

Authentic Religion Does Not Pander to Power (Luke 4:25-27): Bible Commentary for the New Baptist Covenant

“But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel at the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Jesus referenced two stories about prophets, one involving Elijah and one involving Elisha, to challenge the people’s nationalistic and provincial biases.

Both stories focus on marginalized persons.

In the Elijah story (1 Kings 17:1-16), the prophet ministered to a Gentile widow who would also lose her only son to death. As a woman, as a widow, as a sonless mother, as a Gentile, she represents the “down and out.”

In the Elisha story (2 Kings 5:1-14), the prophet healed a powerful Gentile military leader who, despite his reputation, had been stigmatized by a socially unacceptable disease. As a man, as a military leader, as a Gentile, as a leper who was once a healthy person, he represents the “up and out.”

In relating these stories, Jesus used irony to confront the exclusivity of the congregation. He noted that in Elijah’s day there were many widows in Israel, yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, only to a Gentile woman in Phoenician territory.

Similarly, Jesus said that there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha’s day, but only Naaman, a Syrian, was cleansed.

Does this mean that God did not care for Israelite widows or Israelite lepers? Of course not. Rather, Jesus used irony to underscore God’s concern for all persons.

Huston Smith, eminent scholar of world religions, believes that the prophetic movement in Judaism evolved through three stages. One may also add that these three phases reflect a progression in the maturity of theological perspective in any religious tradition.

In its initial stage, prophecy was connected with guilds of prophets. The primary activity involved a collective ecstatic event, designed to produce a state of divine intoxication.

With the advent of the pre-writing prophets—Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and others—a second stage emerged. Emphasis shifted from ecstatic experience to ethics. One connected to God not so much through extraordinary trances or visions, but through a life committed to mercy, faithfulness and justice.

The third stage of the prophetic tradition arrived with the writing prophets: Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and others. Concern for the social implications of mercy, faithfulness and justice became pronounced in their oracles.

Jesus, in referencing stories involving the ministries of Elijah and Elisha to those marginalized and excluded from Israel's tradition, advocated that authentic religion does not pander to privilege. Rather, it supports the marginalized and despised.

A closer examination of these two stories involving the ministries of Elijah and Elisha to those outside the tradition of Israel reveals greater insight into Jesus' understanding of his prophetic role.

The name Elijah means "YHWH is God"—a fitting name for one who challenged a monarchy committed to the worship of Baal and Asheroth. The name Jesus—Yeshua—means "YHWH saves."

The beginnings of the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus are similar to that of Elijah.

John and Jesus arrived on the scene with a similar immediacy, demanding repentance because the kingdom of God was drawing near.

The story of Elisha's healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-14 illustrates that inclusion is more expansive than concern for the poor and defenseless among foreigners. Privileged and powerful foreigners are also within the purview of God's concern.

The name Elisha means “God is salvation.” Interestingly, the name Jesus combines elements from the names of the two prophets under consideration: Elijah (YHWH is God) and Elisha (God is salvation).

Much like Elisha, Jesus challenged the accepted social protocol throughout his ministry. Some followers of Jesus, similar to Naaman of old, broke through the prejudice of social pride and reconstructed their lives on a new foundation based in humility.

The vast majority of those disciples, however, came from the same ranks as the slave girl in the Naaman story. They were the nameless who believed that their names were written in the Lamb’s book of life.

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