

6 Elisha's God

There is a bias in the Book of Kings, which is entirely on the side of the prophets. This is not surprising, since it was finally put together centuries later, when the prophets had been proved right and the kingdom of Israel with all her kings had passed away forever. Consequently, a great deal of attention is given to the prophets, while the kings figure mostly as "baddies" in opposition to them. Today's historians, more interested in the past for its own sake, look more favourably upon the kings and recognise their success as rulers; but then, they are looking from a different point of view, and do not take the Book of Kings' long-term perspective of God's historic relationship with his people.

The prophets who loom so large in the Book of Kings may have been in their time minor performers on the sidelines of national politics. People must have wondered what they were raving on about, when the royal policies seemed so successful. But so it often is: things that pass almost unnoticed in their own day turn out to be the most important and decisive of all in the long run. To anyone who has any experience of the flow and confusion of history (in which we are all, continuously, involved) it is not at all surprising if the obstinate and mad young prophet from the backwoods, who rambles and blusters on in a lost cause, turns out after all to have put their finger on the really important issues; while the great and successful rulers, caught up in a daily struggle to maintain and increase their power, in fact achieve nothing that really lasts.

Prophets listen to God. They are not seers who foretell the future, but people who speak for God, recognising and interpreting God's action in this world. They speak of the past and the present where they have encountered God. If they tell of the future, it is only by way of indicating God's present intentions and the direction events are now taking under his rule. That is why Ahaziah "foresaw" the break-up of Solomon's kingdom, but did not know that it would only come about after Solomon's death. Prophets are those who do best what I have said we must all do. They recognise God's work and meaning in the past and present of history.

There is a collection of stories in the Second Book of Kings¹ which is sometimes called the Elisha Cycle. These stories have less to do with the kings of Israel, and are more concerned with the ordinary followers of the prophets. They tell us things that would not normally get into the history books: the deeds of a slave-girl, a servant, a widow, a little group of prophets making a new home in the wilderness. Once again, they are history remembered in story, only now not national history, but the experience of a few small communities and their scattered admirers.

¹ Ch 1-8

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They are not biographical - not even as much as the earlier stories about Elijah. Most of them feature the prophet Elisha, but at the end of them we still know next to nothing about his character and personality. There is no psychological development. They are a world away from the powerful story of Mount Carmel and Elijah's disappointment. There is nothing to match Elijah's despair in the wilderness, or his meeting with Yahweh on Mount Horeb. In these stories, whether Elijah or Elisha is the hero, the prophet is no longer a weak and vulnerable human being, learning the ways of Yahweh through hope, fear and exhaustion. Rather, he is magnified, surrounded with an aura of power and mystery like one above the doubts and weaknesses of ordinary mortals. He is an exalted intermediary, through whom the divine power works not by request and answer, by slow seeking and finding, but simply as direct and awe-inspiring power. He is living evidence of a God who is even further above humankind, and so to be approached with the utmost reverence and respect.

Most of these stories are "hagiography", the kind of story-telling in which an enthusiastic community hands on the wonderful memories of its revered founder or leader. They are too full of marvels to be factual records; they often delight in the extraordinary, because it brings across convictions that nothing ordinary can express. They are an exclamation, hyperbole pointing to an experience that no normal records can relate. But they are not myths or legends. They are rooted in the experience of a believing community, in a particular period of Israel's history, and they deal with real people, though most of them otherwise unremembered. They are true in the sense that they give us a true and relevant insight into what God is like. They lead us into the awareness of God that grew up among the prophets and their followers, telling us about a relationship in which God was revealed and still reveals himself. In them we too are meeting Yahweh the God of Israel, who acts in the flow of history and relates to us all as a people immersed and formed in our experience of it.

Elijah attracted followers who recognised him as a man of God and wanted to know his God. To do this, they came with him, or settled in groups and communities where together they could live in the will of Yahweh. They were not single men, as in later religious orders, but whole families, men with their wives and children. Such prophetic communities existed before Elijah and survived long after him, but in his time they were deeply affected by him, looking to him for inspiration and entering into his relationship with Yahweh.

Their stories bring us to Yahweh as to God beyond all possible descriptions, and yet as one discovered at the heart of ordinary and extraordinary, but actual, events. They show the fear and respect that is due to him, but they go beyond this, perhaps even beyond Elijah's vision, to something of the utter transcendence of God. Yet they do not lose the sense of his personal closeness: that he is still his people's God, and especially the God of those who rely on him. They show us the immense gulf that is crossed - and should never be rashly ignored - when Yahweh speaks and people encounter God; but also that the gulf is crossed, and that Yahweh is God, speaking in the immediate and concrete experience of those who trust him. They are told not in order to prove anything, but to hold together

and make clear ideas which we almost always separate and distort: the transcendence of God, and his personal closeness.

The "Elisha cycle", and the second Book of Kings, opens with a story of Elijah - a very different Elijah, however, from the prophet of Carmel and Horeb. After Ahab died, Elijah fell foul of his son Ahaziah, who sent an officer with fifty men to fetch him:

They found Elijah sitting on top of the hill. The captain went up to him and said, "Man of God, the King says 'Come down'." Elijah answered the captain, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and destroy both you and your men." And fire came down from heaven and destroyed him and his fifty men.

The king sent a second captain to him, again with fifty men, and he too went up and said, "Man of God, this is the King's order: 'Come down at once'." Elijah answered him, "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and destroy both you and your fifty men." And fire came down from heaven and destroyed him and his men.

Then the king sent a third captain to him, with another fifty men. The third captain came up to Elijah, fell on his knees before him and pleaded with him. "Man of God," he said, "let my life and the lives of these fifty servants of yours have some value in your eyes. Fire has fallen from heaven and destroyed two captains, but let my life have some value in your eyes." The angel of Yahweh said to Elijah, "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him." He rose and accompanied him down to the king. (IIK 1:9-16)

I believe this story is not history but a kind of fable, a moral fantasy (although Elijah may well have had some kind of confrontation with King Ahaziah). The prophet we know from the stories of Carmel and Horeb was quite capable of ordering the slaughter of a hundred men - but not of standing serenely aloof and watching it come from heaven. This is a story pure and simple, and has its place here as an introduction to a theme: the awesome power of Yahweh, terribly and dangerously present even in his representatives.

That power is revealed not as a ferocious act of retaliation, but as Yahweh's relentless consistency. His response to the captains' insolence is not just a gesture of wrath; it is the underlining of their own words. They addressed Elijah as "Man of God", and they chose to deal with the "man of God" by force. Their own words and their own approach are turned back on them, as Elijah consents to deal with them as a "man of God" invoking the power of God. "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and destroy both you and your fifty men." On each occasion, a captain is destroyed not just because he lays hands on a prophet, but because, by his own acknowledgement, he is trying to force a "man of God". On the other hand, the third captain, who comes humbly, recognising

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what kind of power he has been sent to deal with, not only escapes unharmed, but is allowed to carry out the king's orders: Elijah, guided by Yahweh, goes back with him.

The story of Elijah reminds me (by contrast) of a misguided episode from the film about General Paton, "Lust for Glory". In this, Paton is fighting the Battle of the Bulge and is facing a desperate push against the Germans to rescue a besieged allied force. Having undertaken to make an impossibly gruelling dash, he rapidly gives his orders, pushes his tanks and tired men on, and, finally, with the cold snow swirling about him, summons the padre and orders him to pray for fine weather. He brushes aside the padre's hesitation, reminding him that it is his job to pray, as ordered. When the next day brings clear skies and a sun to dry the mud, General Paton decides that this padre is "in good" with the Lord, and sends to have him decorated.

The story of Elijah is true, in the sense that the Paton story is false. The latter portrays the false idea (not uncommon among the military) that God is a force to be reckoned with and shown respect, but to be used in support of your own goals; that if you see fit to acknowledge him, he should respond in his proper function. But God cannot be commanded or obliged to act, even through his servants. To try dictating to him is to court disaster. The story of Elijah, even if it is not history, is true in that it shows our real relationship to God, and the Paton story is false even if its historically accurate, because the interpretation is false. A "true" version would have shown Paton's bullying attempt to command God as futile and dangerous.

Yahweh is never subject to force or command: those who try to use him so are very likely to destroy themselves in the attempt. It is the extreme of foolishness to try to bully God - like trying to bully a brick wall by hurling yourself against it. The trouble is that the captains had grown used to bandying about the name of God, as if he were any of the gods, or a force like other forces, to be harnessed and controlled. They were happy to acknowledge the prophets as men of God. They recognised the religious element, and the priests and prophets as its specialists. But, like Paton, they foolishly imagined that doing so brought the prophet and his God into their sphere of command.

Yahweh is not to be taken lightly: not because he will protect his dignity with a massive overreaction, but because he will take you far more seriously than you want him to. With relentless insistence he will bring your own words back to you like testing fire, and they can destroy you. If you want to be safe with him, you had better approach him humbly - in fear of your life. That reverential "fear and trembling" before Yahweh is a very primitive notion, but a very wise one. It has to be grasped before you can begin to know him better. For it is very hard to discover the mercy and love of God after your own clumsy insistence has brought down the full force of his reality upon you.

Yahweh is dangerously real, for he is God beyond all gods. He is not just a supergod, a force and a being like those of the world he rules, only greater and more powerful than them. Yahweh - God - transcends all beings. He is wholly other, different from the

universe and all its inhabitants. He is far away from the places we know, distant from all our senses and all our ideas of him. Every attempt to pin him down and locate him in the familiar universe must fail. In Chapter 1 we saw how important were the shrines of Israel, how crucial it was to have a place of worship, hallowed by tradition, where Israel could affirm her own identity and identify with Yahweh. But, without denying any of that, the disciples of Elisha realised how inadequate even the best shrine must be: that Yahweh must, finally, elude the best attempts of Solomon or Jeroboam, and the oldest, most respected traditions. Even the land of Israel, the promised Canaan which he had given to his people, cannot contain him.

The story which follows shows that none of the shrines of Israel is the true "place" of Yahweh, who cannot ever be "located". In it, Elijah makes his last journey to Yahweh and in doing so only leaves behind all the places that could have claimed to hold him. The shrine of Gilgal; the national temple of Bethel; Jericho, the first and furthest city in Israel, where the conquest of Canaan began; the River Jordan itself, where the people first crossed into their land: one by one the story takes us beyond them all, into the most distant wilderness. And even there, the prophet who goes to Yahweh passes away where no trace of him can be found.

This is one of the most famous stories in the Bible, although its significance is not always understood. It tells how Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind, and establishes the authority of Elisha as his successor - a story with a double purpose, both of them crucial to our understanding of Israel and Yahweh, of God and the kind of community he creates. Above all, it shows us how far beyond control or description is the miracle that takes place when Yahweh approaches and establishes a relationship through his prophet. The miracle that ends Elijah's life is a parable of the hidden miracle that has taken place all through it: the miracle of God in communication with mere and mortal people. It is a paradox, and discovering the paradox is like unlearning everything that Israel has learnt about Yahweh - like denying every tangible, visible link that made him real to them. It is like a return to the wilderness, retracing Israel's steps and undoing all the progress she has made establishing herself in Canaan. Somehow, in the end, you must leave behind even the best gifts and surest places of Yahweh, if you are to find Yahweh himself.

This is what happened when Yahweh took Elijah up to heaven in the whirlwind: Elijah and Elisha set out from Gilgal, and Elijah said to Elisha, "Please stay here, for Yahweh is only sending me to Bethel."

But Elisha replied, "As Yahweh lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you!" and they went down to Bethel.

The brotherhood of prophets who live at Bethel came out to meet Elisha and said, "Do you know that Yahweh is going to carry your lord and master away today?"

"Yes I know," he said. "Be quiet."

Elijah said, "Please stay here, Yahweh is only sending me to Jericho."

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But he replied, "As Yahweh lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you!" and they went on to Jericho.

At Jericho, the same thing happened. The brotherhood of prophets came out to warn Elisha, but Elisha already knew.

Elijah said, "Please stay here, Yahweh is only sending me to the Jordan." But he replied, "As Yahweh lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you!" and they went on together.

Fifty of the brotherhood of prophets followed them, halting some distance away as the two of them stood beside the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water; and the water divided to left and right, and the two of them crossed over dry-shod.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Make your request. What can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

Elisha answered, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

"Your request is a difficult one," Elijah said. "If you see me while I am being taken from you, it shall be as you ask; if not, it will not be so."

Now as they walked on, talking, a chariot of fire appeared and horses of fire, coming between the two of them; and Elijah went up to heaven in the whirlwind. Elisha saw it and shouted, "My father! My father! Chariot of Israel and its chargers!" Then he lost sight of him, and taking hold of his clothes he tore them in half. He picked up the cloak of Elijah which had fallen, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

He took the cloak of Elijah and struck the water. "Where is Yahweh the God of Elijah?" he cried. He struck the water, and it divided to right and left, and Elisha crossed over. The brotherhood of prophets saw him in the distance, and said, "The spirit of Elijah has come to rest on Elisha." They went to meet him and bowed down before him.

"Look," they said "your servants have fifty strong men with them; let them go and look for your master; the spirit of Yahweh may have taken him up and thrown him down on a mountain or into a valley."

"Send no one," he replied.

But they so shamed him with their insistence that he consented. So they sent fifty men who searched for three days without finding him. They then came back to Elisha who had stayed in Jericho; he said, "Did I not tell you not to go?"

(IIK 2:1-18)

Elijah had taught that Yahweh was the one real God, not just a rival to the baals, stronger and more deserving of Israel's loyalty, but God alone, with a personal reality beside which the alternatives were nothing. It was a lesson Israel failed to learn, for, many generations later, they were still treating Yahweh as one among a number of gods¹. But those who did understand Elijah, those who took in his message, did not stand still with the basic doctrine. They reflected on it and began to realise some of its implications.

They began to appreciate the "distance" between such a God and this world of ordinary experience. Although Yahweh had always communicated with his people in immediate and tangible experience, they were beginning to appreciate how distant and intangible Yahweh's own proper realm must be. Their sense of respect for Yahweh's power joined with a sense of mystery, wonder and excitement, that he who approached his people as Yahweh, approached from a realm that was utterly inaccessible to them. The incident on Mount Carmel, though a miracle, was an event in the history of this world, drawing attention again to its struggles, its politics and its stubborn skepticism. But the ascension of Elijah belongs to another world, to the transcendent mystery of God's own existence.

The power of God at work here is not just a superabundance of physical power, but something transcending all human experience, even its final moment of truth. The ancient Israelites had no conviction of an afterlife, and did not think of the dead going up to heaven, but down, into the ground and its dust, to be no more. When therefore, Elijah is seen ascending into heaven, it is something extraordinary and apart from the experience of ordinary mortals, the end of one who has already differed from the world we know, in his closeness to Yahweh. Yahweh is beyond all death, and the man who has spoken for him, who has become no less than his voice, cannot simply die, as people do. His end is far from every familiar place, beyond Jericho and the Jordan, beyond every search of the disciples. The going of Elijah is beyond even the wilderness. It is the final vindication of his witness to a God who utterly transcends all places. So great is God.

In other civilisations, too, there have been thinkers who realised that the one and only God must transcend the world, being in no way part of it. Later, among the Greek and Roman pagans, philosophers came to this conclusion. But whereas, for them, it remained philosophy, the wisdom of a cultured and leisured elite, in Elisha's Israel it became a passionate conviction about national religion. Though here, too, only a few recognised the One God, those few, especially the brotherhood of prophets, were deeply committed to the "barbarous" god of their history. They insistently identified him as the one transcendent God, calling for exclusive worship and undivided loyalty. And that is the real paradox: that the "unlearning" is not, after all, unlearned. In spite of every break with tradition, with place, with tangible experience, the transcendent One they now worship as God is Yahweh. He is both immeasurably distant, God himself, and dreadfully close as the familiar and jealous lover of his people. God is Yahweh, their god, who has known them, and whom they have known, for generations. So great is Yahweh.

¹ See, for instance, the Book of Hosea.

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For some, the "transcendence" and "universality" of God is merely a license for fantasy. Because he transcends all things, we can make up anything about him; because he is universal, every god is God. It was nothing like that for the followers of Elijah. They recognised that Yahweh is God, the one, transcendent God still speaking to them, communicating with them. By that, they were anchored in history, in a relationship which God had already established, long before. The transcendence of God did not distract them from history. His universality did not distract them from Israel. For them, the dawning recognition that God transcends all the things of our world did not mean that we chase after him by seeking transcendent knowledge. It reinforced their conviction that we know him only by his approach to us, by personal communication in which he takes the initiative, addressing us. It bound them all the closer to Yahweh, who had spoken and acted in history, since they knew that there is no other way of coming to know God.

Since God is truly no part of our world but transcends it utterly, then there is no way we can know him - unless he makes himself known to us, unless, that is, he is personal and chooses to communicate with us. The initiative lies with him. To recognise the transcendence of God is to acknowledge that there is nothing within our reach which we can use to bridge the gap between him and us. Our only hope of ever knowing him lies with him. If we know him, it is only because he approaches us, and if he does approach us, then he is someone, able to approach, initiate, choose, communicate. When he, for reasons which only he can tell us, chooses to communicate with us, he reaches us through words, gestures, symbols, gifts and experiences of his choosing. How he speaks to us, through whom and to whom, are matters that must appear arbitrary in the first instance, for there is no special way which we can pick out in advance as "appropriate" for him. We can only listen to him and accept him and learn the "logic" of his choices afterwards.

The beginning of our knowledge of God is the experience of someone approaching us and looking for our response. But it is not a private experience. It is the shared and public experience of God communicating with his people. We are personal not as individuals, but together with others, and God addresses us not as isolated individuals but as a people, a community. The God who in fact approaches and speaks to us does so not in our private thoughts, but, first and foremost, by intervening where we are most fully alive and fully personal - in our community with others and in our history. We cannot know him privately, drawing on our own private religious experience. Nor can we simply take from others what suits our own taste and ideas. Nor can we choose for ourselves with which others we will meet him. It is not our choice. It is his. We have to begin where he began, accepting that he spoke to Israel, as her God Yahweh. Otherwise, however deep or exalted our perceptions, we are creating our own God.

Because God has spoken in history, identifying his people, speaking, prompting, responding, we can know him. But we have to hear and join in their dialogue. We have to take that history into account. Discovering the transcendence, the complete otherness of God, far from leading us to discard Israel's primitive Yahweh, binds us the more firmly to him, as our only hope of knowing God. He is God, who has spoken and identified himself.

The other point of the story is also very important. It establishes Elisha's "succession" to Elijah, and therefore his authority in the community. But that, as we shall see, is a clumsy way of putting it, for in fact the story challenges the very idea of "succeeding" to the prophet. If God himself is known only through his approach to us, through his personal communication or word, then anyone through whom he speaks can give no grounds for their claim to authority. They can only speak, and rely on God to confirm what they say, by winning over the hearts of his people. They cannot appeal to anyone or anything else.

A prophet, who receives God's word in a direct and individual way, does not remain a private recipient, but becomes a public figure by the very fact that God speaks to them, because God has only one reason for speaking to them: to speak through them. God's word to them is always a word to their people. That is its authority; and if the people listen to God, they will listen to God's prophet. If not, the prophet will be a voice unheard, crying in the wilderness. A prophet speaks with the greatest of all authority, because God speaks through them; and they speak as one who is utterly vulnerable, because if God is rejected, there is no higher authority to fall back on.

Therefore, any talk of "succession" among the prophets is questionable. "Succession" to authority depends on some kind of evidence or principle: inheritance, ownership, designation, seniority - something, in short, which confers the right to succeed. But the prophet's authority is directly from God, as and when God speaks through them. The prophet has something of God's own spirit breathing and speaking in them, and if God cannot vindicate God's own authority, nothing else will. No succession, no appointment, can establish the authority of God. No symbol, no procedure can prove that a person is speaking for God as God's prophet. When Zedekiah and the court prophets challenged Micaiah's authority, he had no answer but a prophecy, for only God in God's own time and way can vindicate God's true prophet.

That is why Elijah demurred when Elisha asked of him the favour that no person, however close to God, could guarantee: the right to inherit a prophet's power and authority.

When they had crossed the Jordan, Elijah said to Elisha, "Make a your request.

What can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

Elisha answered, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

"Your request is a difficult one," Elijah said. "If you see me while I am being taken from you, it shall be as you ask. If not, it will not be so." (IJK 2:9-10)

Only God can appoint his prophet. All that Elijah could do was to indicate the way in which God would show his favour, if he had decided to speak through Elisha. Only Elisha would know, from what he saw at the end, that Yahweh intended to speak through him. The story goes on to tell how, in fact, Elisha picked up Elijah's cloak, and took it back with him. That, if anything, would have counted with most as a sign of succession,

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and the disciples of Elijah seem to have taken it that way. The one who inherits the master's mantle inherits his authority. He "steps into his master's shoes". But the story itself has already pre-empted any such interpretation. Elisha is Yahweh's prophet because Yahweh chooses him - not by any right of inheritance. Not even Elijah could predict it; only Elisha has been shown it. For the rest, his real authority must, because it is God's, speak for itself in God's time and way.

To recognise Yahweh's authority and the voice that speaks for him is Israel's most urgent and essential need, and yet there is nothing that can indicate or validate that authority. No sure sign, or precedent, or standard can be applied, to reveal the presence of Yahweh's spirit. There is no other way for Israel but to trust Yahweh, to listen and to wait for him (a very different way from that of Jeroboam). But if she does so, she can trust that God himself will move her, open her eyes and show her who is really speaking in his name.

Elijah taught, with passionate conviction, that Yahweh is the one and only God, but if we can judge from the stories of the Elisha cycle, it was his followers who drew out the implications of his teaching, discovering for themselves the transcendent mystery of God and his universal rule over all peoples. Elijah had insisted that Yahweh was more than a local divinity, to affirm himself alongside the baals and other gods; and in time his followers came to realise that he is therefore the God of all peoples. It was not a matter of arrogant assumption on Israel's part, making her own parochial deity the god to whom all others must bow, but followed from that deep and challenging realisation that Yahweh is real and personal, with a personal reality that had already shown up other "gods" as insubstantial figments.

But to be the people of such a God was not a matter of easy privilege, and some of its implications are drawn out in the story of the Aramean general, Naaman.

Naaman, army commander to the king of Aram, was a man who enjoyed his master's respect and favour, since through him Yahweh had granted victory to the Arameans. (IIK 5:1)

Here is a surprising statement indeed! We are speaking of the Arameans, the deadly enemies of Israel throughout this period, yet we are told that their general is given his victories by Yahweh. Isn't Yahweh the God of Israel? Whose side is he on?

The god of Israel is the One God, and therefore the giver of Aram's victories as well. If ever the Arameans win, even against Israel, it can only be because Yahweh has granted it. To discover that your god, your own familiar national god, is truly God himself, is no great ego-trip, no quick entry into elite privilege, but the sobering realisation that others, too, have their place in his care. The realisation of Yahweh's uniqueness does not begin as exclusivism, but as challenging inclusivism.

Naaman was a leper¹. Now on one of their raids the Arameans had carried off from the land of Israel a little girl who became a servant of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would approach the prophet of Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy." Naaman went and told his king what the girl from the land of Israel had said. "Go by all means," said the king of Aram, "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten festal robes. He presented the letter to the king of Israel. It read "With this letter, I am sending my servant Naaman to you for you to cure him of his leprosy."
(IIK 5:2-6)

The Aramean king acts with the best of intentions, assuming that so powerful a wonder-worker must be highly placed in Israelite society and that the best approach would be by royal correspondence, king to king, backed up with appropriately lavish gifts. It is a matter for great men to work out between them. Both the king and his general seem to have forgotten that their confidence in Elisha rests on the recommendation of a slave girl.

The king of Israel, however, having little to do with the prophet, is dismayed by the letter and its preposterous demand, which he assumes is just preparing an excuse for war:

When the King of Israel read the letter, he tore his garments. "Am I a god to give life and death," he said, "that he sends a man to me and asks me to cure him of his leprosy? Listen to this, and see how he intends to pick a quarrel with me."
But Elisha heard what was happening and sent word to the King:
"Why did you tear your garments? Let him come to me and he will find that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his team and chariot and drew up at the door of Elisha's house. And Elisha sent him a messenger to say, "Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will become clean once more."
(IIK 5:7-10)

For Naaman, it must have been the last straw. His reception at the palace can hardly have been what he expected, however much the King hid his dismay and observed the proper courtesies. Now he had been referred to a humble dwelling, probably in a poor quarter of Samaria, and there he was not even met, but fobbed off with a message. He was outraged. The ignorance and insolence of the prophet was intolerable. If, after all the trouble he had gone to, his cure was to involve nothing more than washing himself in Israel's stinking river, couldn't he have saved himself the trouble and bathed in the rivers of his own Damascus? He stormed off in a temper.

Once again, it was the servants, less touchy on points of dignity, who saw things in their right perspective:

They approached him and said, "My father, if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? All the more reason, then, when

¹ This could refer to many kinds of skin disease.

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he says to you, "Bathe and you will become clean.' " So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, as Elisha had told him to do. And his flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child. (IIK 5:13-14)

Yahweh is God indeed, and because he is God, he is the ultimate reality, the one who brings illusions to an end, both for his own and for all people. Elijah's illusions had been shattered outside the walls of Jezreel, after Mount Carmel. Now Naaman too has found his meeting with God a painful awakening. Yahweh who once rebuked the deluded self-importance of Ahab has now put an end to the same misconception in Naaman: the idea that the greatest things are achieved in a world apart, where kings converse and great men play their role, above the rough and rude experiences of mere servants. No, the only "world apart" is Yahweh's world, and he reveals it through the most alarming and humbling contact with the ordinary and insignificant things of this world.

Naturally, Naaman was grateful for his cure. He returned to Elisha offering wealthy gifts, but the prophet firmly refused to take anything. Naaman therefore secured his permission to take back with him two mule-loads of earth, his link with Yahweh's land of Israel, since from that time on he would sacrifice to no god but Yahweh. He recognised, in his way, both the universal sovereignty of Yahweh, and his unique link with Israel. The God over all was not to be separated from the God of this people, from Yahweh, to whom sacrifice was offered on Israelite soil.

When Naaman left, Elisha's servant, Gehazi, was sorry to see so much money so lightly refused. Unbeknown to his master, he rushed after the Aramean to see what he could get out of him. And he did very well. He told Naaman that two prophets had unexpectedly arrived on a visit and that Elisha would accept a gift to give them. Naaman pressed on him two talents of silver - an enormous sum - and lent him two servants to carry it back. So Gehazi had the money put in his own house, dismissed the servants and returned to his master, all innocent. But Elisha could see what had happened. Gehazi's vague lies did not deceive him. He saw that his servant would be a rich man now, but would have to pay the price:

"Now you have taken the money, you can buy gardens with it, and olive groves, sheep and oxen, male and female slaves. But Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants for ever." And Gehazi left his presence a leper, white as snow. (IIK 5:26-27)

As surely as those who had laid hands on the prophet Elijah, Gehazi had challenged Yahweh. He had tried to turn Yahweh into a money-spinner. And, like them, he paid the penalty: Yahweh is not a power to be exploited, but a master to be served. The prophet's authority is never to enrich himself, but to do Yahweh's bidding and declare Yahweh's will. Only so can the prophet be a man of God. He may depend on others for his

livelihood, but in that case his livelihood will be frugal: a morsel of bread or a scone baked in the desert. A prophet enriched by his work is a prophet corrupted. There are those whom God enriches, but they are not his prophets, not the ones who can speak with authority in his name and declare his present will to his people.

The role of the prophet is an important one. While kings declare their law, and priests teach the ways of God as they are known in custom and tradition, the prophet speaks directly for God, declaring his will and message for the present moment. Without such guidance, a community is lost, for there is always more to authority and leadership than kings and priests can provide, and more to wisdom than custom and law can supply. The best of governments and the best clerics, without prophets, will lead to stagnation. At best they will preserve what God has already achieved, for only a prophet has the gift to tell the community, from God, where it goes from here.

To lose this prophetic contact with God is one of the worst disasters that can befall any community, and the community we now live in, the developed society of the "First World", is suffering from such a disaster. We have heard many false prophets, but few genuine ones, and even in the churches, the revival of prophecy in the last few decades seems to come too late to save us from death. Our future, our survival, lies not merely in reasserting law, moral principles and traditional beliefs, but in learning again to hear the word of God addressed to us as his people and showing us where we go from here.

Prophets speak for God. They are not their "own men", or anyone else's, and therefore no one is to pay them, except God whose servants they are. To be God's spokespeople in this way is to come into enormous power, but it can only be God's power, Yahweh's power, which is the personal authority of his spirit. It is never power for collecting wealth. While kings may be enriched by ruling and priests may become wealthy, if they prove useful to their people, and gurus and teachers may receive something from their grateful pupils, prophets are not to be paid - not even "expenses" - for they do not serve those to whom they speak, but Godself. Their authority lies in their obedience to him, and they are to rely on him to support them.

Nor does the prophet's authority give them direct or constitutional power. They do not themselves become king or governor, but, for all their influence, must remain a voice to persuade kings and governments. Prophets do not come to the throne, and they do not have the power to compel. They can only persuade. It is not a question of separating "sacred" and "secular" authority: the prophets and the history of Israel recognise no such distinction. The scope of authority is universal, whether it is the king's, the priest's or the prophet's. But the nature of their authority is different, and only the prophet has an authority directly from God, a specific message for the present moment. Their authority is to speak for God, and that only. The carrying out of God's will will always depend on the response of others.

Two stories from the Elisha cycle help to make this point. One tells of Elisha's visit to Damascus, where he meets the Aramean general Hazael and predicts his usurpation of the

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throne.¹ Elisha himself weeps to think of the havoc Hazael will wreak upon Israel - but he has no power to prevent or limit it. He can only say what Yahweh has shown him, and leave matters there.

The other story comes from the end of Elisha's life, when the king of Israel visits him on his deathbed.² He tells the King to shoot an arrow through the east window - a sign of victory over the Arameans. Then he tells the King to strike the ground with his arrows, which he does, three times. Elisha is upset that the King stopped short at three, for five or six times would have indicated total victory. Now he will have only limited success, victory in three battles.

Both these stories have similarities with other folk tales, but it does not matter whether they are fact or fiction. They show us, truthfully, how God works through his prophets: not by putting power into their hands, but by giving them authority to direct others, in such a way that those others remain free in their response, and free in the exercise of the power Yahweh gives to them. Prophets are unable to manipulate events so as to bring about their own preferred ends. They are only servants, speaking Yahweh's will to free agents who also have their given role under the rule of God.

True prophets (like Mother Theresa of Calcutta or the women of Greenham Common) accumulate neither goods nor power. They remain a voice, only a voice. At a particular moment they may be listened to, and then their words will be effective and powerful, and they themselves will be honoured (as Mother Theresa has been honoured by many); but at other times they will be disregarded. When that happens, they will have no sanction to back them up; they will be no more than a voice crying in the wilderness, held up (like the Greenham women) only to public ridicule. Though their prophecy is nothing less than God's word to his world, they are left standing alone and helpless outside the walls of power.

God, whom we must approach with deep and humble reverence, is far beyond all the limitations of our world. Yet he is still identified in this world. He has made himself known by speaking to us as Yahweh, the God of Israel. Because he is God, he is the God of all peoples, and not just of Israel, but because he has so identified himself, he is the God of Israel.

The dialogue between Yahweh and his people, far from trailing off into silence as they begin to realise how exalted, how different, how totally "other" God is, in fact intensifies and becomes more challenging. Communication between the utterly transcendent God and his people is as close and personal as it has always been between Yahweh and Israel.

¹ IIK 8:1-15 ² IIK 13:14-19

They are still bound together in a relationship that identifies each in the other. Israel is still his people, and he is still, though he transcends the very universe of Israel, Israel's God. The followers of Elijah, though they recognised the unimaginable mystery of God, did not lose touch with the solid and ordinary realities of this world, in which God reveals himself. Yahweh, the great God they glorified, reaches out and speaks a palpable language. To those who accept and trust him, there is, after all, a way of knowing him. He is still the God who provides for his people.

The prophetic brotherhoods were frugal communities, loyal to Yahweh when Israel on the whole sat lightly to its commitment. They lived in obedience to him, trusting him even when their attempt to follow him led to serious problems. However remote and awesome God might be, they had learnt to trust him and, trusting him, they found that he cared for them still, that he was aware of them and in dialogue with them, providing for their needs.

Once, a pious farmer brought Elisha twenty small loaves and some extra grain. It was a meagre offering when Elisha had a hundred followers (and their families) short of food; but the prophet knew that Yahweh would make up the shortfall:

"Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said. But his servant replied, "How can I serve this to a hundred men?" "Give it to the people to eat," he insisted, "for Yahweh says this, 'They will eat and have some left over.'" He served them: they ate and had some left over, as Yahweh had said. (IIK 4:42-44)

There are several such stories of Yahweh providing for his people. Two of them look like elaborations of Elijah's encounter with the widow of Zarephath. In one, a widow of the community is in debt, and, without the means of paying, faces foreclosure. All she has is a little jar of oil, but Elisha tells her to gather all the containers she can and to fill them from the jar until there is no more left. She does so, and the jar does not run dry until she has poured enough to pay all her debts and provide for herself and her children.¹ In the other story, the son of a woman who has been hospitable to Elisha dies. But she fetches the prophet, who brings him back to life.² God provides, without any limits, for those who trust him.

Another story looks like a tale of magic, and in a different context it might have been no more than that, but here in the context of a community living in dependence on Yahweh, it involves something more significant and personal than mere magic. The community had grown too large, and a group of them decided to move to new, undeveloped land near the Jordan. One of them borrowed an iron axehead (a very expensive item) for the job of clearing, but while he was using it, it flew off the haft and fell into the river:

"Alas, my Lord," he exclaimed "and it was a borrowed one, too!" "Where did it fall?" the man of God asked; and he showed him the spot. Then, cutting a stick,

¹ IIK 4:1-7 ² IIK 4:8-37

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Elisha threw it at that point and made the iron axehead float. "Lift it out" he said; and the man stretched out his hand and took it. (II K 6:5-7)

Those who are trying to live out their lives in dialogue with God and faithful to his leading, do not escape difficulty, but they find that God meets their needs, even by miracle. Such a miracle is not a mere spectacle, as if God were interfering in nature to show off, but a word in a dialogue of trust, his response to a difficulty arising within that dialogue. Such is the context for miracles: the prompt, uncomplicated meeting of needs in a context of trust.

Those who so trust God do not cautiously or skeptically arrange an investigation in advance. They don't set up any checking or recording apparatus, or position neutral observers to make an "unbiased" report. They do not arrange for parallel control groups. Those who have put their lives in God's hands do not have the constant attention of newspapers. Consequently, it is not surprising if such events go unreported except in stories which are part of the community's own tradition.

It is still the same. I have witnessed a healing of skin disease as remarkable as Naaman's. There are reports of a modern multiplication of food in Juarez in Mexico. When such things happen, they happen within the context of trusting dialogue with God, and only those who enter into that dialogue, risking the challenge of trust, are likely to witness them. Those who engage in such dialogue will not be surprised at miracles. If God is in touch with us and communicating with us at any level, that is already a change in the fundamental nature of things as we know them, beside which a change in the behaviour of physical nature is nothing extraordinary.

It is foolish, therefore, to assert as some do on principle that miracles such as the multiplication of food or the floating of an axehead do not occur - that God does not intervene in that way. He does not normally do so, of course, but miracle stories are not about "normality". They describe the extraordinary results of a personal encounter with God, in which unusual faith has led to or takes on unusual difficulties. They show that trust in God is answered by action, even, sometimes, when no action seemed possible. Their object is not to fill our heads with astonishing facts, but to encourage us to trust God. We are not meant to stand gaping before some divine magic show, but to rise to the challenge and join in a dialogue that knows no limits.

Dialogue, communication between persons, bridges even the gap between the ordinary human world and the utterly different reality of God. Because it is dialogue, it is relevant only in a context of trust, which is the real encounter between persons. With trust, or faith, there is a personal bridge between the world of our experience, in which we live out our personality, and the transcendent, personal reality of God. It is the bridge of God himself reaching out as personal, to speak with us.

The transcendence of God and the ordinary realities of our world are not forever separated. He is the God of a transcendent heaven, but he is also the God of a very

familiar earth. He makes oil and bread, he heals skin diseases, he cares for soup¹ and axeheads, because from time to time these things matter to his people. In dialogue with him, his servants recognise his transcendence without floating loose into the abstractions of philosophy: he is still a God involved in our familiar world.

This is a basic principle of "sacramental" theology: that God is transcendent yet revealed in ordinary, tangible things - not by way of analogy, but because he himself has used them as signs by which he speaks to us. The things by which we know him are not images of him, but words by which he communicates, making personal contact with us. He reaches out to us with things we need, and very homely gifts they are: an axehead, oil, bread. Yahweh is God who comes, from his own realm which no words can describe to the very ordinary and tangible land of Canaan. He is the God who gives his own immeasurable, mysterious, personal self in measurable, familiar necessities: an axehead, oil, bread ...

Both miracle and sacrament are, in different ways, the personal action of a transcendent God in the ordinary things of human experience. Both have their meaning as moments in a dialogue of trust, a personal communication between God and his people. Both are meaningless and unacceptable to those who do not trust, or do not meet God in that personal dialogue. They are signs of the universal God, beyond our universe, who yet acts within it and shares in its events to be with his people.

The stories of the Elisha cycle have shown us something more of God, and of what it is to be his people. They take us further into the experience of his power, revealing a truth against which we cannot shield ourselves. They face the ineluctable mystery of him, the God who cannot be located, yet they find him still speaking to his people and sending his prophets. They acknowledge him as the God of all peoples, yet they recognise that he is Yahweh, the God of Israel. They teach us the relationship of trust in which even the God who transcends all things still communicates with his people, and they recall the signs of his continuing care. They challenge us to meet God, and they offer us a way, exalted though God is. It is the way of commitment, communication, personal dialogue, in which we accept God's approach to us.

To relate to him is to be something more than mortal creatures relating to a transcendent God. It is to be personal, a community of persons in dialogue with him. It is to find the gap between remote transcendence and physical existence bridged by Godself personally approaching his people. In the experience of Elijah's followers, Yahweh is God indeed, and is winning back the hearts of his people.

¹ IIK 4:38-41