

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

THE ELIJAH CYCLE AND ITS PLACE IN KINGS

D.F. Payne,

In the context of the books of Kings, which are visibly structured round the careers of the kings of Israel and Judah, the sequence of chapters unfolding the narratives about Elijah and Elisha come as something of a surprise to the reader, almost a digression from the main thrust of the whole. The kings, for instance, are regularly provided with a summary and critical evaluation; we find nothing of the sort for the prophets, though of course the biblical writer's high regard for them may be taken for granted. It is interesting to observe, moreover, that two of the most significant recent studies of the whole Deuteronomistic History pay an almost insignificant amount of attention to this whole block of material. Scholarship is undecided about the status of the prophetic layer of material in Kings. It is clear, at any rate, that it is readily possible to view the Elijah cycle of narratives (to take the major example) as contributing little to the books of Kings, or to the Deuteronomistic History, taken as a whole.

Two possible historical settings are particularly important. One is the period of the Babylonian Exile, which is the actual period reached by 2 Kings, and in which undoubtedly the Deuteronomistic History was either written or completed. The other possible setting is the reign of Josiah (late seventh century BC), in which the first edition of the Deuteronomistic History may have been compiled, in the view of a number of recent scholars, such as R.D. Nelson and A.D.H. Mayes. To which era, if either, does the Elijah material seem particularly relevant?

Whatever the origins and sources of the narratives about Elijah, it is clear enough that the material is mostly episodic, with relatively little to bind the stories together. For that reason alone, it is tempting to treat each narrative in its own right, without exploring wider perspectives. Moreover, with rare exceptions, there is little evidence of editorial touches; so that it is easy enough to deduce or assume that a deuteronomistic compiler utilized existing material to illustrate

such general points as the wickedness of the kings of the Northern Kingdom, the importance of heeding God's prophetic word, and above all the effect of the divine word on the history of Israel under the kings. The question arises whether it is possible to probe deeper and find theological perspectives here which are consonant with deuteronomistic teachings directed at a specific audience. Opinions differ whether the prophetic material incorporated in the Deuteronomistic History represents an independent layer ("DtrP"), just as opinions differ as to how many deuteronomistic writers and editors there were behind the Deuteronomistic History as we know it; but if any of the so-called Deuteronomistic School was a man who inserted the narratives about Elijah and the other prophets into his history of the monarchy, then we may reasonably suppose that he found in this prophetic material theological perspectives he shared.

Let us then examine 1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 1 with a view to assessing the relevance of each section to deuteronomistic interests. Elijah is abruptly introduced in 1 Kings 17. His first deed is to enunciate the word of Yahweh to King Ahab, after which the drought brought about by that word provides the setting and background to the events of this chapter and the next. God's word, then, is depicted as bringing hardship on the whole nation; but in chapter 17 the reader's interest is affected by the drought, namely Elijah himself and the widow of Zarephath and her ailing son. The word of Yahweh remains a key motif; the same powerful word which had produced the drought provided miraculous sustenance first for Elijah at Cherith, then for the widow and her household along with the prophet. Finally the word of Yahweh restored life to the woman's son. Obedience to the word of Yahweh was the prerequisite for all this miraculous provision in a desperate situation.

How would a deuteronomist have read this story against the setting of his time? Its relevance to an exilic situation is at any rate not hard to see. The word of God through prophet after prophet had brought about the

fall of the kingdom of Judah (as of Israel before it) and the nation found itself in hardship and despair; this was undoubtedly deuteronomistic teaching, whether we assign it (as did M. Noth³) to the whole Deuteronomistic History or to the final deuteronomist of two or three such authors. The drought of 1 Kings 17 offers an analogy to exilic conditions; but there is a message of hope in it, that obedience to the divine word can transform the situation for the individual, bringing blessing and life in a miraculous and unforeseen way. While there was no doubt a general truth here, it would be difficult to find any direct relevance in such a message to the happier and more optimistic days of King Josiah, on the hypothesis that the first edition of the Deuteronomistic History took shape in his reign.

In Chapter 18 we encounter the contest on Mount Carmel, when Elijah successfully challenged the ascendancy of the Baal prophets and their god. The existing political supremacy of the Baal cult in Samaria is emphasized in this narrative; only a miracle could and did remedy the situation. Courageous fidelity to Yahweh, against all odds and appearances, transformed the situation, bringing to an end both the supremacy of those who worshipped pagan gods and also the damaging drought. Here again the relevance of such themes to an exilic situation is clear enough, when the (idolatrous) Babylonians were rampant and Yahweh seemed defeated and powerless. It is true that Josiah's reforms sought to eradicate idolatry, and to that extent the thrust of 1 Kings 18 would have been entirely appropriate for his era too; but the relevance of 1 Kings 18 would have been even greater for exilic readers.

Chapter 19 begins by depicting Elijah's fear of Jezebel's threats and his flight to Horeb, en route partaking of a miraculous meal. This rather unexpected human failing on Elijah's part would at least induce a fellow-feeling on the part of exilic readers overawed by threatening circumstances. Once again miraculous provision is there for the taking: Yahweh seeks only fidelity and obedience, not superhuman courage. Thus far the thrust of the chapter largely reinforces that

of chapter 17; but with the theophany at Horeb (19:9-13) we are confronted with very different material. The difficulty here is that the meaning of the theophany is far from obvious; numerous⁴ explanations and interpretations have been proposed. If however we put aside the problem of the original significance of the passage, it may not be so difficult to find a value for an exilic audience. Wind, earthquake and fire stand in some sort of contrast to the word of God which climaxes the vision. There is at least no doubt about the stress laid in the whole Elijah cycle on the word of Yahweh; that is what exilic readers must heed and obey. It may be that for the deuteronomistic author the wind, earthquake and fire were seen not so much as contrast to the quiet voice of Yahweh as prior to it; for these destructive symbols of Yahweh's activity had already shown themselves in the harsh realities of the Babylonian onslaught on Judah and Jerusalem. Alternatively, if wind, earthquake and fire primarily symbolized Yahweh's presence in the cult,⁵ then the deuteronomist, writing during the exile, could readily have used the theophanic description to teach that despite the loss of cult and temple, Yahweh still revealed himself in the prophetic word. There can be no certainty of interpretation, but some such meaning for exilic readers makes good sense.

The remainder of the section (19:14-18) gives explicit instructions and predictions relevant only to the time of Elijah and Elisha, but it also contains a theme of hope suited to later times. International upheavals could not but result in many Israelite deaths; but the very fact of the existence of many devout people - even if visible only to Yahweh - was the seed of promise and hope for the future.

We next meet Elijah in chapter 21. This chapter, devoted to the story of Naboth's vineyard, contains more signs of deuteronomistic activity than is usual in the Elijah cycle. The deuteronomist in verses 25-26 refers explicitly to the idolatry practised by Ahab, and blames Jezebel for inciting him. This assessment of Ahab and Jezebel relates directly to chapter 18; no idolatry is involved or mentioned in the Naboth incident itself. Verse 25, however,

serves to bring together the social and moral evil displayed in the Naboth affair and the religious evil described in the earlier passage: "There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited." Jezebel had taken a leading hand in both evils. For the deuteronomist, the Naboth story may well have served to illustrate his conviction that idolatry, religious evil, worked itself out in moral corruption and maladministration. Thus the Naboth story confirmed the recurring deuteronomistic theme that idolatry brought about the downfall of the monarchs and the monarchy, in Israel and Judah alike. The theme is patently exilic, not Josianic.

Precisely the same theme recurs in 2 Kings 1, where we next meet Elijah. Now the king is no longer Ahab but his successor Ahaziah; like his father, Ahaziah turns to a foreign pagan god, and Elijah immediately appears on the scene to pronounce his death sentence for idolatry. And as predicted, the word of Yahweh brought about this king's death in turn.

The account of Ahab's death⁶ in 1 Kings 22 makes no mention of Elijah, and doubtless the chapter depends on different sources. Here the prophet who opposed the king is Micaiah. The general message is the same, however, attributing the fall of the monarch to his conflict with the inexorable word of Yahweh. One aspect of the story which may well have appealed to the deuteronomist is Micaiah's prediction in verse 17 that Ahab's fall in battle would in effect spare the lives of his citizens rather than harm them. In the exilic deuteronomistic perspective, the fall of the monarchy in reality benefited the nation; again, such a perspective would be inappropriate for Josiah's time when a good and devout king was implementing much-needed reforms.

To sum up, then, we can suggest that the Elijah cycle was far from irrelevant to the theological concerns of the biblical historians, provided that we keep an exilic situation in mind. If the "twofold redaction" (Nelson's

title) of the Deuteronomistic History becomes the regnant hypothesis in Old Testament scholarship, we should attach the Elijah cycle to the later redaction of the two.

* This short paper is offered in warmly affectionate memory of J.L.M. Haire, whose consistent devotion both to the Scriptures and to sound and careful exegesis was an inspiration. *Zichrono li-berachah.*

NOTES:

1. I refer to R.D. Nelson, The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History (Sheffield, 1981) and A.D.H. Mayes, The Story of Israel between Settlement and Exile (London, 1983). The "Deuteronomistic History" is the sequence of biblical books Deuteronomy - Joshua - Judges - Samuel - Kings.
2. For a recent survey, see G.H. Jones, 1 and 2 Kings (New Century Bible Commentary, Grand Rapids and London, 1984), vol. 1, pp.28-44.
3. Cf. M. Noth, Ueberlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien (Tuebingen, 1943); in English, The Deuteronomistic History (Sheffield, 1981).
4. See Jones, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 332f., for a concise survey of interpretations.
5. Cf. Jones, ibid.
6. Modern discussions about the identity of the king of Israel in 1 Kings 22 are not relevant to this paper; to the deuteronomist, at any rate, the king who fell at Ramoth-gilead was Ahab.