

# JUSTICE, SOLIDARITY, AND THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH

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During Moroni’s 1823 visit to Joseph Smith, he repeats the prophecy written in the fourth chapter of Malachi, although with a slight change in wording.<sup>1</sup> Later Joseph interpreted Malachi’s prophecy as referring to a “welding link” constituted by baptism for the dead performed by proper priesthood authority.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation was canonized and has forever linked this prophecy and “the spirit of Elijah” with genealogy and temple work for the dead.

I suggest that an examination of the prophetic ministry of Elijah in its historical context points the way toward a more expansive interpretation of “the spirit of Elijah.” This interpretation requires us not only to perform temple ordinances as a means to save humanity in the next life but also to focus on the dire need for confronting and reversing injustice in this life, affecting the salvation of those who face inequality and oppression, and in fine, saving creation from exploitation and ruin.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Joseph Smith History 1:38–39. See also Doctrine and Covenants 2; Malachi 4:5–6.

2. Doctrine and Covenants 128; see also 138:47–48.

3. For an extended treatment of this view of salvation and the role of the Restoration, see Ryan D. Ward, *And There Was No Poor Among Them: Liberation, Salvation, and the Meaning of the Restoration* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2023).

## Covenant Justice Abandoned

Elijah’s prophetic ministry took place during the reign of King Ahab, the seventh king of Israel following the dividing of the kingdom after Solomon’s death.<sup>4</sup> Elijah comes to prophetic prominence due to Israel’s descent into idolatry. Although there had been a constant current of idolatry throughout Israel’s history, Ahab’s sins are portrayed as particularly grievous.<sup>5</sup>

Although the narrative as told in 1 Kings discusses and condemns at length Israel’s idolatry, what is less apparent to those unfamiliar with the structure of Israel’s kingdoms is the degree to which they established and perpetuated massive economic inequality and exploitation. Beginning with Solomon, the covenant code of economics that was included in the Mosaic law began to be dismantled.<sup>6</sup> This led to an expropriation of ancestral lands and inheritances by the king and his retainers.<sup>7</sup> Combined with the taxes, tributes, and forced servitude that was levied by Solomon for the building of the temple, his palace, and his fortress cities,<sup>8</sup> this restructuring of the economics of the kingdom ruined the poor people living there and led directly to their exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Though the biblical record is sparse regarding exploitation following Solomon, the reign and dynasty of Omri (Ahab’s father) introduced greater burdens and exploitation of the poor due to his relocation of his capital city from Tirzah and building of a new capital city at Samaria,

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4. 1 Kings 16.

5. 1 Kings 16:33.

6. See Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Frethem, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2005); Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

7. Birch, et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 248.

8. 1 Kings 5:13; 2 Chronicles 2:17–18; 1 Kings 7; 1 Kings 9:19.

9. See the story of the vineyard of Naboth in 1 Kings 21.

which required forced labor and taxation on a large scale.<sup>10</sup> Ahab was bequeathed a stable kingdom by his father, and his reign was largely about consolidating, building, and expanding the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Elijah is therefore called as a prophet during a period of entrenched systemic injustice.

## God of Life and Idols of Death

Elijah's first prophetic act is to shut the heavens, producing a famine in Israel. After three years he comes to Ahab, instructing him to invite all of Israel to Mount Carmel, where he sets up a showdown between Israel's god and Baal. Given the ongoing famine, the stakes are very high. Baal, who was also called the Lord of Rain and Dew and Lord of the Earth, was known as the ultimate arbiter of fertility. Baal's power seemed evident in the wealth and might of Israel's competitors and Ahab's own kingdom. And yet, the long history of Israel had been punctuated by miraculous deliverance by Yahweh. Which god should they trust and serve? The question must have seemed a matter of life and death.

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10. Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, 244; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 996–99; Elelwani B. Farisani, "A Sociological Reading of the Confrontation between Ahab and Elijah in 1 Kings 21:1–29," *Old Testament Essays* 18, no. 1 (2005): 47–60; Kitty Schneider, "The Omrids: Too Much Theology, Too Little Context?" *Old Testament Essays* 17, no. 2 (2004): 267–81.

11. Archaeological evidence from Samaria indicates that Ahab and his court lived lives of excess and opulence, which under times of famine would have come at the expense of the poor. This no doubt contributed to Elijah's ire, in addition to Ahab's syncretism in allowing and establishing Baal worship in Israel, a political expediency which opened up more favorable diplomatic and trade relations with Phoenicia and contributed greatly to stability given the mix of Canaanites and Hebrews in his kingdom. See Ron E. Tappy, "Israelite Samaria: Head of Ephraim and Jerusalem's Elder Sister" in *Archaeology in the "Land of Tells and Ruins": A History of Excavations in the Holy Land Inspired by the Photographs and Accounts of Leo Boer*, edited by Bart Wagemakers (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 73–86; Schneider, "The Omrids."

Elijah, sensing Israel's equivocation, asks them "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him."<sup>12</sup> Elijah provides a sacrifice for the 450 priests of Baal, but gives them no fire to burn the offering. The priests call on Baal all day, even mutilating themselves in desperation, but no fire comes to consume their sacrifice. Elijah dresses his offering and then, in an act of utter defiance, commands that twelve barrels of water be poured on his sacrifice. He prays to God, and fire from heaven consumes the offering, the wood, and the altar, leaving not a drop of water behind. The people fall on their faces, declaring Yahweh as God.

If we consider what the conflict over worship of Israel's god and Baal meant within the context of the social and economic systems embraced by Israel's kings, we can discern additional meaning behind this theatrical display. Although the narrative speaks of idolatry as a largely spiritual act of abandoning Yahweh and embracing idols, the conflict introduced by idolatry can also be thought of as a conflict over how society is to be ordered, with Israel's god representing a more egalitarian social and political arrangement that adhered to the covenant codes, and idolatry representing other, more oppressive social and political systems. As stated by the theologian and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, "theological commitment and social ideology . . . are deeply intertwined so that theological Baalism is the legitimating force for a social theory of exploitation against which Yahwism stands."<sup>13</sup> Thus, whereas the covenant community set up by Israel's god was envisioned as one of justice and equity, where members of society who were poor, vulnerable, and widowed were explicitly taken care of, the turning from Yahweh to idols symbolized an abandonment of the covenant codes that underpinned this community and was often accompanied by social and economic policies that exploited poor and marginalized

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12. 1 Kings 18:21.

13. Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 202.

people.<sup>14</sup> The symbolic choice presented to Israel is therefore between Israel's god—the god of life—and Baal, a representation of all systems of idolatry that privilege the wealthy and powerful over against the poor and vulnerable.

The showdown between Baal and Yahweh set up by Elijah can therefore be viewed as a contest in the minds of Israel as to which god deserved their allegiance. Put another, more relevant way: which god could feed them and provide subsistence for their families? We can see the difficulty faced by the people in making the decision of which god to worship. By demonstrating Yahweh's power in spectacular fashion, Elijah puts to rest any question of which god is deserving of worship and allegiance; "Baal is shown to have no power at all in the realm that is supposed to be his."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Yahweh's opening of the heavens and sending rain in response to Elijah's petition affirms that Israel's god is a god of life, a god who champions human systems of justice and equity that encourage and support flourishing for all and utterly and completely repudiates systems of inequality and oppression and the idols of death these systems spawn, perpetuate, and glorify.

### Solidarity with the Suffering

The history of Israel is one of waiting for unfulfilled covenant promises. The prophets prophesied future fulfillment of these promises, but it was unclear even to them what form that fulfillment would take. What is clear is that Israel will not give up on the promises that were made to them as a people. The Old Testament is in large part the story of Israel making sense of their history at a time when it seems improbable, if not impossible, that the promises will be fulfilled.

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14. 1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 4; Norman K. Gottwald, "Social Class as an Analytic and Hermeneutical Category in Biblical Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 3–22; Farisani, "A Sociological Reading."

15. Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis* (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990), 11.

For many in our world today, the situation is similar. Billions of people in the world today live in poverty. Millions starve to death or succumb to preventable illnesses or disease, many millions more are exploited and oppressed by economic and political systems that enrich the wealthy and immiserate the poor. The world itself is used, exploited, and poisoned, inching ever closer to catastrophic consequences. For many people, the promises of life, justice, and equity covenanted by God with Abraham to Israel, and extended through Jesus to all of creation, seem hollow and remain unfulfilled. As Latter-day Saints, what is our mandate to alleviate suffering? How can we minister to those who struggle to find hope in a society structured on injustice?

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath provides an explicit example of standing in solidarity with those who suffer in an unjust world. Of all the people in Israel, widows were some of the most vulnerable given women's lack of inheritance or other rights in the patriarchal society. This is why God had explicitly provided for them in the covenant code revealed to Moses. The widow of Zarephath, then, can serve as a metaphor for those who have been forgotten or purposely exploited by Israel's kings. She has her counterparts in our own day in the billions of people who live in poverty, experience food insecurity, or face labor exploitation due to the pursuit of never-ending economic expansion and profit.

Elijah encounters the widow outside the city gates gathering sticks to make one last meal for her and her son before they starve to death. Her faith in obeying the word of Elijah results in a miracle. She is able to use her meager ingredients to sustain herself and her son for many days. After some time, her son falls ill and dies.<sup>16</sup> The woman is devastated. She asks Elijah for some answer or solace, blaming some imagined sin on her part for what has befallen her: "What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to

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16. 1 Kings 17:17

remembrance, and to slay my son?”<sup>17</sup> It is in Elijah’s response and the specific method by which he raises her son back to life that we can see a pattern to follow in ministering to those who suffer. This account, though covered in only a few verses, speaks volumes to Elijah’s prophetic ministry and approach to bringing to pass Israel’s promised salvation.<sup>18</sup>

First, Elijah addresses God: “And he cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?”<sup>19</sup> This cry is more than a formality. Elijah uses the widow’s exact same wording in describing the death of her son. This was not necessary. We might assume that since Elijah is a prophet, he would recognize that God had not, in fact, killed the boy. Elijah, however, accuses God of killing the boy, as had the widow. As Old Testament scholar Nobuyoshi Kiuchi explains, “Elijah identifies himself with the widow’s plight. . . . The widow’s bitter words ‘to kill my son’ in [verse] 18 is taken up in Elijah’s prayer in the form of ‘to kill her son.’ This indicates clearly that Elijah identifies himself with the fate of the woman, and is deeply sympathetic to her condition.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in this first act, Elijah has identified completely with the widow. He has not belittled her or attempted to change her views. He simply stands in solidarity with her and addresses her sufferings to God in the same language that she uses to describe her experience. Furthermore, by referring to the woman as a widow and himself as a sojourner, Elijah appears to be reminding God of God’s obligation to widows and sojourners, an obligation made explicit in the covenant code with

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17. 1 Kings 17:18

18. The interpretation in this section is indebted to the work of Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, “Elijah’s Self-Offering: 1 Kings 17:21,” *Biblica* 75, no. 1 (1994): 74–79.

19. 1 Kings 17:20

20. Kiuchi, “Elijah’s Self-Offering,” 76.

Israel.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Elijah appears to be openly questioning the justice of the widow's suffering.

Next Elijah performs a ritual that to us seems curious: "And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again."<sup>22</sup> What are we to make of this symbolic act? On the one hand, it can be viewed as an act of mourning. Elijah grieves and mourns the death of the boy in a very intimate way, indicating his closeness with the family. If we consider this entire episode from the view of Israel's purity codes, however, another meaning presents itself. Elijah has already contaminated himself by taking the dead boy up to his room and laying him on his bed. In this context of transgression of purity codes, the symbolic ritual of stretching himself upon the child can be viewed as further evidence of solidarity by Elijah. As noted by Kiuchi, "If in his prayer Elijah identifies himself with the widow, in his gesture he identifies himself with the death of the child."<sup>23</sup> In identifying with the widow in his prayer, he has questioned whether God is just by suggesting that God has not honored the covenant obligation to widows and sojourners. Now, by stretching himself over the boy not once but three times, he has utterly polluted himself. Kiuchi continues, "Indeed this gesture may imply that Elijah is deliberately making himself anathema to the Lord, so that if God would not revive the child, Elijah wished to be dead as well, thereby showing his dedication and love for the widow's family."<sup>24</sup> This is a similar move as that taken by Moses during the golden calf incident, in which he implored God to forgive the Israelites "and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy

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21. Deut. 10:18–19

22. 1 Kgs. 17:21

23. Kiuchi, "Elijah's Self-Offering," 77.

24. Kiuchi, "Elijah's Self-Offering," 77.



book which thou hast written.”<sup>25</sup> Elijah’s solidarity and advocacy are so complete that he is willing to explicitly transgress the purity laws in an effort to right what the widow has experienced as a grave injustice.

God responds to this act of solidarity and love by raising the dead boy to life. This indicates God’s approval of Elijah’s act of radical solidarity and commends this strategy to us as a means of inviting and petitioning for divine justice in our world. Elijah shows us that standing in solidarity with those who suffer injustice requires us to take their perspective, advocate for justice on their terms rather than in a paternalistic, privileged manner, and be willing to transgress social, political, and religious boundaries that stand in the way of this solidarity.

### Promises, Priesthood, and Justice

With the life and ministry of Elijah in context, what can we make now of Moroni’s version of Malachi’s prophecy? The entire prophecy is framed as the result of a revelation of the priesthood by Elijah the prophet. This revelation will plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers and will turn the hearts of the children to the fathers. If this were not to happen, the whole earth would be utterly wasted. In the context of the current discussion, the promises made to the fathers are the justice and equity of the covenant community. God had promised Abraham that his children would be blessed with a land for their inheritance. This inheritance was the continual quest of Israel, and they understood the fulfillment of God’s covenant in explicitly temporal terms. Elijah would have viewed his role as working to bring about a temporal renewal for Israel: a rejection of idols and the political and economic oppression they signified and a return to the justice of the covenant community.

With this context, we can understand the planting of the promises made to the fathers in the hearts of the children as a desire to realize

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25. Exodus 32:32.

the promised justice and equity of the covenant community. This community has been abandoned in our day. The rise and spread of global economic systems that prioritize profits over human lives has led to a fracturing of community and covenant relationship. The collateral damage of this covenant fracturing is immense, and growing daily. Only a return to the justice and equity of the covenant community revealed and envisioned by God can lead to a realization of the promises made to the fathers and reverse the utter wasting of the earth that is ongoing.<sup>26</sup>

One final aspect of Malachi's prophecy remains to be expanded, and that is how to understand the priesthood in light of this recontextualizing of the spirit of Elijah. According to this view, the particular revelation of the priesthood—the keys, in Latter-day Saint parlance, applicable to our dispensation's specific manifestation of injustice—by Elijah is: the power and responsibility given by God to humanity to (1) work to bring about God's justice in the world (to embrace the God of life and reject the idols of death) and (2) stand in solidarity with those who are suffering until the full justice of God is realized. With this expanded understanding of the specific character of the priesthood revealed by Elijah, the spirit of Elijah can be understood as humanity's yearning for God's justice in today's world of suffering and injustice. This spirit of Elijah cries for liberation in the face of oppression, bondage, and exploitation. It leads, as the prophet Joseph made clear, to divine discontent “with blessing [our] family alone,” obliging us to “[range] through the world, anxious to bless the whole of the human family.”<sup>27</sup> It plants in our hearts the promises of justice and equity made

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26. See Ward, *And There Was No Poor Among Them* for a discussion of the role of the Restoration in this return to covenant community.

27. Joseph Smith Jr., “Letter to Quorum of the Twelve, 15 December 1840,” 2, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-quorum-of-the-twelve-15-december-1840/2/>.

by God to humanity and creation, moves us forward in the hope made possible through the historical and ongoing fulfillment of this covenant, and endows us with love and power to continue the work of bringing to pass God's promised salvation to a suffering world.<sup>28</sup>

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28. Doctrine and Covenants 38:32. The law given to the Saints upon arrival in Kirtland would later be known as the law of consecration, an economic code specifically designed to care for the poor. The fact that the endowment of power follows and is linked to the giving of this law suggests an explicitly temporal component and purpose for this endowment, as does Joseph's framing of the dedication of the temple as a means to "secure a fulfilment of the promises thou hast made unto us, thy people" (D&C 109:11).

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