

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN JESUS AND ELIJAH-ELISHA

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THIS EVENING MARKS NOT ONLY THE 7TH NIGHT OF CHANUKAH, IT ALSO MARKS THE EVE OF THE MAJOR CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL OF CHRISTMAS. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MOST CHRISTIANS THOUGHT OF JESUS AS SOMETHING COMPLETELY APART FROM JUDAISM, AND MOST CHRISTIANS DID VERY LITTLE READING OF WHAT THEY CALL THE OLD TESTAMENT. TODAY, MORE AND MORE CHRISTIANS ACKNOWLEDGE THE FACT THAT IF JESUS IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD AT ALL, HE CAN ONLY BE UNDERSTOOD IN THE LIGHT OF JEWISH TRADITION AS DEVELOPED IN THE "OLD TESTAMENT". ACCORDINGLY, CHRISTIANS ARE TURNING INCREASINGLY TO OUR BIBLE, AND THEY ARE READING OUR SCRIPTURE INTENTLY, SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND THEIR OWN RELIGION BETTER.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN IT WAS CONSIDERED SACRILEGIOUS AMONGST JEWS EVEN TO MENTION THE NAME OF JESUS, BUT, INCREASINGLY, JEWS FEEL FREE TO DISCUSS ALL ASPECTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE LIGHT OF JEWISH TEACHING. CERTAINLY, IF ONE IS SECURE IN HIS FAITH AS A JEW, IF ONE CLEARLY FEELS THAT JESUS WAS NOT DIVINE, THERE SHOULD BE NO REASON THAT WE CANNOT READ THE NEW TESTAMENT TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT HAS TO SAY. WHILE I WOULD NEVER TRY TO DISSUADE ANY CHRISTIAN FROM HIS BELIEF THAT JESUS IS DIVINE, THE MORE I READ THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE MORE I BECOME CONVINCED THAT MUCH OF THE CHARACTER OF JESUS IS COMPOSED BY THE ASSEMBLY OF MANY STORIES THAT OCCUR IN OUR OLDER BIBLE AND BY THE RE-WORKING OF THESE STORIES WITH JESUS AS THE HERO, RATHER THAN THE PERSON ABOUT WHOM THEY ARE EARLIER TOLD. AS I READ STORIES ABOUT HIM WHICH WERE EARLIER ATTRIBUTED TO OTHER JEWISH PERSONALITIES, I FIND THE CASE FOR HIS UNIQUENESS AND DIVINITY WEAKENED.

TONIGHT, I SHOULD LIKE TO COMPARE SOME OF THE STORIES TOLD ABOUT THE HEBREW PROPHETS ELIJAH AND ELISHA WITH SOME OF THE STORIES TOLD ABOUT JESUS. YOU, PERHAPS, KNOW THAT IN MOST ANCIENT TIMES MANY PEOPLES OF THE MIDDLE EAST HAD SEERS OR SOOTHSAYERS WHO WERE PICTURED AS BEING MIRACLE WORKERS AND FORETELLERS OF THE FUTURE. THE GENIUS OF THE HEBREWS IS THAT THEY SLOWLY DEVELOPED A NEW KIND OF RELIGIOUS FIGURE OUT OF THE SEER. CERTAINLY, BY THE YEAR 800 B.C.E. THE SEER NO LONGER APPEARS IN THE CULTURE OF ISRAEL. IN HIS PLACE IS THE PROPHET. THE PROPHET OF THIS PERIOD HAS CEASED TO BE A MIRACLE WORKER. EVEN HIS ABILITY TO FORETELL SPECIFIC EVENTS IN THE FUTURE HAS BEEN MINIMIZED. INSTEAD, THE PROPHET APPEARS AS A MORAL INTERPRETER OF HISTORY, AS ONE WHO OFFERS

GENERAL PREDICTIONS WHICH ARE VALID IF CERTAIN KINDS OF INDIF-
FERENCE AND IMMORALITY CONTINUE. TRUE, THE MAGNIFICANT PROPHETS
OF ISRAEL, LIKE AMOS, HOSEA, JEREMIAH AND ISAIAH, SPEAK AS IF
THEY ARE PROCLAIMING THE LIVING COMMANDS OF GOD HIMSELF, BUT,
THEY ESCHEW MAGIC. THEY ARE NOT CONCERNED WITH MAKING RODS TURN
INTO SNAKES, NOR ARE THEY CONCERNED WITH TURNING ASIDE THE WATERS
SO THAT THEY CAN WALK ON DRY LAND. INSTEAD, AMOS PROCLAIMS,
"LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN AS THE MIGHTY WATERS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS
LIKE AN UNFAILING STREAM," AND JEREMIAH INVEIGHS AGAINST THE
HYPOCRISY OF TEMPLE RITUAL EVEN WHILE THOSE IN POWER ARE UNMINDFUL
OF THE SUFFERING OF THE MASS OF PEOPLE.

BUT THE MORALISTIC PROPHETS OF THE HEBREWS, PREACHERS OF INTER-
NATIONALISM AND UNIVERSALISM, DID NOT SUDDENLY APPEAR AMONGST THE
JEWS. THEY ARE THE END PRODUCT OF A SLOW AND STEADY DEVELOPMENT.
THE PROPHETS ABOUT WHOM WE SPEAK PRIMARILY TONIGHT, ELIJAH AND
ELISHA, WERE ONLY THE EARLY PROTOTYPES OF THE LATER PROPHETS.
WHILE THESE TWO MEN ALSO SPOKE OF JUSTICE, THEY COMBINED THEIR
MORALISTIC TEACHINGS WITH THE WORKING OF MIRACLES. INDEED, THEY
BELONGED TO AN AGE WHERE THE PEOPLE INSISTED UPON THE PERFORMANCE
OF SOME MAGIC FROM A MAN OF GOD BEFORE HE COULD BE ACCEPTED AS ONE
WHO TAUGHT THE DIVINE MESSAGE.

IT IS MY THESIS THIS EVENING THAT JESUS, WHO LIVED PERHAPS 850
YEARS AFTER ELIJAH AND ELISHA, HAD A GREAT DEAL IN COMMON WITH
THIS KIND OF EARLIER PROPHET. WHILE JESUS QUOTES JEREMIAH, WHO
LIVED 600 YEARS BEFORE HIM, AND WHILE HE QUOTES ISAIAH, WHO
BELONGS TO A LIKE PERIOD OF JEWISH HISTORY, NONETHELESS, JESUS
APPEARS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT MORE IN THE MOLD OF THE EARLIER
ELIJAH, THAN OF JEREMIAH OR ISAIAH.

LET US PURSUE THIS THESIS. THE NEW TESTAMENT PRESENTS JESUS
AS A PHENOMENAL FIGURE BECUASE, AMONGST OTHER THINGS, HE HEALS
THE SICK, HE PERFORMS MIRACLES LIKE WALKING ON THE WATER, AND
HE RISES FROM THE DEAD. JEREMIAH AND ISAIAH DID NOT PRETEND
TO DO ANY OF THESE THINGS; THEY REPRESENT A MORE SOPHISTICATED
ERA OF HEBRAIC HISTORY. BUT ELIJAH AND ELISHA, AS WE SHALL SEE,
WERE PRECISELY THIS KIND OF FIGURE, AND WE CAN ACTUALLY SHOW HOW
SOME OF THE JESUS STORIES SEEM TO BE BUT A RE-TELLING OF THE
ELIJAH-ELISHA STORIES.

OUR SOURCE IS THE BOOK OF MATTHEW, FIRST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
BOOKS. IN THE EIGHTH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW WE ARE TOLD THAT JESUS
HEALS A LEPER OF HIS DISEASE (vv. 1-4). IN THE NINTH CHAPTER
A PARALYTIC IS ENABLED, ACCORDING TO THE TEXT, TO RISE UP FROM

HIS BED (vv. 1-8). ALSO IN THIS CHAPTER, A BLIND MAN IS ENABLED TO SEE (v. 27). THESE THINGS ARE USED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AS PART OF THE EVIDENCE THAT JESUS IS GREATER THAN A MAN, INDEED THAT HE IS DIVINE. ELIJAH AND ELISHA DO THESE THINGS, AND THE OLD TESTAMENT DOES NOT MAKE A CLAIM THAT THESE MEN ARE DIVINE. FOR EXAMPLE, IN THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS, CHAPTER FIVE (vv. 1-14) WE ARE TOLD THAT THE KING OF SYRIA WRITES THE KING OF ISRAEL AND ASKS THAT HE HELP TO CURE A CERTAIN SYRIAN, NAMED NAAMAN, OF HIS LEPROSY. THE KING OF ISRAEL RENDS HIS CLOTHES IN DESPAIR AND SAYS, (v. 7) "AM I GOD TO KILL AND MAKE ALIVE?" THE PROPHET ELISHA, HOWEVER, IS NOT AT ALL DISMAYED AT THIS REQUEST. HE SENT A MESSENGER TO THE HEBREW KING SAYING, (v. 8) "WHY HAVE YOU RENT YOUR CLOTHES? LET HIM (i.e. THE SYRIAN) COME TO ME, THAT HE MAY KNOW THAT THERE IS A PROPHET IN ISRAEL." IN OTHER WORDS, ELISHAS CLEARLY CONSIDERED IT TO BE ONE OF HIS ORDINARY FUNCTIONS AS A PROPHET TO HEAL PEOPLE OF LEPROSY. THE TEXT THEN RECOUNTS HOW ELISHA CURES NAAMAN, WHO HAPPENS TO BE CAPTAIN OF THE SYRIAN ARMY. THE CURE IS DESCRIBED AS BEING MIRACULOUS IN NATURE.

IN THE FOURTH CHAPTER OF THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS, WE ARE TOLD THAT A WOMAN FROM SHUNAM COMES TO ELISHA AND COMPLAINS THAT HER SON HAS DIED. WE ARE TOLD THAT ELISHA BRINGS THE BOY BACK TO LIFE (4: 25-37). A SIMILAR INCIDENT IS ASCRIBED TO ELIJAH (1 K 17: 17-24). INDEED, WE ARE TOLD THAT CONTACT WITH THE PROPHET WAS SO VITAL THAT WHEN A DEAD MAN WAS THROWN INTO ELISHA'S GRAVE, HE WAS RETURNED TO LIFE BY CONTACT WITH THE BONES OF THE DECEASED PROPHET (2K 13-21). IN SPITE OF THIS APPARENT ABILITY TO WORK MIRACLES, THESE PROPHETS WERE NEVER DEEMED MORE THAN MORTAL BY THE ANCIENT HEBREWS. WHATEVER THEY DID, IT WAS BELIEVED, WAS BY VIRTUE OF A SPECIAL GIFT OF GOD TO THEM, BUT THEY WERE NOT IDENTIFIED WITH GOD HIMSELF. THE WOMAN WHOSE SON ELIJAH BRINGS TO LIFE MERELY SAYS, "NOW I KNOW YOU ARE A MAN OF GOD..." (1K 17-24).

ONE OF THE GREAT MIRACLES CLAIMED FOR JESUS AS PROOF OF HIS DIVINITY IS THE FACT THAT HE IS DESCRIBED AS WALKING ON THE WATER, SOMETHING NO MERE MORTAL COULD DO. IN THE EIGHTH CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF MATTHEW, WE ARE TOLD THAT HE WAS IN A BOAT WITH HIS DISCIPLES WHEN A GREAT STORM AROSE. HIS DISCIPLES WERE FEARFUL, BUT WE ARE TOLD THAT JESUS AROSE, "AND REBUKED THE WINDS AND THE SEA; AND THERE WAS A GREAT CALM." THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTINUES, "AND THE MEN MARVELED, SAYING, "WHAT SORT OF MAN IS THIS, THAT EVEN WINDS AND SEA OBEY HIM?" (8: 23-27). THE STORY OCCURS AGAIN, SLIGHTLY VARIED (14:25), AND IN THIS SECOND SITUATION, JESUS IS DESCRIBED AS ACTUALLY WALKING ON THE WATER. THE STORY CONCLUDES THAT WHEN THE DISCIPLES GOT INTO THE BOAT, THEY WORSHIPPED HIM, SAYING (v. 33) "TRULY, YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD".

IN THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS, THE SECOND CHAPTER, (v. 8), WE ARE TOLD THAT WITH FIFTY OF HIS DISCIPLES WATCHING, ELIJAH TOOK HIS MANTLE AND PARTED THE WATERS OF THE RIVER JORDAN AND WALKED ON THE DRY LAND WITH ELISHA AT HIS SIDE. LATER (2:14), WE ARE TOLD THAT ELISHA PERFORMS THE SAME MIRACLE. HE, TOO, PARTS THE WATER AND WALKS ON THE DRY LAND, YET, NOWHERE WITHIN THESE STORIES CONCERNING THESE TWO PROPHETS OF THE NINTH CENTURY B.C.E. IS IT SUGGESTED THAT THE PERFORMANCE OF THESE MIRACLES MADE THEM DIVINE.

IN THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF MATTHEW (vv. 32 ff.), WE ARE TOLD THAT JESUS TOOK A FEW LOAVES OF BREAD AND FED A CROWD OF FOUR THOUSAND PEOPLE. THIS, TOO, IS TAKEN TO BE A SIGN OF HIS SPECIAL NATURE. HOW COULD SO MANY BE FED WITH SO LITTLE? IN OUR BIBLE, ELISHA FEEDS A LARGE GROUP OF PEOPLE WITH JUST A FEW LOAVES (2 K 4: 42-44). IN ALMOST AN IDENTICAL SITUATION, AND IN ANOTHER STORY, A WOMAN WITH ONLY ONE JAR OF OIL, ON COMMAND OF THE PROPHET ELISHA, POURS FROM THIS ONE JAR OF OIL ENDLESSLY, FILLING MANY MORE JARS OF OIL TO SELL FOR MONEY, WHILE THE FIRST JAR IS NEVER DIMINISHED (2 K 4:1 ff.). THE OBJECT OF ALL THESE STORIES IS TO TEACH THAT WHERE THERE IS LOVE AND FAITH, MUCH CAN BE DONE WITH VERY LITTLE, BUT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT STORY THE MORAL IS OVERWHELMED BY THE EFFORT TO MAKE JESUS INTO SOMETHING DIVINE. (c.f. WHERE ELIJAH IS FED BY THE WOMAN WHO HAS NO FOOD (1K 17:8-16)).

THE NEW TESTAMENT MAKES MUCH OF THE FACT THAT WHILE JESUS SEEMS TO DIE, HE WAS SEEN TO BE RESURRECTED ON THE THIRD DAY. TO BE SURE, OUR BIBLE DOES NOT SPEAK OF EITHER ELIJAH OR ELISHA BEING RESURRECTED. ELISHA, THE YOUNGER OF THE TWO, APPARENTLY DIES A NORMAL DEATH, ALTHOUGH, AS WE HAVE DESCRIBED, HIS VERY BONES SEEM TO HAVE THE POWER TO BRING ANOTHER DEAD PERSON BACK TO LIFE. THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS TELLS US THAT WHEN THE BODY OF ANOTHER DEAD MAN FELL INTO ELISHA'S GRAVE, THAT MAN WAS RESURRECTED UPON CONTACT WITH THE BONES OF THE DEAD ELISHA (2 K 13:21).

WHAT HAPPENS TO ELIJAH? TO BE SURE, HE IS NOT RESURRECTED, BUT NEITHER, MY FRIENDS, DOES HE DIE, ACCORDING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT. THE TEXT TELLS US THAT ELIJAH IS GATHERED UP TO HEAVEN BY THE WHIRLWIND, (2 K 2:11). HE IS THE ONLY FIGURE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT WHO DOES NOT DIE A NATURAL DEATH, AND JEWISH TRADITION SAYS THAT ONE DAY ELIJAH WILL RETURN TO EARTH, IN ADVANCE OF A CONTINUING DAY OF PEACE AND GOOD WILL. ALTHOUGH ELIJAH MERELY DISAPPEARS AND DOES NOT SEEM TO DIE, EVEN HE IS NOT MADE OUT TO BE DIVINE. WHATEVER HAPPENED TO HIM, WE ARE LED TO BELIEVE, WAS MERELY WHAT GOD HAD ORDAINED FOR ONE OF HIS HUMAN MESSENGERS.

THE CONCLUSION OF ALL THIS IS THAT JESUS IS NOT AS UNIQUE AS SOME WOULD LIKE TO DESCRIBE HIM AS BEING. HIS TEACHINGS IN MANY CASES ARE QUOTATIONS FROM THE JEWISH BIBLE AND FROM THE TALMUD. HIS MIRACLE-WORKING IS LARGELY A RESTATEMENT OF STORIES TOLD ABOUT ELIJAH AND ELISHA WHO LIVED 850 YEARS BEFORE HIM. THE INTERESTING POINT FOR US IS THAT AFTER ELISHA, THE HEBREW PEOPLE SUBSTANTIALLY OUTGREW THIS EARLIER TRADITION OF THE MIRACLE WORKER AND DEVELOPED WHAT WE CONSIDER TO BE A HIGHER TYPE OF RELIGIOUS PERSONALITY IN THE LATER PROPHETS, WHO WERE UNIQUE IN THEIR ZEAL FOR THE CAUSE OF THE PEOPLE, BUT WHO DID NOT PRETEND TO RESORT TO MAGIC. IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE FACT THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT SUGGESTS THAT JESUS IS DIVINE, WE COULD PLACE HIM, AT LEAST IN PART, AS A JEWISH FIGURE COMPARABLE ON THE ONE HAND TO ELIJAH AND ELISHA, AND ON THE OTHER, TO JEREMIAH.

IF WE ASK HOW IT IS THAT JESUS DID NOT SEEK TO PRESENT HIMSELF ENTIRELY IN THE IMAGE OF THE LATER PROPHETS LIKE JEREMIAH, WE HAVE TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE TIMES IN WHICH JESUS LIVED, AND THE REGION IN WHICH HE APPARENTLY GREW UP AND PREACHED. HE WAS APPARENTLY REARED IN THAT PART OF ISRAEL IN WHICH ELIJAH AND ELISHA HAD SERVED. THE NEW TESTAMENT TELLS US THAT ALTHOUGH JESUS WAS BORN IN THE MORE SOPHISTICATED SOUTHERN REGION OF JUDEA, HE APPARENTLY LIVED AND TAUGHT IN THE NORTHERN REGION NEAR GALILEE, AND NEAR THE SYRIAN BORDER. IT WAS PRECISELY HERE THAT THE ELIJAH-ELISHA LEGENDS HAD THEIR GREATEST ROOTAGE IN THE JEWISH PEOPLE, AND IT IS POSSIBLE THAT JESUS WAS THE HEIR TO THIS OLDER AND LESS URBANIZED VERSION OF JUDAISM. FURTHER, JESUS LIVED IN A TIME WHEN MANY JEWS, BECAUSE OF THE CRUELTY OF THEIR ROMAN CONQUERORS, DESPAIRED OF THE USEFULNESS OF A RATIONALISTIC RELIGION AND LOOKED FOR A SUDDEN MIRACLE TO SAVE THEM. THESE JEWS WOULD LIKELY BE DRAWN TO THE IMAGE OF A MIRACLE-WORKING "PROPHET".

ACCORDING TO THE BEST SCHOLARS, CHRISTIAN AS WELL AS JEWISH, IT WAS NOT UNTIL LONG AFTER THE DEATH OF JESUS THAT HIS ELIJAH-TYPE PERSONALITY WAS MERGED WITH THE IMAGE OF A "SON OF GOD" COMING IN THE SKY TO JUDGE BETWEEN THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED. THIS LAST CONCEPT WAS PERSIAN IN ORIGIN.

JESUS, AS HE APPEARS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, IS THUS A COMPOSITE FIGURE, REFLECTING THE INFLUENCE OF BOTH JEWISH AND NON-JEWISH SOURCES. IT IS POSSIBLE FOR US TO ADMIRE SOME OF HIS SIMPLE PARABLES AND YET, AT THE SAME TIME, TO REJECT ANY NOTION THAT HE WAS DIVINE OR REALLY A MIRACLE WORKER. IN REFORM JUDAISM WE ALSO CHOOSE NOT TO ACCEPT THE MIRACLE-STORIES SURROUNDING ELIJAH AND ELISHA. FOR US, THE TRUE MIRACLES ARE NOT THE SUDDEN INTERRUPTIONS IN THE FLOW OF NATURE BUT GOD'S IMMUTABLE AND UNCHANGING LAWS.

STILL, WE OWE A DEBT OF GRATITUDE TO ELIJAH AND ELISHA WHO SERVED THE PEOPLE WELL IN THEIR TIME. PERHAPS, IN 850 B.C.E. THE PEOPLE WOULD NOT HAVE ACCEPTED THE ETHICS OF THE GOD OF ISRAEL HAD THESE EARLIER PROPHETS NOT PRESENTED THEMSELVES AS MIRACLE WORKERS. ONCE ISRAEL HAD EXPERIENCED PROPHETS LIKE AMOS AND JEREMIAH, HOWEVER, WHO DIVORCED MAGIC COMPLETELY FROM RELIGION, IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE WHY ISRAEL COULD NOT AGAIN ACCEPT AN ELIJAH-TYPE FIGURE, SUCH AS JESUS APPARENTLY WAS. IF ISRAEL COULD NOT ACCEPT JESUS 2,000 YEARS AGO, STILL LESS CAN WE ACCEPT HIM IN THIS SCIENTIFICALLY ORIENTED DAY. NONETHELESS, WE JEWS CANNOT FEEL COMPLETELY DETACHED FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT. THERE IS SOMETHING OF JUDAISM IN IT, AND WE MUST LOOK SYMPATHETICALLY UPON EACH MAN'S ATTEMPT TO FIND GOD IN HIS OWN WAY. THIS IS AN APPROPRIATE SEASON FOR US TO ENLARGE UPON OUR UNDERSTANDING AND RESPECT FOR OUR NEIGHBORS, AND IT IS ALSO A FITTING TIME FOR US TO SET OUR SIGHTS UPON THE DISTINCTIVE ELEMENTS OF OUR OWN FAITH SO THAT WE MIGHT LIVE MORE FULLY BY IT.