

ELIJAH: THE PROTO-APOCALYPTIC PROPHET
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1. INTRODUCTION

Apocalyptic literature is of importance to all disciplines of biblical and religious studies as apocalyptic ideas appear in the later books of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and Rabbinic literature. As a result, questions of the origin of apocalyptic thought are of interest. Many scholars assume some sort of relationship between apocalyptic literature and biblical prophecy.

¹ In some ways, describing prophecy as an ancestor of apocalyptic is not completely accurate as the reality of the literary genres is much more fluid. There are prophetic themes in apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic themes in prophetic literature. The best that can be offered is a description of the continuum with identification of points of interest along the way. This paper will attempt to push back the prophetic end of the continuum to the Elijah cycle, using concepts identified by Paul Hanson in his classic, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*. By identifying apocalyptic-like themes in the Elijah cycle, it will be demonstrated that the apocalyptic continuum begins much earlier than many scholars have realized.

2. DAWN OF APOCALYPTIC

Paul Hanson attempted to demonstrate that Jewish apocalyptic thought was not limited to later pseudepigraphic texts, nor was it the result of Persian influence during the post-exilic period.² Hanson's work focused on eschatology in which he saw a development from the prophetic to the apocalyptic. Prophetic eschatology is described as an announcement of God's judgment to the political powers that will be demonstrated within a historical context. Hanson defined apocalyptic eschatology as:

... a religious perspective which focuses on the disclosure (usually esoteric in nature) to the elect of the cosmic vision of Yahweh's sovereignty—especially as it relates to his acting to deliver his faithful—which disclosure the visionaries have largely ceased to translate into terms of plain history, real politics, and human instrumentality due to a pessimistic view of reality growing out of the bleak post-exilic conditions within which those associated with the visionaries found themselves.³

Hanson then went on to show the proto-apocalyptic nature of Isaiah 56-66 ("Third Isaiah"), which he saw as originating with the post-exilic disciples of "Second Isaiah," and Zechariah 9-

14 (“Second Zechariah”).⁴ Within the study of these texts, Hanson found numerous characteristics of apocalyptic eschatology that go beyond the typical “end of the world” descriptions. One aspect is the reuse of older forms, especially “an archaic genre dating from the days of the league and stemming originally from the world of mythopoeic thought, the Divine Warrior Hymn, which celebrates Yahweh’s conflict against his enemies and his glorious victory.”⁵ Secondly, within apocalyptic thought there was a shift from the salvation of all Israel to that of a remnant.⁶ The clearest description of this is: “In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive.” (Zechariah 13:8, NRSV) Closely connected with the remnant theology is that of universalism as the holy nation is redefined as the righteous of all the earth.⁷ Another important aspect of apocalypticism is the disenfranchised nature of the communities that produce apocalyptic texts. Hanson saw the earliest texts originating from a conflict between the disciples of the prophets (also called the “visionary group”)⁸, the Levitical priests (descendants of Abiathar)⁹ and the triumphant Zadokite priests who opposed both groups and consolidated their power with the rebuilding of the temple. The result of this disenfranchisement was pessimism regarding the hope of victory within the present historical context. In Hanson’s words, “the ontological equation, present era = evil, future era = good (limited to the chosen), was taken with increasing seriousness, for the visionary group could understand the present situation only as unmitigated evil, and had come to be completely disillusioned with the prospects of realizing its ideal program of restoration in the present world.”¹⁰

Hanson saw the development of these apocalyptic thoughts within Trito-Isaiah and Deutero-Isaiah, both of which he dated to the postexilic period. This paper will argue that these themes already existed in the Elijah cycle preserved in the Deuteronomistic history. It is interesting to note that in the scriptural index in *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* there are no references to 1-2 Kings. In fact Hanson suggests that the Deuteronomistic historian actually purged Yahwism of the cosmic ingredient of myth that was so important in the development of apocalypticism.¹¹ It will be demonstrated that despite Hanson’s lack of use of this material, that many of the themes found in Trito-Isaiah and Deutero-Zechariah are predated in the Elijah cycle.

3. DIVINE WARRIOR AND DUALISTIC THEOLOGY

The presence of other gods is assumed throughout the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the concept of true monotheism as the basis for the ancient Hebrew religion has been seriously questioned. Whether or not the Israelites actually believed in the existence of these other gods, the threat of going after other gods was an ongoing theme. However, throughout much of the Hebrew Bible the references are focused on warnings to remain true to Torah without much interaction between YHWH and the other gods. Idolatry seems to be mainly a legal issue. This changes when we come to the Elijah cycle.

The majority of the Elijah cycle is not so much a warning against idolatry in general but an organized attack on Baal in particular. Montgomery explains why the nature of Baal worship under Ahab and Jezebel required the extreme actions of both sides:

The foreign deity in the story is to be distinguished as 'the Baal,' from the many local Baals ... and is to be identified with the well-known Baal-of-the-Heavens. In him was concentrated in Syrian lands the Semitic urge towards monism, if not monotheism. Under Jezebel's fanatical patronage the Heavenly Baal was brought into conflict with Israel's sole Deity; doubtless the practical monotheism of the latter religion intensified the monistic tendency of the religion of 'the Baal.' The result was for the first time in history a fanatical contest in the name of monotheism. Israel could put up with the local Baals ... but there could be but one supreme Deity.¹²

This led to a situation in which the two gods would have to battle for supremacy.

The introduction of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1 begins with a terse statement spoken in the name of YHWH that there would be no rain for a number of years. This seems to be a direct attack upon Baal who was a storm god and a god of fertility. One of the main reasons for worshipping Baal was to ensure that the rains would come and that the crops would be able to grow. By announcing a drought YHWH, through Elijah, was bringing the battle directly to Baal's doorstep. If Baal was going to have any chance to be successful it would be in this area of his specialization. The fact that the drought continued for three years was an embarrassment to the worshippers and prophets of this Canaanite god of rain.¹³ The importance of the drought story in the YHWH-Baal conflict can not be overstated. As Walsh explains:

To make the claim, as Elijah does in 17:1, that he, a servant of Yahweh, controls the rain is to blaspheme Baal. It is to claim for Elijah, and implicitly for Yahweh his master, territory that has traditionally been Baal's dominion. The conflict between Baal and Yahweh is joined from that instant, and there can be no quarter or compromise. In this

light, everything related to the drought is seen to be part of the rivalry of the gods, and the contest on Carmel is simply the climatic moment in a lengthy narrative of struggle.¹⁴

It is important to note that the conflict between YHWH and Baal does not end with the killing of the prophets but with the return of the rain by Elijah's word in 1 Kings 18:44-45, signifying YHWH's victory.

The war with Baal escalated as Elijah was sent to Zarephath of Sidon. While on the surface this story seems like a story of miraculous help to a poor widow, it is in fact a continued assault on Baal's strongholds. First of all, the story takes place in the heartland of Baal worship. YHWH proves himself to not be limited by territorial boundaries in his attack on Baal. The story focuses on a widow, which is very important as one of the meanings of 'Baal' is 'husband.' Baal is as good as dead and this leaves even his own people as widows without a source of support. YHWH steps in as a surrogate husband by using Elijah to provide for the widow's needs. This is taken to a new level when the son of the widow dies. It seems as if YHWH has failed, after all even Baal was required to submit to Mot, the god of death every year. The question is, as Provan states: "When faced by 'Mot,' must the LORD, like Baal, bow the knee?"¹⁵ However, unlike Baal who needed to be rescued annually by the goddess Anath from his several month imprisonment in the underworld, YHWH proves his superiority by bringing the boy back from the dead without any difficulty.

The most dramatic part of the story is the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. In the introduction to this story with the meeting between Elijah and Obadiah we find the first use of the title "LORD of Hosts" (1 Kings 18:15). Robinson explains the background of this title:

LORD of Hosts, Yahweh Sabaoth, was the title by which Yahweh had especially been known in the days of the old tribal league. It was then the rallying cry of the tribes for battle, and some think that it was particularly associated with the Ark, especially with use of the Ark in battle.¹⁶

Although the Ark does not play a part in this story, what the Ark as the presence of God did to Dagon (1 Samuel 5), the prophet who stands before the presence of God (1 Kings 17:1) would now do to Baal. The LORD of Hosts was about to take up his military role to do battle against Baal.

The focus of this particular conflict was to be the response of the particular god in the context of worship. Everything is set up to give Baal the greatest advantage. There are four

hundred prophets of Baal against the solitary prophet of YHWH. The contest will take place on one of the forbidden high places¹⁷ rather than YHWH's Jerusalem Temple. The sacrifice is to be a bull, often identified with Baal worship.¹⁸ The challenge is for the true god to consume the sacrifice with fire and since Baal also had attributes as a sun god,¹⁹ this should be very easy. Every detail in the story is set up to give the advantage to Baal. Despite this, Baal proves himself to be helpless while YHWH sends fire down from heaven to consume the bull sacrifice. The people seem to accept YHWH's victory as they echo Elijah's name with "the LORD is indeed God." (1 Kings 18:39) Elijah caps off the battle with orders to have all the prophets of Baal killed at the Wadi Kishon. There may be some irony in this story in that Baal was believed to achieve his status by overcoming his father *El* and in this story we have Baal being overcome by the YHWH who is *Elohim*.

This story is not just a warning against idolatry, it is a full assault on a particular god with special attention to his specific characteristics. As a result, the conflict moves from the legal level to the cosmic level. YHWH and Baal are set against each other as combatants in a spiritual battle. Although this story is informed by the "dumb idol tradition" that gods do not exist and the believing reader knows that Baal is doomed, the nature of the conflict is elevated beyond any other example in the Hebrew Bible.

The problem with the YHWH-Baal conflict and Hanson's use of the Divine Warrior Hymn in early apocalyptic texts is that the battle in the later texts takes place in the indefinite future, the eschatological Day of the Lord when all evil would be vanquished. However, it is not just the eschatological nature of the conflict that is important but rather the dualistic nature. The problem with the world is not just that there are scattered pockets of rebellion but that there is a real conflict between good and evil. The conflict between YHWH and Baal in 1 Kings 18 is the closest thing to cosmic dualism before the full fledged apocalyptic movement.

4. REMNANT THEOLOGY AND DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Throughout the Elijah narrative, Elijah continues to claim to be the only one who is still faithful to God. As the reader moves through the story, however, it soon becomes apparent that this is more a statement of emotion than of fact. There are two passages that reveal that there is a relatively small remnant of God's faithful still remaining. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah meets with Obadiah ("servant of the LORD"), who is described as a man who revered the LORD greatly (v.

3). Beyond Obadiah's own faithfulness is the fact that he was responsible for the protection of one hundred of the YHWH's prophets. Although these prophets are hiding unlike Elijah, they represent a righteous remnant among the majority that had submitted to Ahab and Jezebel's Baal-oriented syncretism. This remnant is revealed to be even larger, when on Mount Horeb God reveals to Elijah that seven thousand²⁰ people had not bowed the knee nor kissed Baal and they would receive God's protection (1 Kings 19:18).

However, the existence of a relatively small group of faithful followers is not enough to claim apocalyptic tendencies. There have always been sub-groups that have been particularly zealous about their beliefs. What is required is the disenfranchisement, if not the outright persecution of the minority by the ruling class. In the postexilic era, Hanson identified these groups as the descendants of the prophets and the Levitical priests who had lost all religious and political power to the reigning Zadokite priests.

The role of the prophets within the Deuteronomistic history is very important, especially with regard to the relationship with the kings. The first great prophet of the monarchic era is Samuel. Samuel is given the role of king-maker. It is Samuel who anoints Saul as the first king of Israel. Samuel and Saul had a complicated relationship and at times Samuel seemed afraid of Saul. Yet Samuel retains in the story a position of power, including the ability to rebuke the king, to announce his rejection by God and to anoint David as his successor. Despite the strained relationship, Saul seeks out Samuel's counsel even from the depths of Sheol. Samuel's role as the court prophet is taken over by Nathan during the reign of David. Nathan is given much power in David's kingdom, including the passing on of God's refusal to allow David to build the temple, the freedom to strongly rebuke David in his adultery and murder at the Bathsheba incident and a significant role in making Solomon David's successor. Nathan, like Samuel before him, has much power both in the religious and political realm.

By the time of Ahab, the presence of single influential prophets is replaced by groups of prophets identified by different gods, including one hundred prophets of the YHWH, four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah. The position held by each of these groups had ramifications far beyond religious rituals. As Judith Todd explains:

The Yahweh party retained the traditional values represented in pre-monarchial Israel of an egalitarian societal configuration where Yahweh owned the land and the people were in equal relationship to their god and to each other. The Baal party, on the other hand,

fostered the traditional city-state configuration where the gods legitimated the hierarchical structure of king, ruling elite, and a highly developed social stratification. Thus, the question became not merely which god to serve, but in which social configuration to live.²¹

With such strong religious and political differences, there would be little room for tolerance. These groups of prophets moved beyond religious activity and were greatly involved in the political sphere of society. As Robinson states: “Each ruler supported bands of prophets in the expectation that they would declare his policies to have divine approval and authority.”²²

It soon becomes apparent that the days of the privileged position of YHWH’s prophets such as Samuel and Nathan were long gone. Elijah was not the court prophet of Ahab but rather YHWH’s courtier.²³ One of the first things that happens in the Elijah cycle is the command for Elijah to hide (1 Kings 17:3). It is no longer safe for the faithful of YHWH. This danger was very real as we see the reason that Obadiah needed to hide the one hundred prophets was that Jezebel had been active in killing the prophets of YHWH (1 Kings 18:13). There is a tremendous amount of irony in 1 Kings 18:1-6 in that while Jezebel is “cutting off” the prophets of YHWH, Ahab is worried about the “cutting off” of his animals.²⁴ In Israel, animals had become more valuable than the prophets of YHWH. From Elijah’s perspective, this was not just the religious bigotry of one foreign queen but rather the turning away of Israel itself (1 Kings 19:10). Elijah was the representative of the small disenfranchised remnant of the righteous who had once held power in the royal court. This loss of power, a loss that continued even after the dramatic victory at Mount Carmel, prepares the reader to reflect on the true source of power.

5. DIVINE REVELATION

One of the most important aspects of apocalyptic literature is the presence of divine revelation. Sometimes the apocalyptic prophet is caught up to heaven and sometimes an angelic messenger is sent to earth. As a prophet, Elijah had been accustomed to revelations throughout his ministry. However, what takes place on Mount Horeb is described in significantly different terms. As Montgomery explains: “The marvel is that here in a legend about an early Northern man of God the spiritual nature of God and his self-revelation to man is for the first time expressed in historical narrative.”²⁵ The location itself sets the story up as a place of very special revelation. Elijah finds himself on Mount Horeb, the same place that Moses was given the greatest

revelation, that of God's covenant name of YHWH (Exodus 3:14-15). This is particularly important for Elijah whose mission was to proclaim YHWH as God. The comparison to Moses' revelation continues with the similar appearance of God to the prophet in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 33:21, 1 Kings 19:11-13). Secondly, the presence of an angel is a strong connection to the later apocalyptic texts. Prophets normally receive their revelations directly from God. The presence of an angel in this story highlights the supernatural context of what is happening.

Elijah's revelation is not just a speech about a future event but rather a demonstration in creation about the nature of power. Elijah's expectation was that the victory on Mount Carmel would turn around the political situation and that God's power would be manifested in the historical context. As Sigve Tonstad explains:

... what happens at Horeb does not take the form of an affirmation of Elijah's prior paradigm. Instead, the theophany shatters the old framework or at least revises it, right down to its original Mosaic foundation. The message this time, assuming that the contrary had been the message on prior occasions, is not for the prophet to show humility in the face of an awesome display of divine majesty and power. It is rather that the reasons for the prophet's confidence in God must lie elsewhere, demanding of him a new perception and outlook. It is, as it were, as if Yahweh is repudiating the features on which Elijah's prior confidence was built before his very eyes.²⁶

The vision of the earthquake, fire and sheer silence demonstrated that God's presence is not defined by human understanding of power structures.

6. NATURE OF HOPE

The result of the experiences on Mounts Carmel and Horeb was an understanding that ultimate victory was not possible in this life. As much as Elijah may have wanted a victory like Moses' with a dramatic exodus into a new future, the fact was that life is not that simple. The prophets of Israel's past, such as Samuel and Nathan, were able to focus on the kings of their day, to correct them and if needed, to replace them. However, the rebellion against YHWH was no longer a leadership issue, it was a society issue. The problem was not the evil of Ahab or Jezebel but the evil of Israel who were always seeking alternatives to the committed worship of YHWH. Elijah, who had remained zealous for YHWH, could not receive the reward that he wanted, a full scale and complete return of Israel to YHWH. The reward for Elijah's faithfulness could not be received in this world as the power structures were completely corrupted.

The conclusion to the Elijah cycle is significant as a manifestation of this change in hope. Elijah prepares Elisha to take over the prophetic ministry and then waits for God's action. What takes place is very unique in the Deuteronomistic history. Normally, the deaths of the important prophets are not described. In Samuel's case, his end is as everyone else, despite a brief message from Sheol with the witch of Endor. Elijah receives something qualitatively different with the removal from earth and arrival in heaven accompanied by horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 2:11). Wiseman notes that the chariot "symbolized strong protection as well as the forces of God's spiritual presence which were the true safety of Israel."²⁷ Tonstad explains:

The ultimate next step for Elijah, as if to drive home that he increasingly stands apart as a resident alien in the ongoing and tumultuous conflict, is neither that he is dismissed nor that he is recommissioned. Instead, he is taken up to heaven in a flaming chariot as the final promotion in his life and the definitive vindication of his ministry.²⁸

It seems as if Elijah is allowed to enjoy heaven without physical death. The only other event similar to this is the removal of Enoch in Genesis, an event that was greatly expanded on in later apocalyptic literature.

The relevance to apocalyptic thought is not so much the presence of flaming chariots, although that type of supernatural image would become more common. The greatest relevance is the realization that true victory for God's people would not take place in a conflict with political leaders but rather with God's intervention in snatching the faithful remnant away from this evil world, whether by death, flaming chariot or for the apocalyptic writers, an eschatological day of judgment. This otherworldly source of hope would eventually manifest itself in resurrection beliefs such as in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2. Elijah's departure from earth was not a sign of defeat but rather a redefinition of what true victory must look like.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper does not argue that the Elijah cycle was fully apocalyptic as we see in later texts such as Daniel and *I Enoch*. However, the Elijah cycle does contain many of the elements that define later apocalyptic texts and which previously were seen as appearing the earliest in Trito-Isaiah and Deutero-Zechariah. The Elijah cycle goes beyond the command of simple obedience to Torah and moves towards a dualistic theology in which there are competing spiritual powers of which the Divine Warrior YHWH will ultimately be victorious. It is also within the Elijah cycle

that we see early reflections on a remnant theology where the few disenfranchised followers of YHWH struggle with their loss of political power. Divine revelation also plays a major role in the Elijah cycle, mediated by angels as with the later apocalyptic texts and revealing a radically different view of reality. Finally, there is a redefinition of the source of hope as political power becomes less available and the presence of God, especially beyond this life, becomes more important. There are some differences with later apocalyptic texts as the battle between good and evil takes place in history rather than at the end of time. Also, Elijah's translation to heaven is not explained in a way to make that hope available to all believers. These differences are expected with the Elijah cycle being so early on the apocalyptic continuum. What the Elijah cycle does do is show apocalyptic themes in an embryonic stage that would later develop into a form that would help define both Judaism and Christianity. Paul Hanson did an important work with his *Dawn of Apocalyptic* by demonstrating that apocalyptic ideas were not a Persian import but were a natural development of Hebrew thought.²⁹ This paper shows that the origins of apocalypticism can be traced farther back than Trito-Isaiah and Deutero-Zechariah and that they are found as early as the Elijah cycle.

¹ D.S. Russell considered prophecy to be the father of apocalyptic literature, while Paul Hanson saw prophecy as the mother. D.S. Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 104; Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 402. There are those who disagree. Gerhard von Rad responded to the idea of apocalyptic literature as the child of prophecy as "completely out of the question." Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 303.

² For a recent use of Hanson's theory, including acknowledgment of its limitations see Mark Adam Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 197-98.

³ Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 11-12.

⁴ Hanson, pp. 32-208, 280-401. This paper does not require the acceptance of the divisions of Isaiah and Zechariah. Even if the historical figure of Isaiah is responsible for "Second Isaiah" and "Third Isaiah," the Elijah cycle still predates those prophecies.

⁵ Hanson, p. 124.

⁶ Hanson, p. 348.

⁷ Hanson, p. 388.

⁸ Hanson, p. 75.

⁹ Hanson, p. 223.

¹⁰ Hanson, p. 158.

¹¹ Hanson, p. 309.

¹² James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), p. 308.

¹³ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 & 2 Kings* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), p. 164.

¹⁴ Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 261.

¹⁵ Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 134.

¹⁶ J. Robinson, *First Book of Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 206.

¹⁷ Mount Carmel had a long history as pagan ground. See Montgomery, pp. 300-01.

¹⁸ Some carvings depict a bull-headed Baal. See Glenn E. Markoe, *The Phoenicians* (London: Folio Society, 2005), p. 205. Baal's father El was also known as Bull-El.

¹⁹ Wiseman, p. 169.

²⁰ Perhaps an authentic note of some census. See Montgomery, p. 315. Walsh prefers 'seven' as a biblical term for an adequate or ample supply, p. 278.

²¹ Judith A. Todd "The Pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle" *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (Robert B. Coote ed.) (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 10.

²² Robinson, p. 192.

²³ Montgomery, p. 292.

²⁴ Walsh, p. 239.

²⁵ Montgomery, p. 314.

²⁶ Sigve Tonstad, "The Limits of Power: Revisiting Elijah at Horeb" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19.2 (2005): 261.

²⁷ Wiseman, pp. 195-96.

²⁸ Tonstad, p. 263.

²⁹ Hanson, 402.

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