

1 Kings 19

Limits of the Text

1 Kings 19 is a complete literary unit. It begins with Elijah quitting his ministry in fear, and ends with him doing God's work once again.

Plot

- Background – Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah (1 Ki 19:1-2).
- Crisis – Elijah asked to die (1 Ki 19:3-4).
- Resolution – God restored Elijah (1 Ki 19:5-18).
- Conclusion – Elijah called Elisha (1 Ki 19:19-21).

Towards Authorial Intent

The **plot** of the story focuses upon God's response to Elijah's actions. His prophet wanted to quit on him. What did God do? He sustained with food, reminded him with Mt. Horeb, instructed with natural disasters, and then gave new tasks. The plot indicates that God helped his prophet return to ministry.

The **pace** of the story slows down when God interacted with Elijah on Mt. Horeb.

Of the various **dialogues** in the story, three times God commands Elijah. One, get up and eat for the journey. Two, go outside and stand on the mountain. Three, go anoint some people. Each dialogue is a way that God worked with Elijah, encouraging him and helping him.

External Context

In the previous story Elijah was at his best, demonstrating the power of God and killing the false prophets of Baal. In this story he was at his worst, ready to quit at the threats of the queen. But God did not let him quit, and in future stories he would interact with Ahab and Ahaziah before being taken into heaven in a chariot of fire.

Interpretation

19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."¹

More clearly than ever the author of Kings revealed that Jezebel was the real power behind the throne. Previously she had killed the prophets of God (1 Ki 18:13) and fed 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah at her table (1 Ki 18:19). Now she was going to kill the prophet who had publically proven that Baal was impotent and God was powerful.² Despite the events of Mt. Caramel, she still clung to Baal; this was a woman who was radically committed to what she believed. She was as absolute as Ahab was flexible and determined to do whatever she wanted; thus we are not "surprised to find Jezebel, once told the tale of Caramel, offering the kind of immediate and decisive response of which Ahab was so patently incapable,"³ namely threatening to exact her revenge upon Elijah.

3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

There is a little bit of ambiguity in the Hebrew text here. Every English translation I read says, "Elijah was afraid," but many have a footnote admitting that the verb could be "Elijah saw." The idea of the latter would be that Elijah saw how things were;⁴ that is, despite fire falling from heaven, Jezebel would still champion Baalism and kill those who opposed her. Either way, he expected her to make good on her threats. "In the shock of [realizing that she was impervious to evidence] he forgets to think theologically and simply reacts...to circumstances;"⁵ "rather than resting in God for His protection as he had for the past three and one-half years, Elijah ran for his life."⁶

Elijah went to Beersheba, located in the southernmost part of Judah (see map on following page). Here he left his servant, apparently dismissing him, continued into the wilderness, and asked to die.⁷ The phrase "I am no better than my fathers" is idiomatic;

¹ ESV.

² Later she would devise and enact the plot to kill Naboth, so Ahab could take his vineyard.

³ Provan, 143.

⁴ Provan, 144.

⁵ Provan, 144.

⁶ Walvoord, 1:528.

⁷ Note the irony: If he had wanted to die, he could have waited for Jezebel to carry out her threat. Allen suggests that he fled to die somewhere else, so Jezebel would not get the credit for it (quoted in Davis, 258).

as his ancestors were all dead, it means, “I am as good as dead.” Elijah no longer wanted to be a prophet of God; he was quitting ministry all together.



*Elijah's Travels*⁸

At this point, the crisis of the story has been reached. God’s prophet wanted to quit on him. God could turn off rain, provide food, raise the dead, and send fire from heaven to prove he was more powerful than Baal. But when his own prophet resigned, how would he prove to be God?⁹

⁸ Walvoord, 1:522.

⁹ House rightly notes: “How will the Lord prove to be God now? This question remains *the* fundamental issue in the story.” (222).

Why was Elijah so afraid that he wanted to quit and die? The text doesn't say clearly. Many commentators attempt to get inside Elijah's mind, positing all sorts of psychological and psychiatric explanations. Based upon God's actions in the following paragraphs, it seems to me that in the heat of the moment, when faced with the threat of death, Elijah simply forgot who God was, what he was capable of doing, and how he can work in different situations. While it's easy to get on Elijah's case, James reminds us that Elijah was a man with a nature like ours (Ja 5:17); he had sin tendencies, such as the fear of man, just like we do.

5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

God did respond. He provided his prophet with food and water not by a raven or a Gentile widow but by an angel.

Who sent Elijah on this journey? Was it God's idea or Elijah's? The text is not clear, but I think this was God's leading for several reasons. One, Elijah was ready to die under the broom tree. Two, the angel first mentioned the idea of a long journey. Three, God provisioned him for the journey. Four, God used Mt. Horeb to provide some historical reminders.

Mt. Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, the mountain located near the southernmost end of the Sinai Peninsula. It is where God spoke to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:1) and gave him the Law (Ex 19:18ff). The Bible Knowledge Commentary estimates that the trip to Mt. Horeb was 200 miles and should have taken two weeks.¹⁰

Why did God sent Elijah to Mt. Horeb? Why did his journey take so long? Tyndale's Bible Dictionary notes that "Sinai came to represent the place where God came down to his people,"¹¹ citing Dt 33:2, Jgs 5:5, Ps 68, Ne 9:13, and Ac 7:30, 38. Given that God's actions and words in the next paragraph did not specifically require him to be at Mt. Horeb, it seems that God sent Elijah there because of its history. It's as if God said to Elijah, "As I have spoken to my people at Mt. Horeb in the past, so I will speak to you there now." As Elijah travelled there for forty days, it seems likely that he would have recalled all that God did there, his miracles, his anger against idolatry, and the covenant he made with his people. When he arrived, I suspect he was expecting God to meet with him in some way, perhaps some spectacular way.

¹⁰ Walvoord, 1:528.

¹¹ Elwell, 1024.

9 There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. 12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper.

What is the tone of God's repeated question to Elijah? Is it accusing, berating Elijah for being where he should not be? Is it legal, allowing Elijah to make his case? Is it gentle, allowing Elijah to express his fears and frustrations? The answer seems to depend upon one's understanding of why Elijah was at Mt. Horeb. As I understand that God led Elijah here in order to teach him and recommission him for service, God's question seems to be an invitation, a chance for Elijah to explain why he quit, so God could work on him.

Elijah's answer expressed the reason for his discouragement, for his wanting to quit ministry and die. In essence, he said that the fight was not winnable. Israel—especially Jezebel—was so wicked, he had no hope. It appears that in his despair, Elijah misrepresented the truth; he completely left out the 100 prophets that Obadiah had saved (1 Ki 18:3-4) as well as the 450 Baal prophets that were killed (1 Ki 18:40), but this would not be unexpected for one who despairs and has lost hope.

God's response by passing by without being in the disasters but in the whisper was a curious way to respond. It appears to have been a vivid object lesson for Elijah, designed to teach him about the breadth of God's work. God can work in mighty, powerful ways—pouring fire from heaven, for example—but he can also work in less dramatic ways, ways that might not even be seen or heard. "God can work in ways which even his servants cannot detect."¹²

This text reveals something of God's character when dealing with his servants, especially those who are discouraged. He can be tender, giving them the sustenance they need, and he can be encouraging, teaching them how he works.

13 And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 And the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the

¹² Carson, 1 Ki 19:1.

wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. 16 And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. 17 And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. 18 Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

Why did Elijah give the same response? It may have been that though he understood the point of God’s lesson, he still felt that he was alone and unable to do anything to change the situation in Israel. But God did not share Elijah’s viewpoint. “The Lord’s word to him reaffirms God’s uniqueness, his sovereignty over all nations, and the importance of the prophetic word.”¹³

And certainly God was not interested in Elijah’s resignation; he already had work for him to do in Israel. God sent him off with one last bit of encouragement: There were 7000 faithful people in Israel! Certainly there was more happening in Israel than Elijah knew. At this point the conclusion of the story has been reached. God proved to be God by restoring his prophet; he sustained him with food, he used an object lesson to teach about his ways, he gave him a new assignment, and he encouraged him.

19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. 20 And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And he said to him, “Go back again, for what have I done to you?” 21 And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him.

Having seen his restoration, the story concludes with Elijah’s return to prophetic ministry; in particular, the author of Kings focused on his calling of his protégé, Elisha. By casting his cloak of him, he was symbolically passing on his calling and authority.¹⁴ Asking to kiss his father and mother was a way of asking for permission to say goodbye and to break his familial allegiance.¹⁵ “What have I done to you?” was an idiomatic expression, one that meant, “Do what you want” or “I won’t stop you.”¹⁶

The sacrificing of the oxen and the destruction of the yoke symbolized Elisha’s willingness to completely leave his old life and start on a new life.¹⁷ Jesus expected his

¹³ House, 224.

¹⁴ House, 225.

¹⁵ Provan, 149.

¹⁶ Walvoord, 1:529.

¹⁷ House, 225.

followers to have his same mindset (Lk 9:59-62). “Elisha’s call...simply depicts what God is always entitled to do (command our obedience) and what we are always obligated to acknowledge (that he has the right to do so).”¹⁸

¹⁸ Davis, 273.

Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story of a prophet who wanted to quit.
2. National History – This is a story about Israel’s premier prophet wanting to quit the fight against Baalism.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God restoring one of his servants.

Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind’s **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? Even after seeing God do amazing things, we can be discouraged by physical or spiritual opposition. In our discouragement we can even give in a desire to quit our ministry to God.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? Because the cross has made us his children, God can gently love us and encourage us and bring us back to the point of useful service to him.

Outline

This outline is based upon the plot of the story:

- Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah (1 Ki 19:1-2).
- Elijah asked to die (1 Ki 19:3-4).
- God restored Elijah (1 Ki 19:5-18).
- Elijah called Elisha (1 Ki 19:19-21).

Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 19 in order to teach exilic Jews how God restores his servants.

Teaching Outline

When his servants are so discouraged they are ready to quit, God restores them to service again; today I want you to know that God stands ready to restore you, should you need it. From our text today in 1 Kings 19, we are going see four ways that God restores his servants.

1. When you are discouraged, allow God to sustain you (1 Ki 19:1-6).
2. When you are discouraged, allow God to remind you (1 Ki 19:7-8).
3. When you are discouraged, allow God to teach you (1 Ki 19:9-12).
4. When you are discouraged, allow God to task you (1 Ki 19:13-21).

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