Gabriella R. Makuc

ENG 285: Biblical Narratives in Literature

Elijah's Strength in the Face of God's Silence

Paulo Coelho's novel *The Fifth Mountain* retells the narrative of the prophet Elijah as found in 1 Kings 17-19. Both accounts chronicle the rise in power of the prophet Elijah as he follows the word of the Lord. The culmination of Elijah's ascent is his ultimate struggle with and rejection of God's plan. In the biblical narrative, Elijah ultimately resigns from his prophetic duties due to feelings of isolation and abandonment. However, the element of human love in Coelho's retelling nourishes Elijah such that his resignation from prophetic duties is an affirmative choice instead of a dejected complaint. This paper will address Elijah's strength as present in his decision making through the biblical narrative and its retelling.

In the biblical narrative, God's increasing silence facilitates Elijah's rise to power. In his article "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," Robert Cohn identifies a shared plot structure between these three chapters. Comparing chapter to chapter, Cohn cites five events that occur sequentially within each: an announcement, a journey, two encounters, a miracle, and an ensuing conversion (Cohn 1982, 343). Over the course of these three cyclical repetitions, "Yahweh's manipulation of the course of the journeys decreases as Elijah's independence increases" (Cohn 1982, 345). God micro-manages Elijah's journey in chapter 17, seems to disappear after the travel instructions in chapter 18, and by chapter 19 does not even induce the travel.

In keeping with this upward trajectory of Elijah's power, by chapter 18, he alone overtakes the 450 prophets of Baal by means of his successful miracle, and proceeds to slay them (1 Kings 18: 38-40). Yet after having sustained a widow, revived her son from death, and facilitated a miracle that prompted the people to fall on their faces and worship the God of Israel

(1 Kings 18: 39), he asks for death in chapter 19. It is ironic that he who has brought rain to the barren land, bread to the hungry, and even life to the dead now begs, "Enough! Now, O YHWH, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (1 Kings 19: 4). Elijah has just proven God's dominion over Baal, yet runs from Jezebel who invokes the names of such similarly powerless gods in her intention to kill him (1 Kings 19: 2). It seems that such a genuine plea for death is not based on a spontaneous decision, but on sentiments that have been welling up in Elijah for some time. However, these feelings of dejection are absent from the earlier chapters. When others questioned God's commands in previous scenes, Elijah was quick to dismiss their worries, as in the encounter with the widow. Although he was not forewarned by Yahweh that the widow was impoverished, when she denied him food because she had not even enough to keep herself alive, Elijah confidently replied, "thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: 'The jug of flour shall not give out and the flask of oil shall not fail, until the day that YHWH gives rain on the face of the earth'" (1 Kings 17: 14). Although Elijah has appeared fearless in the face of failure, Jezebel's proclamation has brought to the surface latent frustrations . Just when he thought all was well in Israel, and acted as an outrunnner to Ahab (1 Kings 18: 46) to demonstrate his reconciliation with the king (Cogan 2000, 445), he realizes how much more there is to be done. He realizes that as a prophet, his mission is never complete. As a finite human, he no longer has the resolve to carry out the will of the infinite God. Similarly, he realizes how the silence of God will play out in his struggles. Although God guided him on his journeys in chapters 17 and 18, God does not give him a divine plan to follow when his life is directly threatened (1 Kings 19: 3). The unexpected has occurred, and Elijah is unprepared to face it without instructions from God. Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin: while Elijah's independence has

increased through his own decision to flee, this measure of autonomy leads him on an unguided and more difficult path.

In Coelho's retelling, Elijah's rise to power and ensuing expression of dejection are chronicled in detail. Coelho retells Elijah's struggle with God in the narrative setting of 1 Kings 17 (instead of 19), in which Elijah lives with a widow in a foreign land. In the retelling, after Elijah raises the widow's son from death through a miracle, an angel visits him and announces, "from this day forward, and until the moment thou returnest to the land thou hast abandoned, no other miracle will be granted thee" (Coelho 1998, 60). He must learn to use only the strength within him. As such, he comforts the sick, feeds the hungry, and settles disputes among neighbors (93). He is challenged to confront and even nurture the romantic love he feels for the widow (85). The greatest opportunity of all is the instruction that he must choose when he will perform his coming once-in-a-lifetime miracle. Yet similar to the fear that biblical Elijah expresses toward his freedom in 1 Kings, Elijah cries despairingly, "The Lord has given me a choice that should be His" (135). Elijah can choose to save the city of Akbar from an approaching attack by the Assyrians or to deliver the people of Israel, his homeland, from Jezebel's power. Either way, a tragedy will occur, and this seems markedly unjust to Elijah. He does not understand why an infinite God cannot simply work through infinite goodness, instead of relying on an "indecisive servant" to make a choice that will bring redemption to one people and harm to another (135).

While the question between the infinite nature of God and the finite nature of the prophet is ultimately left unanswered in 1 Kings, Elijah's messenger angel provides an answer in *The Fifth Mountain*. Tragedy, known as the unavoidable, is temporary, but its lessons are everlasting (Coelho 1998, 137). In responding to Elijah's assertion that God has given him too great a

choice, the angel explains that Elijah's strength must lie in his power to make a decision: "he who maketh no choice is dead in the eyes of the Lord" (136). Elijah, however, fails to make this decisive choice. He calls forth the conditions for the miracle, asking God to stop the advancing army so that he might intervene and bring about peace in Akbar. Yet, out of fear, uncertainty, and tense social situations, he does not follow through with the miracle (143). Although he tries to leave Akbar with the widow and her son the night before the Assyrians will attack the city, God does not allow him this decision as a substitute for the one that he failed to make. He will not allow Elijah to evade his decision or defer it until later. Elijah must return to Abkar and face the situation that he has created (152). In *The Fifth Mountain*, as in the Bible, Elijah's rise in power comes with a loss of guidance and security from God. While this dynamic is built subtly into the rhetoric of the biblical narrative, by increasing omission of God rather than affirmative emphasis on Elijah's independence, it is explained clearly as part of Coelho's narrative. It serves to develop Elijah's character, as well as the characteristics of service to God that will be of great importance later in the novel.

When Elijah asks for death in the biblical narrative, he is instead nourished by a miracle. An angel brings him not only a helping of food to keep him alive, but a second serving that will sustain him in his forty day walk to Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19: 7-8). Through this nourishing angel, God is leading Elijah on to challenge him at Mount Horeb. Elijah does not acknowledge this miraculous sustenance in his plea on the mountain. On the contrary, he seems to doubt God's sustenance as a whole:

> I have been most zealous for YHWH, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, your altars they have destroyed, and your prophets they have killed by the sword. And I, I alone am left, and they have sought my life to take it. (1 Kings 19: 10, 14)

God's response to Elijah's complaint is to reveal himself to the prophet. He does this pointedly not through the elements of wind, earthquake and fire, which are only his messengers (1 Kings 19: 11-12). Rather, it is at the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19: 12) that Elijah "cover[s] his face with his cloak" (1 Kings 19: 13). And when God once again asks him what he is doing, he responds with the same statement.

God's intervention between Elijah's identical pleas appears to be an attempt to revive him. Cohn argues this point by examining the different roles of God and Elijah in the Mt. Horeb scene than those active in chapters 17 and 18. Elijah breaks the expected flow of occurrences as established in previous chapters. Cohn contends that the miracle in each chapter involves an accusation to which Elijah must respond, the preparation of a sacred space, the three-fold repetition of a sacred act, and God's answer to Elijah's prayer (347). In chapters 17 and 18, the miracle is concluded by a conversion: the widow proclaims God's word true and Elijah a worthy prophet (1 Kings 17: 24), and the Israelites return to God (1 Kings 18: 39). In both of these miracles, Elijah is responsible for the preliminary work: he establishes the sacred space of the upper room in the widow's house and builds the twelve-stone altar on Mount Carmel. He "stretche[s] out on the child three times" to revive him (1 Kings 17: 21) and orders water to be poured on his Mount Carmel offering three times (1 Kings 18: 34). As for the miracle itself, Cohn asserts that "the intervention of Yahweh becomes progressively more direct" (Cohn 347). There is a textual punctuation break in the first miracle between Elijah's call and God's response: "Yahweh heard Elijah's call; the child's life returned to his body" (1 Kings 17: 22). On Mount Carmel, God is more directly linked to the physical act: "Then Yahweh's fire descended and consumed the offering" (1 Kings 18: 38). The "sheer silence" that Elijah experiences in the third miracle (1 Kings 19: 12) is so direct that it is not even physical. But while the two other

miracles produced visible conversions, Elijah does not budge after his most intimate experience of God. This time, God sets aside the sacred space by "calling Elijah forth from his cave to the mountain" (Cohn 1982, 347). God brings forth the three preparatory acts in the elements of the wind, earthquake and fire (1 Kings 19: 11-12). Instead of Elijah calling upon God, God is calling upon Elijah. In place of Elijah asking something of God, as seen in chapters 17 and 18, God asks something of Elijah in the ambiguous question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19: 13). Just as Elijah brought all he had to the altar of his previous miracles, knowing that he faced ridicule and death if they were unsuccessful, God brings his inner being to this encounter with Elijah. Yet Elijah is all too familiar with this sequence of events. Instead of allowing for the miracle of renewal to occur within him, he breaks the sequence of the preceding miracles. No conversion occurs. His stubborn strength has decided the course of events.

Coelho's Elijah also begins the chain of events that facilitates his challenge with God by begging for death. Similarly, Elijah's plea for death in the midst of an Assyrian attack is met by sustained life. He shouts, "Ask them to kill me at once!", and the opposing army will not oblige (156). His plea is answered, furthermore, with audible screams of terror from the woman he loves as she burns in a perilous fire. These sound spurs him into action, into life out of his death. He prays that God who has revived his life will save the woman who took him into her home (157), yet God is silent. He is silent to Elijah's thrashing about and "clamoring against the heavens" (159). He is silent even when death sets in on the widow who is buried beneath rubble:

> The silence of death descended, and the wind ceased to blow. Elijah no longer heard the cries outside or the flames crackling in neighboring houses; he heard only the silence and could almost touch its intensity. (167)

This is a poignant reworking of the wind, earthquake, fire and silence symbolism from 1 Kings 19. Among the wind, screams and flames that have overtaken Akbar, God is nowhere to be found. This is quite akin to how he is not present in the wind, earthquake and fire that precede

him on Mt. Horeb. Unlike in the Bible, though, neither is he to be found in the silence. The palpable silence Elijah feels is that of his beloved's cruel death. It is not a silence filled with God's presence, but God's injustice. Similar to the biblical Elijah, Coelho's character voices this plea to God:

> I do not understand Thy designs. I see no justice in Thy acts. In bearing the suffering Thou hast imposed on me, I am sorely wanting. Remove Thyself from my life, for I too am reduced to ruins, fire, and dust.
> Amidst the fire and desolation, the light appeared to Elijah… (168)

While Elijah is a prophet and, as such, is called to rise above the material world, the death of his beloved has entrenched him in its destruction. He is reduced to the ruins, fire, and dust (like the earthquake, fire and wind of 1 Kings) that is not of the Lord. He cannot find the sacred silence that God reveals in the Bible; the only silence he feels is that of utter abandonment. The angel that appears in the subsequent light proclaims, "the Lord hath heard thy prayer and thy petition will be granted thee" (168). Until he has undergone his time of trial, he will receive no more messages or demands from God.

Elijah asks for an end to his prophetic duties, and God grants him this request for the time being. This is another expression of God's silence; not an overpowering presence, but an actual withdrawal from Elijah's life. Unlike the silence on Mount Horeb, it is a silence that brings about transformation; Elijah does change his mind, and does not return to God with the same complaint. However, his conversion takes place without God, in the purely human realm. Elijah has been charged by his now deceased beloved with caring for her only son. Elijah and the boy flee the destroyed city and find themselves at the door of a shepherd's home. The food and water he receives are described as facilitating a miraculous physical revival (Coelho 1998, 177), and the shepherd's instructive words bring about a spiritual revival. As in the biblical narrative, Coelho's Elijah is disillusioned with a task that seems impossible. The boy desperately wants to

return to Akbar and rebuild its ruins, as his mother's dying words proclaimed that she was the city. However, the task seems insurmountable and even pointless to Elijah in the face of a God who would allow such cruelty. The boy's hope is juxtaposed with Elijah's despair, and the shepherd offers words that lead both forward: "If you have a past that dissatisfies you, forget it now" (180). Elijah is inspired to drop his grievances against God, and take his life into his own hands. He will no longer blame God's incomprehensible motives or injustice for his struggle, but will join with the boy in rebuilding the city of his beloved.

Elijah's declaration of blatant disobedience to God is filled with symbols from 1 Kings. Coelho juxtaposes the sound of the wind with Elijah's silence and the lack of a fire from heaven with his own assertive choice. Through the strains of an increasing wind, Elijah challenges God:

> "Slay me now, because if Thou allowest me to arrive at the gates of the city, I shall rebuild that which Thou wouldst sweep from the face of the earth. And I shall go against Thy judgment."
> He fell silent...His heart was free, and no longer did he fear what might befall him…
> Elijah opened his eyes. The fire from heaven had not descended on him, and before him were the ruined walls of Akbar. (187)

God's silence in this moment of utter defiance leads Elijah on to rebuild the city and his past. The biblical Elijah lives for God alone until he can no longer execute his infinite task. Coelho's Elijah is nourished by the spirit of humanity. In his dealings with the widow, the boy, and the shepherd, he realizes the confidence it takes to make a decision. No longer will he live in the shadow of wondering what path God has set out for him. He will take charge of his own life- which means blatantly defying God- and in it, find the sense of choice that God has desired for him all along. He realizes that through his encounter with the temporary but tragic unavoidable, he finds the eternal strength of choosing his own path within. He reflects, "the Lord was generous and had led him to the abyss of the unavoidable, to show him that man must *choose*- and not *accept*- his fate" (205). While the biblical Elijah is stubborn as to his human needs, persistent in that he cannot fulfill the will of a constantly demanding Lord, he does not choose

his fate. He presents the problem before God twice, and allows God to react as he will. His repeated statement is a complaint of God's injustice rather than a constructive solution. Coelho's Elijah learns that God is not the power that forces decisions on an individual, but the silence within the internal process of making a choice. In light of Coelho's Elijah, biblical Elijah does not understanding the overwhelming significance of the theophany he experiences because he fails to hear the still small voice within himself. Although he manages to change the course of events, he does not transform his grievance into action.

The Kirkus Review of *The Fifth Mountain* brings to light how Coelho "handles religion, politics, battles, plagues, the earthshaking arrival of the alphabet, and the destruction and rebuilding of Akbar" (Kirkus 2010). It is also Elijah who handles all of these in the course of the narrative. He learns to live amidst complex human society and find God within it all. God's silence in the wake of Akbar's destruction allows Elijah and the remaining inhabitants to rename themselves and experience the process of redefining their community without instructions from a higher power. Elijah understands in the end that the greatest of all gifts is the "capacity to choose" (Coelho 1998, 204). As frightening and isolating as it may be, God's silence ultimately initiates the most profound and convicted human decisions.

Works Cited

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