c) There is great faith in his ministry (vv.22-24)

Elijah's faith is of course in the Lord, and in the Lord alone. Indeed, the whole of God's Word has no confidence in any other religion whatsoever, apart from God's revealed truth and his saving work in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by

which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Elijah's particular confidence in the Lord answering by fire (v.24) is based on what God had done at previous pivotal moments in the days of Moses (Leviticus 9:24) and Solomon (2 Chronicles 7:1). I have no answer to the intriguing but secondary question of why the author of Kings did not include the record of the fire coming down when Solomon dedicated the temple. It would have emphasized that the God of Solomon is the God of Elijah. Nevertheless, the event happened and Elijah surely knew it had happened. His faith was based on the unchanging faithfulness of God.

d) There is great steadfastness in his ministry (vv.25-35)

Elijah knew how to set the scene and build up to a climax: 'Elijah, the holy rascal, was a master of drama. He knew how to stage-manage a show', says William Still, and there was nothing wrong with that! The whole incident is told wonderfully graphically. We can see the ridiculous ranting and raving of the prophets of Baal (v.26). As someone has said, 'Pagan religion is preoccupied with making God hear', and our Lord commented on that (and perhaps he had the event in mind) in Matthew 6:7: 'When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words'. We can hear the sarcastic taunts of Elijah: 'Shout louder!' (v.27).

Whereas the prophets of Baal 'shouted . . . and . . . danced' (v.26), Elijah solemnly and steadily rebuilds the altar in the light of the revealed Word of the Lord (v.31), aware that he is standing in the long line of those to whom the Lord has graciously revealed himself (v.36). So again:

e) There is great prayerfulness in his ministry (vv.36-37)

The man who stood so much before the Lord on his own, now stands before him in an equally intimate way but with thousands around. His public praying reflected his private praying, as did our Lord's (John 11:41-42). I think of two noted ministers recently quoted (Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel, London, and William Still of Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen) in whose public prayers one felt one was sharing in an intimate conversation with their Father.

Elijah's prayer was not with many words but 'he prayed earnestly' (James 5:17; literally 'he prayed with prayer') to the covenant-keeping, unchanging God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who still speaks his Word. It is in obedience to that Word that Elijah ministers (v.36: 'command' = 'word'): see how that Word draws out Elijah's own prayer. In effect he prays, 'Lord, come and honour your word'.

f) There is great concern for the Lord's honour in his ministry (v.37)

– as hearts are turned back to the Lord, and as he is

seen as the only God, the Saviour God. We too are to share Elijah's concern for the glory of God in the turning and changing of hearts. Only the Lord can remove hearts of stone and give hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). The fire had already fallen on Elijah. 'Get on fire for God and men will come and see you burn', said John Wesley. But then the fire of the Lord did fall afresh:

The Lord – the 'insider' God and the 'outsider' God – immanent and transcendent (vv.38-39)

The God whom Baal could never oust from being among his people, yet came from the clear sky and answered by fire.

Of course, we see Calvary prefigured – another altar, another sacrifice, with the invisible fire of God's wrath falling on his own beloved Son. That is why the fire fell at Pentecost without consuming the disciples: the wrath was satisfied and spent at the cross, so at Pentecost it came to enlighten and to teach and to equip. On Carmel the tide was turned and a nation saved; at the cross, righteousness and peace kissed each other (Psalm 85:10), and a whole world was saved. After Carmel, the prophets of Baal were disposed of (v.40; see Deuteronomy 13:12-18); at Calvary, Satan received his mortal blow. The roaring lion is in his death throes. As a boatman remarked to me on the shores of Lake Kariba after striking a poisonous snake: 'He is killed but he is not yet dead!' At Carmel, a crowd cried, 'The Lord – he is God'. At Calvary, a Roman Centurion, probably scarcely grasping the significance of his own words, said of Jesus, 'Surely, he was the Son of God' (Matthew 27:54). In leading needy, sinful men and women to Calvary, we have a greater privilege than Elijah in leading them to Carmel.

Yet for Elijah, after the fire, there was no quiet evening by the fireside. Carmel, like Calvary, was a great energizer in prayer. Elijah knew the rain was coming and yet (because of that mysterious interlocking of divine sovereignty and human responsibility) knew that his prayer ministry was needed if the rain was to come (vv.41-46). And so he prayed and prayed until it was reported that 'a cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea' (v.44). It may have been the size of a man's hand: that was immaterial, for the almighty hand of the Lord was behind it.

Elijah knew that nothing could undo what had happened on Carmel, as nothing can undo Calvary. In the ongoing joys and battles and struggles of ministry and service, we fight not towards victory but from it. And like Elijah in v.46, we look to the constantly renewed 'power of the Lord' to keep us (in the words of Hebrews 12:1-2) 'running with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus'.

Tony Baker is Vicar of Bishop Hannington Church, Hove, East Sussex.