# Elijah, Depression, and the Prophetic in Contemporary Christianity

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What is the role of a prophet’s psychological state? Because every prophetic agent *has* psychological states that vary over time, the question is relevant. As both a participant and observer of the contemporary prophetic scene, I am deeply interested in the divine-human interaction that leads to prophetic acts and utterances. I have found the scriptural record to be rich with applicable insights, some of them in the Elijah account. His story of serving amid a series of psychological highs and lows illumines not only his experiences but the experiences of prophetic agents everywhere throughout history.

## Fiery Prophet, Under Fire

Immediately apparent in Scripture is Elijah’s intense zeal for God. He abruptly appears on the royal scene, opposing Ahab’s corrupt practices and declaring himself emissary of Yahweh’s heavenly council (1 Kings 17:1; Jer. 23:18). Much as Moses confronted Pharaoh (Exod. 5:1), Elijah confronts Ahab and predicts a long, devastating drought. When the years-long drought is about to end, Elijah summons Ahab, 850 false prophets, and all of Israel to Mount Carmel for a prophetic showdown, which ends badly for Ahab, Jezebel, and the Baals (1 Kings 18).

Elijah is God’s agent in this divinely ordered event. Immediately afterward, Elijah slaughters the Baalist prophets. Enraged, Queen Jezebel promises to hand Elijah the same fate (1 Kings 19:2). The man of God flees in terror and enters the wilderness, leaving his servant behind (1 Kings 19:3–4). The prophet who fiercely opposed the Omride Dynasty’s corruption suddenly plunges into a state indicating major depressive disorder, a condition the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* describes as being marked “by persistent sadness and other symptoms.” Exhausted, he seeks personal isolation and relief from his painful emotions.

## When All Seems Lost to Fear

Elijah seems to have lost all equilibrium. God’s acts on Mount Carmel are behind him and panic engulfs him. Whether Jezebel intends to take his life or simply drive him away cannot be known. Assuming she has the power she boasts of having, she could easily dispatch messengers to eliminate the man who called down fire and humiliated her god. All Elijah knows at this point is his fear. He has lost his sense of standing with God and remains strangely vulnerable to a woman whose god had already been proved nonexistent and therefore powerless.

Because of Elijah’s fear, his fight-or-flight response is triggered. His physiology changes, enabling him to run hundreds of miles (although not in an instant, as many conclude). According to Jerome T. Walsh in *1 Kings*, Elijah starts out in the Northern Kingdom and reaches the Southern Kingdom’s farthest border (Liturgical Press, 1996, 266.). Even exhaustion cannot deter his flight, which delivers him into complete isolation under a solitary broom tree. Collapsing from the strain, he asks God to take his life (1 Kings 19:4). Much like Paul would do centuries later, Elijah despairs of life itself. Having fled from Jezebel, he perhaps longs to escape from himself. This is reminiscent of Moses’s state of mind after striking down the Egyptian. He also isolated himself; yet there is no record of Moses wanting to perish. Perhaps the distinction between the two men’s reactions involves individual temperament, which the *APA Dictionary* attributes to biological factors, the effects of which manifest in one’s early years.

## The Role of Temperament

Such factors may have predisposed Elijah to depression. Based on 1 Kings 17:1, we know little about his beginnings. We do know that, as an adult, he is abrupt, fiery, intense, and zealous. In other words, his temperament seems mercurial. Writing “Temperament” in *Christianity and Developmental Psychopathology*, Mezulis, Harding, and Hudson note the suggestion from contemporary therapeutic research that a child’s temperament can continue into adulthood (IVP, 2014, 50). Elijah’s upbringing and its effects on his temperament can only be inferred by what we see in his adulthood. On that basis, it seems possible that his zeal and intensity were traits from his earliest formation. Even his choice to settle in a place as geographically remote as Gilead may have been prompted by his long-standing sense of comfortable places and ways to live. If so, his tendency toward isolation existed long before Jezebel’s threat and his ensuing depressive bout.

## What Does This Have to Do with the Prophetic?

Why are such factors relevant to prophetic consciousness, prophetic perception, and the enactment of prophetic speech-acts? And why is Elijah’s history so interesting? It is precisely because these factors and prophetic function require self-awareness. Without it, prophets can unknowingly respond to internal and external influences that have little or nothing to do with God’s intended message. When prophetic agents are unaware of what impels them, the legitimacy of their presumably inspired speech-acts is imperiled.

It is unlikely that Elijah expected a major depressive episode following his fulfillment of God’s instructions at Mount Carmel. However, he seems to be consumed with proving the opposite of his statement, “I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). This anguished statement, uttered in prayer to God, reveals a deep-seated drive to achieve and even prove his own legitimacy. By saying, “I am no better than,” he indicates a method of comparing himself to others. Although his scale of measurement is subjective, he has a working formulation in mind. It is rooted in his expectations for himself and, perhaps, his assessment that his ancestors fell short. He is either yearning or expecting himself to exceed whatever he understood their record to be.

In his state of extreme stress and duress, Elijah’s thinking is compromised. Yet, he tenaciously measures himself against his unrealistic standard. In modern parlance, he was engaged in behaviors described in social comparison theory. The article, “Social Comparison Theory and 12 Real-Life Examples,” talks about how “we compare certain aspects of ourselves (e.g., our behavior, opinions, status, and success) to other people’s, so that we have a better assessment of ourselves” (Nortje 2022). According to Nortje, we can handle social comparison with balance, but it can expose any unrealistic and distorted expectations that diminish well-being and self-esteem. Sometimes, the tendency to compare stems from deprivation neurosis, a condition that seemed evident in Moses’s life. In Elijah’s case, it may have resulted from needs that were unmet in his family of origin.

## Led? Or Driven?

On the one hand, Elijah is Spirit-led; on the other, he is driven to prove himself. His dichotomy is common to people and prophets everywhere. It impacts what psychologist call emotional self-regulation. In “What is Emotion Regulation? +6 Emotional Skills and Strategies,” Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury explains how we govern the emotions we choose to have and express (Chowdhury 2021). However mature we might be, stress affects our ability to self-regulate. Overwhelmed by Jezebel’s threat and burdened by self-imposed comparisons with his ancestors, Elijah would have experienced this kind of stress. His journey certainly seems to indicate as much. If he was in fact deprived of affirmation in his earliest years, his concept of himself would be understandably skewed.

Human beings who are used by God in prophetic function are not immune to human frailties, whether they are biologically or environmentally caused (or both). Prior to his public appearing, Elijah chooses the isolation of Gilead, a fertile border region. On the positive side, he has no issue with living around borders (1 Kings 17:3, 8–ff). However, when despair sets in, he reverts to a similar setting as an unhealthy psychological default. While it is true that solitude can provide sound benefits and rewards, it can portend negative outcomes for those who tend toward depression. When, as in Elijah’s case, the drive to achieve unrealistic standards is frustrated by a sense of failure, solitude produces emotional pain and one’s relational capacity suffers. This seems evident in Elijah’s choice to separate from his servant at Beersheba. When he most needed relational and practical support, he instead withdrew from contact. His emotional anguish drives his choices. As Jerome T. Walsh observes, “Without as within, Elijah’s burdens overwhelm him: he can escape neither his despair nor the desert sun” (Liturgical Press, 1996, 267). It is as though Elijah found it easier to cope with emotions that were deadened than those that were raw and negative. Instead of acknowledging his responses to his pain, he sought to escape them altogether.

## Isolation and Divine Intervention

Metaphors so masterfully capture the essence of ideas and story. In the Elijah narrative, the solitary broom tree speaks volumes about Elijah’s chosen isolation. Walsh writes that “the solitariness of the broom tree is telling. The Hebrew counts it—‘he sat under *one* broom tree’—even though this species of shrub is not necessarily a solitary growth. But in the case of the solitary prophet who has just left his sole companion behind in Beer-sheba, the loneliness of *one* broom tree appropriately reflects his own isolation” (Liturgical Press, 1996, 267).

Elijah desperately needs an intervention. What God uses first and foremost is a meal of bread and water. For one raised in the Hebrew tradition, this would likely provoke memories of manna in the wilderness, a sign of God’s nurturing and faithful provision. The fact that a heavenly messenger delivered the repast is perhaps meant to evoke Elijah’s connection to his tribe and what Walter Brueggemann calls in *The Prophetic Imagination* the “energizing memories and radical hopes” of the God who has previously answered his prayers (Fortress, 2001, 1). Yet Elijah seems unmoved by the angelic encounter. Being in the presence of a being from the unseen dimension shatters no barriers in his psyche formed in relation to care, purpose, and direction in his life. The man who was emotionally charged by God’s work on Mount Carmel now seems indifferent. His seeming “deadness” is so entrenched that even encountering the *numinous*—Rudolf Otto’s term denoting “what is experienced in religion as the ‘holy’” (Bretzke 1998)—cannot arouse in him any sense of assurance or hope.

## Not Finished Yet

The angelic messenger realizes that as emotionally drained as Elijah is, his energy is not fully spent, and the broom tree is not his last stop. The messenger admonishes him to eat so he can endure the next leg of his journey: another forty days of travel to return to the place where Moses saw God’s glory (Exod. 33). For the time being, it is necessary to expose Elijah’s cognitive distortions so he can exit his depressed state. Instead of fleeing or suppressing his emotions, they must run their full gamut. Elijah will need emotional regulation in the presence of truth, and his body will need to move. Forty days will transition Elijah from his restless-yet-exhausted state to Horeb, where Israel’s God makes him more receptive to his intended future.

Elijah ultimately regains stability when he is joined with Elisha. Despite the elder’s irascible and isolating nature (1 Kings 19:20), he mentors Elisha, knowing that he will receive the mantle in due time. Despite Elijah’s dark season of depression, he is present to God and to God’s chosen successor when the time comes. In the pivotal moments before his own departure, one final piece of mentoring prepares Elisha to wear that mantle as God’s prophet.

Through the highs and lows, none of the events in Elijah’s prophetic life occurred apart from the realities of his humanity. His psychological state, temperament, and subjectivity were involved in his interaction with God and others. Shall we ignore these human factors in contemporary prophetism? If so, do we risk ignoring the fullness of God’s choice to work in, with, and through human agents? And do we lay ourselves open to the subtle but consequential deceptions that can undermine prophetic legitimacy? I propose that such a choice, even if it is made in ignorance, is a denial of God’s intent for Christ’s body, the church.