



Beyond Yon

Kathy E. Williams

Abstract

As we consider leadership and spirituality, purposeful development becomes a requisite. Using the idiom, “hither, thither, and yon” this article addresses the prophet Elijah’s mission. The implication of the expression is that our journey takes us through many places, including unscheduled and unexpected stops. His journey encompasses our responsibilities as 21st-century leaders to operate in positive spiritual, economic, and political influence. Within the framework of socio-rhetorical analysis and a five-step interpretive journey archetype, we learn from Elijah how to utilize private and public struggles in guiding us to the place that is beyond yon. Our processing includes a gamut of experience, but more importantly, arriving at yon is arriving in a place where sense-making becomes the transformative factor. Included in the processing are leadership-followership, affective competence, organizational empathy, strategic planning, mentoring, and succession.

“Beyond Yon” is based on the idiom, “hither, thither, and yon” and is useful to those in leadership, whether a newcomer or seasoned individual. The expression of hither, thither, and yon speaks to a person traveling from one location to another. Beyond yon is a place where our personal journey evolves into deeper significance. The prophet Elijah is our model for the synergy of leadership and spirituality. Beyond yon is a place that appreciates mistakes equally with successes. It is a level of wholeness that justifies our totality. The socio-rhetorical analysis

tools utilized for this deliberation are ideological texture and sacred texture. In this article, we become traveling companions to the prophet as he (we) reaches beyond yon. The expertise of Vernon K. Robbins instructs us that “Ideological analysis of a text, then, is simply an agreement by various people that they will dialogue and disagree with one another with a text as a guest in the conversation.” By incorporating the insight of J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays and their five-step interpretive journey, we trace the original historical-cultural context and graduate to crossing the principizing [sic] bridge. The interpretive journey is a framework that allows us to transition scripture from its original setting to our contemporary setting. That concept is fundamental to transferring our observations of Elijah into our lives.

Few could imagine Elijah’s inaugural assignment of altering a national economy by commanding rain. From her several scholarly Jewish writings, Patricia Berlyn aids our context, “Rain was so desired that it was regarded as a reward for virtue, and drought so dreaded that it was deemed a punishment for sin.” The declaration concerning rain served as a moral indictment against Ahab. King Ahab is Elijah’s nemesis. “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him” (1 Kings 16:30, KJV). How is the impasse between Ahab and Elijah relevant to contemporary leaders? Ahab provokes divided spiritual loyalties of the people; thereby tainting national identity, society, and culture. Yeshiva University Scholar Rabbi Hayyim Angel explicates “Ahab believed in the prophets, but still wanted control over their messages and despised them when they maintained their integrity.” Contemporary leadership comes with the obligation of challenging unprofessional, unethical, and illegal conduct. This is particularly true when the conduct influences stakeholders and shareholders. Ahab is the personification of something all leaders need – a challenge. Project results from The Center for Creative Leadership affirm, “Challenge is a developmental force because it creates a condition where the leader must grow in order to become effective . . .”

Elijah’s prophetic office is his strategic position; however, he (we) will learn that position does not equate to process. From 1 Kings 17:2-24, we are made privy to a succession of critical points. God was invested in the totality of Elijah’s destiny such that He did not permit the prophet to become lodged into reputation or mired in situational contentment. Accomplishment in one scenario does not guarantee the absence of missteps. The inclusion of success and failure in our portfolio should prove an inspiration to remain humble. In 1 Kings 17:3, God gives Elijah a three-part instruction to get, turn, and hide. There are times that triumphs are not to be celebrated but are better implemented by shifting to a departure. As Elijah’s immersion into solitude took a sharp turn toward minimal provision followed by receiving sustenance through a widow woman, the roles of cultural standards were reversed. When the woman’s son died, she immediately accused Elijah of being the source of her grief. In that encounter, we learn a powerful lesson about leadership and spirituality. Elijah not only had no answer to her query, but he cried out to the Lord with questions. Her despair became his desolation. The Center for Creative Leadership speaks to us again “. . . adversity is a powerful crucible for leader development . . . the lessons from adversity are deeply personal.” The combination of leadership and spirituality is an “opposites attract” relationship. Leadership suggests you are in charge, but spirituality teaches that only God is in control. Leadership says you should be

moving forward, but spirituality teaches its lessons through backing up, backing down, and sometimes backing out. Leadership implies that you have answers, but spirituality exposes more questions.

Elijah prophesied to a king and was rewarded with exile, eating from a bird of abomination, depending on a widow woman, and wreaking havoc in his leader-follower relationship. Little wonder that in 1 Kings 17:20, Elijah cries out to God asking why He has done evil? Evil is *ra'a'* in Hebrew which means mischief or injury. When a question is the only form of communication that remains, it is a setting for intimacy. The inquisitive nature of writer, poet, and photographer Bill Gnade constructs a perfect statement, "That is the beauty of a question: It implies vulnerability and weakness, need and desire. And that is what God wants us to bring to him, like a father waiting for his son to ask for what he desires, or for help with what he needs." In spirituality, the leader becomes the follower. In spirituality, leaders find peace with tears running down their face and questions pouring out of their heart. Our inadequacies become God's classroom for teaching us.

When Elijah eventually returns to the public stage, he is equipped to offer direction, alignment, and commitment to God's people. Consider the following descriptions from The Center for Creative Leadership:

"Direction is shared in the sense that each member of the collective knows the aims and goals of the collective and knows that other members know those aims and goals as well. Alignment is the coordination of knowledge and work in the collective. Commitment is the willingness of members of the collective to expand effort toward the needs of the collective . . ."

Leadership and spirituality cannot be a private affair. It should be painful for a leader to see others being seduced by conflicting systems. That leader's passion should compel them to challenge every ideology that causes compromise, yet revitalization for others often comes at a high price.

"Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do *to me*, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time" (1 Kings 19:2). In retrospect, a simple question begs to be asked. Which gods? Was Elijah so intent on defeating Baal that he did not consider the plurality of gods? Perhaps this is a perfect analogy to contemplate leaders who excel in certain areas of leadership or spirituality but battle intensely with feeling inadequate in other areas? It also poses a paradoxical consideration. What is it that the enemy fears most about us? More so, what is it that our internalized fears can destroy in ourselves? The initial commitment to consider leadership and spirituality through Elijah using ideological texture and sacred texture fits perfectly into this portion. God becomes a character on the stage with Elijah. The battle for establishing God's sovereignty in the saga of 1 Kings 18 conquered the public discrepancy between good and evil. What Elijah is soon to experience is the human redemption aspect of sacred text.

According to renowned socio-rhetorical expert Robbins, “As a result of things that happen . . . divine powers will transform human lives and take them into a higher level of existence.” Ideological texture is inclusive of a person’s primary orientation, and Elijah’s upcoming encounter, like Robbins, accesses his “. . . perception of personal, divine forces at work in the innermost nature of creation.” The demonstration of fire pales in comparison to the prophet’s private encounter with God. Unlike Jesus’ query to His followers, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” (Matthew 16:13), the quest for leadership and spirituality compels the individual to understand both God and self.

Suddenly, Elijah (like us) is engaged in a study of contrasts. A description offered by theologian R.C. Sproul frames that contrast accordingly,

“. . . when we are aware of the presence of God, we become most aware of ourselves as creatures. When we meet the Absolute, we know immediately that we are not absolute. When we meet the Infinite, we become acutely conscious that we are finite. When we meet the Eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a powerful study in contrasts.”

We can imagine (or have experienced) the inner turmoil of the prophet as he ran from the intimidation of Jezebel. Was he a failure? Was he a coward? One question after the other came like cruel accusations. Nothing about what Elijah knew prepared him to feel so desolate. According to educational experts, Richard H. Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski, “The wounding experience often forces the leader to confront an essential question ‘Who am I?’” Elijah becomes a demonstration of what every leader must experience – a point where identity becomes a revelation. When we are reduced to only what God knows about us, we are at a birthing place to become a mature leader.

Elijah’s first steps toward identity begin in 1 Kings 19:4 when he went a day’s journey away from Jezebel’s threat. Following two days of sleeping and eating (some of our coping mechanisms), the prophet spent another 40 days and nights before arriving at Mount Horeb. God allows conditions that shift us away from using psychological or intellectual filters to interpret spiritual circumstances. Elijah’s life forever changes once he grasps the distinction between hearing the word of the Lord and hearing the voice of the Lord. A word is objective and impersonal. Most know the story of how God sent wind and earthquake yet He was not actually in those manifestations. It is in 1 Kings 19:13, “. . . and there came a voice unto him . . .” that the climactic moment takes place. *Qow* is Hebrew for voice which means a full voice or proclamation. In the still, small voice, God exposed Elijah to the fullness of His voice. When God shifts our lives, it is cathartic. It compels us to retrace our steps because everything makes sense. God instructs Elijah to, “. . . Go, return on thy way. . .” (1 Kings 19:15). To consummate the wedding of leadership with spirituality, we must go back the way we came. Per Professor of Pastoral Theology Michael Jenkins,

“Whatever else we may say about the experience of becoming conscious of ourselves in the presence of the holy, that it is both ‘daunting and fascinating’ that it transcends reason, entails dread and terror, that it is captivating and wonderful and awful, what must be clearly

understood is that it is not our religious experience, but the holy one, who lays claim to us in the encounter.”

The Sovereign God laid claim to Elijah during the mountaintop encounter, and He will lay claim to each of us. When that happens, we will never again consider leadership and spirituality separately. The fusing of leadership and spirituality produces authenticity. The concept of authentic includes, “having the origin supported by unquestionable evidence” and “of undisputed authorship.” That fits our image of Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). *Archegos* is the Greek word for author meaning one that takes the lead and affords an example. Our faith should reflect Jesus; therefore, we become the one who takes the lead and sets an example. Since the scripture assures us that we are not ignorant of Satan’s devices (2 Corinthians 2:10), we are equipped for strategic leadership. Elijah’s crisis becomes our tutor. “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

One lesson from Elijah’s saga concerns affective competence which can be defined as an upgrade of emotional intelligence. From her Master’s work at Berkley School of Divinity, author Sara Shishler Goff explains, “Being affectively competent includes being able to practice the skills of emotional intelligence while valuing feelings as much as thoughts and behaviors, and recognizing that emotions have a spiritual element.” For someone who is purposed for futuristic thinking to be drawn into and retained by the weight of the present, the consequence can be depression (or other anxiety conditions). Depression alters both decision making and the capacity to interpret the spiritual messages God is sending. It is the soul trying to bear the weight of the spirit.

While some leaders may not have directly associated their role with the prophetic, it is an inevitable match for 21st-century leadership. Elijah allowed his emotions to overtake him and to become his interpretive filter. His depression was so severe that in 1 Kings 19:4, he verbalized a death wish. We cannot be so desensitized that we do not hear the depth of his cry, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I *am* not better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4). What is the root of his despair? Elijah’s introduction specifies that he is Elijah the Tishbite? Tishbite means captivity. In his moment of despair, does Elijah feel that he can never be free of the generations before him? Was his prior boldness attached to his need to be disconnected from the lineage of captivity? Was his passion to “let God be God” rooted in his own unresolved issues? God will not use us for others to be free while leaving us isolated in personal torment. He loves us enough to not let us mix our issues with His will. It is ironic that our deepest pain holds the capacity to birth our greatest strengths.

The prophet had to be delivered from operating through emotionally-driven choices. Elijah’s time on Mount Horeb became the prerequisite for his assignment to mentor others. Scriptural analysis expert Robbins states, “Some people begin and end their analyses of biblical texts with analysis of the sacred texture. The result is a disembodiment of their sacred texture from the realities of living in the world.” Little wonder that the Apostle Paul later instructs young Timothy to “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be

ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). *Orthotomeo* is Greek for rightly dividing with a meaning that speaks not only to accuracy but to innovation. Jesus instructed His disciples to be “. . . wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16). He acknowledged that there would be religious and political opposition to their message, yet He made them aware that they could operate in strategy and innovation. The three letters of *a-n-d* in Greek means *kai* which is a cumulative conjunction. Jesus did not tell them (us) to be wise or harmless. He issues a cumulative assignment of combining qualities until it gathers momentum as a change agent. A life lesson for Elijah (us) is that we cannot live in pieces and portions or by moving from hither to thither. We are purposed to get a place that is beyond yon. God’s design for leadership and spirituality is that we move further than our plans and operate in His design. Elijah’s transition began with that still, small voice on Mount Horeb. When did your changeover begin? Was there a specific point that began as a downturn that became your catalyst? Authentic change agents create legacies; they raise the value of succession.

Within 1 Kings 19:15-19, we find the release of team strategy. God articulates instruction to anoint Hazael as king over Syria, Nimshi as king over Israel, and Elisha as a prophet to Elijah. God reveals to Elijah that there are 7,000 other prophets. Elijah’s fears of being alone are dissipated. In 1 Kings 19:20, we see the fruit of Elijah’s growth when he speaks to Elisha about coming with him. When the younger man asks to say goodbye to his parents, Elijah demonstrates empathy. Empathy institutes relationship which is crucial for organizational competence. Elijah’s story culminates with his departure in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:1-11). Lest we casually approach reading the Word, let us consider the following thought. One application of the Greek *orthotomeo* of “rightly dividing” the word in 2 Timothy 2:15 is a mining term meaning to cut straight. When we draw meaning from the sacred scriptures, there is an obligation to do so in a way that produces the richest yield. Our lives (and those we speak to) should have enhanced meaning because we extrapolated the Word. “And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground” (2 Kings 2:8). At this moment, moving hither and thither meant moving to the right and to the left opening the route for Elijah and Elisha to move to yon. Elijah became a leader who operates by divine intention. As Elijah went up in the chariot drawn by horses of fire, he went beyond yon. Does that mean we have to die for those we mentor to move forward? Not at all! Elisha was given access to a private moment of ascension. As leaders, we must be committed to sharing, not just our professional persona but our personal journey. In so doing, others are equipped to surpass our achievements. “And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over” (2 Kings 2:14). Beyond yon is the place where we find fulfillment, but more so, it is the release to promote excellence in future generations.

About the Author

Kathy E. Williams is a Chaplain in a men's prison with the majority of the population serving sentences for felony sexual crimes. Her passion is recovering broken lives, empowerment, and teaching. Her personal testimony of deliverance from domestic violence, rape, addictions, alcoholism, and poverty fuels her commitment to see Genesis 18:14, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" manifest in the lives of others.
