

Elijah, Narcissism, and (Especially) Me

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Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kgs 19:1-18 (1-4a, 8-18)

New Testament Lesson: Matt 17:1-13

“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

On Narcissism

Let me begin this sermon by saying that I try. I do, I mean, I *really* try. I try not to be narcissistic. It's just *so hard*. But I try. *I* (that's *me*, by the way)—*I* try!

Narcissism, you might recall, gets its name from the Greek myth of Narcissus. Narcissus was so handsome that he fell in love with his own reflection in a pool and never looked back...or to the left or right for that matter. He spent the rest of his life just staring at himself. Now I don't know if he tried, like I do, not to be a narcissist. It seems that it would have been very difficult for him: he was, after all, *the* Narcissus! The very first narcissist!

I think it's safe to say that a bit of Narcissus' malady afflicts all of us to one degree or another, in smaller or larger quantities, whether we think ourselves to be handsome and beautiful or not. In fact, we might admit that it's oftentimes our *lack* of fantastic qualities that leads to our own particular instances of self-obsession. Regardless, if it's true that we all have a bit of narcissism, then we probably find it hard to not be narcissistic, even when we try. *If* we ever do.

Elijah and Narcissism

In the text we just heard from 1 Kings 19, the great prophet Elijah is also trying hard not to be a narcissist—he's just failing at it. Now don't get me wrong: I don't want to be too hard on Elijah. It's very easy, in the pulpit, to take potshots at the people of God in Scripture, even and especially the saints. And let's face it, Elijah is one of the heavies when it comes to Bible saints. He came on the scene in 1 Kings 17, and in the chapter previous to the one we just heard, he single-handedly confronted 850 prophets of the gods Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel. Elijah remains active into 2 Kings, gets an honorable mention at the very end of the Old Testament in the book of Malachi, and then makes a stunning comeback in a number of places in the New Testament, especially in the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-10; Luke 9:28-36).

So, no, I don't want to poke fun at the great Elijah easily. He's got a lot on his plate, after all. I mean, he just had a major head-to-head, or rather head-to-850 heads with the false prophets. And now the queen who funded those prophets, the notorious Jezebel, wants *his* head! He's terrified and he's tired. Like I said, he's got a lot on his plate. That granted, since I've already confessed that I'm a narcissist (but so are you), let me just go ahead and say that I think Elijah, despite all these caveats, is a bit of a narcissist as well, because, well let's face it, I'm preaching, and if I want Elijah to be a narcissist, it's a done deal! (My narcissism strikes again!)

But even if Elijah is narcissistic in this passage, it doesn't mean those other things aren't true. According to verse 3, he really is terrified; and in verse 4 things are bad enough that he longs for death from God's hand rather than Jezebel's. But then he gets some rest and some miraculous food and drink, and off he goes, refreshed by all that, for forty days and forty nights until he gets to Mount Horeb. That's God's mountain, in case you didn't know (1 Kgs 19:8). There he enters what the Hebrew text calls "the cave." Why *the* cave, we might wonder. There've got to be a lot of caves in Mount Horeb! It's hard to say for sure, but maybe, just maybe, because this cave is, in fact, *the* cave, the selfsame cave where Moses hid when he saw God's glory pass by. So far then, things seem to be lining up to make this an event of significant, dare one say, biblical proportions: 40 days and 40 nights (hardly coincidental); God's mountain, Horeb; *the* cave.

This biblical trend continues in what follows: Elijah is suddenly confronted by "the word of the LORD." That's a good prophetic speech formula—it's what prophets say before they utter God's message. It's the kind of thing Elijah himself says (see 1 Kgs 21:23; cf. 2 Kgs 9:36), but here the word of the Lord comes *to him*, addressing *him*.¹ But despite the biblical proportions, the specific question that is asked seems rather mundane:

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kgs 19:9b; NRSV)

So Elijah delivers his report—*his* report, mind you: "I've been very passionate for the LORD God of hosts because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they want to take my life too (1 Kgs 19:10; CEB*)!"² Did you hear all that? "*I've* been very passionate; *I'm* the only one left; they want to take *my* life too." That's a lot of "I" language in there! Elijah sounds a bit narcissistic, doesn't he?

Further confirmation of that is found if we keep reading, because, right after he gives his report, he is told to witness a great revelation of God—once again, not unlike Moses. This is a famous passage, but what's important for us right now is to note that after all the special effects—the strong wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the sound that was thin and quiet (CEB)—the same question comes to him: "Why are you here, Elijah (1 Kgs 19:13b; CEB)?" And Elijah's response is the same as before—*exactly* the same—*word-for-word*.

Well, he's got a lot on his plate, you might say. *We* might say. *We all* have a lot on our plates, after all! It's hard not to be concerned about all that, you know. Hard not to be worried about all that. Hard not to keep coming back to all that—hard not to be obsessed with all that over and over again, no matter what else is going on. Exactly.

It really *is* hard not to keep coming back to all that—hard for Elijah, too, despite all that has come in between and along the way: you know, things like God's provision of divine fire in the showdown with the false prophets (1 Kgs 18:38), or things like God's provision of rain after the terribly-long drought (1 Kgs 18:45), or things like God's provision of food and drink, not once, but twice, on Elijah's trek to Horeb (1 Kgs 19:5-8), or things like God's stunning display of pyrotechnics from the biggest of things to the smallest of sounds. That's *a lot* of things! And so, the question comes a second time: "*What* are you doing here, Elijah?"

"Well, *I've* been working really hard...just *me*...all by *my* lonesome...and did *I*

mention that everybody else—I mean *everybody else*—is against *me*...oh, and you too—you too, God!”

No, I don’t want to be too hard on Elijah, but it’s hard not to see some narcissism here. But once again, he’s got a lot on his plate. Jezebel, if nothing else! So shouldn’t we cut this great prophet a break? Maybe so, but God doesn’t.

God and Elijah’s Narcissism

God asks the question a second time and gets the same response, despite all that has come before and in-between, and so God moves on—quite literally. Elijah gets no comforting response—he already got that in the showdown on Carmel. Elijah gets no sustaining power—he already got that in the divine food and drink. Elijah gets no miraculous display of God’s presence—he already got that in the theophany. What Elijah gets now, despite all that’s on his plate, despite his deep passion, his real fear, his deep tiredness—and yes, perhaps, also his touch of narcissism—from God, instead, is marching orders. There are three things specifically.

First: “Go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king of Aram”—it’s a long way from Horeb, way down south, to Damascus, way up north, and it’s directly through territory controlled by Queen Jezebel.

Second: “Also anoint Jehu, as king of Israel”—that’s even more dangerous than the Damascus bit: anointing a new king of Israel, instead of Ahab, the present one, Jezebel’s husband. That’s revolt, that’s sedition, that’s treason. That could come to blows. And it does come to blows!³

Third: “And anoint Elisha...to succeed you as prophet.” In brief, what God says to Elijah is: “You’ve got work to do, son. What are you doing here? Do you think things are dangerous now? You’ve got to go to Damascus! You think Ahab and Jezebel are out to get you now? Wait until they’ve got a coup on their hands because of you! You think you’re alone—maybe even all washed up? Tired and afraid enough to die? Alright then, go anoint Elisha. He’ll be happy to take over for you.”⁴

That’s not therapy, *per se*, and thankfully God doesn’t charge by the hour, but Elijah’s narcissism has just met up with a serious dose of reality. *God’s* reality, mind you, not his own. And God has work that needs to get done.

Yes, Elijah has been passionate. Yes, Elijah has been faithful. Yes, Elijah is now under threat; he’s tired, afraid, at the proverbial end of his rope. But not really. There’s still yet more rope, and Elijah has more work to do, including coming to grips with the realization that he is eminently and imminently *replaceable*.

And as if all that wasn’t enough, God gives Elijah just a wee bit more reality. “Oh, by the way,” God says, “I have preserved...seven thousand in Israel...whose knees haven’t bowed down to Baal and whose mouths haven’t kissed him (1 Kgs 19:18).’ *Seven thousand*, Elijah, not just one—not just your one. Actually, make that 7000 and 1, if you count Elisha.⁵ Did I mention he’s your replacement?”

“Why yes. Yes, God, I believe you did.”

The very next story finds faithful, reoriented Elijah calling Elisha to the job.

Elijah, Narcissism, and Us

Well, there’s a lot we could say about this passage, but time is short. So, in classic narcissistic style, let me offer a few thoughts about how this passage concerning Elijah’s narcissism and God’s work in the world strikes *me*.

Among other things, the story suggests to me that it isn't all just about me—alas!—even when I am truly tired and rightfully afraid. It just isn't about just me. It's about God's work and other people—God's work *in* other people. In fact, it's so much about those other people that the part that is about me may boil down ultimately to being only about them—preparing them to do the jobs God has in mind for them, whether I like those jobs or not, whether I like those people or not. I'd like to think that Elijah liked Elisha just fine, and maybe Jehu okay,⁶ but I wonder what he thought about Hazael,⁷ not to mention what he thought about the bloody methods those kings used to accomplish their tasks. Whatever the case, it just wasn't about just Elijah; it just isn't about just me. Narcissists take note! (Yes, that's means *you*!)

And, as if all that wasn't hard enough to hear, there's more: if I insist on sticking to my narcissism, even if it *means well*, mind you, even if it's predicated on my faithfulness, *my* faithfulness, mind you, and if I find out that, well, if you crunch the numbers, it turns out that there're a lot of other folks just like me out there, working just as hard, if not harder, doing their things for God, being faithful, resisting the other gods, not kissing the Baals or bowing their knees to them. 7,000 or so, but who's counting? Just God. And 7,000 is a decent number. A stereotypical,⁸ very respectable number of people who are ready, willing, and able to do God's work whether I do it or not, whether I get up from the pool of my self-obsession or don't. People who are not only ready, willing, and able, but who are already doing God's work—quite apart from me, quite independently of me. I suspect and I believe and I hope that I'm looking at some of those people right this very minute.

To realize that there are many others hard at work for God, not just me—and that I'm not that crucial after all—well, that's a sobering thought, but ultimately quite a wonderful one, far more interesting and important than the pool of my self-reflection, the locus of my own narcissism. And let's face it, my self-obsession can't hold a candle in terms of significance to Elijah's. He had *real* things to worry about.

So, despite my proclivities to be a wee bit narcissistic, I readily acknowledge that I'm no Elijah—that's for sure. But let's just put ourselves in the story anyway for a moment—you and me—and play the parts. Even at 43 years of age, I know that my time, like Elijah's, is winding down. But you? Consider yourselves anointed.

Notes

1 See also 1 Kgs 17:2, 8; 21:17, 28.

2 An asterisk (*) means that I have altered the translation slightly.

3 See 2 Kings 9-10.

4 It is, in fact, precisely Elisha who appoints Hazael (2 Kgs 8:13) and Jehu (2 Kgs 9:1-3).

5 Perhaps still more, see 1 Kgs 17:24 and 18:3-4, unless these are subsumed in the 7000.

6 See 2 Kings 9-10 and note John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (2nd rev. ed.; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 412 on the meaning of Jehu's name.

7 Cf. 2 Kgs 8:7-15: Hazael ultimately does Israel harm.

8 Signifying in Hebrew "a lot!"