

Elisha as the Original Pentecost Guy: Ten Theses

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The Elisha narrative in 2 Kings 2-9, 13 constitutes a quite distinct literary corpus in the Book of Kings.¹ In terms of content and placement, it is a corpus of literature that suggests great intentionality on the part of the traditionists in celebrating this odd character right in the midst of jaded royal power.

1. *Elisha is the original "Pentecost guy" who anticipates the rush of the spirit upon Jesus and who models the conduct of the apostolic community in the Book of Acts.* Indeed, Elisha may be the first "apostle," the one sent. He is infused by the spirit of God who will lead and guide him into courageous transformative acts in a society that had no reason to expect such transformations.

Elisha's narrative introduction as a carrier of the spirit is accomplished in three parts. First, he is presented as a disciple of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:19-21. At the very outset he has Elijah's mantle thrown over him, a symbol (or totem) of power and authority. He is reluctant to leave his old life with family and work, but Elijah tersely permits him to get his life in order. And then he "follows," enlisting in a dangerous enterprise out beyond all previous connections.

Second, in the scene concerning Elijah's "ascent," Elisha is in deep grief over the loss of Elijah and prays "for a double portion of your spirit" (2 Kgs 2:9-12). It is telling that his bid is not for the spirit of God, but for the spirit of Elijah. He is profoundly aware of continuity (apostolic succession?) and presents himself as heir to Elijah's power and authority.

Third, after the "departure" of Elijah, Elisha recovers the mantle of power and authority and dramatically "parts the waters" of the Jordan River (2 Kgs 2:13-14). The reader is invited to relate the Jordan waters to the waters of the exodus, as has already been done in Joshua 4:23; it is as though Elisha is prepared to lead a new exodus, this one to depart the hopeless royal enterprise of Israel. He will replicate the work of Moses. His companions are able to discern, from this dramatic act, that "the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha."

In three quick paragraphs Elisha is identified as the carrier of the transformative spirit of Elijah. He—with this undomesticated power—is on the loose. He is, moreover, on the loose in the regime of Ahab and Jezebel who had compromised Yahwism, who had no appreciation for Torah mandates, and who practiced an oppressive politics and an exploitative economics. The narrative walks us into a situation where the spirit of emancipator transformation is at deep odds with the order of the day.

2. *The emancipatory intent of the Elisha narrative is to witness to the transformative power of God that is loosed in the world through this human agent.* The narrative—not unlike the Synoptic accounts of Jesus—offers an inventory of transformative actions that leave witnesses "amazed," awed by the inescapable awareness that the force of the spirit is back in play against the closed settlements of society:

Elisha transforms polluted water into "wholesome water" (2:19-21).

Elisha rescues a poor widow and her son from rapacious creditors by an act of neighborly abundance (4:1-4).

Elisha gives a son to the Shunammite woman and then raises him from the dead (4:36).

Elisha transforms poisonous food into edible food (4:38-41).

Elisha feeds 100 people from a small food supply (4:42-44).

Elisha heals a Syrian general of leprosy (5:1-27; see Luke 4:27).

Elisha recovers an axe head from a swamp by causing iron to float (6:1-7).

Elisha transforms a Syrian military threat into a great feast of peacemaking (6:8-23).

Elisha eases a famine in Israel by the work of *the wind* (6:24-7:20; note 6:6).

Elisha causes a widow to receive back her forfeited property (8:1-6).²

Elisha anoints a new Israelite king, thus initiating a dramatic social revolution in Israel (9:1-16).

The list of transformative deeds is breathtaking when it is recited in sum. Remarkably, Israel's narrative exhibits no curiosity about these extraordinary events, nor does it offer any explanation. It is content to tell! The narrative permits the reader to discern, from episode to episode, that something beyond conventional human management is underway in this collection of "miracles."³

3. *The deconstructive intention of the Elisha narrative is to expose monarchs in Israel as impotent and irrelevant to the promissory history of God.* The Elisha narratives do not happen in a vacuum, but are situated in a larger body of texts entitled "Kings." The presumptive subject of the narrative of "Kings" concerns the kings who rule in Samaria and Jerusalem. The Elisha narrative, moreover, is framed in 2 Kings 1:17-18 by a report of the death of Ahaziah (son of Ahab) and the ascent to the throne of Jehoram (another son of Ahab). At the conclusion of the narrative of Elisha, it is framed by a report of the ignoble death of Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:30-37). It is reported that after dinner Jehu, the one dispatched by Elisha to eliminate that dynasty, found nothing left of the rejected queen except "the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands" (v. 36), a residue of failure that signaled, says the narrative, that "This is the word of the Lord." The royal figures in chapters 1 and 9 serve to frame the Elisha narrative, but neither Jehoram nor Jezebel figures significantly in the action that is reported.

Inside the narrative, moreover, kings play only a small role and are regularly reduced to irrelevance.

♦ In the narrative of Naaman, the Syrian general, the Israelite king responds in dismay and anger to the request for healing, for he is shown to have no healing capacity. Indeed, he himself recognizes as much: "When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me'" (2 Kgs 5:7). The narrative must run on quickly to Elisha.

♦ In the narrative concerning the war with Syria, the king in Samaria is presented as "perturbed" at the outset, seeking to arrest Elisha (2 Kgs 6:11-12). Absent from the crucial action of the narrative, the king reappears at the end, wanting permission to kill his Syrian adversary (6:21). He is rebuked by the prophet who reminds the king that this is his show, and the king has no role to play.

♦ In the narrative of famine, the desperate woman pleads with the king to provide food: "Help, my Lord king" (6:26). But the king, yet again, abdicates responsibility and confesses that he has no capacity to make a difference: In 2 Kgs 6:27, "he said, 'No! Let the Lord help you. How can I help you? From the threshing floor or from the

wine press?” As in 5:7-8, so in 6:31 the narrative must promptly refocus on Elisha, the real agent in this account.

- ♦ In the narrative of the woman who had forfeited her property, the king is conferring with Elisha’s aide and seems to act in response to the woman according to social passions of Elisha (8:4-6). In this case the king does act on his own, but the context suggests that even in this royal act, the horizon of the prophet is operative. The king is peculiarly interested in the “great things” of Elisha that critically break open a closed society.

- ♦ In the culminating event of revolution, the prophet has the capacity to anoint new kings and create new political possibilities before which incumbent kings are powerless (9:4-10).

- ♦ The cumulative effect of the narrative is to portray kings in Samaria as feeble office holders who have no power to govern in generative ways. They cannot heal (5:7); they cannot make peace (6:22); they cannot produce food (6:27). They cannot contribute any dimension of well-being to common life, not health care, not foreign policy, not sustenance. They cannot do anything that kings are supposed to do. The intent of the narrative is to deconstruct and expose them as empty ciphers in the processes of social power that merit neither loyalty nor obedience. The Pentecost guy does not wait on them, but simply disregards them. He is not intimidated by them and offers no allegiance to their empty forms; he has other wonders to enact that make common life possible, wonders over which the kings have no say.

4. *When one considers the wonders wrought by Elisha on the one hand and the impotence of the kings on the other hand, it is clear that the narrative enacts and exhibits a profound tension between office holders and wind carriers.* That same tension has been at the heart of Israel’s faith since the wind blew back the waters in Egypt at the behest of Moses, an act that exhibited the impotence of Pharaoh, the quintessential office holder. It is possible to trace that great and durable tension and the great contest between formal power and effective power through Scripture; in the season of Pentecost it is possible to see the effective transformative power that is credited to the force of God. So it is with Amos and Amaziah (Amos 7:10-17), with Isaiah and Ahaz (Isa 7:1-12), with Jeremiah and Zedekiah (Jer 37:17; 38:14-28). And so it is, most dramatically, in the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate. Pilate is exposed as an empty, helpless cipher who administers all the emblems of power but is in fact powerless (John 18:33-19:16). Jesus, by contrast, has none of the credentials or emblems of power, but effectiveness in transformative activity.

Given that interaction of formal power and effective power, it is no wonder that the apostles, in the Book of Acts, are dangerously on the loose in the empire, turning the world upside down. The Book of Acts is commonly seen as a book that exhibits “the spirit in the church” and as the drama of Easter preaching. What is not noticed most often is that *the Spirit* and *Easter preaching* bring the apostles *before the authorities* who regularly summon the wind-carriers into court. The Book of Acts is a replica of the Elisha narrative. Both attest that the tension in the midst of formal power is a place where all of the Pentecost folk dwell.

5. *“Office holders” characteristically seek to retard and resist transformative authority and action.* In the Elisha narrative, the king has taken Elisha to be an enemy precisely because Elisha has unloosed transformative energy and authority in his realm: “And he said, ‘So may God do to me, and more, if the head of Elisha son of

Shaphat stays on his shoulders today” (2 Kgs 6:31). The king imagines that if he can eliminate the wind-carrier, the wind will go away. In this regard Elisha is viewed in the same way that Father Ahab viewed Elijah before Elisha, as “troubler” (1 Kgs 18:17), and as “enemy” (1 Kgs 21:20). Pentecost characters are always an inconvenience and most often a threat to establishment arrangements. And certainly Elisha in his work of *healing, peace, and food* called into question the power arrangements that privileged some in Samaria over against others.

It was, of course, the same with Jesus. Mark reports, already in chapter 2, that healing and forgiveness are reckoned by the authorities to be “blasphemous” (Mark 2:7), and already in 3:6, a healing provoked lethal opposition: “The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6). The tension between the privileged that guard the settlement and the underprivileged who want access is neatly voiced by Luke: “Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard” (Luke 19:47-48).

The same contest continues in the United States now; the Senate consists mostly in billionaires whose work is primarily to channel tax money to preferred lobbyists; only very occasionally can such an establishment body bring itself to care for the common good. *Mutatis mutandis*, what passes for “orthodoxy” in the church as established certitude is a device for maintaining power, whether about who is excommunicated or who is eligible for ordination or any such decision. “Truth” characteristically takes on a strange alliance with power. The office holders in the Elisha narrative are a powerful embodiment of self-protection and exhibit an unwillingness to run any risks beyond their own protection.

6. *Conversely, wind-carriers characteristically shun office-holding and maintain a distance as “outsider” that gives freedom and energy.* One could not imagine Elisha as a candidate for kingship in Samaria. Nor would one have thought that Jesus might run for governor in Galilee. There are important exceptions to this rule. Thus many of us have regarded Franklin Roosevelt as a wind-carrier for the poor and the powerless; and John XXIII was a wind-carrier who shocked and scared the office holders in the Curia when he arrived at the Papacy. And Desmond Tutu, after long risky witness, became a bishop. In all of these cases, however, the occupants of the office did not suffer from amnesia. The presidency did not cause Roosevelt to forget the poor. Papal authority did not cause John to turn away from pastoral realism for the sake of pomp. And Tutu as archbishop was not seduced by Anglican punctiliousness away from the critical issues of his society.

These exceptions are important. But they are exceptions. In the Elisha narrative, in any case, the prophet is portrayed as utterly unimpressed by formal authority, unburdened by official responsibility, acting out of a kind of freedom and energy and courage to which “office” could add nothing. Beyond that, his imagination remained uncurbed and unfiltered, so that he could imagine the poor made safe, the dead given life, the hungry given food, the sick healed. He knew in profound ways that the ways things are are not the ways they need to be. Pentecost, in ancient Israel or wherever, concerns the force of newness that is undeterred by present power arrangements. That is why established church traditions, with precious legacies and huge endowments, tend not to specialize in Pentecost.

7. The labels “office holder” and “wind carrier” pertain more to a mindset and an act of imagination than they do to visible, organized reality. The social reality of being “in office” or not is important, but I do not think that being “in office” or out of office is crucial. What counts is one’s self-perception and one’s readiness or lack of readiness to live one’s life in a responsive way. Thus in or out of office, one can imagine a safe self that stays close to settled power arrangements and official forms of management and control. Or one can, in or out of office, refuse to be restrained by excessive burden or excessive privilege, and be able to run risks out beyond the treasured contours of any social arrangement.

We do not have access to the way in which Elisha “imagined himself,” and perhaps he did not permit himself the luxury of self-reflection, not being a modern person. But we can entertain the prospect that Elisha—or Elijah before him—might have been more “contained” in royal Israel by privilege and deference and entitlement. But one cannot, from the narrative, imagine that he would have been restrained or self-centered in his energy and courage for newness. Thus I suspect that Pentecost is the invitation to reimagine ourselves—since “imagination” is close to the work of the spirit—not as products of power arrangements, but as heirs of life-giving wind that refuses to be controlled.

8. The core work of Pentecost is to embrace the wind and to yield the controls of “office.” We may watch Elisha in the early vignettes of his life, “embracing” and “yielding.” In 1 Kings 19:19-21 where he is first on the scene, he holds back from Elijah for the sake of his “mother and father.” Interestingly Elijah does not press the point, but gives him room for unfinished business. But Elisha does not hold back from Elijah very long; he moves immediately to an act of outrageous newness; he kills the “means of production” of his family for the sake of “following.” And in 2 Kings 2:12, as he asks for Elijah’s spirit, he cries out in some fear and desperation: “Elisha kept watching and crying out, ‘Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!’ But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces” (2 Kgs 2:12). One can see in both cases that he is processing his new role, his new vocation, and his new identity. We have no evidence that Elisha ever wanted to “go back.” Our own sense of self, nonetheless, will indicate that this Pentecost process of *embracing and yielding* is a demanding one.

The matter pertains to us personally in the ways we are always re-deciding our identity and our vocation. It is possible to imagine the self as an essential “given” and therefore fated from our nurture and environment. Or it is possible to think in terms of an emergent self upon whom the wind continues to blow. The move from *essential self* to *emergent self* is evoked in (a) the liturgical process of confession and pardon and invitation to lead “a new and righteous life,” and (b) in psychotherapy in which the assumption is that a new self can be nurtured and chosen and embraced.

As the matter of embracing and yielding pertains to persons, so it may also pertain to corporate bodies. Jim Wallis now is proposing that the church in the United States may faithfully accept its identity not as *institution* but as *movement*.⁴ The pair of terms, institution and movement, makes a nice parallel to “king and prophet” in our narrative. The king embodies all of the closure and settlement of institution, and the prophet represents in the narrative all the risks and possibilities of movement. Pentecost is the lively possibility of our becoming wind-carriers when we have spent much of our energy to secure “tenure” in our “office.”

9. *A Pentecostal decision about “office holding” and “wind carrying,” embracing and yielding, pertains to biblical interpretation as it pertains to every faithful practice in the church.* John O’Banion, in his magisterial review of Western literature, contrasts two types of literature under the rubric of “list” and “narrative.”⁵ By “list”—under which he includes Plato and Descartes—O’Banion means literature that is comprehensive and organized to bring control. By “narrative” he means indeterminate openness to newness. His categories lead him to speak of the “demise” of narration in a way that is reminiscent of Hans Frei, only O’Banion works in larger scope concerning all Western literature.⁶ His categories also remind me of Levinas’s defining categories of “totality” (by which he means an all comprehensive, totalizing, totalitarian offer) and “infinity” (by which he means openness beyond control).⁷

The reason I cite O’Banion—along with Frei and Levinas—is that the categories pertain to how a spirit-powered church might read Scripture. Too much, I believe, we read Scripture according to “historical criticism” that is designed to accommodate the text to our reasonableness. But our interpretation of Scripture that is post-critical and open to the compulsion of the spirit might indeed generate new missional energy. I suggest it is worth a long pondering about how to read Scripture as wind-carriers and not as office holders.

10. *Preachers are caught, given Pentecost, in a deep bind precisely because preachers—like tenured seminary teachers—are “office holders.”* That is, they are accountable for budgets, programs, and membership lists, and these responsibilities cause one to be cautious, prudent, and restrained. But every preacher knows, as she faces *the text*, about the intrusion of the spirit who summons to say the unsayable and to hope the unhopeable that violate everything that is acceptable in “the office.” There is no way out of this dilemma, but there is gain in naming the Catch-22 that is at the center of the Pentecost crisis.

I finish with three ponderings about the Elisha narrative and all the Pentecost guys and gals summoned to be wind-carriers. First, the narrative about the death of Elisha may give us pause (2 Kgs 13:20-21). As the narrative works, Elisha’s last public act—the initiation of a political coup—happens in chapter 9; he disappears from the narrative until his death report in chapter 13. There it is reported that by accident a dead man was thrown into the grave of Elisha:

“As soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he came to life and stood on his feet” (2 Kgs 13:21). Contact with the dead prophet, we are told, caused new life for the man. The prophet is radioactive, loaded with the gift of life. It might matter that preachers should know—rather than being managers or therapists or moralists—that their very bones, infused by the spirit—are radioactive, recruited for the transmission of life. Preachers might claim more for the wind that powers them!

Second, as I pondered Elisha, I kept being drawn back to the Book of Acts. Preachers at Pentecost are more or less stuck with the Book of Acts and the all-too-familiar story of “tongues of fire.” But what if the Book of Acts—set in the empire of Rome—is simply a replay of the ancient narrative of king and prophet, of office holder and wind carrier? Pentecost, in such purview, turns out to be not about a great charismatic event (though it is that), but a surge of power for life that leaves us always unsettled and on the move. In a society where “our kind of church” exists, we tilt always to the side of the settled. But if Pentecost follows Easter and the gift of new life, then Pentecost is about public power and public history and public peace and public

healing and public food. It means to wrest the public out of the hands of the office holders.

Third, after Elisha and the Books of Acts, Pentecost is a special time to consider how the people of God position themselves in a society of fear and violence. It should be clear that the office holders—right and left—have not a clue about how to reorder and renew our common life. Just like the ancient kings, they are bewildered at what they face. What a time for *talk and walk* that knows that the wind is blowing out beyond our preconceived formulations and settlements. Pentecost preaching is not for magic tricks. It is for the slow, steady obedience to what we cannot grasp. This work enacted by the spirit concerns: the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, life everlasting.

All of that is well beyond the ken of office holders!

Notes

1 On this body of texts, see Walter Brueggemann, *Testimony to Otherwise: The Witness of Elijah and Elisha* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).

2 In this narrative text it is the king, and not the prophet, who acts. The narrative reports, however, that the king has been much interested in “the great things” of Elisha, that is, the wonders he has performed. It is reasonable, I suggest, to think that the narrative exhibits the king as instructed and empowered by the wonders of Elisha to enact precisely such a wonder in his own sphere of power, namely, the recovery of the property of the widow that is in the right of the king. If this connection is credible, then the king acts in this way only because of the empowering report of Elisha.

3 It is conventional in critical scholarship to identify these Elisha narratives as “legends,” a label that serves to dismiss them because they do not conform to conventional reason. A post-critical reading of them, however, suggests not that they are second rate, but that they open a newness not available to conventional categories. A reflection on such a dismissive use of the label of “legend” lets us observe the way that conventional criticism serves conventional management of social power.

4 Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith & Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

5 John D. O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

6 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).