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Continuity and Innovation in Biblical Tradition

Elijah from 1 Kgs 17–18 to Jas 5:17-18*

Giovanni Claudio Bottini

Premise

Before presenting my paper, it seems opportune to note that in the marginal apparatus affixed by the publishers to the Greek text of James in Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graecum* (ed. 28), there are different references to citations and allusions of the Old Testament. In only two cases are there references to texts of prophets: Jas 2:25 refers to Josh 2:1.4.15; 6:17, and Jas 5:17-18 to 1 Kgs 18:42-45. In this paper, I intend to examine how the intra-biblical interpretation of the figure of Elijah came in the Letter of James that originated from 1 Kgs 17–18.

That Elijah was a crossover figure throughout the Scriptures and well-known in ancient Jewish literature is a given fact testified by all and is well studied¹.

1 The Original and the Target Texts: 1 Kings and the Letter of James

These are the words with which Jas 5:17-18 recalls the figure of Elijah and an episode of his life:

Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed intensely that it would not rain and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. And again he prayed and the sky gave rain and the earth produced its fruit.

If these statements are compared with the account of Elijah and the similar episode found in 1 Kgs 17–18, at least three differences are immediately

* Translated by Lionel Goh from the Italian original.

¹ Cf. *Élie le prophète* (Les Études Carmélitaines); JEREMIAS, El(e)ias; WALSH, Elijah.

noted. (1) In 1 Kgs the drought and its end are simply announced by the prophet: “Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Galaad, said to Ahab, «As the Lord the God of Israel lives, whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain these years, except by my word» ... «Go, eat and drink, because there is a sound of heavy rain»” (1 Kgs 17:1 and 18:41). (2) There is no explicit reference made to the prayer. (3) With regard to the duration of the drought, in 1 Kgs 18:1 we find only a hint: “After many days the word of YHWH was addressed to Elijah, in the third year”.

Many commentators and scholars of James’ letter naturally pose the question: what is the relationship between the text of 1 Kings and its reuse in James²?

Some authors consider the prayer of Elijah as an allusion to 1 Kgs 18:42 “... falling onto the ground, he placed his face between his knees”³. Others maintain that James reached his detailed description from ancient Jewish tradition by pointing out an explicit text in 4 Ezra 7:106-111⁴.

Regarding the duration of the drought (3 years and 6 months), a detail also found in Luke 4:25⁵, there are two explanations: (1) this difference between Jas 5:17 and 1 Kgs 18:1 is due to a Jewish way of computing the years⁶; (2) James used an ancient Jewish source that sought greater precision in the time duration, just like in the matter regarding the prayer⁷.

² For an almost exhaustive list of commentaries and studies, cf. ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, xi-xlix.

³ This is the position taken by ancient and modern commentators; cf., e.g., MAYOR, *The Epistle of St. James*, 180; ROPES, *The Epistle of St. James*, 310-311; ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, 776-777; BOTTINI, *Lettera di Giacomo*, 225-229.

⁴ Cf. BOTTINI, *La preghiera di Elia*, 70-100; DAVIDS, *Tradition and Citation*, 119-121.

⁵ The terminologies are close but not identical; regarding this, cf. THIERING, *The Three and A Half Years of Elijah*.

⁶ Cf. HOLZMEISTER, *Clausum est coelum annis tribus et mensibus sex*; MUSSNER, *La lettera di Giacomo*, 329; MARTIN, *James*, 213; FABRIS, *Lettera di Giacomo*, 346.

⁷ Cf. the other authors cited above in n. 5 and n. 6.

2 Intermediate Texts and Traditions: Sir 48:2-3; Ancient Jewish Literature; Luke 4:25-26

2.1 Sir 48:2-3: Elijah Full of Zeal and Corrector of the People

The letter of James is not the first to cite Elijah and the event of the drought and the rain. Well before James, the book of Sirach had such a mention in the praises of the fathers (Sir 44–50). In Sir 48:2-3 we hear that “He [Elijah] brought a famine upon them, and by his zeal he made them few in number; by the word of the Lord he shut up the heavens and three times brought down fire”.

Comparing this with 1 Kgs 17–18, the following can be noted: (1) Ben Sirach records only the negative aspects brought about by Elijah (the famine, the reduction of the population due to the famine, and the shutting up of heaven); (2) the vocabulary is typically Sirach and shows only some similarity with LXX 1 Kgs; (3) Sirach’s perspective of this episode is much more profound: it is not so much highlighting the prodigy of the prophet, but rather to emphasise the pedagogical and parenetic function of his prophetic mission: moved by zeal for God and with the power of the word of the Lord, Elijah invokes the punishment for the correction of the people.

2.2 Ancient Jewish Literature

Throughout the vast world of ancient Jewish literature, the theme of Elijah, the drought and the rain resound abundantly⁸. The following are the motifs and themes in which Jewish tradition involves the prophet:

(a) The famine caused by the drought of Elijah is considered as one of the ten biblical famines and is often remembered for its harshness (cf. *Targum Rt* 1,1; *Rt Rabbâ* 1,4 on 1,1; *Pirqê di Rabbi Eliezer* 26; *Gn Rabbâ* 25,3 on 5,29; 40,3 on 12,10; 64,2 on 26,1).

(b) Elijah is a “just” man (cf. *Tanchuma Mass’ei* 8; *Pesiktà Rabbati*, Piska 11,5; *Gn Rabbâ* 33,5 on 8,7; *Dt Rabbâ* 7,12 ed. Lieberman; *Sanhedrin* 63b), who can intervene and influence the phenomenon of drought and rain (cf. *Gn Rabbâ* 77,1 on 32,25; *Dt Rabbâ* 10,2-3 on 32,1).

(c) The “key” to the rain, together with that of life, resuscitation and bread/food, is the hand of God, but which Elijah has a share because God himself

⁸ Cf. STIASSNY, Le prophète Elie dans le Judaïsme.

granted it upon Elijah's request (cf. *Midrash Tanchuma*, wajjēšē'; *Midrash Sl* 78,5; *Sanhedrin* 113a; *Taanit* 23a). For this reason, the prophet could be said to have held back the winds (cf. *Nm Rabbâ* 12,11 on 7,1; *Pesiktà di Rav Kahana*, Piska 1,4; *Pesiktà Rabbati*, Piska 5,3).

(d) Elijah prayed for the drought. The use of the Hebrew verb עמד (*I serve*; 1 Kgs 17:1) seems to suggest that in different contexts, it has the sense of "standing before, serving" in prayer (cf. *Midrash Sl* 78,5; *Sanhedrin* 113a).

(e) Elijah is a praying intercessor for rain (cf. *Targum 1 Kgs* 18,36: 4 *Ezra* 7,106-111); his gestures on Mt. Carmel (cf. 1 Kgs 18:42: falling on the ground ... face between the knees) are interpreted as appeals to the merits of circumcision and the Sabbath to obtain a favourable outcome (cf. *Pesiktà Rabbati*, Piska 52,4; *Lv Rabbâ* 31,4 on 24,2; *Qo Rabbâ* 11,2,1; *Ct Rabbâ* 7,6,1).

If the characteristics of this episode and particularly of Elijah, are compared with 1 Kgs 17–18 and its first re-use in Sir 48:2-3, one can observe that the Elijah tradition is conserved, enriched and made precise with various details.

Of course, the texts of this literature pose problems with dating, with textual and literary criticism and the recourse to different methods of interpretation that cannot be addressed here. But these problems do not diminish its importance in appreciating the continuity and the novelty with respect to the previous tradition. These texts also largely explain the development of the Elijah tradition in the New Testament.

2.3 *Luke 4:25-26: Elijah Typology of Jesus*

It is a widely held view that Luke presents Jesus as a new Elijah⁹. It begins with the text of 4:25-26:

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.¹⁰

It is evident that the literary reprise of the drought is purely circumstantial. The point of the text is to highlight the fact that the prophet was

⁹ Cf. DUBOIS, *La figure d'Elie*; BRODIE, *Towards Unraveling Luke's Use of the Old Testament*; MILLER, *Elijah*; CROATTO, *Jesus, prophet like Elijah*.

¹⁰ ALETTI, *L'arte di raccontare Gesù Cristo*, 47.

sent to help a foreign widow. Luke assigns a precise length of time for the duration of the drought (“three years and six months”)¹¹ and through the use of the theological passive, attributes the closing of the heavens to God.

This Lucan use of this detail in the narrative cycle of Elijah (1 Kgs 17:8-16) to refer to the person and work of Jesus, is of great interest. Two elements make this reference even more interesting : (1) the context of the “self-revelation of Jesus” which characterizes the whole pericope of Luke 4:16-30¹² and (2) the contribution which the comparison of Elijah (and Elisha) together with the text of Isa 61:1-2 read and commented by Jesus, leads to the prophetic christology applied to Jesus of Nazareth by Luke¹³.

3 Jas 5:17-18 in the Light of the Preceding Tradition

Returning to the literary reprisal that Jas 5:17-18 employs of the original episode narrated in 1 Kgs 17–18, we immediately observe that the author of the Catholic letter undertook a re-reading of the figure of Elijah and his gestures in commanding the drought and rain. The “personal” aspects of this rereading are multiple and interesting. Firstly, we observe the paraenetic context in which James makes use of the example of Elijah. This passage Jas 5:17-18 is part of the pericope 5:13-20 in which the theme of prayer is considerably developed. It is a theme dear to this letter (cf. 1:5-7; 4:2-3; 5:13-18). It is precisely in this passage that James offers a brief and concise synthesis: prayer of praise or supplication in every circumstance of life (cf. 5:13-14, 17-18), prayer of the community for the sick (cf. 5:14-15), mutual prayer for the forgiveness of sins (cf. 5:16), Elijah the model of insistent and effective prayer.

Another interesting point: James, unlike Sir 48:4 and some other rabbinic texts that exalt the prodigious aspects of the prophet, makes no reference to the extraordinary powers of Elijah. Indeed, he underlines his humanity: “Elijah was a man like us” (Jas 5:17)¹⁴, meaning he is subject to the same laws and conditions of human weakness and fragility. In this context, this emphasis renders the exhortation for prayer of mutual intercession more convincing: Elijah was

¹¹ This formula has apocalyptic origins in which 3 years and 6 months is a symbol of a time of suffering and persecution; cf. ROSSÉ, *Il vangelo secondo Luca*, 159, n. 87.

¹² SCHÜRMAN, *Il vangelo di Luca*, 395.

¹³ ALETTI, *L'arte di raccontare Gesù Cristo*, 50-51.

¹⁴ Cf. BOTTINI, *La preghiera di Elia*, 153-158.

a simple man, not an extraordinary person, hence his example can be imitated by the recipients of James' letter.

A third point is highlighted in the literary re-use by James of the prophet Elijah: the power to order the sky to shut and the subsequent gift of rain is due to his prayer.

Conclusion

This brief survey from Jas 5:17-18 to 1 Kgs 17-18, passing through Sir 48:2-5; ancient Jewish literature and Luke 4:25-26, has shown that this short passage from the first Catholic letter has a history of continuity and novelty in interpretation regarding the person and work of the prophet Elijah.

I would like to add a few notes that may be useful for reflection. The letter of James clearly contains literary and thematic relations with the Old or First Testament (LXX). In fact, there are numerous themes that the author takes up and develops from the historical, prophetic and wisdom literature¹⁵.

James uses the term *γραφή* to refer to texts of the Torah (cf. Jas 2:8.23) and to a text which is not found in any passage of Scripture (cf. 4:5-6) and of uncertain meaning¹⁶.

From the Historical books (Former Prophets), he adopts two figures: Elijah whom I had just studied and Rahab, whom James recalls the acts of hospitality through protection and liberation of the explorers whom she saved as mentioned in Jas 2:1.15 and 6:17. For James, the figure of Rahab is also an example or paraenetic model for his readers or listeners. Recourse to this character is motivated by the discussion of justification by faith or works (cf. 2:14-26) and the faith is presupposed¹⁷.

Now perhaps we can ask ourselves: what type or model of recourse to Scripture (intrabiblical interpretation) is found in James' letter? Naturally, the question and answer imply not only the two texts cited but all or at least the principal, "parallel" passages indicated by the apparatus in the outer margin affixed by the editors of Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graecum* (ed. 28). This though would lead us away from the theme of the paper. In any case, it is

¹⁵ Cf. JOHNSON, *The Letter of James*, 29-34; ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, 51 (schematically); BOTTINI, *Lettera di Giacomo*, 23-25 and 266-269.

¹⁶ Cf. BOTTINI, *Lettera di Giacomo*, 171-174.

¹⁷ Cf. BOTTINI, *Lettera di Giacomo*, 139-140.

striking that in a writing of limited proportions such as the letter of James, four Old Testament figures are recalled: Abraham, Rahab, Job and Elijah.

Commentators and scholars have addressed this topic, speaking of intertextuality or in more traditional terminology – of sources or literary dependance etc¹⁸. From their conclusions we can draw that the author of James knows the Scriptures by having read or heard from a text such as the LXX¹⁹.

But perhaps it is necessary to say more, as Allison Jr. does: “James did not know biblical texts in isolation but received and understood them via Jewish tradition.”²⁰ The same thing must obviously be assumed for James’ readers or listeners, otherwise it would make no sense for him to refer to them in his paraenesis.

James’ “methodology” – freely taking biblical examples characterized by interpretative traits from the re-readings attested in ancient Judaic literature – leads to the discussion on the “formation of the canon or on the awareness of a canon”²¹. It is an acknowledged fact that in the first century, there was no canon defining the Scriptures. Therefore, the discussion on how James quoted the Scriptures and evoked the biblical characters remains open and depends on oral or written traditions²².

An additional note: in this present study I had not included Rev 11:6a: “These [the 2 olive trees] have the power to close the heavens so that rain would no fall during the days of their ministry.” There are 2 characteristics of the Elijah tradition that are recalled here: the power of opening and closing the heavens, and the 3 and a half years of Elijah’s drought. Modern exegetes mostly see in this a literary contact with 1 Kgs 17:1 and Jas 5:17. The image of the olive trees came from Zech 4:11-14 who originally referred to Joshua and Zerubabel. It is possible that the long and widespread Elijah tradition had influenced the way Revelation re-read the description of Zach 4:11-14.

¹⁸ Cf. DAVIDS, Tradition and Citation; POPKES, James and Scripture.

¹⁹ ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, 52: “That he (James) was familiar with most of what we think of as the LXX is a reasonable inference”.

²⁰ ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, 54 who highlights the relations of Jas above all with the writings of Philo and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A statement of the same tenor had already been made by DAVIDS, Tradition and Citation, 123.

²¹ Cf. DAVIDS, Tradition and Citation, 123.

²² Regarding the discussion of ALLISON, *The Epistle of James*, 52-53.

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Zhrnutie

Jak 5,17-18 ponúka veľmi zaujímavý príklad intrabiblickej interpretácie skorších prorokov. 1Kr 17–18 spolu s Jak 5,17-18 majú spoločné to, že spomínajú proroka Eliáša v súvislosti s obdobím sucha a následným dažďom. V 1Kr Eliáš jednoducho hovorí: „Ako žije Pán, Izraelov Boh, v ktorého službe stojím, nebude v týchto rokoch rosa ani dážď, iba na moje slovo“ (17,1). Podľa Jakubovho listu ale prorok svojou modlitbou zastavil dážď na tri roky a šesť mesiacov.

V akom vzťahu sú tieto dva texty? Odpoveď spočíva v dlhej tradícii, ktorá dané texty spája. Epizóda je totiž citovaná alebo referovaná v: Sir 48,2-3; Lk 4,25-26; Zjv 11,6, ku ktorým treba priradiť aj texty helénskeho judaizmu (LXX 1Kr 17–18; Jozefus Flávius *AJ* 8.319.324), pseudoepigrafy (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 48.1; 4Esd 7,106-111), targúmy (Targúm k prorokom o 1Kr 17–18; Targúm k Rút 1) a rabínsku literatúru (Sifra k Lev 26,4; GnRb 77,1; DtRb 1,2-3). Porovnanie týchto textov, ktoré sú súčasťou dlhej a neustálej tradície o postave proroka Eliáša, ukazuje, že Eliáš bol už v ranej židovskej literatúre považovaný za postavu spravodlivého muža, na ktorého modlitbu sa nebo môže zavrieť a opäť otvoriť. Pokiaľ však ide o trvanie sucha, zdroje nie sú zajedno; obdobie tri a pól roka nájdeme iba u Lukáša a Jakuba. Čitateľom/poslucháčom Jakubovho listu je Eliáš predstavený ako jednoduchý muž, ale aj ako model príhovornej modlitby. Jakubova „metodológia“, ktorá voľne preberá biblické postavy charakterizované interpretatívnymi črtami z reлектúry doloženej v starovekej židovskej literatúre, vedie k otázke „formovania kánonu alebo povedomiu o kánone“. Je ale uznávaným faktom, že v prvom storočí neexistoval kánon definujúci posvätné Písma. Preto otázka o tom, ako Jakub citoval Písma a evokoval biblické postavy zostáva otvorená a závisí na ústnej alebo písomnej tradícii.

Kľúčové slová: Eliáš, 1Kr 17–18, Jak 5,17-18, Sir 48,2-3, Lk 4,25-26, literárna tradícia, intertextualita.

Summary

James 5:17-18 offers a very interesting example of “Intrabiblical Interpretation of the Former Prophets”. 1 Kings 17-18 and James 5:17-18 both agree in mentioning the prophet Elijah in connection with drought and subsequent rainfall. In 1 Kings, Elijah simply pronounces an oracle: “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, during these years there shall be no dew or rain except at my word” (17:1). In James, the prophet, by his prayer, is granted three years and six months of drought and the subsequent rain.

What is the relationship between these two texts? The answer lies in the long tradition that links them. The episode is in fact quoted or evoked in: Ecclesiasticus 48:2-3; Luke 4:25-26; Revelation 11:6, to which must be added the texts of Hellenistic Judaism (Septuagint of 1 Kings 17-18; Josephus *AJ* 8.319.324), of the Pseudepigrapha (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 48.1; 4 Esdras 7:106-111), of the Targumim (Targum to the Prophets on 1 Kings 17-18;

Targum of Ruth 1:1) and of Rabbinic literature (Sifra on Lev 26:4; Genesis Rabba 77.1; Deuteronomy Rabba 1:2-3).

The comparison of these texts, which are part of a very long and permanent tradition on the figure of the prophet Elijah, shows that it is in Early Jewish literature that the figure of Elijah is established as a righteous man on whose supplication the heavens are shut and opened again. The sources are not unanimous on the duration of the drought; the period of three-and-a-half years is found only in Luke and James. To the readers/listeners of James, Elijah is presented as a simple man and yet a model of intercessory prayer.

James' "methodology" – freely taking biblical examples characterized by interpretative traits from the re-readings attested in ancient Judaic literature – leads to the discussion on the "formation of the canon or on the awareness of a canon". It is an acknowledged fact that in the first century, there was no canon defining the Scriptures. Therefore the discussion on how James quoted the Scriptures and evoked the biblical characters remains open, and depends on oral or written traditions.

Keywords: Elijah, 1 Kgs 17–18, Jas 5:17-18, Sir 48:2-3, Luke 4:25-26, literary tradition, intertextuality.

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