

Elijah
The Lonely Zealot



Elchanan Samet

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ELIJAH
THE LONELY ZEALOT

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Maggid Books

Elijah
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First Edition, 2021

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

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Cover image: "Elijah the Prophet" by Nicholas Roerich (1931)

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *The Jewish Book Trust*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-533-6, *hardcover*

Printed and bound in the United States

In honor of our parents

Miriam and Bernard Hochstein

*whose commitment to learning Torah
and generosity of mind and spirit
inspired us*

להגדיל תורה ולהאדיר

In memory of

Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Braun

and

Mr. and Mrs. Norman Liberman

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Preface to the English Edition

Elijah: *The Lonely Zealot* presents a systematic literary commentary on the chapters in the book of Kings in which the prophet Elijah appears.

Elijah first makes an appearance in chapter 17 of I Kings, and he continues to be at the center of events until chapter 2 of II Kings (excluding chapters 20 and 22 of I Kings). There are six different episodes in these chapters, and we have devoted a series of studies to each of them, with the titles: (1) The Drought, (2) Carmel, (3) Horeb, (4) Naboth, (5) Ahaziah, and (6) The Storm.

For each episode, the series of studies constitutes a “close reading” of that episode. However, each study deals with a separate topic and can be read independently.

Elijah’s powerful character is at the core of the six episodes discussed in this book, some of which are among the most turbulent of the biblical narratives. Is there a central theme that links these stories, other than Elijah’s appearance as the main character in each of them? Do the chapters attempt to deal with, and perhaps even answer, a focal question that lies in the background of the Elijah narratives?

The answer to these questions seems to be yes. The prophet’s policy of action often aroused opposition and protest among the people

with whom he came into contact. The main question facing the reader is: To what extent is a prophet's policy of action, inasmuch as it is the product of his own initiative, accepted by the One who sent him?

This book was first published in Hebrew in 2003 with the title *Pirkei Eliyahu*, by Ma'aliyot Publishers of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, Maale Adumim; it was republished as a new edition in 2009, by Yedi'ot Sefarim.

This English translation has been made possible thanks to the generosity of Susan and Barnet Liberman and Suzanne and Michael Hochstein. I owe them my deepest gratitude.

Kaeren Fish, whose translations of my writings have accompanied me for many years, translated this volume. I am delighted that her translation of this work is the first of my writings to appear in English as a book, thus opening the door for many more readers. May Ms. Fish see blessing in all her endeavors.

I am most grateful to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, editors Rachelle Emanuel, Debbie Ismailoff, and Ita Olesker, and the entire staff at Maggid Books, who have worked hard to publish this book in its current format.

Elijah: The Lonely Zealot is complemented by the Hebrew book *Pirkei Elisha* (Tel Aviv: Miskal Publishing, 2009), which goes on to explain, by means of the same literary methods that I use in this volume, the sections in the book of Kings that focus on the prophet Elisha, Elijah's disciple and successor. In that book we examine, among other issues, the emotional and practical bond between the mentor and his disciple, a bond that we begin to see and discuss in the present volume. In *Pirkei Elisha*, additional light is shed on the character of Elijah. It is possible that at some time in the future, it too will be translated into English.

I thank God for granting me the privilege of seeing this book, the first of my books to be published in English translation, in print. Now those who are unable to read *Pirkei Eliyahu* in the original Hebrew will be able to become acquainted with the ideas, interpretations, and analytical methods proposed in *Elijah: The Lonely Zealot*.

Elchanan Samet
Kfar Etzion, July 2021

Introduction

THE ELIJAH AND ELISHA NARRATIVES: UNIQUE ASPECTS

Starting with Elijah's appearance in chapter 17 of I Kings, the book of Kings devotes several chapters to the personality and actions of this great prophet and, later, to those of his disciple and successor, Elisha. This extended focus on the two prophets – even where they do not directly affect the history of the Kingdom of Israel – is a phenomenon unparalleled in Tanakh. (Moses and Samuel are also at the center of the books describing their activities, but in addition to being prophets they are also leaders of the nation, while Elijah and Elisha serve only as prophets.)

The stories of Elijah and Elisha share a number of special characteristics:

1. *Multiplicity of miracles*: This is particularly noticeable in comparison with the paucity of miracles performed both before the appearance of Elijah and after Elisha leaves the scene. For the most part these miracles seem to be performed at the initiative of Elijah or Elisha alone; only very rarely is a miracle based on an explicit divine command. There are even miracles where there is no mention whatsoever of God's name. In addition, some of the miracles are performed for the prophets' own benefit or for the benefit of a single individual, rather than in response to any national need.
2. *Continuity*: Elisha, who is Elijah's disciple and attendant, is also his heir and successor as a prophet of Israel. This phenomenon has no

- parallel in all the history of prophecy. Admittedly, it is somewhat reminiscent of the relationship between Moses and Joshua, but the latter serves as Moses's successor as national leader, not as a prophet. The unique relationship between Elijah and Elisha demands that we pay close attention to the link between the two sets of narratives, especially to those stories in which the two prophets are described together. Similarly, this unique relationship calls for a constant comparison between the deeds of the disciple and those of his mentor.
3. *Literary framework*: This comprises individual narratives, at the center of which stands the prophet. From the collection of narratives as a whole, we gain understanding of the prophet's character and his unique prophetic approach.

The singular nature of the stories of Elijah and Elisha raises several questions, which we shall address later on.

ELIJAH'S APPEARANCE IN KING AHAB'S GENERATION

Few prophets are mentioned in the book of Kings prior to the arrival of Elijah. So why does Elijah appear in the Kingdom of Israel at this specific time, leading to intensified prophetic activity from this period onward?

The Kingdom of Israel, ever since its establishment under the reign of Jeroboam son of Nebat, deteriorated steadily. It is easy to see how the religious sins went hand in hand with the internal political disintegration of the kingdom. Rapid degeneration characterized the kingdom, especially during the period prior to the rise of Omri, as described in I Kings, chapter 16.

A significant change occurred with the rise of the House of Omri to power. With the stabilization of the kingdom, the political assassinations that had been frequent occurrences until then ceased, and the internal regime in Israel became secure. Omri and his son, Ahab, also made efforts to fortify their kingdom through large-scale construction, reinforcement of the army, and a foreign policy based upon treaties with neighboring countries. The relations between the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah changed completely, and they became allies to the extent that marriages were forged between the two royal houses. The treaty with the kingdom of Tyre and Sidon was renewed, and here

too, marriages cemented the bonds between the two royal houses, with Ahab marrying Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon. This period was one of promising political ascendancy for the Kingdom of Israel. These processes did not happen spontaneously; the vision and efforts of Omri and of his son Ahab brought about this progress, and both the biblical text and *Hazal* give them credit for this.

However, alongside this process of political revival, the Kingdom of Israel underwent an inverse process of religious decline. The contrast between these two developments is described already during the reign of Omri, founder of the dynasty:

He bought the Samaria mountain from Shemer for two talents of silver, and he built up the mountain and called the name of the city which he built after Shemer, the owner of the Samaria mountain. But Omri did evil in the eyes of God, and he did worse than all those who had preceded him. He walked in all the ways of Jeroboam ... to anger God, the Lord of Israel. ... The rest of the things that Omri did, and the valor that he performed, are they not written. ... (I Kings 16:24–27)

On one hand, Omri built up a new capital city, thereby symbolizing, like David before him, his intention to introduce a new national era. On the other hand, he “did evil in the eyes of God... worse than all those who had preceded him.” On one hand, he angered God; on the other hand, he performed mighty acts of valor in Israel’s wars against its enemies.

This dissonance becomes even more acute in the days of Ahab, his son. Here we discover that there is a connection between the two processes:

Ahab, the son of Omri, did worse in God’s eyes than all those who preceded him. It was an easy thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat: *He took as a wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonites, and he went and served Baal and bowed down to him.* He established an altar to Baal in the house of Baal which he had built in the Samaria. And Ahab made an

ashera, and Ahab did more to anger God, the Lord of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who had preceded him.” (16:30–33)

Within the framework of the political covenant with the kingdom of Sidon (a covenant dating back to the days of David and Solomon), Omri married his son to Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. Thus, for the first time, the stage was set for institutionalized idolatry in Israel, supported by the royal family.¹

It quickly becomes apparent that Jezebel was a forceful woman – both in relation to Ahab, her husband, and to the kingdom which she had entered. While the wives of King Solomon had exploited his old age in order to build altars to their gods, apparently for personal worship, Jezebel tried to import idolatrous worship into Israel on a grand scale. She brought hundreds of prophets of Baal with her from her birthplace, and it seems that it was on her initiative that the altar to Baal was established in the city of Samaria. These steps aroused the opposition of the prophets of God, and therefore Jezebel instituted a campaign of persecution in order to eliminate them from the kingdom; it is possible that this campaign even included destruction of God’s altars. Such deeds had never before been perpetrated in Israel.

Jezebel also interfered in other aspects of the administration of the kingdom; the story of the vineyard of Naboth illustrates the corrupt norms that she introduced into the regime.

Despite all this, Ahab was a great king, promoting the benefit of his nation, as he understood it, fighting Israel’s wars selflessly when necessary, doing much to build up the kingdom and its army, and implementing a foreign policy of great scope and vision.

Such a generation and such a king required a prophet of great stature, who had no fear of persecution and would not hesitate to make his voice heard, to berate and rebuke the nation and its king, and even to punish when necessary. The success of the House of Omri in those public spheres in which the kings were active contrasts starkly with their very grave actions in the religious sphere. This contradiction demanded

1. According to some commentators, Jeroboam’s act of placing golden calves in Beit El and in Dan was not true idol worship but rather an inappropriate way of serving God.

the appearance of a prophet who was able to warn of the results of such sins. In these historical circumstances, there was a need for a prophet with sufficient personality to draw both king and nation after him.

PERFORMING MIRACLES WITHOUT A DIVINE COMMAND

It is clear that miracles were the main “tools” that Elijah and Elisha employed to fulfill their prophetic mission. Their miraculous acts might be compared to the prophetic monologues delivered by prophets of later generations (Hosea, etc.). But while these oral prophecies generally emphasize that the prophets were conveying God’s word (and even when this is not stated explicitly, it is implicit in what they say), the miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha were not, for the most part, commanded by God. In most cases the prophet did not even offer a prayer. We may therefore assume that these prophets operated on their own initiative and at their own discretion and, nevertheless, God answered them and fulfilled their wishes. Indeed, this is the situation as Maimonides describes it in his Introduction to the Mishna (R. Shilat edition, p. 29):

All that Elijah and Elisha and the other prophets did in the realm of wonders was not done in order to establish their prophecy, for their prophecy had already been confirmed previously. Rather, they performed these wonders because they needed them, and owing to their closeness to God He fulfilled their wishes, as it is written concerning the righteous, “You shall utter a decree and it shall be fulfilled for you” (Job 22:28).

Rabbi Joseph Albo, in the fourth article of his *Sefer Halkarim*, condenses this idea into a principle of faith:

It is a great principle of the Torah, and a root of faith... that the blessed God bends nature under the feet of the believers... and certainly by the word of the prophets, who could perform as many miracles as they decreed. Elijah said, “As God lives... if there will be dew and rain for these years, except by my word” (I Kings 17:1); he also said, “If I am a man of God, let fire descend from heaven and consume you and your fifty men” (II Kings 1:10) – and it was

so. Likewise, Elisha said, “At this time tomorrow, a *se’a* of fine flour will be sold for a shekel” (II Kings 7:1), and it was so; also, the iron floated (II Kings 6:6), in addition to the rest of the miracles that he performed without any preceding prophecy or divine command.

However, not all the commentators agree. Some assume the existence of a divine command or a prayer offered by the prophet concerning each individual miracle. Rabbi Yitzhak Arama, for instance, differs sharply with Rabbi Albo; in the eighth chapter of *Akedat Yitzhak* he writes:

I am certain, concerning all of the prophets and righteous men that [Rabbi Albo] mentions, that if there had been no divine command concerning each instance, they would not have performed [the wonders] on their own accord.”

Other commentators deliberate on this question in several places in their commentaries. See, for example, below, “The Drought,” chapter 2.

Straightforward reading of the text would seem to support the view of Maimonides and Rabbi Albo. If we examine the rare cases in which there is a divine command or a prayer to God offered by the prophet prior to the performance of the miracle, we see that these instances are the exception, implying that where no command or prayer is mentioned, the miracle took place without them, on the initiative and by decree of the prophet alone.

One of the commentators who adopts the opinion of Maimonides and Rabbi Albo is Abrabanel, and he raises the following question:

As to the stature of [Elisha] as a prophet, there is no doubt that the text attests to it and to that of Elijah. . . . It appears from their actions that most of what they performed in wondrous ways was done on their own initiative: They made decrees concerning natural phenomena, and their word was fulfilled. We must then ask: *How did these prophets merit . . . to perform the miracles without a divine command?* (Abrabanel, commentary on II Kings 8:1–6)

The answer that we propose to this question represents, in our view, the necessary background for understanding the status of Elijah and Elisha in Tanakh and for an understanding of their activity in general. It is also the key to the exegetical study of their actions, as the end of this introduction will show.

THE PROPHET'S PART IN THE DIVINE MISSION

Is the prophet merely a vehicle to convey God's word to his listeners (a sort of recording and broadcasting device which receives a frequency that is inaudible to others, which he "translates" into audible speech), or is he an active partner in the effort to achieve the aims of his prophetic mission? It would seem that the second description is more accurate: The prophet is required to place all his talents and ability, his very personality, and even his personal lifestyle at the disposal of his mission.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 89a) states: "No two prophets prophesy in the same style." God's word, then, appears in a verbal garb suited to the style – the personality and traits – of the prophet who declares it. The prophet must couch God's word in the most suitable terms and concepts he can find in his vocabulary, using the literary and rhetorical devices that will best succeed in conveying the content of the message to the listener. The prophet's unique style is what creates the literary form in which the prophetic message, or substance, manifests itself. This substance is like a soul that gives life to the body, but it is also dependent on it. A change in style, a change in the form in which God's word appears, will necessarily affect the image of the inner substance. This intimate relationship between substance and form makes the prophet a partner in the prophetic mission, in the full sense of the word.

This is true of prophetic *speech*. However, the early prophets, who preceded the oratory prophets, are characterized by the *acts* that they performed in the various spheres of their prophetic activity. What is the nature of the partnership between the prophet and his Sender in these acts? Does any such partnership exist here?

Sometimes the prophet is commanded by God, "Go and do such and such." Even then, the fulfillment of God's command within the conditions of a dynamic and changing reality requires resourcefulness on

the part of the prophet. He must enlist his own originality and initiative, and adapt himself to the prevailing conditions, as he perceives them.

However, sometimes the divine command indicates to the prophet only the long-term aim of his mission. Then the prophet must bridge the gap between the present situation and the future when the purpose of his mission will be achieved. He must create all the intermediate stages himself, with no explicit instructions. How is he to do this? Obviously, by enlisting all of his human resources, placing all his abilities at the disposal of his mission, and exerting maximum physical and spiritual effort. Clearly, the choice of strategy to achieve the aim of his mission is left to the prophet's discretion. This discretion, and the way he chooses to implement his strategy, will depend on his personality, on his personal style. This individual style of operating corresponds to the verbal style of the oratory prophet. We may paraphrase the words of the Talmud and add that "no two prophets operate in the same style."

All of the above is equally applicable to a scenario in which an agent represents a human dispatcher: To the extent that the agent is loyal to his handler or supervisor, he will exert every effort to fulfill his mission successfully, even when he lacks precise instructions for every stage of the mission and every possible situation that may arise. Some situations may help him and he should take advantage of them, while others are likely to harm his mission and he must overcome them. We learn what is expected of a loyal emissary from the detailed and repeated description in the Torah of the way in which Abraham's servant went about fulfilling the mission entrusted to him by his master in very few words (Gen. 24). In the book of Proverbs, too, we find some insightful adages concerning loyal agents (see, for example, 13:17 and 25:13). If all of this is true concerning a mission on behalf of a mortal, how much more so concerning a mission that God entrusts to His prophets.

PROPHETIC ACTS WITHOUT AN EXPLICIT COMMAND

What is the prophet's part within his partnership with God in the actions that he performs as part of his prophetic mission? We have already stated that his role changes in accordance with the nature of his mission and the

command that he is given. We may add that the greater the prophet, the greater is his human part in the fulfillment of his mission as a prophet. To clarify this point, let us return to our metaphor of a mortal dispatcher.

A person who sends his messenger on a highly important, complex mission will formulate his instructions in accordance with the agent's personality and level. If the agent is inexperienced, and his loyalty has not yet been proven, or if he is not very intelligent, the dispatcher will take care to make his instructions as detailed as possible. He will enumerate several possible situations that the agent may encounter, and will guide him how to respond in each instance. If possible, he will request that the agent maintain continuous contact with him, in order to receive ongoing guidance as he progresses. In this scenario, where the dispatcher has little confidence in his agent, the latter is left with not much room for independent action. He is certainly a loyal emissary, following his instructions with great precision, but ultimately, he is not a very effective one.

The picture is quite different if the agent is experienced, wise and intelligent, and completely loyal to his dispatcher. In such a case, the dispatcher can entrust him with the mission with just the briefest mention of the final aim. The dispatcher will be quite confident that the agent will achieve the aim in the best possible way, using his own initiative and drawing on his rich experience, altogether focused on the wishes of his dispatcher to whom he is close and whom he understands well.

Let us now return to the prophet participating in the fulfillment of his mission, and ask: How are we to relate to and evaluate those actions which he performs on his own initiative? Are they actions that are performed "by God's word," to be considered as though they had been explicitly commanded? On one hand, it is difficult to make such an assertion, since God does not in fact command these actions; they are based on the prophet's own discretion, on his "style," and hence their source is mortal. On the other hand, the prophet is apparently required to perform these acts; they are required by virtue of the divine command that indicates only the final aim. These acts express the partnership discussed above, between God and His prophet. For this reason, we frequently find clear expressions – either by the prophet or in the text – indicating that these actions are performed "by God's word." The prophet's actions

bear a divine seal of approval, for his intention is directed toward his Dispatcher; he aims to fulfill His wishes and achieve His aims.

ELIJAH'S AND ELISHA'S PROPHETIC MISSION

Let us now return to agents of mortal dispatchers. In days gone by, it was quite common for wealthy landowners to leave the administration and operation of their estate in the hands of a representative whom they would appoint. This steward would be left alone to operate at his discretion, the general aim being to run the estate in optimal fashion for the benefit of its owner. Only once in a long while would the steward present himself before the landowner and report on his actions and his plans.

It was rare for a landowner to find a steward so loyal, so aware of his preferences, and so capable in his job that it was possible to leave the running of the estate completely in his hands, such that he would operate in place of the owner, with almost total freedom.

A superficial observation would mislead one to identify the steward (who would usually reside in the landowner's castle) as the landowner himself. Only someone who knew the steward to be less well-to-do than his surroundings would suggest, or who saw him performing all manner of labor around the estate that was not appropriate for someone of the owner's apparent means, would realize that he was operating as the agent of the wealthy landowner.

The same relationship can exist in the realm of prophecy. To the extent that the prophet appears to act independently within the framework of his prophetic mission, not requiring explicit commands from God telling him what to do, we may conclude that he is a great and responsible prophet, loyal to God. A proper perception of his actions shows them to be undertaken with their Dispatcher's approval and with the intention of fulfilling His will; thus these, too, are performed "by God's word."

This is the key to understanding most of the acts that Elijah and Elisha performed of their own accord and at their own discretion, as part of their mission to serve as prophets for their generation. They were entrusted with the general task of guiding Israel, God's inheritance. They were loyal stewards to the "Landowner"; God handed them the keys, as it were, and relied on their judgment to do everything necessary for God's "estate" to flourish and produce abundant fruit.

We can now understand the multiplicity of miracles that characterize the respective careers of these two prophets. They performed them, in general, at their own discretion and without any command, in order to combat the mistaken impression that their messages were not inspired by God's word. The miracle was proof that their actions were performed by God's word, for no mortal could generate such wonders without God acceding to the prophet's will in initiating them. The miracle served as a divine stamp of approval, certifying that the "Landowner" approved of what His prophet-agent was doing.

THREE LEVELS OF PROPHETIC ACTS

We have mentioned that the prophet may act based on his own judgment and his human understanding as part of his partnership in the prophetic mission. We must then ask: Is it possible that the prophet might be mistaken in his judgment and his desire to perform some act that is not suited to, or will not have any value in relation to, the aim of his mission, such that his actions will be undesirable in God's eyes?

When God gives the prophet explicit instructions as to what he must do, it would seem that there is no room for error. Our question concerns those actions performed by the prophet as part of his mission without any explicit divine command.

Our answer must be that it is indeed possible for errors to occur, for the source of the prophet's action is within himself. Since he is mortal, he is not immune to human weaknesses. Therefore, when it comes to actions that are undertaken based on personal judgment, it is possible for the prophet to be mistaken, or for there to be some deviation from the divine will.

We may mention here three examples of prophets who tried to act in a certain way, as part of their prophetic mission, without any divine command – and were mistaken:

1. Samuel is sent by God to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the future king of Israel in place of Saul. Upon setting eyes on Eliab, the eldest, he is certain that this is the chosen son. He proclaims, "Surely God's anointed one is before Him!" (I Sam. 16:6). But God rebukes him

for his mistake: “Do not pay attention to his outward appearance... for it is not as man sees it: Man sees [only] with his eyes, but God looks into the heart” (v. 7).

2. David approaches Nathan the prophet, expressing a desire to build an edifice to house the Ark of the Covenant. Nathan tells him, “All that is in your heart, go and do, for God is with you” (II Sam. 7:3). But the same night Nathan receives a prophetic message telling him that God does not want David to build the Temple.
3. Elisha responds to the Shunammite woman whose son has died: He sends his attendant, Gehazi, armed with the prophet’s staff and with instructions as to how to revive the boy. But the attempt at resuscitation fails (II Kings 4:29–31). It is only when Elisha himself comes to the home of the Shunammite woman, prays to God, and performs a series of actions, that the boy opens his eyes.

Obviously, we must seek the reason for the prophet’s mistake in every such instance. But whatever it may have been, it is clear that the prophet’s word, based on his own judgment, does not become God’s word except where God’s view accords with his. In the above examples, God does not agree with the prophets’ word, and He even reveals Himself to Samuel and Nathan, ordering them to correct their mistake.

Here we must raise a different question: Is it possible that a prophet may act in a way that is not desirable in God’s eyes, but that God will still permit his actions and fulfill his word? There may be different reasons for such a situation – perhaps because divine opposition to what the prophet is doing is not absolute, or because the prophet is acting in public (unlike the three examples above), and a lack of response on God’s part would harm the prophet’s status in the eyes of the nation as well as the institution of prophecy in general. In situations such as these, once again, it is difficult to say that the prophet’s actions are performed “by God’s word.” God admittedly responds to him, even acceding to the miracle that he wishes to perform, but this is no proof that God in fact agrees with the prophet’s view.

It seems that we can divide actions of the prophets based upon their own human judgment into three levels. The lowest is when his action is defined as a mistake (either explicitly, in the text, or by inference), and the prophet is required to cancel his act or to correct it. Such

instances are extremely rare, but they are not difficult to identify, for the text attests to the mistake. We must explore the reason for the mistake, and what we may learn from it.

The next level is where the prophet's action is not in accordance with God's will, but nevertheless, God fulfills his word for some reason. Such instances are more complicated to identify, since the prophet's action appears to be rewarded with success – why should we think that God did not desire it? A very sensitive reading is required for this purpose, with attention paid to the *way* in which God fulfills his word, as well as to what transpires afterward both in the actual situation and in the relationship between God and the prophet. All of this should expose the criticism of the act and lead the prophet himself to recognize his mistake. We will discuss such a case in depth in the first part of the book – in the chapters on the drought.

The highest level, fundamentally different from the others, is when the prophet's action reflects the divine will and achieves the objective of his mission. Such an act is performed “by God's word” even where there is no explicit command. There is no doubt that the great majority of the actions by all the prophets in Tanakh fall into this category.

The chapters concerning Elijah and Elisha in the book of Kings tell us about two great prophets, most of whose actions as prophets are not performed by divine command but rather on the basis of their own judgment. This fact alone speaks in praise of these prophets and teaches us something about their greatness and their loyalty to God. We need not necessarily conclude from this that every one of the narratives is meant to praise the prophet. A reading of these chapters requires a degree of sensitivity that is constantly questioning whether the narrative includes criticism of the prophet or whether it describes his actions as bearing a resounding divine stamp of approval.