

## **My approach to this passage within the TheoArtistry Composers Project.**

What I want to do is to ask you, the composer, to tell a story in such a way that it may reveal something of its meaning for us today. There are some tools which I can offer you to help to try to get right into the text and feel something of its theological message. Although I have some training and experience in music I will not at this stage make any musical suggestions: you are the composer.

In this document, I hope to do six things. Initially I shall say a little about my hopes for putting theology and music together in this text. I shall then introduce the main character in the story, his role and the location of the event. This will be followed by some theological context and some clues for reading the text. After that it will be time to read the core text.

We will then travel nearly 400 miles and 2,000 years to another location and another group of people. A further journey of 3 and a half thousand miles and 3 and a half centuries will bring us to the last person whom I am introducing.

### ***Hopes for theology and music***

I see this work we shall do together not as merely dressing a story with music, but as an attempt get within the text in order that its theological message may open out to those involved in the music which you will write, - whether that is you as you compose, or those performing or listening to your composition.

I don't know all the answers about the text we will be working on, I certainly can't plumb all its depths, and I approach it hoping that a musical exploration will help to open it out. There are tools which I can provide to you, the composer, so that when we approach the text we are in a frame of mind that resonates with the intention of the passage in its scriptural context. There are clues in the text which, while clear to the original audience and to those who have some knowledge of scriptural texts, may well be hidden to one who doesn't have specialist knowledge. These must be identified and brought to the foreground.

This is particularly apposite in the case of the story that I have chosen, because at its very centre there is, as one translation has it 'the sound of sheer silence' which it associates with an encounter with God. Is this telling us that knowledge of God is ineffable? What does ineffable mean? Is it the same as incommunicable? Is the silence the same as the experience of God, or just another image for it? Can music provide a different image in the way that poetry tries to do? Is the

music illustrative, straight forward imagery, or is it a way actually to explore the theological reality? Can music explore the ineffable and after exploring communicate something in ways which words cannot? Should both words and music be silent before God? The endeavour of theologians, particularly Christian theologians who study God who became man in the incarnation, and study in a college whose motto is *In principio erat Verbum*, (In the beginning was the Word) would suggest that we do need and want to try to understand and communicate knowledge of God.

At the heart of the episode which I offer you, I understand that an experience of God has taken place. The terms in which the story is recounted carry powerful images for the Jewish audience of the story, images of the existence and identity of the Israel as a people chosen to be the people of God, created to live in fidelity to God. Their cultural identity is built on knowledge of God's interventions in their history which is kept alive in memories of stories, memories which have a living power to this day.

Experience of God is foundational for Israel, and for Christians the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ is the consummation of the experience of God in history. The presence of Jesus Christ will reach its fullness in the world at the end of time. On the way, God is made known in Christ through grace and the Christian life. While God can be known in some faltering way in theology, He is also known through faith and love. This knowledge can be experienced as profoundly personal and life-changing and it is also very hard to put into words. Hence, I am bringing alongside the text from the Hebrew bible some poetic text from a Christian mystic in the hope that this different form of human and theological expression may bring something to the approach to silence and encounter with God.

### ***The Character of Elijah***

The main character in the story is the Prophet Elijah who lived in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC. To this day, Elijah is a powerful presence in Judaism, remembered every Sabbath meal, every Passover and at every ritual circumcision. He is known as the prophet who will usher in the coming of the Messiah to the people of Israel. The name Elijah is an affirmation of the choice by God of the people of Israel and their choice of him as their God. It is a compound, formed from the general Hebrew word for God which is *El* and a syllable from the particular name which God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. This name, YHWH, is so sacred that to this day it will not be spoken by Jews, but is always replaced with another name which may be spoken without danger of blasphemy. So *Elijah* is *El is YHWH*.

The prophets of Israel were characters singled out by God to communicate to the people on God's behalf. Often the job of the prophet was to denounce the behaviour of the people – not least the leaders, priests and kings – and call them to repentance and fidelity to the One True God. They made their point through words and actions, not infrequently presenting their message in a sort of life episode, a living expression of a point they are trying to make. This certainly opens the way to presenting their teaching in other formats, such as music. If Elijah is acting out something in the story we will consider, then perhaps you will be able to find a way that music can heighten the prophetic performance.

The prophets were necessarily larger than life and this is particularly true of Elijah. Our episode occurs on Mt Horeb after Elijah has run away from the queen, having killed 450 of her false prophets. Elijah is very much to the foreground in Judaism to this day. The so-called Elijah Cycle runs from 1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 2: 15. The passage on which I am focusing comes in 1 Kings 19: 9 - 14.

### ***The Story, its location and images***

The story takes place on Mt Horeb, the exact location of which is unknown, though it is somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula. You can find some photos of Sinai along with various other bits and pieces in a folder which I have created on Dropbox for sharing things with you. <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/akb8vnto2lz9cc6/AADSt8OcAo-ByasQfkXfF8Vga?dl=0>

Mountain is a theological and literary keyword: when we hear mountain, we must also hear that this is a place of God revealing Himself. Throughout the bible mountains are places on which God makes himself known. Mt Horeb in particular has a foundational role in the life of the people of Israel: when we hear Mt Horeb we must hear the giving of the Ten Commandments which constitute this group of people as a nation of God and other encounters of Moses with God.

Another key within the episode comprises the natural phenomena, fire, earthquakes, mighty wind, each of which are associated as signs of the pagan gods. In particular, Ba'al, the false god whose prophets Elijah has slain, is the god of thunder and storm. Paradoxically, however, fire is also associated with encounter with God, both in the burning bush from which God made himself known to Moses and revealed his name as YHWH, <http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Exodus+3> and in the phenomena experienced on Mt Horeb when God speaks to Moses and the whole people giving the commandments, the adherence to which makes the people the people of God. <http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Deuteronomy+5>

The cave recalls the cleft in the rock where Moses stood as the Lord passed by, in one of the most powerful of the encounters of an individual with God in the history of Israel. In that episode, too, Moses covers his face with his cloak before God.  
<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Exodus+33>

The still small voice, or sound of sheer silence, at the climax of the story recalls the first two verses of Genesis in which the breath of God hovers over the waters.  
<http://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Genesis+1>

It might be good to read these four passages slowly and carefully letting the words and images sink in, if not before reading the Elijah text, then certainly while becoming familiar with it. They might be something which you want to talk over later.

So now with those things in the mind, ears and eyes of the reader, here is the text of the story:

### **The Text**

1 Kings 19:9-15 9 At Mt Horeb Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 11 He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 15 Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;

**Some translation variants of v12b**

JPS 1 Kings 19:12 and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

KJV 1 Kings 19:12 And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

NAS 1 Kings 19:12 And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing.

NIV 1 Kings 19:12 After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

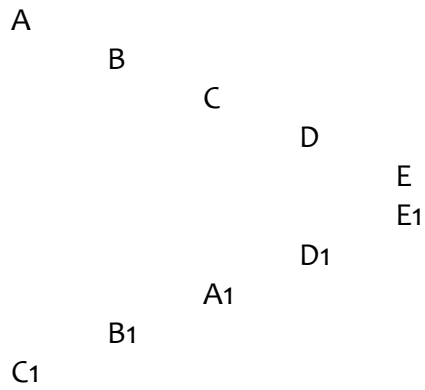
NJB 1 Kings 19:12 And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a light murmuring sound.

NRS 1 Kings 19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

TNK 1 Kings 19:12 After the earthquake -- fire; but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire -- a soft murmuring sound.

### ***Structure of the passage***

The passage is structured in a precise way known as a chiasm, or a chiastic structure. This is somewhat similar to the musical form of a rondo with repetition and development. In this particular case the structure can be described thus:



A: Elijah in readiness at cave

B: God calls Elijah

C: Elijah answers

D: God instructs Elijah to do go to the cave

E: the phenomenon

E1: the still small voice (antithesis of the phenomenon)

A1: Elijah in readiness at cave

B2: God calls Elijah

C1: Elijah answers

D1: God instructs Elijah to do go back to his prophetic ministry

Putting the structure with the text we arrive at the following::

**A: Elijah in readiness at cave** At Mt Horeb Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there.

**B: God calls Elijah** Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**C: Elijah answers** <sup>10</sup> He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

**D: God instructs Elijah to do go to the mountain** <sup>11</sup> He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."

**E: the phenomenon** Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire;

**E1: the still small voice** and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

**A1: Elijah in readiness at cave** <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

**B1: God calls Elijah** Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

**C1: Elijah answers** <sup>14</sup> He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

**D1: God instructs Elijah to do go back to his prophetic ministry** <sup>15</sup> Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;

In analysing the text note the movement to the centre and back: God and Elijah are there at the beginning and the end – and also in the middle to which they seem to have journeyed in and then out.

Note the cave at the beginning and the end – and also at the central section.

Which is the climax: is it E1? Or perhaps A1 or B1? Or, conceivably, even D1? Each of these emphasises something crucial: E1 is the still small voice which emphasises the difference of God from the pagan idols, and perhaps also his intimacy. A1 emphasises the willing response of Elijah who has heard God. Did he hear God in the silence, or was it that hearing the silence he was prepared for meeting God in a way even more unknown? B1 has God addressing himself anew to the prophet who is called after the particular emphasis of the God of the burning bush (ie Elijah meaning El is YHWH.) and this may seem to suggest a new calling of Israel.

I would like to look at the still small voice as intimate encounter with God, or at the least as closely associated with it. To do this I am bringing in the help of St John of the Cross. He does directly reference this episode from the life of Elijah at least once, but the connection with the Elijah and the Carmelite order of which St John of the Cross was a member is deeper than that. In order to understand that we must move to Mt Carmel in the north of present day Israel, another site very strongly associated with Elijah and the cradle of the Carmelite Order. (See the dropbox folder for some photos.)

### ***Carmel and Elijah***

The Carmelite Order was founded at the turn of the 13th century on Mt Carmel. The first hermits who settled there were crusaders who exchanged their military existence for a hermit religious life, living in prayer, contemplation and silence. This group of men gathered together, so their Rule of Life says, 'around the spring of Elias on Mt Carmel'. (There are some photos of the location in the dropbox folder.) The Carmelites had no single great founder but looked to scripture for their inspiration. They were known as The Brothers of the Virgin Mary of Mt Carmel. Elijah, with his association with Mt Carmel, became an important figure in their identity. The story of Elijah that we will be exploring with its climax in a silent, ineffable encounter with God, became a key text for these contemplative brothers. Later, when they had moved to Europe and it became politically expedient to have a single founding father, they adopted Elijah. Episodes from his life, which had been the subject of the reflection of the brothers gathered round the spring of Elias, remained central to the spiritual attitude of the Carmelite order in their contemplative searching for the still small voice of God.

### ***St John of the Cross***

Moving swiftly forward three and a half centuries and three and a half thousand miles, we come to St John of the Cross who was born in Spain in 1542. As a young Carmelite friar he met Teresa of Avila, older than him by 27 years, who persuaded him to be involved in the reform of the Carmelite order. The two of them are known as the founders of the reformed, or discalced, Carmelite Order. This religious order is contemplative and largely silent.

St John of the Cross is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest mystics in Christianity. He is recognised as a doctor of the universal church which means that the church accepts his teaching as having outstanding worth for the whole people of God. The centre point and summit of his teaching concerns the most profound and intimate union of the human person with God and the way to that union. He struggles to express through his poetry the knowledge learned through



mystical experience. He describes intense suffering on the way to union with God, which he understands entirely within the context of the salvific suffering of Christ. He writes of a journey of purification made at night, so we have the phrase the dark night of the soul, a phrase comes from one of John's poems which begins: 'One dark night, my soul being now at rest, I went out...' He uses images such as 'silent music' and 'sounding solitude' in his attempt to articulate something of the experience of union with God. The stumbling attempts of his poetry I think will help to prompt a musical articulation. I have put a document in the dropbox folder with some texts from his work and more about him. Here is a brief taster of his poetic attempt to talk about the experience of union with God:

My Beloved, the mountains,  
and lonely wooded valleys,  
strange islands,  
and resounding rivers,  
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,  
the tranquil night  
at the time of the rising dawn,  
silent music  
sounding solitude.

That's it for now! I am really looking forward to working with you and hope I may be of help to you in producing a piece of work which will mean something to you and which you will enjoy!