

FAITH: BE IN IT!

Sunday 26th June 2016

2 Kings 2: 1-14



What do the movies: District 9, Independence Day, Village of the Damned, The Day the Earth Stood Still and War of the Worlds all have in common? Well, for movie buffs it's pretty obvious. These movies all refer to, or focus on, aliens - creatures from outer space who, in some way or another, make contact with the earth.

As an impressionable high school student, my eldest daughter went through a phase when just about every episode of the television science-fiction series, The X-Files, was viewed. Here, the idiosyncratic FBI Agents, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, investigated unsolved cases involving paranormal phenomena. Such a surreal television series made for great viewing especially as tensions between Mulder, who believed in the existence of aliens, and Scully, who worked to debunk such theories through careful scientific analysis, were played out every week.

The idea of aliens watching us from outer space is not a new phenomenon. In my undergraduate days studying archaeology and ancient history at Sydney University I remember a massive controversy centered around a fellow by the name of Erich Von Daniken. In 1968 he published a contentious little book titled Chariots of the Gods? - Unsolved Mysteries of the Past.

Von Daniken's hypothesis claimed aliens visited this earth in ancient times and left their mark. Just look at the Egyptian Pyramids, the megalithic structures of the ancient Americas, Stonehenge and the Moai figures of Easter Island. In Von Daniken's terms, these could never have been constructed by mere mortals.

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Then there are the Nazca lines in Peru that could only be, in Van Daniken's terms, landing strips for alien spaceships while the Ark of the Covenant, that plays a big part in the Old Testament, could only have been a secret communication device used by and for aliens.



With these claims in mind, Von Daniken refers to Ezekiel 1:4 where the prophet exclaims:

"I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north - an immense cloud with flashing lighting and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. This was their appearance: they were of human form, but each of them had four faces and four wings..."

For Von Daniken and his followers this was surely the description of a spaceship manned by aliens. Meanwhile Von Daniken perpetuates such a line of thinking with references to Jeremiah 4:13 and the description of chariots that spin and swiftly fly, to Zechariah 6:1 where the prophet sights four flying vehicles coming from between two bronze coloured mountains and to Job where the Lord is said to speak from a spinning flying object (Job 38:1).

But it's the reading today from 2 Kings that calls for our attention.

Von Daniken seizes on this text to claim, yet again, there is evidence for another spaceship sighting as a spinning chariot of fire lifts the prophet, Elijah, to heaven. Listen again to what is written in the pages of the Old Testament:

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“As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.” (2 Kings 2:11).

Now, this is pretty amazing stuff. And we may well laugh at Von Daniken’s hypothesis. But how are we to understand such an event. How are we to make sense of such a story? Did Elijah really ride a chariot of fire into heaven - and in doing so was he either hijacked by aliens or did he become a spaceman himself?



To get a handle on all this it’s important to understand a little about this prophet, Elijah.

In simple terms, Elijah was a fiery ninth century BCE agitator who came from an area east of the Jordan River to wage a war in the name of God against the pagan gods of the day, the baals. Here Elijah spent a significant part of his life confronting the king, Ahab, who was new to throne.

Ahab married Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, and with this marriage came a softening towards popular middle-eastern religious practices of the day that focused on agricultural cycles, fertility rites and the appeasement of the weather gods.

For Elijah, an enthusiastic, dedicated follower of God, there was to be no compromise. Apostasy leads to disaster and King Ahab’s reign would be severely judged as he erected hundreds of altars to these fertility gods and to the weather gods. Such actions contravened, indeed they insulted the call to follow Yahweh, the one true God of Israel.

Elijah is considered to be one of, if not the most important prophets of ancient Israel. His name is a cognate of two words that refer to God, namely “El” and “Yah” that express the attributes of God as Creator and Provider.

As Creator, God is sovereign. There are no other gods. Indeed, such a God calls for absolute loyalty, complete commitment and utter faithfulness. To falter is to arouse God’s displeasure. It is to incur God’s judgment in the wake of God’s call to just, faithful, righteous living.

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As Provider, God is merciful and compassionate. Here there is a call to care for the vulnerable and to promote the needs of the marginalized and the poor. Indeed, the corollary of this is a bringing down of God's wrath upon those who exercise power and might in unjust, unscrupulous, underhanded ways.

Indeed, in the course of Elijah's ministry the idea of God as Provider is manifest in Elijah's defense of Nathan as the king tries to annex his land (I Kings 21:1-21), as Elijah feeds the poor (I Kings 17:8-16) and as Elijah raises the widow's dying son (I Kings 17:17-24).

God's attribute as sovereign Creator is clearly manifest in one of the most amazing scenes in the Bible as Elijah takes on the gods of baal in that dramatic story on Mount Carmel. Elijah declares Ahab has forsaken God and he challenges the king to a contest where Elijah's God, Yahweh, runs out a clear winner (1 Kings 18:20-40).

This story states emphatically that Elijah's God is sovereign. Elijah's God is the one true God. Moreover, Elijah's God has no time for the scheming antics of those who rot the system, who promote fear, perpetuate injustice or pander to human vanity and greed.

Indeed, in what all of us would say today is a particularly brutal, bloodthirsty, most unacceptable act, Elijah deals with this situation by having the prophets of Baal, all 850 of them, put to the sword.

In today's reading the focus is on Elijah exiting this world of calamity and literally passing the mantle of his prophetic calling on to his follower, Elisha. This comes about in a sequence of three important journeys or events that culminate in Elijah's ascension to heaven.

And this is where we encounter that chariot of fire!

Friends, the point of Elijah's ministry, and the ministry he hands on to Elisha, is one that concerns the right and proper use of power. Worshipping the baals involved seeking the means by which the power of the gods could be harnessed and controlled to one's mutual advantage - whether it be control of the elements or whether it be influence over a fertility god to achieve good fortune or a bumper wheat harvest.

Elijah's ministry is set within such a power framework. That's why Elijah comes across as a fiery, zealous, audacious person who is willing to call a "spade a spade" and who is more than ready to take on both the civil and religious powers of the day.

And into this realm comes the chariot of fire!

For you see, one of the principal gods in the Canaanite pantheon was known as the "rider of the clouds" - the "god of lightning and thunder", the "mightiest of warriors", the "Lord of the sky and the earth."

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And here scripture, with its reference to Elijah's amazing ascent into heaven, makes a statement that basically says, anything the Canaanites can produce, we can do better!

Indeed, if Baal is the "rider of the clouds", if Baal is the "Lord of the sky and the earth" then Elijah's God can go one better as the one who opens heaven to accept those who God wishes to receive. In other words the point of this story is simply this. God reigns supreme. There is no other God. Any imitation, no matter how elaborate and how startling, falls into obscurity.

Hence, the story of Elijah's chariot of fire is effectively a polemic against the popular religion of the time.

And friends, what does this mean for us today? Is the story of Elijah's ascent into heaven simply a curious tale from antiquity? Is it an evocative tale from a by-gone era, a high-blown but now irrelevant relic from the past? Or is it merely a colourful story designed to feed the fertile minds and the rampant postulating of people like Erich Von Daniken?

I think not. For, you see, the story of Elijah has, I believe, two critical things to say to us today.

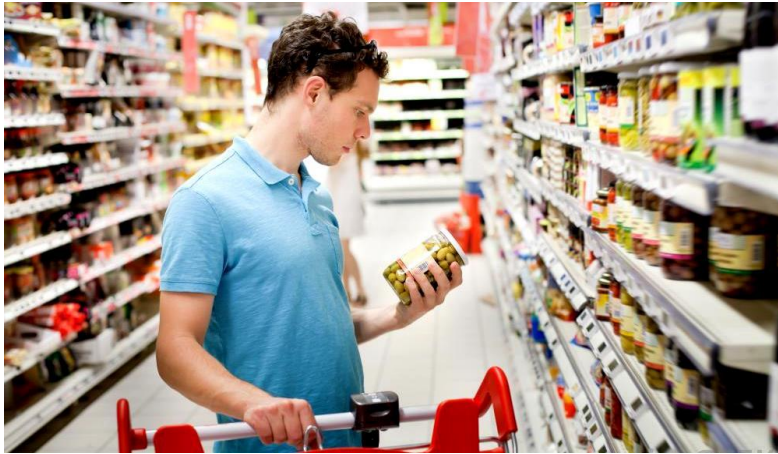
Firstly, the God we proclaim and the God who we follow in Jesus Christ does not involve a question of options. Placing God above the baals of Elijah's time sends us a message. And that message is this - we are to make God top priority, we are to give God absolute precedence in our lives. God is never to be runner-up to other things that we may choose to cling to or value.



Secondly, faith in God and a life in Christ is no soft option. Everything about Elijah and his faith was bold, audacious and, indeed, courageous. There is a strong message here for us.

I don't know about you, but it's so easy to take a "smorgasbord" approach to God. By this I mean taking an approach to God much like one approaches a buffet lunch. We choose something here and we take something there - according to how we feel, to what we want or prefer.

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Such an approach treats God like a series of preferences that are simply there to meet our needs or to serve our ends. Such an approach translates into a participation in church activities simply when it suits one to do so. Or it means giving to the collection plate simply what spare cash one has on the day. It's a "take to or leave it", "easy-come, easy-go", "up to me" attitude to God.

And, dare I say, that firey, audacious, loud-mouthed Elijah says such an approach won't do!

Moreover, it's so easy to take a "comfortably numb" posture when declaring a position on faith. Here the matter of a life in Christ becomes just another agenda item among many that are designed to keep one busy and make life bearable.

Of all the Hebrew prophets, Elijah stands as one of, if not, the closest precursor to both John the Baptist and to Jesus. And at the center of this is the need to engage in a change of heart. There is a need for a tipping point where things are reversed, where accepted values and ways of doing things are seriously challenged and turned completely on their heads.

For, you see, Elijah confronted the popularism and the power structures of his day. Elijah did this with a faith that refused to accommodate to anything that undermined the integrity of who God is.

Indeed, here faith is not about what one wants to believe. Faith is not about what one feels comfortable with. And it's not about what one needs. Rather, faith is a response to what God asks of us. Faith is a commitment to what God calls us to be!

Now, with such a dramatic story as Elijah's chariot of fire ascending to heaven on the agenda one could be led into thinking faith and life as a people of God is a pretty much an "out there", extravagant, outrageous, indeed controversial, even subversive thing. And under the leadership of Elijah it no doubt was. For Israel, some 800 years before the birth of Christ, was a vigorous, religiously dynamic place to be.

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But the world we live in today is so different. We no longer speak about a confrontation between the religion of popularism and faith in Christ. We rarely make the point that God is sovereign, that God rules above the powers and principalities of this age to the point that, for example, policies developed and promises made during an election campaign must all, ultimately, be accountable to God - and not to our sense of fear, to our need for security or to our desire to deepen our hip pockets.

Indeed, with these things in mind, I feel we are managing to anaesthetize the church concerning the urgency to openly proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. The community is effectively sedating itself when it comes to the need to speak clearly and courageously about issues of mercy and justice. We are submerging ourselves in a pretence that says we are simply too busy, life is too hectic to actually attend to the things of God.

Moreover we risk masquerading about who we are as Christians. We choose indifference concerning what Jesus really calls us to do. We begin to take on signs of amnesia when it comes to radical discipleship. Meanwhile, all the time God is saying to us - come on, get on with it - there's a lot at stake out there!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the challenge is to take a leaf out of Elijah's book and be a little more audacious. The call is to listen to Elijah's witness and be more bold about matters of faith. The summons is to note the incredible spectacle of Elijah's experience and be more courageous about issues of justice and peace. Indeed, the urgency is to respond to Elijah's example and be more resolute about what God calls us to be - even to the point of risk.

For, you see, we can go through life - indifferent, impassive, withdrawn, detached and oblivious to what God is really calling us to be. Or we can "get with it", we can revel in the joy of being God's persons, we can feast in the privilege of following Jesus, we can celebrate in the courage and integrity of bearing witness to the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Light of the World.



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Friends, Elijah no doubt grabs our attention - Elijah no doubt dazzles. Elijah no doubt astonishes and overwhelms. For, Elijah demands to be seen. Elijah insists to be heard. Elijah hankers for us to take God seriously and to make faith an absolute priority.

What is your response?

Is it, as the tired, withdrawn Snoopy dog demonstrates, a spot on the kennel?

Or is it, as the revived, excited Snoopy dog shows, a place in the sun - where we all share in the joy of being God's loving, generous, passionate, merciful people.

Elijah's testimony calls us all to wake up to life and to live faith to the fullest - as we are challenged to affirm:

Life be in it - faith be in it!

What's it going to be for you – the choice is yours!

Amen.



John Barr

Questions for Discussion:

- How do you describe Elijah's witness?
- In what ways is Elijah a precursor to John the Baptist and Jesus?
- A "smorgasbord" approach to following Jesus and participating in the life of the church - together with a "comfortably numb" posture in terms of faith – is this a fair way of describing the situation we face today? How does Elijah speak to such a scenario?
- Which "Snoopy dog" do you identify with? How and why would you change?