WE WHO WRESTLE WITH GOD

PERCEPTIONS OF THE DIVINE

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INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
12 RULES FOR LIFE AND *BEYOND ORDER*

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CAIN, ABEL, AND SACRIFICE

To my recently deceased mother, Beverley Ann Peterson, who, like all of us, wrestled with God (she more happily than not).

CARRION COMFORT

Not, I will not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist—slack they may be—these last strands of man
In me ór, most weary, cry *I can no more*. I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer.
Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fóot tród
Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.[1]

Earlier drafts of the final line:

Of darkness done, that I wretch wrestled, I wrung with God.
Now done I know that I wretch wrestled, I wrung with, God.
Done now, I know that I wretch wrestled, I wrung with God.
Of darkness, now done with, I wretch in wrestle wrung.

—Gerald Manley Hopkins (1885)

The history of supreme beings whose structure is celestial is of the utmost importance for an understanding of the religious history of humanity as a whole. We cannot even consider writing that history here, in a few pages. But we must at least refer to a fact that to us seems primary. Celestially structured supreme beings tend to disappear from the practice of religion, from cult; they depart from among men, withdraw to the sky, and become remote, inactive gods (*dei otiosi*). In short, it may be said of these gods that, after creating the cosmos, life, and man, they feel a sort of fatigue, as if the immense enterprise of the Creation had exhausted their resources. So they withdraw to the sky.... [2]

—*Mircea Eliade,* The Sacred and the Profane (1959)

FORESHADOWING: THE STILL, SMALL VOICE

We begin our journey, our wrestling with God, with a singular story. It is one that presents a remarkably weighty idea, in the dramatic form typical of the biblical narratives—an idea that can help us understand why we should explore these increasingly forsaken ancient stories. It is the story of the prophet Elijah, also known as Elias, and it offers one of the most fundamental characterizations or definitions of God. The prophet in question lived in the time of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, in the ninth century BC. Though his story is a brief one, Elijah is notable among the prophets for two reasons: his strange departure from earth, and his much later appearance alongside Moses and Jesus of Nazareth at the pinnacle of Mount Tabor during the Transfiguration, when Jesus revealed his divine identity to his disciples (Matthew 17:1–9; Mark 9:2–8, and Luke 9:28–37). That term, *transfiguration*, was employed by the Latin translators of the original Greek text, who referred to that event with the word *metamorphoō*, with its connotations of the qualitative transformation of caterpillar into butterfly. Human beings grow and develop as they mature—assuming they mature—in a manner nearly as radical as that of the winged insect. As the apostle Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 11–13: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." It is thus far from irrelevant that the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή)—the root from which the term *psychology* is derived; the signifier for the human spirit or soul—literally means butterfly.

Profound as that linkage is between soul and butterfly, it is not the only reason for the comparison. Butterflies are also capable of astonishing feats of navigation. This is something at least near-miraculous, given their fragility

and hypothetically limited intelligence. In this navigational capacity—and, perhaps, in their brevity of life and restrictions—they are similar to human beings, who have traveled from their African point of origin to every corner of the planet, no matter how distant and inhospitable. The gossamer-winged insects are also beautiful, exceptionally symmetrical, and remarkable in their capability to perceive in relationship to that beauty and symmetry, and select mates accordingly. They can detect deviations from both characteristics with stunning accuracy. This reveals a high capacity for judgment, in relationship to the ideal: another ability that the perfectly crafted insect shares with the human psyche. Why is all this relevant to our account of the prophet Elijah and to the understanding of life? Because his manner of death, and his later appearance in the company of the transfigured Christ, are both representative, or symbolic, of the psyche's capacity for qualitative and revolutionary transmutation.

We are informed in Kings 2:2 that Elijah is taken up bodily into heaven while still alive, a privilege that the Old Testament awards only to him and the prophet Enoch (Genesis 5:24). It is of course part and parcel of Christian tradition that Jesus ascends into heaven, in a similar manner, after his resurrection (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11). Much of Christendom also accepts the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, the taking up of her body and soul into heaven after her death, but that is the extent of such phenomena. Ascension or assumption to the divine realm marks the presence of someone very notable indeed. At the time of Elijah's assumption, he is in the company of Elisha, his disciple and successor. They are traveling from Gilgal to Bethel, both places of deep biblical import. Gilgal is, for example, the place where the Israelites set up a memorial to God to commemorate safe passage over the River Jordan to the promised land (Joshua 4:19–24). Bethel, for its part, means "house of God." It first appears in Genesis 28:10–22 as the place where Jacob dreams of an upward-reaching ladder to heaven with angels—intermediaries between the divine and man—descending and ascending upon it. In this dream, God reaffirms to Jacob the covenant He had made with Abraham and Isaac, promising him

numerous offspring, land, and divine protection. Any story that features its heroes moving from a place of momentous occurrence to another of equivalent or even greater consequence is an account of the idea of "significant journey" itself—a description of a path of life being realized in the optimally adventurous and meaningful manner. It is in keeping with this that Elijah's last and greatest adventure occurs at or near Bethel, the site of the vision of Jacob's Ladder. Elisha is with him:

> And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.
>
> And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so.
>
> And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.
>
> And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces.
>
> *2 Kings 2:9–12*

Here, Elijah is delivered into the Kingdom of God, in the same manner that the great seeker after beauty and navigator of the insect world takes wing into the heavens after its metamorphosis. This rise into the realm of the divine on the part of the prophet sets the stage for his later reappearance with Jesus on the pinnacle of Mount Tabor:

> And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart,
>
> And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.
>
> And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.
>
> Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.
>
> While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.
>
> And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.
>
> *Matthew 17:1–6*

A similarly awe-inducing transformation occurs in the accounts of Moses: "And it came to pass, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him" (Exodus 34:29–30). This shining is the co-occurrence of the ultimate up, so to speak, with what is normally merely human—an indication of the descent of the divine to the profane, or the ascent of the profane or wordly upward.

It therefore makes perfect sense, symbolically speaking, that such revolutions in character or transmutations of psyche occur on mountaintops. The summit of the holy mountain is the mythical place where heaven and earth touch, where the merely material meets the transcendent and divine. Further, life is well portrayed as a series of uphill journeys. For pessimists, that is the dread fate of Sisyphus, doomed to roll a rock up a mountain to the peak only to have it roll back down, so the process must be endlessly

repeated. A more optimistic interpreter of life might see instead the opportunities for personal transformation. When we have climbed a new mountain and reached the pinnacle—that is, attained our aim—we have brought something successfully to an end, fulfilled a proximal vision, and become more than we were. When we have reached the top, at least of our present climb, we can also see everything laid out in front of us, including the next challenge—the next possibility for play, maturation, and growth; the next calling for transformational sacrifice. The continually ascending progress represented by a series of uphill climbs, each with its peak experience, is a variant of the path of ascension represented by Jacob's Ladder, the spiraling rise into the heavens toward the Kingdom of God, with God Himself beckoning at the high point—on the apex of the highest conceivable mount.

There is much more to the story of Elijah than his assumption into God's kingdom and his final transformation. The great prophet lived in the time of the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah. At that point, the people of Israel labored under the rule of King Ahab, who turned them to the worship of gods other than Yahweh, the traditional deity of Abraham, Isaac, and the chosen people. This perversion of aim occurred as a direct consequence of Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a wealthy, privileged princess of Phoenicia—one who brought her false gods in tow in the aftermath of her wedding. Baal, her god of choice, was a Phoenician/Canaanite deity of nature, responsible for fertility, rain, thunder, lightning, and dew. Ahab's new wife, who was nothing if not direct, killed most of the prophets of Yahweh during her attempts to establish Baal's primacy. It is said that Jezebel's husband, fully under her sway, "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). Elijah warns the king against his weakness and idolatry, telling him that the consequences of his misguided rule will be years of drought so severe that even the dew will cease to appear.

As Baal was the god deemed directly responsible for the life-giving rain, Elijah's predicted drought clearly undermined the authority of the god and

his priests, as well as the people's trust in Ahab, their king, and Jezebel. The literary motif of the "parched kingdom" employed in this narrative fragment is a stably meaningful symbolic trope. This was evidenced, for example, in the Disney animated masterpiece *The Lion King*. When Scar, the evil brother of the rightful king, deposes Mufasa, true King of Pride Rock, he banishes his son, Simba, to the periphery of the kingdom. Consequently, the rain ceases to fall and the animals the lions hunt and depend on vanish. When Simba retakes the throne, the rain returns. The fairy tale *The Water of Life* by the Brothers Grimm elaborates on this theme, presenting it as the adventure of a younger brother charged with bringing the water that revitalizes to his dying father. Something similar is indicated in the Book of Exodus, with its contrast between the stonelike rigidity of the intransigent pharaoh and the dynamic mastery of water characteristic of Moses. When the wrong principle is established as supreme—when a false king is set upon the throne or an impious ethos prevails—the people quickly find themselves deprived of the very water of life. More deeply, however, a kingdom oriented around the wrong pole—that worships the wrong gods, so to speak—suffers psychologically or spiritually.

After declaring the drought and retiring to the desert, where he is initially fed by ravens and drinks from a brook, the prophet's own stores dry up. God directs Elijah forthwith to a widow in the town of Zarephath. He finds her by a well and asks for water and bread. She responds, "As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruise: and behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die" (1 Kings 17:12). Elijah reassures her, saying that God will not allow privation into her house: "For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth" (1 Kings 17:14). It may seem strange that an emissary of God finds it necessary to turn to an impoverished widow for sustenance. But the biblical accounts are subtle and sophisticated. Here, the story of Elijah stresses first, the importance even of the lowly (the widow, in this instance); second, the

necessity of moral orientation even under conditions of privation (the widow's willingness to provide hospitality, an obligation that will resurface in our investigations); and third, the absolute dependence of abundance upon proper moral orientation on the part of all, regardless of their status.

The undue and manipulative influence the wife of the weak king brings to bear on her feckless and faithless husband threatens the integrity of the state itself. In part, she represents the oft-dangerous attraction of the strange ideas and customs that can invade and permeate a society under the guise of the creative, sophisticated, and new. Before the objection arises—"The authors of the biblical stories were inexcusably prejudiced, even xenophobic"—it is right to consider Old Testament figures such as Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, who figures so importantly in the Book of Exodus (see, particularly, 18:17–23); Rahab, a courageous and faithful prostitute from Jericho (Joshua 2); and Naaman (2 Kings 5), whose humility and faith allowed for his healing at the hands of Elisha. These are all individuals who, despite, or even because of, their foreignness, perceive with an untrammeled eye and conduct themselves morally, and they therefore play a corrective role when the Israelites corrupt themselves. Sometimes the new parasitizes and poisons, and sometimes it restores and renews. Wisdom is, not least, the ability to discriminate help from hindrance in such cases.

The poor but good woman who has lost her husband is subtly presented as desirable opposite to the arrogant and dangerous queen Jezebel. Why? For most of human history, widowhood was a dire state of affairs, particularly when the women so afflicted had dependent children. In the biblical corpus, the figure of the widow is therefore often used to represent vulnerability, powerlessness, and existence on the social and economic fringe. Her miserable state of affairs might well be regarded as an ever-present form of cosmic injustice. It is for this reason as well as for the moral edification of his people, that the spirit of God calls on the Israelites to redress this inequity—to forgo the temptations of narrow self-centeredness and greed and to leave something for the dispossessed:

> And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.
>
> And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God.
>
> *Leviticus 19:9–10*

This principle is elaborated in the Book of Deuteronomy, along with an additional point: at some stage in life, each and every individual will depend on others; therefore, a properly structured psyche and society are arranged so that this inevitable dependence meets with necessary care and concern. There is no sense in establishing a society that fails to care for the people who compose it at every stage of their development, from vulnerable to able, productive and generous.

> When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.
>
> And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt: therefore I command thee to do this thing.
>
> *Deuteronomy 24:21–22*

The widow who is generous despite her poverty embodies the pattern of reciprocal sacrificial conduct and mutual aid that characterizes a mature, reliable individual and a peaceful and productive state alike. She stands in the starkest contrast to the privileged queen whose self-absorption threatens the psyche and community.

As the story of Elijah continues, the idea that the psychological and social hierarchy of values must organize itself under the appropriate ruler—or, more abstractly, the proper principle—is driven further home. The prophet leaves Zarephath and sets up what might be regarded in colloquial terms as

the showdown at Mount Carmel. He convinces the head of Ahab's palace, Obadiah, to gather all the prophets of Baal, as well as the people of Israel, at the mountain's foot. Two sacrificial altars are prepared: one for Baal, under the control of his prophets; the other for Yahweh, under the dominion of Elijah. Each god is called on to ignite the altar fire that will consume the sacrifice. Baal's prophets pray for hours to no avail. Elijah soaks his altar with water three times (just to drive his point home), and then requests Yahweh's intercession. A fire immediately descends from heaven and immolates the sacrifice and even the altar itself. Yahweh's supremacy is thus established. The prophets of Baal are executed, and an "abundance of rain" (1 Kings 18:41) immediately returns. There can be no wealth in the absence of a true moral order. Under the guidance of the appropriate animating spirit, privation can be made a distant memory.

None too happy, Jezebel directs her wrath at Elijah. The hapless prophet therefore flees deep into the barren wilderness. He takes shelter in a cave, where God speaks to him (1 Kings 19). The receipt of revelation in a solitary place is a common storytelling trope. Internal voices and imaginative experience become more likely under conditions of isolation, when external verbal communication is minimized, and in darkness and silence, where external sensory stimuli are dramatically reduced. This increases the likelihood of revelatory experience—for better or worse. At a deeper level, this may be because the neurological systems of the right hemisphere, which (at least in right-handed people) are more associated with unconscious and implicit thought and action, can take control of verbal and imagistic experience when they are not drowned out or otherwise suppressed by the more normal conditions of social interaction and sensory input.[1]

Elijah expresses great frustration and hopelessness, believing that his attempts to remain faithful have resulted in nothing but disaster: "And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kings 19:10). God says to him, "Go forth, and stand upon the