

Encounter with the Living God

When Elijah reached Horeb, the mountain of God, he 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?' 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.' 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; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

1 Kings 19.9-13

There is a text in the Torah – the first part of the Bible which culminates with God's revelations to Moses – where God says to Moses that 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33.20). It is one of the foundational texts in the entire Scriptural testimony, describing how we *behold* and *recognise* God. We note especially the *elusiveness* of God's appearance to our human senses and ability to understand. One of God's defining characteristics is to be *transcendent* – to exceed anything which we can see, perceive, or know. The Old Testament, in particular, is fastidious in respecting this transcendence when it speaks of God himself.

The moment when God discloses himself to Moses – a *partial* disclosure, since the *fullness of God* is more than any of us could bear – is marked by intriguing detail, some of which foreshadows God later disclosure of himself to *Elijah*. (Remember that Moses and Elijah are the witnesses who accompany Jesus in his Transfiguration: cf Matthew 17.3-5; they alert us that this, too, is an encounter with God which follows the same pattern as they had known in the past.) This is how God shows himself to Moses:

Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he [God] said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' And the Lord continued, 'See, there

is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock; and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.' Exodus 33.18-23

It is an *almost*-encounter, but *not quite*. The *presence* of God, and God's *effects* in the world, are *completely tangible*; but God himself remains *unseen* – and not only unseen; but *unseeable*. Notice the sophistication with which the text describes this as a manifestation of God's *goodness* – something less than the very fullness of God, who remains inaccessible and just out of reach. (In the New Testament this becomes the reason why Jesus Christ *comes to us*, not the other way round: he makes himself accessible by *self-emptying* and *self-humbling* in the manner described so eloquently by the Apostle Paul: cf Philippians 2.5-11.) The Old Testament encounters take place only when our *direct gaze* is blocked or averted. It is *oblique*. God's elusiveness – seemingly half-present but also half-absent *at the same time* – does not mean that these texts are talking nonsense, but that they are recording something which *exceeds description and account*.



So it is that when he visits *Elijah* – exemplar of the tradition of the *prophets* just as Moses is exemplar of the tradition of the 'law' – God is recognised not in himself, but through his *effects*. Unlike the whirlwind, the earthquake and the fire, which herald an encounter with something earth-shattering

in its significance, *God himself* slips past as something like *silence*. We *perceive* that he passed by (there is no *doubt* about it); but we missed the moment itself. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas compares it to someone ringing the doorbell; but when we get to the door, they have already gone. We know that they were *there*; but they eluded us.

As we reflect on the subtlety of these encounters with the Living God, let us not think this elusiveness a reflection of weak or poor faith. Instead, may our own near-encounters with God and with the effects he has upon us be an encouragement and strength, as they were to Moses and Elijah.

The image shows a cave on Mount Sinai traditionally linked with Elijah