

# THE DIVINE PRESENCE ON THE MOUNT HOREB

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## Abstract

Allah menunjukkan kehadiran-Nya melalui berbagai fenomena. Pada masa Elia, berbeda dengan manifestasi kehadiran pada zaman Musa, Ia menyatakan diri dengan bunyi angin sepoi-sepoi basa. Tulisan ini mengulas tentang latar belakang sejarah pada zaman Elia, beberapa elemen di dalam manifestasi kehadiran Allah dan pembahasan dari setiap ayat teks 1 Raj 19:9-14. Elia berdialog dengan Allah dengan mengungkapkan pengalaman pribadinya dan semangat yang menyala untuk Allah semesta alam. Manifestasi kehadiran ilahi yang dinyatakan secara misterius dengan fenomena alam ini mengarahkan manusia untuk melihat karya Allah yang tersembunyi dan tanggapan dalam kesetiaan hidup di bawah bimbingan-Nya.

## Keywords

theophany, Elijah, divine presence, Horeb

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The God of the Bible is not only the highest, but also the very close. He is God creator that presents in his work, God saviour presents with his people. The presence of God, manifested through sensitive signs, remains that of a spiritual being whose love involves his creature<sup>1</sup>. In the Old Testament, God, who created man, wants to be present to him. We can also say this manifestation is a “theophany”, which is not a biblical word, but is derived from two Greek terms, θεος “god”, “to shine” or “to give light”. They are understood as the appearance or sensitive manifestation of the divinity to an important person at a significant moment in the history of the individual or of the community of faith<sup>2</sup>. There are various ways of the encounter between human and divine. In the first place God manifests himself to the privileged individuals that assures of his presence: to the fathers with whom he makes a covenant and to Moses who has the mission to free his people. God leads his people through them<sup>3</sup>. One of those is through Elijah.

In this paper the historical context of Elijah's era and the elements of the theophany in general are presented, and the second is an exegetical part of God's presence on Mount Horeb.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN THE ERA OF ELIJAH

About fifty years after Solomon's death, Omri ascended the throne in northern Israel and founded a new capital of Samaria. He had relations cemented with the kingdom of Phoenicia to the north of Lebanon by marrying his son, Ahab, with a daughter of the king of Tyre, Jezebel.

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<sup>1</sup> M. F. LACAN, “Presenza di Dio” in G. VIOLA – A. MILANOLI (ed.), *Dizionario di teologia biblica*, Marietti, Casale Monferrato 1971, 980.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. NOBILE, *I-2 Re: nuova versione, introduzione e commento*, Edizioni Paoline, Milano 2010, 532.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. F. LACAN, *op. cit.*, 981.

His political sense was also determined many years later. At the time of Elijah, in the 9th century BC<sup>4</sup>, Jezebel, Ahab's wife, erected a temple to his god Baal to replace the worship of Yahweh (1 Kings 16:31-32). Bringing in a queen who worshiped the pagan god Baal and allowing her to create a temple for her worship, Omri raised up prophets against her house. He allowed Ahab's pagan wife Gezabel to persecute and kill many of the Lord's prophets. Few had escaped. Elijah finds himself alone to challenge and fight the Baal for the Lord.

## **THE CHARACTER AND ACTIVITY OF ELIA**

Elijah, the Tisbite, “who was of the inhabitants of Gilead” (1 Kings 17:1) as powerful with the spirit of the Lord. In his life he is always in attention of the presence of the living God. He commands a period of drought for three years as a punishment from God on the north of Israel and he also does healing miracles by multiplying the food for the widow of Sidon who is very humble (1 Kings 17:7-24).

Furthermore, Elijah confronts the prophets of the god Baal on Mount Carmel in a race to the death (1 Kings 18:20-40). Later, Elijah was desperate and saddened, because the people did not reform their ways, nor threw out the pagan cults of Jezebel. God calls him to return to Horeb, the name of the people of northern Israel for Mount Sinai, where Moses had received the covenant (1 Kings 19:1-8). In tradition, he will come again, “Behold, I send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Mal 4:5-6).

## **THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION OF MOUNT HOREB**

Mount Horeb is referred to as the “mountain of God” (Ex 3:1). At Horeb, Moses receives the revelation of the name of Yahweh, and Elijah later finds the secret of his presence (1 Kings 19:8). The name “Oreb” comes from a root meaning a “ruin” or “arid desert”, Deuteronomy situates several episodes that the Exodus reports to the Sinai: the Decalogue (Deut 4:10-15), the covenant (Deut 5:2; 28:69). The Horeb is separated from a desert by the camps of the Midianites, but it is found only three days' journey from the village of Gosen (Ex 3:1,18; 5:3). Eleven days separate him from Cades-Barnea (Deut 1:2). These indications seem to be key to the forty-day march of Elijah (1 Kings 19:8). That points to any top of the Badret-et-Tih, not too far from the Isthmus, rather than on the Sinai of pilgrims<sup>5</sup>. It is a large peninsula located between Egypt and Palestine. Triangular in shape, bordered by the two branches of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Elat to the east and the Gulf of Suez to the west<sup>6</sup>. In various passages in the Old Testament this mountain is identified with Sinai, but a distinction appears of which the mountain itself is Sinai and the broader neighbouring wild area is Horeb<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> L. BOADT, *Reading the Old Testament, an Introduction*, Paulist Press, New York (NY) 1984, 271.

<sup>5</sup> M. BUIT, “Oreb”, in P. M. BOGAERT – M. DELCOR, *Dizionario enciclopedico della Bibbia*, Borla, Roma 1995, 942.

<sup>6</sup> A. NEGEV, “Sinai” in *L'enciclopedia archeologico di Terra Santa*, Prentice Hall Press, New York (NY) 1996, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> R. K. HARRISON – J. K. HOFFMEIER, “Sinai”, in G. W. BROMILEY, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Revised*, Volume 4, William. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids (MI) 2002, 525.

## THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE THEOPHANY

The theophany narratives show several reasons around which the story is based: the first, the preparation for the theophany as the setting of the scene. Its primary function is to separate the protagonist from the others in preparation. For what in most cases is a solitary experience. The second, the apparition and the word of Yahweh. One can also be characterized by a dream or by the appearance of an angel of God. The third, the human response to the divine presence. One of the main distinctive features of theophany stories is the reaction of the protagonist to the divine appearance: fear and fascination with the expression of doubt or anxiety to accept the prophetic mission. The fourth, the externalization of experiences. A greater awareness of the public sphere to translate private experience into a collective framework<sup>8</sup>.

## THE LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK

Chapters 17-19 are bound together, although in turn they must be divided into two parts: the first, constituted by 1 Kings 17-18, has as its theme a drought; the second, 1 Kings 19, sees Elijah as the protagonist of a special theophany on the holy mountain of Horeb. 1 Kings 19:1-3 connects with the previous part (1 Kings 17-18). These sections are made up of various narrative material, in large part of popular traditions that saw in Elijah a thaumaturgist and an extraordinary man capable of portents<sup>9</sup>.

The theophany episode, connected with the rest of the plot, has the mental scheme of the Deuteronomistic history. The story is known by a continuous thread, recognizable by the similarity of the characters and the events, but also by the novelty that each can entail. Elijah strongly evokes the liberator of Israel. He also defends the Yahvistic cult and wants to convert his people and the new theophany brings with it the mighty of Es 3<sup>10</sup>.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE LORD

*And he came thither unto a cave and lodged there.* This cave does not refer to a particular cave on the Horeb. Some identify it with “the crack of a rock” where Moses remained (see Ex 33:22), although the echo of the previous stay in the mountains can be heard<sup>11</sup>. The word of the Lord was addressed to him in these terms: “What doest thou here, Elijah?” This is a rhetorical question that serves as an opening to conversation (see Gen 4:9)<sup>12</sup>. This section highlights the location with adverbs of place “there” , and “here” <sup>13</sup> above or near the mountain<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. W. SAVRAN, *Encountering the Divine, Theophany in Biblical Narrative*, T & T Clark International, London 2005, 14-25.

<sup>9</sup> M. NOBILE, *1-2 Re*, 211.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>11</sup> F. GIARDINI, “Presenza di Dio e Ricerca della Divina Presenza”, in *TABOR* 36, 5 (1964), 374.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. COGAN, *1 Kings: a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Yale University Press, London 2001, 452.

<sup>13</sup> KOEHLER – W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, E. J. Brill Publishers, Leiden 1994, 916.

<sup>14</sup> S. J. DEVRIES, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Kings*, Word Book, Dallas (TX) 1985, 286.

## ELIJAH'S REPLY

The word “I am full of zeal for the Lord”: *qannō' qinnē<sup>o</sup> tī lyhwh la'dönäy*, literally, “I am jealous of jealousy”, is an idiomatic grammatical expression which means having a deep jealousy, a passion that evokes the same that God has for his people. It is the same one found in Es 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15<sup>15</sup> about *'él qannä' ' ' “Jealous God”*. God of hosts *élöhé cübä'öt* ( ) is the most common divine title in the Old Testament. Indicates a specific element of the Old Testament idea of God, as “the overall power of hosts”. This title began its triumphal march in the context of the temple cult, but without the help of the prophets it would never have reached the high regard achieved later<sup>16</sup>. *They have thrown down thine altars*. The altar of Yahweh on Mount Carmel was noted as having been destroyed (see 1 Kings 18:30). *They have slain thy prophets with the sword*. The persecution by Jezebel is referred to 1 Kings 18:4. *I am only left*. Elijah made this reference to Carmel (see 1 Kings 18:22), where he also ignored the 100 prophets saved by Obadiah. *And they seek my life, to take it away*. Before his victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah was a wanted person (see 1 Kings 18:10), after the massacre of these prophets, Jezebel warned him that his life was forfeited (1 Kings 19:2)<sup>17</sup>.

## THEOPHANIC REVELATION

The surprised and frightening event at the appearance of Yahweh is a known fact in the theophany (see Ex 19:16-18; 20:18; Judg 5:4-5; Ab 3:3-6). After the fire, the whisper of a light breeze. There is expression of un ( *qôl Dümämâ daqqâ*), literally, “a voice or sound of slight silence”, which has been variously translated. This expression gives the sense of the radical revealing difference of the new manifestation. The sound of silence. It's like a whisper that opens up access to the mystery of God, an event that only a few people can experience, a phrase that hides while it reveals. This is one of the most beautiful expressions of the Old Testament, the fruit of a subtle spiritual elevation. The “voice” of God this time reveals its presence in a situation of mysterious stillness. There are many exegetical interpretations given. What may be of interest is suggested by J. Jeremias, who refers to a text by Qumran, namely 4QSI 39:24 which speaks of the presence of God in worship<sup>18</sup>.

## THE SECOND CHALLENGE OF THE LORD

*And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle*. The revelation of this God automatically leads the prophet to cover himself with his cloak. It was clear that it is not possible to see God in the face because it cost the death penalty (see Gn 16:13). Elijah's instinctive reaction to hiding the divine presence is like that of Gideon (Jg 6:22). The whole scene, including Elijah who veils his face, recalls the theophany promised to Moses in Ex 33:18-23. Elijah obeyed the command of the Lord, but Elijah is nowhere “on the mountain”, nor is his position “before me”, as the Lord specified in Ex 33. The question comes again, “*What doest thou here, Elijah?*” Insensitive to what he witnessed; Elia repeats his

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<sup>15</sup> W. BAKER, *The Complete Word Study Concordance: Old Testament*, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga (TN) 2003, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> J. BOTTERWECK, H. RINGGREN, P. G. BORBONE (ed.), *Grande lessico dell'Antico Testamento*, Volume VII, Paideia, Brescia 2007, 503.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. COGAN, *1 Kings*, 452.

<sup>18</sup> M. NOBILE, *1-2 Re*, 228.

complaint. New command of the Lord leads to a commission that responds point by point to a complaint<sup>19</sup>.

### **ELIAS' SECOND ANSWER**

Elias answer in v. 10 repeated in v. 14. This repetition highlights his sense of persecution by the people. This also explains the discourse with which God entrusts Elijah's mission (see vv. 15-16)<sup>20</sup>. It is an implicit confession that no force for ministry remains in itself and must therefore come from God himself. 1 Kings 19:15-21, after the theophany, the word of God makes itself present to Elijah with the order to return to his path and to go towards “the desert of Damascus” (v. 15), to perform a triple task: to anoint Hazael king of Aram, of which Damascus was the capital, anoint Iehu king of Israel, and Eliseo successor of Elia himself. Elia accomplishes only the third mission. The first two will be fulfilled by Elisha.

### **CONCLUSION**

The divine presence is revealed in the history of humanity and in sacred history. Here we find the character who always lives in the manner of God and the world, full of zeal that God himself has for his people. The manifestation of the presence of God on Mount Horeb which we examine is a sensitive presence through the audible phenomenon. The theophany that takes place is more understandable by recalling what had happened five centuries earlier, to Moses on the Sinai. The Lord had descended at the time of Moses amid fire, smoke, the sound of an earthquake and powerful trumpet blasts and he had a voice proclaimed that proclaims his sovereign kindness. These natural phenomena are well known throughout Scripture and have often happened in the appearance of the divinity in the Canaanite land. Elijah experimented differently, with a light breeze. This light wind symbolizes the intimacy with which Yahweh entertains himself with Elijah, a mysterious presence of God, also implies his work in secret. On the one hand, God's revelation calls for the response of man, a fidelity due to God, to live under his gaze, following and doing the divine mandate that he commanded to man.

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<sup>19</sup> J. T. WALSH, “1-2 Kings”, in R. E. BROWN – J. A. FITZMYER (ed.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 2000, 172.

<sup>20</sup> M. NOBILE, *1-2 Re*, 227.

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