LS — Week 8 Response

This was my first reading by Trible herself, and unfortunately I found it a little simplistic. The core idea that Elijah and Jezebel are foils for each other is a good one. But there are subtler nuances than "Elijah is shown as good and Jezebel is shown as bad; now notice their opposite genders and religious beliefs" and subtler ways of pushing back than to lionize and imply that the Phoenicians would have told the story from a good feminist angle (p. 178).

I actually find that Elijah is not a wholly sympathetic character, despite his longevity in the tradition after him. Iain Provan of Regent, in his 1 & 2 Kings course that I'm listening to right now, discusses Elijah as a disappointment for the second half of his prophethood. He instantly caves to Jezebel's threat despite his miraculous victory; he withdraws from his prophetic duty; he hides from God, and when he faces him, claims falsely that he's the only one left; and when God gives him three tasks (anoint Hazael, anoint Jehu, appoint Elisha), he leaves the first two undone and never even really warms up to Elisha, mostly just telling him to go back when he wants to follow him (1 Kings 19:20; 2 Kings 2) and making vague coin tosses about his succession (2:10). Meanwhile, I find that the portrayal of Jezebel as a strong, effective, imposing figure isn't as easy to miss as Trible implies, and hence I'm not convinced that the narrator wanted to uniformly condemn her — she's more respectable than Ahab, king of Judah!

Similarly, Ahab and Jehu are both complex, the former with moments of real humility and the latter with the usual condemnation that he ultimately led Israel into more sin. Another interesting point Provan makes is that Ahab doesn't know his own country's law, asking Naboth to sell his vineyard despite Leviticus 25:23 ("the land must not be sold permanently"), whereas Jezebel has done her reading and fulfills the requirements of Deuteronomy 17:6 and Exodus 20:7.

But, again, the literary opposition of the two figures is a good insight; both Elijah and Jezebel are good representatives of their worldviews and both know how to pull the strings in a kingdom. Each altercation is a contest, like Pharaoh and Moses.

The whole Ahab sequence is a very fun read full of interesting happenings. (It also makes for good intermediate Hebrew study, as I found out in one course!) There are fascinating miracles like the resurrection of the dead and the contest on Carmel, as well as puzzling ones like Elisha's bears. Many people find a favourite moment in God's answer at Horeb: "God was not in the fire, the earthquake, the wind… Then Elijah heard a still, small voice." Elijah as the second person not to die but be taken up, Ahab's foolish attempt to evade death by a disguise and being struck by an arrow as providential as that of Artemis, multiple multiplications of food… a gold mine!

There is one scene I enjoy for broadening my perspective on the Bible. In 1 Kings 22, Ahab wants to go to war and asks Jehoshaphat king of Judah to support him. He assembles 400 prophets (ominously, the same number of prophets of Baal assembled by Jezebel) and they prophesy success. But Jehoshaphat asks whether there are any prophets of *the Lord* to ask. Ahab answers: "There's Micaiah son of Imlah, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, only bad." Jehoshaphat reprimands him: "The king should not say that." They summon Micaiah, who is counselled to agree with the other prophets, and so he does. But Ahab immediately smells something off and insists that Micaiah tell him the truth, whereupon he changes his tune and tells Ahab that God is baiting him to go to war in order to destroy him.

In his mostly excellent *How Fiction Works*, James Wood claims that Old Testament narrative doesn't depict people's inner psychological life, but I find that every now and then we *do* have these surprisingly human moments. Ahab's here is one of them: a relatable and honest statement of what's really wrong with the kings of 1 & 2 Kings, followed by an understandably awkward, understated admonishment by a peer, and then the use and detection of sarcasm. You can see how Micaiah would appear to any normal person in Ahab's position: your 400 advisors tell you one thing, the projections are good and things are looking up, and then this troublemaker comes and predicts disaster, calling all the others misled. That's just what he always does. He can't get on board. Then he has to be snide and taunt you. What's his problem? Can't you catch a break?

The lesson I take from it is the classic one: hindsight is 20/20. From our privileged perspective with our sympathetic narrator, as Trible notes, we can see that Yahweh is the Lord, those who oppose him are doomed, the one is right and the 400 are wrong, and so on. But we have to remember that in the moment, it was very hard to believe in this picture of things. Clearly, throughout 1 & 2 Kings, the followers of the Lord are in the minority. Prophets follow Baal. Kings find the law politically useless, ignore God's voice, uphold the polytheism practiced by the people, listen to foreigners Elijah may not be the only one left when he complains at Horeb, but the government is indeed against him and the people change their minds day to day (1 Kings 18:21). Israel and Judah have lost their supremacy and been divided; it's not obvious that the "lamp forever burning" promised to David's line is worth much. So things are somewhat bleak and the covenant appears out of focus for the average person. How are you supposed to know which prophet is telling the truth before you get burned? It's not so easy. Jesus says our problem is that we revere the same prophets who, in the past, our own ancestors killed (Luke 11:47), implying that if they came again today, we would do the same to them. "If Jesus was to preach like he preached in Galilee, they would lay Jesus Christ in his grave," sings Woody Guthrie. As Christians, we have the challenge to try to listen to the one Micaiah instead of the 400 yes-men, even when it's the hardest message to hear, knowing that God often speaks at such a ratio.

That could apply to voices telling us Covid is not over yet and we should still be following the health protocols. But look, I can find 400 people in positions of authority telling me the opposite! Why do you have to rain on my parade? I can't handle any more lockdown measures! Or climate change: "Let us silence these prophets of doom," in the words of a French musical from 2002.[1]

It could also mean listening to hard voices in teaching. One thing I've noticed is that when I get hard feedback on my courses or my methods, if I bring it up to colleagues, they always have my back. We support one another and say things like, "Which one said that?... Oh, *them.* Don't worry, you're not the first!" or "And what was their grade? *Aha…*" Even me, when writing a survey for the end of the semester, I was tempted to reword or remove questions that prompt students to think of problems. But those reactions aren't the ones we're called to. We have to "test everything" (1 Thess. 5:21) and hold onto what is good, not dismissing any source out of hand, regardless of how outnumbered it is, and regardless of how little we like hearing it. It's an obvious message, but with our flawed psychology and tendency to justify ourselves, we're liable to be as guilty as Ahab of ignoring the hard messages that come from the Lord.

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[1] *Cindy :* « "Ils ont beau nous dire que c'est un monde sans avenir. Ils ont beau nous annoncer le pire tous les matins. Je vous croire à l'être humain, et croire à demain … Faisons taire ces prophètes de malheur !" » "No use for them to tell us the world has no future. No use for them to announce the worst every morning. I want to believe in humanity and in tomorrow… Let us silence these prophets of doom!" The lyrics can almost be heard on Ahab's lips.