

**Partners in Faith  
Biblical Summer School  
July 6-8, 2004**

*"Walk Humbly with your God"*

**Elijah and Ruth**

<p>"How long do you mean to hobble first on one leg then on another? If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him"  -Elijah to the people of Israel</p>	<p>"Wherever you go I will go, Wherever you live, I will live, your people shall be my people, Your God, my God. Wherever you die, I will die And there I will be buried" - Ruth's commitment to Naomi</p>
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# Elijah

## Chapter one

### Prophet Elijah in the biblical Texts

#### 1. Incomplete text, perfect picture

The information we have in the Bible about Elijah is like photos in an album - rather incomplete. The first and last pages are missing. The story begins in the middle and finishes before the end: we know nothing of the birth, vocation, old age or death of the prophet. The Book of kings gives just six separate photos, in six different chapters.

However, we were still left with a perfect picture of who Elijah was, his life as a prophet and his ideals. Then, as everyone knows quite well, to get the taste of a cake there is no need to eat the whole thing. A small piece is sufficient, and this the Bible does give us.

Each of these six pictures is one complete story from the life of the prophet Elijah. Six independent stories which were told and retold passed down from one generation to the next, long before going into the written form. This kept the prophet very much alive and present in the lives and memory of God's people, and a very inconvenient presence for those in authority. We know that if the authorities of the time had their way, the memory of Elijah would have been swept out of sight and forgotten forever ( 1Kg 18,17; 19,1-2; 21,20; 2Kg1,9.11; 2Cor 12,12-15).

The people however, never lost sight of him. For them it was important to always keep before them his life and dealings with the queen and the king. Remembering the stories about Elijah, the people recalled their past but – and this was the most important element – they also kept sight of their identity and a clear awareness of their mission. In this way the subversive memory of the people of God was always a present reality.

#### 2. Reading the story of Elijah through the eyes of a prophet

1Kings 17-19, 21, and 2Kings 1-2 give us all the information we have about Elijah. In *our* Bibles the two Books of Kings are referred to as Historical Books, because they contain the history of the kings. However, in the *Jewish Bible* 1 and 2 Kings fall into a different category. They are called the *Earlier Prophets*. For the Jews the main purpose of these books (which also includes the Books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel) was not to pass on information about the doings of the kings, but to teach the people how to read the history of the kings through the eyes of a prophet. This explains why Elijah appears in the middle of the kings - to criticize and condemn the behaviour of those who oppress and confuse the little ones.

#### 3. To encourage and give direction to God's people.

The origin of these stories is undoubtedly the schools of prophets which sprung up around the person and name of Elijah. The spirit of Elijah remained on in these groups (2Kg, 2.9.15). Just like their patron, these schools of prophets fought to keep the people faithful to Yahweh (1Kg 18,21) and his Law (1Kg 19,10). They preserved and passed on the stories about Elijah and thus gave direction to the people in their defence of the Alliance. These stories encouraged them not to throw in the towel in face of the abuses against their beliefs being carried out by those in power (1KG 16,32-33; 21,8-10; 2Kg 1,2) - the abuses of the false notion of God being spread by the prophets of Baal (1KG 18,27) and the oppression and exploitation of the people by the kings themselves (1Kg 21,19; 18,12.14) and Jezebel who persecuted and killed the prophets (1Kg 18,13; 19,1-2).

#### **4. To reveal the face of the father**

The stories about Elijah were like a mirror. When the people looked in there they discovered the greatest truth of all: “Yahweh is always with us in our efforts to preserve the Alliance” Not only that, they also discovered what God was asking of them. They discovered God’s hidden presence in the everyday events and in the course of history. The unveiling of this presence of God is the most subversive, most disturbing and most liberating thing imaginable.

In our present day efforts for more fraternity and a better society, as we look into the mirror of the stories of Elijah, we easily see on whose side God is. We can see what God is asking of us, what he wants and how he makes himself present in the daily fight for survival. We can see the face of God looking out at us from the events taking place around us.

#### **5. True and false prophets**

We may not have everything we would like to know about Elijah in the six chapters of 1 and 2 Kings, but the Bible does give us a very clearly defined image of him. These six chapters do give us a perfect picture of what a prophet should be – the perfect prophet. In other words the stories about Elijah were and still are valid criteria to separate the true from the false prophet, which never was an easy task (cf. 1KG 22,5-28).

## Chapter Two

### Prophets before Elijah

#### **1. Prophets were once known as visionaries**

Early on in the history of the people of God there was no clear idea of prophecy. There were prophets for everything, and other nations and creeds also had their prophets. From the beginning prophets were religious groups of artists and singers, clairvoyants and poets, charismatic and holy people: “You will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place, headed by harp, tambourine, flute and lyre; they will be in an

ecstasy” (1S 10,5). With the help of musical instruments they went into a trance and began dancing: “Saul stripped off his clothes, fell into an ecstasy, and falling down, lay there naked all that day and night” (1S 19,20-24).

The prophets were considered as people in some way connected to the divinity, “men of God” (1S 9,6), and consequently were sought after to solve such problems as finding a stray ass (1S 9,3-6.20), health problems (1Kg 17,17-18), water problems (2Kg 2,10-22). They were known as councillors, seers. “In Israel when a man used to go to consult God he would say ‘come let us go to the seer’, for a man who is now called a prophet was formerly known as a seer” (1S 9,9)

## **2. Prophets and kings, at first, went hand in hand**

In Israel as in the other nations the kings sought the approval of these prophetic groups. The support of the prophet was equivalent to divine approval, a kind of divine confirmation of the power of the king. If the king had the support of the prophet it was much easier for him to demand obedience from his subjects. Much the same as today, politicians seek religious support: they want to be seen talking to the pope, or appear at religious festivals or places of pilgrimage. Religion is still manipulated by those in power.

The situation was more or less the same at the beginning of the history of Israel. The chiefs of the 12 tribes fought for the support of Samuel in their attempts to change the system of government and introduce the kings (1S 8,4-5). The first three kings – Saul David and Solomon – arrive on the scene with the support of the prophets (1S 10,1.24; 16,1-13; 2S 7,1-17; 2Kg 1,34). Even Jeroboam, so criticised later on by the prophets, had the support of the prophet to bring about the separation of the kingdom into North and South – Israel and Judah (1 Kg 11,29-31). In other words, from the beginning the kings of Israel could count on the support of the prophets. The reason being that, at that time the monarchy was the expression of the will of God for his people. But this situation was short lived.

## **3. The tragic mistake of those in power**

Little by little, in the Israelite communities, the person of the prophet began to develop a personality all of its own, in contrast with the prophets from the other nations.

For the majority of the other peoples, the king was regarded as being divine, a son of God. But their gods were nothing more than a human invention, created to justify the so-called “rights of the king” (1S 8,9). These prophets had no authority, but were simply servants of the king and controlled by him. Rarely did they have any critical authority in relation to the king. They depended on the king for just about everything – they were kept by the king and ate from the table with the queen (1Kg 18,19). The king could always rely on them for support. In other words religion and the prophets were an integral part of the system, were an important element in the structure that kept the system in operation.

Slowly but surely the kings of Israel began to imitate the other kings (1S 8,5.20, 1Kg 11,1-2). Then like Solomon “his heart was not wholly with Yahweh his god as his father David’s had been” (1 Kg 11,4). Justified by the “rights of the king” slave labour was introduced (1Kg 5,27[13]; 12,4), they turned the people away from the Alliance and got them to worship false gods (1Kg 11,1-13). The oppression the people had fled from when they left Egypt was back again, even though Yahweh himself had said “you must never go back there [to Egypt] again” (Dt 17,16). To make things even worse, this was all done as if in keeping with the will of Yahweh who had taken them out of Egypt (1Kg 12,28). Just imagine Yahweh, the God of the people, treated like any of the other false gods; an idol at the service of the throne. Here lay the tragic error of the kings – Yahweh, the god of Israel, is not just any old god.

#### **4. Our God, Yahweh, is a different God.**

Yahweh is not a human invention, but rather the creator of all peoples. Yahweh is in no way the product of the mind of the king to guarantee his control over the people. Instead it is the king who must obey Yahweh and be his representative, governing the people, not according to the “rights of the king”, but according to the Ten Commandments of the Law of god (Dt 17,18-19). Yahweh does not allow himself to be a pawn.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is a different God, and so the prophets of Yahweh are also different. They are not as the prophets of other nations. Being ‘men of God’, they have their own personal experience of God, and their reactions are based on the demands made on them by Yahweh.

This experience of Yahweh has its own special characteristics. Above all it is an experience of the God of their fathers, the God of the Alliance, the same God who was responsible for bringing them out of Egypt. And so this experience brings with it the memory of everything that Yahweh had done for his people in the past. Consequently the prophet is the incarnation of the critical conscience of the people. He is the one to bring to the surface the things that very often they would prefer forget. The experience of the holiness of God is at the same time, the experience of the sin and weaknesses of the people and their rulers. This experience of God is the source of the freedom and autonomy felt by the prophets in the presence of the king. Here too lies the seed of the conflict between the throne and the prophets that is to develop from now on.

#### **5. Conflict between kings and prophets**

The seeds of this conflict went back to the time of Moses, when god said to Moses “I will raise up a prophet for them like yourself, from their own brothers” (Dt 18,17). The prophetess Deborah “used to sit under Deborah’s Palm... and the Israelites would come to her to have their disputes decided”. “All Israel came to know that Samuel was accredited as a prophet of Yahweh” (1S3,20). The conflict slowly takes shape in the same proportion as the kings of Israel begin to imitate the practices of the kings of other nations.

This separation becomes evident and definitive in the person of Elijah. With Elijah, prophecy erupts from the bowels of the conscience of the people of God and establishes itself as an independent force, free from the influence of the king, a clear expression of God's own liberty before men, his creatures. From here on the prophets assume an independent line in defence of the interests of the Alliance and the life of the people against the power of the king.

Due to the criticism coming from the prophet, the king quickly perceives that he controls neither God nor the people. His power is not unlimited or without control. The only true master that there is, is Yahweh himself, to be obeyed by his servants, both kings and prophets, to serve the interests of the people, each in their own specific way according to the demands of the Alliance.

## 6. True and false prophets

Not all prophets followed the example of Elijah. There were always prophets and prophetesses to defend the false gods and oppression. These reduced Yahweh to the size of their own interests and ideas.

These are called "false prophets": they create confusion in the minds of the people, and say only what the king wants to hear. This conflict between true and false prophets is present throughout the history of the kings from the time of Elijah right up to the Babylon Captivity. Practically all of the prophets had their problems, conflicts and even fights with the false prophets (Jr 28, 1-17; 23, 9-40; 14,13-16; Ez 13,1-23; Is 28,7-13).

The problem facing the people was to distinguish between the true and the false prophet. They asked themselves: "How are we to know what word was not spoken by Yahweh" (Dt 18,21) - quite a serious and real problem even at the present time. One prelate says one thing and another says the opposite, and both say they are speaking in the name of God. To be able to sift through this confusion we must ask ourselves what discernment process was used in the past to separate the true from the false prophet.

## 7. The Criteria

The Bible gives us many different criteria to separate the true from the false prophet. Here are just a few:

1. God said to Moses "I will raise up a prophet *like you*" (Dt 18,17). "I will put my words in his mouth and he shall tell them all I command him" (Dt 18,15-18). The basic criterion then is to establish if what the prophet says and does are in keeping with what Moses said and did. Moses is seen as the *greatest* of the prophets. "Never has there been such a prophet in Israel as Moses, the man Yahweh knew face to face" (Dt 34,10-11).
2. Elijah remained on in the memory of the people as the model of the *ideal* prophet. The stories told about him are the norm to judge those who set themselves up as a prophet.

3. A safe criterion is to check if what he announces comes to pass. This is the confirmation whether the prophecy is, in fact, from God. “When the prophet speaks in the name of God and the thing does not happen and the word is not fulfilled, then it has not been spoken by Yahweh. The prophet has spoken with presumption. You have nothing to fear from him (Dt18,22 cf. 1S 10,1-8; 2Kg 22,28; Is 7,14; Jr 28,16-16; 44,29-30).
4. But even then, there are cases when what was announced by the false prophet does in fact come to pass. These people confuse the people by saying “come then let us follow other Gods (whom you have not known) and serve them” (Dt 13,3). The biblical orientation in this situation is: “You are not to listen to the words of that prophet or to the dreams of that dreamer. Yahweh your god is testing you to know if you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and all your soul” (Dt 13,4). In other words, the safest criteria of all is whether the life and the message of the prophets in keeping with the alliance and with the commandments of the Law of God. (Read Dt 13,2-6; Jr 23,16-18).

## Chapter Three

### The situation of the people at the time of Elijah

During the first 250 years after coming out of Egypt, the People of God organised themselves into tribes, clans and families, and each tribe looked after the necessities of its members in the way that they thought best. Major decisions were taken in meetings between the leaders of the different tribes. Then round about the year 1030 BC – when they began to lose sight of where they had come from, and started to pay more attention to how their neighbours were organised than to what Yahweh had to say – they decided to adopt the monarchy. This meant that they moved away from the judges and opted for a king. In this way they were able to produce more, and they became a stronger nation. However the consequences were that the people were heard less and less, and their traditional values and way of life were slowly left to one side.

The consequences of this radical change were felt most in the centre and the north of the country, the regions that were producing most. The maintenance of the king meant heavier taxation. When this situation was no longer bearable, (100 years after the adoption of the monarchy), in the year 931 BC, the centre and north proclaimed their independence from the south. This Northern Kingdom adopted the name Israel, in opposition to the Southern Kingdom, known as Judah.

By so doing they thought that the new monarchy would solve their problems. But in fact it was merely a change of king, and not a change of system. The kings continued to abuse their power. Everything they did was aimed more at promoting their own interests and fame, than at solving the problems of those that most needed a solution.

Elijah comes on the scene about 50 years after the separation of the two kingdoms. The king had little interest in the people and the people had lost contact with their king. During a period of just 57 years they country had had seven kings, three of whom had

been removed through coup d'états. As well as this, Samaria was the fourth capital (after Sichem, Fanuel and Tersa).

From the international point of view, they were at peace with Judah, to the south, and with the Phoenicians in the Northeast. Moab, in the southeast was controlled by Israel, but between them and Damascus, the situation was tense, with occasional skirmishes.

At the time there is an economic boom in Israel, production is at a peak. What was important was to produce more and more. Farming was rapidly developing, some cities were growing and the state was getting more and more powerful. But this progress, on the other hand meant that more and more people were excluded, all in the name of progress. Things were much the same as before the separation of the two states.

From the religious point of view, what was going on? The king, Acab, married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Tyre. She, in turn, brought with her, her own religion with its own priests, and a mentality that had little to do with religion. She began to persecute those who did not fit into her plans

The people were lost, with each one seeking their own personal interests. They had more or less forgotten about the God that had taken them out of Egypt. The scene is set for rampant injustices.

## **1. Hearing the cry of God's people**

If there pieces of glass all over the floor you immediately know that something has been broken – a glass or a window. When impoverished people begin to appear in the midst of God's people, the prophet passes by and says "the alliance has been broken". Many people get used to looking at the broken glass, but not the prophets. They hold the situation up for questioning and demand change in the name of god. "Let there be no poor among you" (Dt 15,4).

The Alliance demands that all be brothers (Lv 19,15-18), that everything be shared (Dt 15,7; Ex 16,4), that authority be a service (Dt 17,14-20; Ex 18,13-23), that there be no exploitation of the poor (Ex 22,20-26), that the commandments be observed (Ex 20,1-17), that the people never again return to Egypt (Dt 17,16). By living in this way, the people live the Alliance and live in the likeness of God who hears the outcry of the people (Ex 22,22-26), and stretches down to free them (Ex 3,8).

If God's people live this way there will be no poor in their midst (Dt 15,4-5). However if, on the other hand, poverty is allowed to become a reality, "be it just one of your brothers in any one of your towns" (Dt 15,7), this then is clear indication that the Alliance has been broken. Somebody has taken possession of that which is not theirs, and by so doing has made somebody else poor. In this way the impoverished are - silent or on the streets and roads protesting - the appeal being made to the conscience of the people of God.

It is the job of the prophet to catch this silent appeal and give it back to the people. The prophet interprets this presence of impoverished people as an appeal coming from god.

And so he is a trouble maker and very often provokes the irrational anger of those who are rich at the expense of the poor

## **2. Elijah appears on the scene**

Elijah comes on the scene in the year 860 BC, during a three-year drought. At the time Omri and his son Acab were kings in Israel (885-853). Elijah tells Acab that the drought is God's punishment. From the beginning he is in open conflict with the authorities, so much so that he is referred to as the enemy of the king, and deserves to die. He is denounced as the one responsible for all the evil that has come upon the country and the kings sends his henchmen to the four corners of the nation in search of him. What had gone wrong in the lives of the people that caused him to react so violently? In other words, what appeal coming from Yahweh had he heard?

## **3. The king's main worry - "Save the horses and mules"**

Chapter 16 of 1 Kings tells us that Omri, Ahab's father, was chief of the armed forces, when he became king in Israel. At the time things were very confused and during his reign, and that of his son Acab – which together lasted 34 years – they consolidated the power of the kingdom. They were responsible for the great economic development that took place, and the remains of which still remains up to the present day.

Omri made Samaria the capital, where Acab, his son, built his "ivory house" (1Kg 22,39), to be later condemned by Amos (Am 3,15; 6,4). Acab ordered the fortification of the city (1Kg 16,34; 22,39) and then made a treaty with the king of Tyre to be sealed by his the marriage with Jezebel , the king of Tyre's daughter (1Kg 16,31).

However all this economic progress brought with it many injustices. In the old capital Tersa, where Omri had ruled for six years (1Kg 16,23), archaeologists have found the remains of rich and poor neighbourhoods. Falling back on the "right of thee king", Acab and Jezebel walked on the poor, stole their lands and even killed to get what they wanted, as if they were the owners of their subjects (1Kg 21,1-16). And to get what they wanted they could count on the help of the "elders" and "nobility" (1Kg 21,8), as well as the military (2Kg 1,9.11).

During the period of drought of hunger, the king was not in the least put out about the situation of the people, but instead worried about finding grass and water "to keep the horses and mules alive" (1Kg 18,5). This means that he was more concerned about maintaining his power (the "horses") and in increasing his wealth ( the "mules"). The horses guaranteed military power, while the mules were necessary for transport and consequently export. As Amos reminds us, "safely ensconced snugly in Samaria" (Am 6,1), the "Cows of Bashan" oppressed the needy and crushed the poor (Am 4,1), but "about the ruin of Joseph (the people), they do not care at all" (Am 6,6)

## **5. A divided people, a broken Alliance**

Fraternity and equality had gone out the door. The nation is divided: on one side the rich, the elders, the nobility, and the military: and on the other the farm workers, the widows the persecuted prophets, the poor. The Alliance had been broken (1Kg19,10.14).

The one to blame for this situation was the king himself (1Kg 18,18), who no longer had any interest in either the alliance or the people. “He had done what was evil in the eyes of the Lord” (1Kg16,30): that is, he had abandoned Yahweh, the god of the people, and allowed Jezebel, his wife, to import the false gods of Baal and install them on the main altar of the temple in Samaria (1Kg 16,31-32).

These prophets of Baal held place of honour in the royal palace, while the prophets of Israel - Elijah and company - were being persecuted and killed. There were many such prophets – 450 alone had come with Jezebel from Tyre (1Kg 18,19, and still another 400 accompanied Acab (1Kg 22,6). All of them at the service of the king and queen, while Elijah felt alone to preach the word of Yahweh (1Kg 18,22;18,10). Those who were not of the same opinion as the king were considered “the scourge of Israel” (1Kg 18,18) and the king’s enemy (1Kg 21,20). The people were afraid, with no energy to protest or react (1Kg 18,12.14), and confused with no idea where they stood (1Kg 18,21).

## **5. Hiding the face of God**

What was happening was that Yahweh, the god of the people, had been reduced to the size of the king’s interests, and those of the system. He had been reduced to being just another idol, a Baal, a piece in the system

The unjust social structure not only took away from the people their money and power, but also – what was even worse – hid from them the true face of God. When God is no longer visible, everything disintegrates and life has no more meaning. There were even cases of people who went as far as sacrificing their very own child to the false gods, as if these gods were in need of human blood (1kg 16,34).

This distorted, false image of God being implanted in the minds and hearts of the people by the prophets of Baal, was that of a who is a businessman god, a traveller, even sleeping and in need of being woken up: “Call louder for he is a god: maybe he is occupied or busy, or has gone on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and will wake up’ (1Kg 18,27).

A god such as this listens only to the strong, influential rich, never to the cry of the poor, and is rarely called upon by them, serving only to legalise oppression and domination.

## **6. Doing what is evil in the eyes of the Lord**

When referring to the life and actions of Omri and his son Acab, kings of Israel, the Bible tells us that “they did what is displeasing to Yahweh” (1Kg 16,25.30). Now the same phrase is used for all the kings of Israel. All of them, without exception “did what was displeasing to Yahweh”, and sometimes adds, “following the example of his father” (1Kg 22,53; 2Kg 8,27; 13,2; 14,24 etc). In other words, sin passed from father to son.

The system was stronger than the king, it outlived him. It was a living thing and had its own power to survive and even get stronger. In a certain sense, all were prisoners of the

system that they had created and which, in the end, led them to destruction. (2Kg 17,7-18). Thanks to the system, the road was paved for the entry of false gods, their worship and their prophets, all at the service of the king.

The result being that, at the time of Elijah, practically everyone had abandoned the Alliance, many did not know what to do, while others still just blindly followed the orders of the king killing their fellow citizens and arresting the prophets of Yahweh who opposed the system.

## **7. The seeds of resistance**

But all was not lost. There still remained those who resisted and refused to be dragged in:

1. We had Obadiah, “the master of the palace”, going against the queens expressed orders, and putting his own life at risk, saved the life of 100 prophets, hiding them and looking after them (1Kg 18,3)
2. The widow at Zarephath, the poor foreigner who kept alive the ideal of sharing and was able to divide the little she had of bread and oil with Elijah (1kg 17,13-15)
3. Then there was Naboth, the owner of the small vineyard, capable of resisting the temptation to sell or swap the inheritance of his ancestors (1Kg 21,3).
4. There was also the group of prophets, Elijah’s companions, who lived in Bethel and Jericho (2Kg 2,3; 1Kg 19,8)
5. And we should not forget the 7000 who had refused to bend their knees to the false Gods (1Kg 19,18)

In a word, the poor, the anonymous, the unknown and the prophets remained faithful to the alliance. These represented the hidden, silent resistance to the onslaught coming from the king and the queen. It is from this group that Elijah comes to publicly denounce the evil being done and to unveil the hidden face of Yahweh, the god of the people. He took upon himself the job of defending the downtrodden and became the revelation of the living God. Because of this his memory was preserved in the minds of the people of God who, in turn, passed it on to future generations and to us.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Picture we inherited of the Prophet Elijah**

#### **1. A man of God**

Elijah is known as a man of God (1Kg 17,18.24; 2Kg 1,9.11.13). Not of any God, but Yahweh, the god of the people, the god of the Alliance, the god who had freed them from Egypt. Elijah’s maxim was “As Yahweh lives, the god of Israel whom I serve” (1Kg 17,1). It is with these words that he becomes part of the history of God’s people, and it is with these words that he presents himself to the king.

Elijah allowed Yahweh to take control of his life, the word of Yahweh drove him to action (1Kg 17,2,8.24; 18,1; 19,9.15; 21,17.28); the angel of Yahweh gave him courage and told him what to do (1Kg 19,5.7; 2Kg 1,3.15); the spirit of Yahweh could take control of him at any moment, and lead him to do the most unexpected things (1kg 18,12; 2Kg 2,16); the hand of Yahweh was with him and made him run even faster than the king (1Kg 18,46).

This profound personal experience of Yahweh, the God of the people, enabled him both to perceive and break down the false image of god disseminated by the king and his cohorts (1kg 18,27). It also made him, for his people, the revelation of the living God (1Kg 18,39), to the extent that God was identified as the “God of Elijah” (2Kg 2,14). Elijah does nothing thinking only of himself, but it is zeal for the things of Yahweh that drives him (1Kg 19,10.14). Everything he does is done in the name of Yahweh (1Kg 18,36).

For the poor, Elijah is “a man of God and the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth itself” (1Kg17,24). He is known in the bible as “a man of fire, his word flaring like a torch” (Si 48,1), or as the one who will return at the end of time, to restore the tribes of Israel (Si 48,10 and “prepare for the Lord a people fit for him” (Lk 1,17).

## **2. A man of the People**

Besides being a man of God, Elijah was also a man of the people. He was born in Tishbe, and was known as the Tishbite. Tishbe was a small town in Transjordan, the northeast of Palestine, a region of strong religious traditions and a very conservative belligerent people. Conservative in the good sense of the word: preserving the faith values of the true living god, while reacting strongly against the abuses of the king and his house

Coming from a farming background, Elijah had no recourse to the king’s palace, nor did he sit at the queens table as did the official prophets (1Kg 18,19), but rather lived in the solitude of the desert (1Kg17,3; 19,4) and the mountains (2Kg1,9) , or simply lived with the poor (1kg 17,9). He wore simple clothing (2Kg1,8), and lived off what nature had to offer him (1Kg 17,4-6) or what the poor shared with him (1Kg 17,11-16).

His close relationship with God in no way separated him from his people. Instead it brought him even closer to the downtrodden: the impoverished widow of Zarephath; Obadiah who had been threatened with death; Naboth who had been assassinated because of land conflicts.

But at the same time this close relationship with the poor and oppressed did not separate him from Yahweh, but sent him more and more in search of the true god: his life in the house of the widow drove him to prayer for her and her son; his suffering because of his people drove him to Horeb in search of Yahweh, and find there his source of energy.

Elijah played an active role in national events: he took the drought out of the neutral field and interpreted it as God’s punishment; he called the people to Mount Carmel and forces them into a decision; he intervenes in the political process in Aram and in Israel.

## **3. A man of prayer**

A man of God, a man of the people and a man of prayer, these are his characteristics of the prophet Elijah, (and indeed all the prophets), that have come down to us from the Old and also the New Testament. The letter of Saint James tells us: “Elijah was a human being like ourselves – he prayed hard for it not to rain, and no rain fell for three-and-a-half years; then he prayed again and the sky gave rain and the earth gave crops” (James 5,16-18).. He knew how to pray and his prayer sparked off God’s reaction: it gave back life to the widow’s son; it brought rain after the long drought; it brought down fire on the captain who followed the unjust orders of the king; it made the fire consume the sacrifice to prove to the people that Yahweh was the one true god.

Elijah constantly fell back on the traditional sources of faith, present in the lives of god’s people since their origins to nourish his life of prayer - union with Yahweh and union with the people: he crossed over to the other side of the Jordan to the wadi Cherith from where, before the time of the Judges, the people had come to conquer the land; he drank from the stream and ate bread and meat, like his predecessors as they crossed the desert; he spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert where, at the time of the Exodus the people had spent 40 years; he went as far as Mount Horeb, God’s holy mountain where, at the time of the Exodus the people had come into existence and the alliance was drawn up with Yahweh; he lived in the solitude of the mountains, because Yahweh, the God of the Israel was known as the god of the mountains; he lived in the house of the widow who, in spite of the drought and her poverty, preserved the old ideal of the alliance and put the ideal of sharing into practice even if she had little or nothing to share. In a word: Elijah retraced the historical path of his people to the sources of his faith, eventually found God again and placed himself at his service.

Through prayer, nourished by the life and history of his people, the life of Elijah becomes a transparent, eloquent sign of god’s presence in the midst of his people. His very name, Elijah, is a synthesis of his life and witness: the word *Elijah* means *God is Yahweh*.

#### **4. An active role in the conflicts**

Yahweh, Elijah’s god is no neutral god, and neither is Elijah. He takes a clear, defined position in all conflicts. He places himself firmly on the side of the “little ones”, the oppressed and carries the banner of their cause. He is against those who oppress and exploit

He is against Acab who infringes the Alliance; against Jezebel who robs and kills; against Ahaziah, the king of Samaria, who consults Baalzebub the false God (2Kg 1,3-4); against the king of Judah, Jehoram, who kills his brothers and caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves (2Cr 21,12-15); against the false prophets who gave support to Acab and Jezebel; and against the army captain for carrying out the unjust orders of the king.

He is on the side of the poor widow and her son, who shared the little they had to survive; he is on the side of Abadiah, the court official, who put his life at risk and disobeyed the queen’s orders to defend the prophets of Yahweh; on the side of Naboth the owner of the

little vineyard, who died rather than break the law forbidding him to sell or exchange his family inheritance; and clearly takes the side of the confused and mixed up people who had been lead astray by the misleading propaganda of the false prophets.

This behaviour made Elijah the mouth-piece and revelation of the will of Yahweh, the god of the people; made it possible for the spirit of Yahweh to intervene in the course of history and defend the oppressed who had remained faithful to the Alliance, and go against the oppressors who had done what was evil in the eyes of the Lord.. The obvious result is that he is persecuted, threatened with death, sought out by the king in every nook and cranny, and forced to come down from the mountain and appear before the king. It also forced him to flee to the other side of the Jordan – back to his origins -, or to the desert in the south of the country. He is not afraid of the consequences.

## **5. A sign of contradiction**

Not everyone sees him as a prophet. For Acab he is an enemy, the scourge of the nation. For the palace workers he is just an unknown strange character, wearing a hair cloak and a leather loincloth. For the queen he is a danger that must be eliminated as quickly as possible.

Only the poor understand his real identity and accept his message. They are able to recognize the signs and open up to Yahweh: the widow; the fearful captain; Abadiah; Elisha, who left everything to follow him; his fellow prophets in Jericho and Bethel; the abandoned people.

Others see nothing in him except a threat, because they have other interests. The king goes against the precepts of the Alliance, his interests are to save the horses (army) and mules (trade); increase his property; kill his enemies and win his wars. The nobility and the elders are interested in carrying out the interests of the king, and the orders of the queen – kill Naboth and imprison the prophets.

The little ones see him as a man of God who speaks the word of God – precisely because they share the same interests. Their way of life is in keeping with the alliance, and only this is capable of removing the scales from their eyes to see God's appeal present in the everyday events. This was true at the time of Elijah, and is still true to the present time.

## **6. Personal struggle and the struggle of the people**

While the people of God did have great respect for Elijah, they did not make of him a super-hero. The situation was rather the opposite. They saw him as being very human, full of limitations. He had his moments of fear and despair, a desire to throw in the towel and die. After standing up to the king and the 450 prophets of Baal, firmly believing that he was the sole protagonist of Yahweh's cause he concludes "I am the only one left and they want to kill me" (1Kg 19,10); he runs from the threats of the queen; lying under a tree he wants to die, because he thinks that he is no different to the rest of them (1Kg 19,4). How can we explain this?

The word of God is like a sword that sinks deep into the soul and from there it shows up our defects. In his search for Yahweh, Elijah follows the traditional paths (1Kg 19,11): the storm, the earthquake and the lightning, because this was how Yahweh had revealed himself in the past to Moses on mount Horeb (Ex 19,16-18). Elijah expected Yahweh to follow tradition just as the king wanted God to reveal himself in accordance with the interests of the king. While admitting that Elijah and the king had very opposite interests, both of them take away Yahweh's freedom, because they both want to force him to be the type of God they want: be it according to tradition or be it according to the system.

This attitude has in it the seeds of death. Not the death of God but of our faith in God and human liberty. This attitude tries to fit Yahweh into a scheme where we feel secure. Then when this security fails, our faith in Yahweh gives way to fear and despair "Yahweh I have had enough. Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (1Kg 19,4)

The fight for justice and freedom takes place not only in the unjust society, but also in the heart of each individual, where we find reflected the cause of all the unjust social structures, and the human, worldly way of seeing Yahweh. Elijah had had many victories, but he was still very aware of his limitations and his need for conversion. And for those who passed down these pictures of Elijah, this interior struggle on Mount Horeb is just as important as the struggle that took place in society

## **7. Rediscovering Yahweh**

The ever faithful God answers the appeal of the dejected prophet. However, he refuses to be tied down, even by the most traditional forms, accepted as the guidelines for the people to lead them to their God, and reveals himself as he so desires. Instead of the storm, the lightning or the earthquake, he chooses the "gentle breeze" (1Kg 19,12-13).

It is precisely this freedom that lifts the weight off Elijah's shoulders. He had considered himself as Yahweh's only defender. "I am the only one left" as if to say "If it wasn't for me, Yahweh would be lost". A very pretentious attitude, but no more than the logical consequence of identifying Yahweh with our ideas of him.

Yahweh, on entering Elijah's life proved himself to be the same god as ever, blankly refusing to be imprisoned in any one system of human thought. By so doing, he made it clear that he did not depend on tradition, but that tradition depended on him; that the gentle breeze did not fit into tradition, but that tradition needed to be reread in the light of the gentle breeze; that it was not Elijah who was defending Yahweh, but Yahweh who was defending his prophet Elijah.

This divine freedom was the revealing flash that freed Elijah from his deathly anguish and taught him that the ultimate foundation of all human confidence is not what we ourselves think or tradition shows us, but that which Yahweh is in his essence: Yahweh, a free liberating God. After this discovery the renewed Elijah could go back and get on with his mission (1Kg 19,15). True liberty, the source of all courage, was rekindled in his being.

By preserving his own freedom in relation to all human systems, Yahweh upheld the freedom of his people and gave hope to the poor, because, once again he confirmed that

he refuses to be forced into any one, specific frame of thought. Faithful to himself alone, Yahweh is forever full of new surprises when it comes to hearing the cries of his people. It is the prophet's job to remain open to this surprise element of the free liberating action of God. God's freedom is the only real guarantee of human freedom. It is the only element capable of breaking through the chains of all oppressive totalitarian ideologies. Yahweh continuously reappears on the outskirts of history, recreating a new awareness.

Elijah's journey was a slow painful one, a dark night. He had to discover that, even in Elijah himself, Yahweh was never on the side of the proud, famous, victorious, fighting aggressive Elijah, who considered himself the leader in the war against the mistakes of the king, but on the side of the anguished, disheartened, persecuted humiliated Elijah. Yahweh himself had to point out to him that there were more than 7,000 others who had refused to bend their knees to the false prophets. He was not alone; he was not the only one out there to defend Yahweh. Up to then he had been so narrow-minded in his outlook, that he was incapable of seeing that there were many others involved in the same fight and on his side. God opened his eyes through the excruciating experience of his own limitations. He had to painfully discover that Yahweh is free, not only in relation to the king and the oppressors, who imagined that they could control him, but also in relation to Elijah himself. From this moment on he gained the freedom to free others.

## Chapter Five

### **Carrying on the Work of Elijah; Waiting his Return**

800 years later the people still remembered Elijah, in the stories they told and even in their celebrations, and they believed that he continued to look after all those in difficulty.

Jesus and his group had a special liking for him. Only Moses (80 times), Abraham (73 times) and David (59 times) are mentioned more times than Elijah (29 times). He is seen as a man of god who, through prayer, gets whatever he wants (James 5,17-18 and 1Kg 17,1); through the power of god he overcomes the oppressors (Rv 11,5 and 2Kg 1,10); helps the marginalized (Lk 4,25-26 and 1kg 17,1 and 18,1). In a word, Elijah is a "prophet". The representative of the prophetic role (Mt 17,3; Mk 9,4; Lk 9,30; Rv 11,3-6). This goes far beyond merely remembering Elijah, it is an invitation to the community to carry on his prophetic function.

For the people of God Elijah had not died, he had been taken up live into heaven, where he awaited further orders. Some held that he was to appear again before the Last Judgment, while others were of the opinion that he would appear just before the Messiah. One way or the other, he was an eagerly awaited very mysterious individual.

Proof of the special regard the Jews had, and still has, for Elijah is his place in the Passover celebration. During the Passover there are four different cups of wine, each having a different symbolism. This is followed by a fifth chalice known as the "chalice of Elijah", which is not drunk: it can only be drunk by Elijah himself at the end of time. When is this to be? Nobody knows. But the community is always vigilant. So after each celebration of the Pasch, the door is opened for Elijah to come in, and the people pray "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118,6).

All of this is the expression of one basic truth: our faith teaches us to never throw in the towel. God may be slow about coming, but he never fails. The day of reckoning will come, the Day of the Lord, and it is the people of faith, those who live with the spirit and power of Elijah who prepare this day. John the Baptist had the same mission as Elijah. His very dress reminds us of Elijah, he had come to do what the people had expected of Elijah.

## Appendix

### Names and places

**Acab.** Seventh king of Israel (874 – 853). Kept good relations with the neighbouring countries, developed foreign trade and modernized the country. His economic policy deepened social inequality, brought about injustices and religious confusion.

**Ahaziah.** Eight king of Israel (853-852). Ahab's son and his successor. Cf 1Kg 22,52-54; 1Kg 1.

**Amorites.** An ancient Canaanite people

**Baal.** Name used by many of the neighbouring nations for the divinity. The name means: lord, master.

**Baasha.** Third king of Israel (909 -886 B.C.). Cf. 1Kg 15,33 and 16,7. This explains the reference made to him in 1Kg 21,22).

**Baal Zebub.** The God of Ekron was called Baal Zebul, or Lord, Prince. However, the Israelites changed the last letter of the name, which ended up meaning Lord of the Flies. In the New Testament Baal Zebul, is also referred to as “Lord of the demons” (Mt 12,24)

**Beersheba.** City to the south of Judah, in the Negev desert, 1Kg 19,3.

**Carmel.** The beautiful mountain that looks out to the Mediterranean, on one side, and on the other down on the city of Haifa, Israel. The name means “garden”. Cf 1Kg 18,19).

**Cherith.** A stream, one of the Jordan tributaries, on the eastern bank. The stream is so small that it is to be found only in the more detailed maps. Cfr. 1Kg 17,3.

**Damascus.** A Syrian city-state, belonging to the Aramaeans, to become later on the capital of Syria. Cf 1Kg 19,15).

**Ekron.** A philistine city 30 kms west of Jerusalem.

**Elijah.** A prophet, active in the kingdom of Israel, in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, between 900 and 850 B.C. For the post-exilic Jews he was considered the precursor of the Messiah (cf Mal 3,23). In the NT he is taken to be the representative of the prophets, as Moses is the representative of the Law. He is the fourth most mentioned person from the OT in the NT (29 times) after Moses (80 times), Abraham (73 times) and David (59 times). The name means “My God is Yahweh”. Three other people are

mentioned in the Old Testament with the same name, but there are no details (1Ch 8,27; Ez10,21; and Ez 10,26).

**Elisha.** Disciple and follower of Elijah. As a prophet he was very active socially and politically 1 Kg 17 and 2 Kg 1. We also have the cycle of Elisha (2kg 2 -13). The name “God saves” or “God helps”.

**Gilead.** A region to the east of the Jordan, between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Cf. 1Kg 17,1.

**Guilgal.** There is more than one place in the Bible with this name. The Guilgal mentioned in 2Kg 2,1 lies in the Jordan valley, more or less near Bethel

**Horeb.** The people from the north used this name to refer to Mount Sinai 1kg 19,8.

**Israel.** A name for the Israelite people. Also used to refer to country where Elijah was active.

**Jehoram.** The ninth king of Israel (852-841 B.C). Brother of and successor to Ahaziah. At this same period, the king of Judah, in the south was also called Jehoram; they had nothing to do with each other. Cf. 2Kg 1,17. The Bible fits the Cycle of Elisha into the reign of Jehoram. Cf 2Kg 3,1ss and 9,22ss

**Jehu.** Tenth king of Israel (841-814). He had the support of prophets from Elijah and Elisha’s group to gain power. To get the crown he had to kill the king, and then proceeded to eliminate all the royal family and the followers of Baal. However, he was not moved by the spirit of Yahweh. The story of his reign is found in 2Kg 9-10. Nine hundred years later, the prophet Hosea also from the kingdom of the north, painted a very negative picture of him Hosea 1,4.

**Jeroboam.** There are two kings in Israel with this name. Here we are referring to Jeroboam 1, the leader who fought for the independence in the north and who became the first king of the independent Kingdom of Israel (931 – 910 B.C.).Cf. 1 Kg 11,26-40; 12; 14,1-20. The reference to him in 1Kg 21,22 goes back to 1Kg 14,10-11.

**Jezebel.** King Ahab’s wife, and daughter of the king of Sidon, and a follower of Baal, the God of Phoenicia. Did everything in her power to put an end to the prophets of Yahweh in the kingdom of Israel. Her name became a symbol of evil (Rv 2,20). 1kg 18,4; 215ss; and her death 2Kg 9,30-37.

**Jezreel.** A city, 30 kilometres to the southeast of Mount Carmel, used by Acab as a kind of second capital. It was also the place where Naboth had his family vineyard. Cf. 1Kg 18,45-46; 21,1.23.

**Kishon.** A stream, near Mount Carmel. Cf. 1Kg 18,40.

**Moab.** A country to the east of the Dead Sea, inhabited by the Moabites.

**Naboth.** A poor farmer, persecuted and killed because he stood up for his rights against the royal family. He lived in the same town, Jezreel, where the king had his second palace Cf. 1Kg 21.

**Philistines.** A people who established themselves on the narrow plains of Palestine along the Mediterranean coast, more or less to the west of the kingdom of Judah.

**Phoenicia.** A region to the north of the kingdom of Israel – the Lebanon today. Tyre, Sidon and Zarephath are all towns in Phoenicia. Present day Beirut is 38 kms to the north of Sidon.

**Samaria.** The capital of Israel all during the time of Elijah. It was chosen to be capital by Omri, Acab's father, cf. 1Kg 16,24. Before Samaria Israel had had three other capital cities: Shechem, to be quickly substituted by Peniel (cf. 1Kg 12,25); and Tirzah (1Kg 15,33).

**Sidon.** An important Phoenician city on the Mediterranean, 16 kms north of Zarephath.

**Tishbe.** Elijah's home town, in Gilead. Today it would be part of Jordan, but we know nothing more about it. Cf. 1Kg 17,1.

**Tyre.** An ancient Phoenician city, on the Mediterranean coast, 23 kilometres south of Zarephath; an important sea port and commercial centre. It had a strong cultural influence over Israel during the monarchy.

**Yahweh.** The name of the one true God.

**Zarephath.** A Phoenician city on the Mediterranean Sea between Tyre and Sidon. Cf. 1Kg 17,9).