

Mendelssohn's Elijah – The Story

Background

Dateline: Israel, c 865 BC. Ahab is king. Some 60 years before he came to the throne the country was divided when the ten northern tribes, led by Jereboam, rebelled against Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Judah was left with the two remaining tribes and the capital city of Jerusalem, the key religious and strategic centre.

Without Jerusalem, Jereboam had to find other centres of worship, and so he set up golden calves to serve initially as symbols of the presence of Jehovah. This was a rather ambivalent gesture since the bull was also an object of Canaanite worship (a nature god, a Baal) and so began the invasion of foreign gods. Jezebel, Ahab's wife who was a daughter of the King of Tyre in Phoenicia, accelerated the process. The Phoenicians worshipped the nature god Melkart, known to the Israelites like all foreign gods as Baal. When Jezebel married Ahab she brought the idols, priests and prophets of her own religion with her.

Prologue (No 1)

Worship of Jehovah (God, the Lord of Israel) has dwindled. Elijah the prophet is very much a lone voice. He puts a curse on the whole country: there will be no precious rain until he gives the word.

The drought has become severe, but the people refuse to turn to God (Nos 2- 5)

As the overture ends the people cry for help. At first wearily and then more angrily they complain about the lack of water. Obadiah, Elijah's servant, tells them that the remedy is in their own hands: because of their transgressions Elijah has sealed the heavens through God's power. If they forsake their idols and return to God, if they truly seek him with all their hearts, God will relent.

Oh no, say the people. God mocks us; he has cursed us and will destroy us. He is a hard, jealous God and he will keep blaming a fourth generation for their great-grandparents' sins even though usually his mercies fall on those who love him and keep his commandments.

Elijah goes into hiding, and stays with a widow whose son he restores to life. (Nos 6-9)

In the meantime, Elijah is instructed to go into hiding in the east of the country at the brook of Cherith where ravens will find food for him. But even the water in the brook runs out, so he is further instructed to go to Zatepah where a widow will look after him. God will arrange that the supply of food will last until he sends rain again for a new crop.

The widow has a critically ill son and is really alarmed when Elijah arrives. Somewhat perversely, she blames Elijah for her son's illness because she thinks that the presence of a Man of God automatically brings hidden sins to light. God can no longer ignore them and will seek retribution. Her son becomes so ill he stops breathing. Elijah prays to God that the child may live. The widow's scepticism turns to belief when her son revives. Elijah urges her to fear God with all her heart, her soul and her might. The chorus comment that 'Blessed are those who fear God – they ever walk in the ways of peace. Through darkness light comes to the upright.'

The public contest to find 'Top God'. (Nos 10 – 17)

On the third anniversary of his original curse Elijah resolves to visit King Ahab and arrange for God to send rain again. Ahab regards Elijah as a real troublemaker, but Elijah boldly tells him to his face that it is Ahab himself and his ancestors who have caused all the trouble by worshipping Baal. He manages to persuade Ahab to gather the whole population at Mount Carmel and to summon the prophets of the gods whom the queen supports. There can be a contest to determine which god is top god – 'whose god is Lord'. He instructs that a bullock should be killed as a sacrifice (a burnt offering), but the fire under it is not to be lit. They must call upon their gods, he will call upon Jehovah, and whichever god causes the fire to be ignited shall be God the Lord.

Elijah invites the others to have first turn – there are a lot of them, but he is the only prophet of God left. The priests cry more and more urgently to Baal for a response. Elijah mocks them – perhaps he's in a meeting, out hunting or travelling somewhere? Perhaps he's asleep – why not cry louder and wake him up? Even though they try to wake him up, Elijah tells them that they are wasting their time. Their increasingly desperate cries are met by complete silence.

Elijah invites the people to gather round him and then calmly calls upon God – the god of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, the ancestors of the people – to prove himself and to show that Elijah is acting under his instructions. He asks that God will answer him, that he will show the people that he is Lord God and that the people's hearts may again be turned back to him. At this critical moment Mendelssohn inserts a Lutheran chorale as a sort of sung creed, a statement of universal belief in God.

Elijah invokes God's angels, his ministers of flaming fire, to descend. To the people's amazement fire descends from heaven and consumes the sacrifice. They fall in worship on their faces, acknowledge that Jehovah is God and declare that they will have none other.

Flushed with success, Elijah immediately calls for all the prophets of Baal to be seized and executed. 'Isn't Gods word like a hammer that breaks even rocks into pieces?' he declaims. The alto soloist reflects; 'Woe unto those who forsake God, destruction shall fall on them for they have transgressed against him. Even though God has redeemed them, they have fled from him: Woe unto them.'

The people pray for God's forgiveness: He sends rain in response. (Nos 18 – 20)

Obadiah, ever pragmatic, asks Elijah to help the people because the need for rain is desperate. The heathen gods failed miserably to bring rain: only God can solve the problem. So Elijah prays to God for rain and the people repeat his prayer. Elijah sends a child to see if rain clouds are gathering over the sea but there is nothing. Elijah says the lack of rain is God's answer to the people for rejecting him. The people ask for forgiveness and pray to God. At the third attempt Elijah makes an impassioned plea to God, the child announces a rapidly gathering rainstorm and the people joyfully give thanks to God because rain falls at last on the thirsty land.

SECOND PART

Introduction (Nos 21 and 22)

The second part of the oratorio opens with a soprano aria in which the people of Israel are reminded to pay attention to God for he will comfort and strengthen them. The chorus pick up the theme of 'Be not afraid, thy help is near, says God the Lord.'

Elijah accuses King Ahab of provoking God. Queen Jezebel turns the tables on Elijah who, dispirited, is forced into hiding in the wilderness. (Nos 23 – 29)

Now full of confidence, Elijah accuses King Ahab of provoking God in the first place by worshipping Baal and killing the righteous; as a result of his actions, God will wreak revenge on the people of Israel. The Queen stirs up the people – 'Haven't you heard what Elijah has prophesied against Israel?' 'Yes, we've heard it', say the people. 'Well, who governs the country, King Ahab or Elijah' asks the queen, calling for Elijah's blood and blaming him for the famine. 'Yes', say the people, 'it was Elijah who put the curse on the land in the first place. Why has he spoken in the name of the Lord? He shall die!'

Obadiah warns Elijah to escape to the wilderness and begs for his blessing before he leaves. Once there, Elijah's confidence is shattered and he prays to God that his life may come to an end – 'It is enough.' Despite all his efforts, the people of Israel have forsaken God and killed his prophets. 'Now let me die, Lord take away my life.' He goes to sleep in the wilderness under a juniper tree.

But God's angels gather round him and instruct him to look up to the mountains because God is coming to help him. The chorus comments that God watches over Israel and never slumbers or sleeps.

Elijah has difficulty keeping his spirits up, but he is told to go to Mt Sinai by an angel. God appears to him there and he is gathered up to heaven in a whirlwind. Nos 30 – 39)

An Angel wakes Elijah and tells him that he has a long journey to go to Horeb (aka Sinai), God's sacred mountain. Elijah asks God why he doesn't come down from heaven and amaze his adversaries – 'Why have you let them forsake you? Please let me die'. The Angel answers him: 'Rest in the Lord, be patient and he will grant your wish.' The chorus urge steadfastness: 'He who shall endure to the end will be saved'

Night falls, and Elijah prays again to God. An angel appears and tells him to stand on the mountain because God in all his glory will appear. The weather becomes violent: there is a hurricane, a tsunami, an earthquake and a firestorm, but God wasn't in any of them. Then there was a still, small voice, and onward came the Lord. Above him the seraphim stand who cry to each other 'Holy, holy is God the Lord. His glory has filled all the earth.'

The chorus reassure Elijah: 'Go on your way, for now God has seven thousand followers.' 'Yes', says Elijah – 'I go on my way in the strength of the Lord. Even though the mountains depart and the hills are removed, God's kindness and peace will not depart from me.'

The chorus describe how Elijah looks as though he is on fire. He overthrows mighty kings and hears the judgements of the future at Mount Horeb, and when God is ready to receive him in heaven a fiery chariot and horses appear which envelop him in a whirlwind. The tenor comments: 'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in their heavenly Father's realm.'

Epilogue - commentary on Elijah's role in the transformation from the old to the new covenant. (Nos 40 – 42)

The soprano remarks that God sent Elijah before the Great Day of the Lord so that he could turn the hearts of the people lest God come and smite the earth with a curse. The chorus then look forward to the next coming – one who from the rising of the sun shall call on his name and who will trample on princes. 'Behold my servant and mine elect in whom my soul delights.' 'O come unto him', sing the combined soloists, 'and your soul will live forever.'

The chorus declare as the oratorio concludes: 'Then shall your light break forth as the light of morning..... and the glory of the Lord ever shall reward you. O Lord our Creator, how excellent your name is in all the heavens.'

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