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Psychotic or Sanctified I Kings 19:1-18

Intro: We have arrived at one of the more difficult passages to understand in the OT. On the one hand, it seems pretty straight forward: Elijah's success on top of Mt Carmel is followed by unrealized expectations and a lot more running. Clearly, the Elijah of [ch19](#) doesn't seem to be the same Elijah of [ch18](#) but, are his actions here psychotic and self-serving or are they actually sanctified and God-honoring? This question may sound ridiculous but since there is such a sharp contrast between the Elijah of Carmel and the Elijah of Horeb, expositors and commentators are quick to jump in and render their own expert psychological profile of Elijah's mindset and spiritual character.

One commentator depicts this failure succinctly by simply stating: Elijah cracked up. Another well-known author says that up to this point, Elijah had been sustained by faith's vision of the living God but now he lost sight of the Lord and only saw a furious woman. Another reacts to Elijah's response in v10 by saying, the response is self-serving. One would imagine he came to Horeb simply to celebrate his personal faithfulness. Another exclaims, "What a contrast! Elijah the hero of Carmel victorious over Baal! Elijah the coward of unbelief at Horeb, self-occupied, utterly discouraged, wishing to die... praying against rather than for God's people.

The picture doesn't improve much with literary critics. One states that the response in v10 once more reveals "Elijah's arrogance." Another holds that Elijah is "transformed by Jezebel into a whimpering defeatist;" that he "has not come to Horeb to do Yahweh's will" but is still "running from Jezebel and seeking Yahweh's pity." Even evangelical commentators fail to provide a more balanced view. One declares Elijah "exhibited symptoms of manic depression, wishing for death... an inability to manage and with excessive self-pity." Another opines that on Mt Horeb, "we see him weak, mistaken and in need of God's rebuke." Finally, a duo of writers lament that just "when God needed him most, the divinely trained prophet was to prove a notable failure."

While these comments may seem particularly harsh, they also seem to

make up the majority opinion on Elijah in [ch19](#). But is this correct? If Elijah is so far off the mark here, if he is so far outside of Yahweh's will, why is there no clear rebuke from Yahweh? Why was the angel sent to Elijah to sustain him for a journey that Yahweh, apparently didn't want him to take? Why was the angel sent with cake and water and not a flaming sword and a talking donkey? Obviously, there's something very important going on in this passage that directly relates to the results of the God contest in [ch18](#) and with a little attention to the text, we can gain insight into Elijah's mindset and this will allow us to better understand the directions God gives to Elijah at the end of this passage. We'll consider a few clues in the text that will help us determine what's really going on here and then make some applications.

1) Check the text – The adverse opinion of Elijah's spiritual and mental state may come from a problem of interpretation. In the traditional Hebrew text the first word of [vs3](#) is the verb ra'ah – saw= and then he saw...or "when he saw (that)." But, a few Hebrew manuscripts contain a form of the verb yare' – to fear, be afraid. The Septuagint and versions translated from it contain that reading. The phrase "then he was afraid" seems to fit so naturally in this spot that most modern English translations use it but which is original? If "fear" was original then we have a problem: it fits perfectly with Jezebel's threat in [v2](#) so why would a Hebrew scribe ever change it to "saw?" But, if "saw" were original, we could see how someone could misconstrue it for "fear" since it fits the text so naturally.

If saw were the original word, how does it fit the context, coming as it does after Jezebel's threat in [v2](#)? What has just happened in [ch18](#)? Yahweh had publicly and irrefutably revealed that Baal wasn't a weak god – he was a non-god! He did this in living color on turf sacred to Baal. By both miraculous fire and rain, Yahweh had proven He was the only real God and the people had confessed the same. Ahab then went home and spilled the beans; which prompted Jezebel to issue her death-threat to Elijah.

So, what Elijah saw was that, in spite of the glowing success of the God contest on Carmel, nothing was going to change in Israel. Jezebel still wore the pants in the kingdom and was still calling the shots. Ahab was still incapable of exerting kingly authority over his rogue queen. Since Elijah wasn't required to offer himself as a lamb to Jezebel's slaughter fest, he left the kingdom – but not because he was afraid of dying. In fact, Elijah *wanted* to die because he was broken. Still, he didn't want to die by Jezebel's hand

as that would've been seen as a victory for her. So he heads south to the southern most city of the southern kingdom of Judah...and then keeps going, into the wilderness of Judah, where no one could give Jezebel credit for his death. Yes, Elijah was broken, but you can be broken and still not be psychotic.

2) Check the map – Beersheba is roughly 100 miles south of Jezreel – quite secure from Jezebel's evil intentions. When he goes a day's journey into the wilderness, it's not out of fear of the wicked queen. He goes there to beg Yahweh to take his life. It's ironic that Elijah prays for death and God not only says no, He doesn't allow Elijah to die at all! Instead of death, Yahweh sustains his life. The angel of the Lord himself suggests the provisions are for a long journey that will bring him to Horeb; some 200 miles south of Beersheba. The geography renders the fear motivation moot. The map suggests we are dealing with a plan here, not a panic.

3) Check the parallels – What's the significance of Mt. Horeb? The parallels are non-existent until you realize that Horeb is just another name for Mt. Sinai. What other significant OT event occurred on top of Mt. Sinai? This is where Jehovah gave Moses the Law; where God entered into a covenant with the nation of Israel. In fact, the covenant was both given and broken on that very spot. Moses was up on top of Sinai receiving the Law and Israel was at the foot of Sinai breaking the Law! Moses was 40 days/nights receiving the Law and went back up for another 40 days/nights to intercede for Israel's breaking of the Law. It was here that Yahweh "passed by," just as He'd promised Moses.

So, Moses was here in Exodus and now Elijah is here in I Kings. Both occasions focus on covenant business except in Exodus, covenant intercession by Moses leads to covenant renewal and restoration while here in I Kings, we will see a covenant accusation which will result in covenant judgment and restriction. These parallels suggests that at the very least we are dealing with issues of redemptive historical import and not just with a whiney prophet

4) Check the angel – the Angel of the Lord arrives with provisions in anticipation of the trip to Horeb. This means Elijah goes to Horeb with divine authorization; a fact which allows us to properly hear God's questions in 9 and 13.

5) Check the options – Does Yahweh rebuke Elijah with His questions? Rebuke him for what? Didn't He send him there? Is it possible that the questions are an invitation, not a rebuke? Could He be asking, "What are you doing here, ay Moses' old stomping grounds, the Covenant Connection; where I have lead you to come?" This was a question of tender kindness, an invitation for Elijah to pour out the full burden of his heart; an opportunity he had been so far denied. Now God invites Elijah to release the sorrow and let it pour freely from his mind and heart.

6) Check the prophet – instead of whining and complaining, is it possible that Elijah is simply sharing the sober truth in v10 and 14? There is no problem implied in the double questions and responses; the text deals in pairs: 2 stages of Elijah's journey, 2 accounts of angelic provision. If we're dealing with covenant matters here then this entire scene is a court case: v10 is the preliminary hearing and v14 is the formal statement of charges. Yes, Elijah is upset but he is upset for the sake of Yahweh, for God's cause. Note the emphasis on "Your altars" and "Your prophets." It sounds like Elijah is charging Israel with apostasy rather than crying over a failed ministry.

It appears that v13-14 make up a formal lawsuit against Israel. After the covenant Lord arrives, He puts the formal question to the officiating prosecutor (13b) who then levels the formal charges against the accused (14). So, Elijah's mission at Horeb was to bring covenant accusation against Israel for breach of the covenant. How can we be sure?

7) Check the connections – v15-18 provide helpful illumination on v9-14. Here, Yahweh puts Elijah in charge of anointing Hazael, Jehu and Elisha. These 2 kings and 1 prophet will be Yahweh's instruments of judgment upon a stubbornly apostate Israel (note sword and slay in v17). This is Yahweh's response to Elijah's accusations – He agrees wholeheartedly! It's almost as if God was saying, "You're absolutely correct, Elijah! I concur with your assessment and your charges are true. So, I'm going to bring covenant judgment and I'm tasking you to go and set apart My instruments of judgment." Clearly, this judgment would come through internal political forces within Israel (Jehu); external military forces (Hazael) and the prophetic ministry of Elisha. God doesn't rebuke Elijah, He agrees with him! He doesn't condemn Elijah; He confirms his diagnosis.

This was a word of encouragement to Elijah. With this promise he knew that ultimately, justice would be done and that Yahweh would not allow the institutionalized persecution and promotion of idolatry to go unpunished.

Before we launch into application we need to consider both the wonder and mystery of v11-13a. Many have tried to decipher this passage and many a sermon's been preached from it but what is actually going on here? What are we meant to learn and know about God from this text? There are several interpretations of these verses but our main concern is what this text reveals about God: the indisputable fact here is that God is especially present in His Word.

Yahweh was not "in" the wind, earthquake or fire. These events were precursors of His arrival but He is "in" none of them. The still, small voice is different. The text doesn't say He was "in" the voice but the voice clearly signals to Elijah that Yahweh was present. The voice of 12b appears again in 13b where it asks Elijah the what-are-you-doing-here question, the same question that was posed to him in v9 by the word of the Lord. Thus, we can safely assume that the voice in 13b can be identified with the word of Yahweh.

Maybe all of this is just to present to us a contrast – you may not always find God in the spectacular explosions of nature but you can be sure He is always present in His quiet word given to His prophets (and apostles) a word that directs history (15-17) and preserves people (18).

So, as we move into gleaning applications from the text, let's keep in mind the flow of the context: Elijah wasn't terrified of Jezebel but was broken in spirit by her unrepentant paganism and by her continued position of power over the nation. We also must keep in mind the relation to redemptive history, especially the significance of Mt. Horeb. Elijah was meeting with God at Moses' holy hangout and Yahweh had directed him there. Elijah's mission there was to bring accusation against Israel for ongoing breach of her covenant with Yahweh. How does the text apply to us?

1) the limitations of "evidence" – There is a belief among many in the church today that if we can just get the truth to the most people or if we could just impress on them our most logical and rational arguments for the gospel

then... Some go so far as to say that if God would just reveal himself in a mighty way during our services then revival would break out and many will come to Christ. It's a beautiful thought but what does the text say?

After everything that happened on Carmel, Jezebel was still unmoved. There was a blaze of light on Carmel but unless God grants an internal light to see His external light, the darkness remains. God's fire consumed everything except the blindness in Jezebel's mind and the stubbornness of sin in her heart. Don't mistake this as being unique to old Jez ([John 3:19](#)). This reality is not meant to temper our enthusiasm to witness and minister but it should temper all our expectations of the results of our ministry. God never instructs us to fret over the results but be faithful.

2) God's tenderness in our despondency – Elijah has had enough and was ready for God to take him home. If you think Elijah's being a tad melodramatic, you haven't been in a ministry very long. But, does God go drill sergeant on Elijah? No, He comes to him with provision and understanding. There's even tenderness implied in His questioning of Elijah. It's not a reproof but an invitation; a double invitation. It's an invitation to state the case against Israel and in so doing, to unburden his own soul. Yahweh's question is both covenantal and pastoral. It's an act of kindness, offering Elijah the opportunity to spill his concerns.

God offers us that same opportunity every day. In fact, I believe some Christians would be in a better frame of mind if they would make good use of that open opportunity more often than they do. As the old hymn exhorts us, "Are you weary, are you heavy-hearted; tell it to Jesus, tell it to Jesus..." God is standing by ready to hear our prayers and heal our hearts.

3) The holy passion that should stir us – Was Elijah depressed, despondent? I think that's pretty clear in the text. But what was he despondent about? He was despondent about Yahweh's interests – His covenant, altars, prophets... Elijah's intensity was all God-centered, not self-centered, and that can be a little unnerving. What things do you get despondent over? Is it the price of gas; inflation; politics; the elevation of immorality and devaluing of life in our society. All of those are troubling but what about the state of the church; its doctrinal indifference and gradual slide into apostasy? Do you ever get depressed for God's sake? Depression is never desirable but at least this kind has a workable solution – take your

concerns for God to God in prayer and pray for His will to be accomplished.

4) God's work/ presence is often hidden – God wasn't in the wind, earthquake or fire but He was in the still, small voice. This may suggest that God will no longer be giving many dramatic, overt proofs of His reality, like He did at Carmel, since that particular revelation has been officially rejected. Instead, His presence and reality will primarily be seen in His ongoing work of judgment (15-17) and grace (18), work He has disclosed to His prophet through His voice and His word. The quietness of Yahweh's work doesn't mean He's not at work but that His kingdom has gone into mustard-seed mode.

This same reality applies to us today, maybe even more so. There are plenty of Christians out there who crave for God to reveal Himself through signs and wonders, yet they seldom find Christ in the wind, earthquake or fire. It was Baal worship that tantalized and stoked up the emotions; Baal worship was exclusively experiential but biblical faith is content with the Word. God has revealed Himself in His word and He embodies that revelation. Do you crave to experience God's presence? Get into His word and stay in it and you will walk with Him everyday.

5) God's stubborn grace – Yahweh assures Elijah that he's not alone and his ministry hasn't been unsuccessful. "I have reserved 7K!" This is the OT equivalent of Jesus saying, "I will build My church." Grace will have a remnant! The God of grace insists on it. God will always have a people, even in Israel, to worship Him on earth. He's decided that He will have a true people and He will have them and keep them and there's nothing any Jezebel can do about it.

Where will these 7k come from? No doubt from the ministry of the only prophet in Israel who hadn't gone on the lam. This showed Elijah that his quiet ministry over the years had actually born more fruit than his spectacular ministry on Mt. Carmel. The still, small voice had been doing in Israel what Elijah could not do.

Elijah was certainly not God's last broken servant. There have been plenty of cases under the new covenant as well. It's not a desirable place to be but our text teaches us not to fear being broken when we have such a kind and adequate God to turn to for strength. 😊