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ELIJAH, ELISHA AND POLISH INDEPENDENCE

ELIASZ, ELIZEUSZ I POLSKA NIEPODLEGŁOŚĆ

Introduction

100 years ago was a year that crowned an effort of a few generations of Poles to resurrect a Polish state from its 123 year-long absence on the European map. After a golden age, a couple of centuries earlier, Poland slowly began to weaken due to the irresponsibility of Polish nobility. The nobility usurped more and more rights caring little for the state. Finally, in 1792 some of the magnates established the Targowica Confederation, which fought against the Polish and Lithuanian forces and practically gave the power to govern Poland into the hands of Russian Empress Catherine II. Their goal was to return to the status quo that they held before Great Sejm, which had limited their privileges. In the attempt to regain their status and power they unintentionally caused the whole country ceased in its existence. For years to come, Poles would have to fight foreign invading powers.

Jezebel as foreign power

Over 2600 years earlier, another people group was fighting against their foreign ruler. Ahab, king of Israel married Jezebel,¹ a daughter of Etbaal,² king of Sidon (1 Kgs 16:31). Such marriages solidifying inter-state alliances were quite common in those times. Sidon was a neighboring country so the marriage was aiming at securing the Israelite-Sidonian border and building a strong alliance against Aram.³ The queen, however, was not satisfied to be just a wife of king; she wanted to change the whole country so that it would be similar, in terms of politics, values and religion, to her own kingdom.

The Bible narrates that in order to accomplish it, she made⁴ her husband build a temple and an altar for one of the Sidonian chief gods – Baal – in the capital city of

¹ A discussion of the portrayal of the queen, both in history and in the Biblical and Jewish literature, can be found in Dagmar Pruin, *Geschichten und Geschichte: Isebel als literarische und historische Gestalt*. Göttingen 2007.

² The name means, “with Baal”.

³ M. A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville 2013, p. 206.

⁴ The text at first does not say explicitly that building of Baal’s temple, the altar and Asherah pole was done because of Jezebel’s inspiration but 1 Kgs 21:25, summing up Ahab’s rule, stated that Ahab did more evil in YHWH’s eyes than any other Israelite king because he was urged on by his wife Jezebel. The verse, then, together with the fact that the

Samaria (1 Kgs 16:31-32). What is more, Ahab made also an Asherah pole, a cult object devoted to Canaanite goddess Asherah, who, according to Canaanite mythology, was related to Baal (1 Kgs 16:33).⁵ All of these were foreign influences into the Israelite culture.

But it was not enough. Not only she was introducing a foreign tissue into the body of Israelite society, she wanted to completely eradicate the Israelite religion; something that was a core of the whole society. In order to accomplish her purposes, the queen was killing off prophets of YHWH (1 Kgs 18:4, 13) while, at the same time, feeding at her table 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kgs 18:19). Jezebel's influence was so great that actions that had been considered as banned and cursed by YHWH, were being accomplished during her time (ex. 1 Kgs 16:34). Altars, used earlier for the worship of YHWH, laid in ruin after being torn down (1 Kgs 18:30). Jezebel's policy of rooting out any Israelite-ness from the society worked well. Obadiah, a high official in Ahab's court, was hiding the fact that he secretly supported the cult of YHWH.⁶ Even the king, when recounting to Jezebel his conversation with Naboth concerning the acquisition of the latter's vineyard, omitted the main fact that the only argument of the Israelite for not selling his property was that it was his ancestral inheritance (1 Kgs 21). The king himself was embarrassed to mention this fact to his Sidonian wife because either she would not understand the Israelite values or he feared being ridiculed by her. Ironically, the queen, hearing the adjusted report, said "And you are the king of Israel", which was an intended double-entendre. The narrator together with Jezebel asked Ahab, who was in power in the kingdom. While Jezebel's statement suggests that the king was weak for not forcefully taking a commoner's property, the narrator's question was pointing to the fact that it was Jezebel – the foreign queen, and not the king, who was ruling the kingdom. The notion of double-meaning of the statement is supported by the queen's later action – she issued an order to falsely accuse Naboth and to kill him, and stamped it with the king's seal. The narrator made the king's weakness evident also by recalling a famine during which the king was himself looking for fodder for royal cattle while Jezebel was enjoying her time in a royal palace together with her entourage of over eight hundred people that supported Sidonian religion.

Elijah as first model of opposition

Jezebel presented a foreign threat to Israel and the nation's values. This raised opposition. Following introduction of the queen and her influence on the kingdom, the narrator introduces Elijah (1 Kgs 17:1). Even though a chapter division in the

Books of Kings for the first time speak about Baal after introducing Jezebel, and the fact that most statements Jezebel uttered to her husband were in imperative mood or sense, all of these points validate the conclusion that Jezebel was standing behind raising up idolatrous constructions.

⁵ See Ł. Tobola, *Cykl Baala z Ugarit*. Kraków 2008.

⁶ Ironically, his name – Obadiah, that is, "servant of Yahweh" was publically indicating his secret allegiance.

modern Bibles separates the two accounts, suggesting that the appearance of the prophet starts a new narrative, the Hebrew syntax suggests otherwise.⁷ Elijah's actions were connected, and were a reaction, to Jezebel's activity. In his opposition, he reminds us of later romantic heroes. He goes to the homeland of his chief enemy and there he supports a widow and her son who, in effect, converted to the faith of YHWH (1 Kgs 17). He, then, returned to his land and stood alone against hundreds of prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). He proved the greatness of YHWH and impotence of Baal, thus bringing the nation back to its God and its core values. Facing, however, one woman who sent a message with a threat that he would be killed next day,⁸ he ran for his life. Like a romantic hero, Elijah goes through moments of depression when he wished himself death. He, in his own eyes, was the only person facing the forces of evil in Israel. According to him, he had to stand not only against a partially foreign regime but also against his own countrymen who supported Jezebel's policy (1 Kgs 19:10, 14). Depressed and resigned he was ready to quit but after having a religious experience (1 Kgs 19:8-18) Elijah found strength to stand twice more against the royal house.

One may find some traits of Elijah in characters from Polish literature of the romanticism period. For instance, both the prophet and Konrad from III part of *Dziady* were individualistic, believing that they suffered for their nations and that it was their task to bring back nations' greatness. One and the other, had an impression that there were sole leaders standing against the oppressors.

There are also similarities between Slowacki's Kordian and Elijah. Kordian, just like Elijah, withdrew from his society. Lonely and depressed he wished death upon himself. Both characters were extremely brave but also emotionally unstable. Both sensed there was a mission to accomplish.

The motif of a lonely hero, or a group of a few men, who can make a whole nation to stand up against its tyrant and fight was not only present in Polish literature but also in Polish history. Kościuszko Insurrection, as well as November and January Uprisings were examples of such attempts to move the whole nation to follow a leader or a leading group to break free from a bondage of Russia. But the insurrections proved to be ineffective because only a certain percentage of the whole nation was ready to fight. There were influential groups which preferred the status quo under Russian occupation and they undermined any effort to change the situation. Mickiewicz, a leading writer of that time, described the nation in a following way, "Our nation is like lava, cold, hard, dry and filthy on the surface, but the inner fire would not be quenched even in a hundred years. Let us spit on the crust and go down to the depths".⁹ The futility of the January Uprising made people doubt the effectiveness of such romanticized strife for freedom therefore the patriotic elite

⁷ It is 1 Kgs 16:34 that starts with a disjunctive clause and not 1 Kgs 17:1. While it is possible for a story to begin with *waw* consecutive, it is awkward to use a disjunctive clause a sentence earlier and then to begin a new account using a non-disjunctive clause.

⁸ Jezebel did not want to kill Elijah, she just wanted him to escape. For more details see: R. J. Merez, *Jezebel's Oath (1 Kgs 19.2)*. Biblica 2009, Vol. XC, pp. 257-259.

⁹ A. Mickiewicz, *Dziady*. Paryż 1844, p. 204 [own translation].

began to think in terms of educating Polish society. Raising awareness of the Polish roots and national identity was a new way of fighting against the foreign invaders.

Elisha as second model of opposition

Interestingly, thousands years earlier similar change in mentality took place in Israel. Elijah, before being taken to heaven, nominated Elisha as his successor. Elisha, similarly to Elijah, was considered to be the leader of opposition against Jezebel. The narrator showed this, inter alia, by mentioning him in every single chapter during the lifetime of Jezebel. After her tragic death, however, the prophet disappeared from the narration - he was not needed anymore because the major threat to Israel was dead. He appeared only four chapters later to make his final prediction and die (2 Kgs 13:14-21).

Elisha's strategy differed from that of Elijah. From the very beginning the narrator presented the prophet as the one concerned with the society.¹⁰ He helped local communities in their daily activities and was responsible for developing Yahwistic prophets' schools. What is more, even though he was in conflict with the royal house (ex. 2 Kgs 3:14), he was not hotheaded – he helped the royalty when his actions could benefit Israel and the Yahwistic faith (see, for instance, 2 Kgs 3:14-19; 5:8; 6:8-13). His pro-society actions were such that even the king, at a certain occasion, ordered that the deeds be recounted to him (2 Kgs 8:4). It was totally different way of running the opposition from that of Elijah. No wonder that even scholars today see “the presentation of the character of Elisha as a belittling portrayal of the prophet and prophetism in general.”¹¹ Elisha, just as representatives of positivism in 19th century Poland, saw development of the society as the key to successful change in the nation, which would lead to its freedom.

Comparison of the two models of opposition

By putting these two pictures of opposition near to each other in the text, the author of the Books of Kings provokes the question if there is a superior method of opposition or if they are to complement each other. It was especially crucial for the nation which was under a foreign domination at the time of writing the Books. The romanticized Elijah won a spectacular battle at Mount Carmel but his emotional wavering and a syndrome of a lonely leader did not allow him to make a long-lasting impact on the Israelite society. Elisha, on the other hand, did not experience any spectacular duels with the royal house. In fact, at certain times it looked as if he was an ally to the throne. His impact on the local communities, however, was much stronger and much more effective. It was him who, when the time was right, stirred up the right people to abolish the king and kill Jezebel who was then a queen-mother (2 Kgs 9). It can be argued, then, that the narrator purposefully juxtaposed two models of opposition and he himself was in favor of the one exemplified by Elisha.

¹⁰ Elisha's first public miracle was to help community in Jericho. He treated water so that it became drinkable again (2 Kgs 2:19-22).

¹¹ W. J. Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*. JSOT SS 286. Sheffield 1999, p. 42.

Such a form of resistance did not, however, have many enthusiasts in the Jewish circles. Prophets like Malachi (Mal 4:5-6) or the author of Sirach (Sir 48:10-11) awaited for an Elijah-like figure who would restore the greatness of Israel. By the 1 century C.E., that is after about five centuries of being ruled by foreigners, the idea of a deliverer was so strong and longed for in Jewish society that even the Israelite judges who were portrayed negatively in the Book of Judges, were considered heroes and examples to be followed (see Heb 11). The successful insurrection of Maccabees gave Jews confidence that they were capable of winning any war against their oppressors provided that the proper leader appears on the scene. Josephus was one of the exceptions, who saw more value in positivistic, Elisha-like approach than in Elijah's romanticized upheaval (Josephus *Ant.* 9.46-185).¹²

The further history of the Jewish nation proved that the positivistic tactic that emphasizes education and development, that is, the tactic that viewed real patriotism as teaching children what it meant to be Jewish rather than sending them to war, was a successful endeavor. Naturally, it required more perseverance and more work because instead of one-time uprising, it focused on day-to-day tasks. Even though it was less striking or showy, it was more effective. Development of system educating children and building in them a sense of Jewish identity on the one hand, and motivating them to climb the societal ladder in their field of expertise, on the other, helped the Jewish nation to survive six hundred years under dominion of other countries and then eighteen centuries without a country, with many people being expelled from their own land. Biblical books of Daniel and Esther gave examples of how to combine the positivistic ideas (even though they were not known then as such) and faith in God for the benefit of Yahwism and Israel.

The author of the Books of Kings, however, did not opt just for a passive opposition. Using Elisha, the prophet who successfully got rid of the foreign queen, the author suggested that the development of the society and work at the grass roots were crucial elements but should be complemented with a smart military action when needed.

In Poland, positivism lasted only about 30 years because perseverance, a quality needed for any long-term endeavor, was not a typical Polish characteristic. Critics of the movement hated standardization, norms and routines. They longed for a romantic effusion. Education of society would require significant time and hot-blooded Poles were not keen to wait. The "new" old romantic approach was called "Young Poland". Divided among three invading countries, Poles stood no chance against the oppressors. Therefore, a return to romanticism and its suppositions looked irrational to an objective observer, especially since positivism, in its various forms, lasted for decades in many other countries. For many Poles, however, patriotism meant emotions but not work, fighting but not education, willingness to die but not life-long persistence. Given the circumstances and attitudes of the nation's elite, Poland was very fortunate that the Great War, known later as World War I, swept over Europe, giving opportunity for the Polish state to emerge.

¹² K. Litwak, *Elijah and Elisha in Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove 2013, p. 229.

Conclusion

The Elijah and Elisha narratives are a dialogue between the author and the intended reader about a better approach to fighting against invaders. After presenting two options, the author points to the positivistic approach with a smart use of military power as a more effective solution. The Polish nation also struggled with the same question. After putting into practice the same two options, the nation's vanguard chose the romantic approach over the positivistic one.

The positivistic method proved to be better when one thinks in long terms. A romantic-like military uprising with a charismatic leader may be a good and sometimes very much needed resolution but is ineffective in the long term. It relatively quickly runs out of its fuel. Therefore, the primary focus of an occupied nation should be patriotic education and societal development with use of military revolt only when it has a chance of success or when it is a part of a bigger plan.

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SUMMARY

Biblical Books of Kings depict Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon, who through the marriage with King Ahab became a queen over Israel. According to the Bible, the foreign monarch had, as her goal, destroying Yahwistic religion that was the backbone of the Israelite society. Such an attempt raised two forms of opposition. Addressing Jews, who at that time lived under foreign occupation, the author used Elijah and Elisha, two prophets opposing Jezebel, to discuss two different models of fight against foreign invaders. What is interesting, the very same models are present in Polish literature and philosophy of the time when Poland was ruled by foreign powers. It is a romantic and positivistic approach. The article shortly discusses the two models and then shows which model was preferred by the biblical author and which by the Polish elite.

STRESZCZENIE

Biblijne Księgi Królewskie opisują Izebel, córkę Etbaala, króla Sydonu, która poprzez małżeństwo z królem Achabem stała się królową Izraela. Według Biblii ta cudzoziemska monarchini postawiła sobie za cel przetrząść kręgosłup społeczeń-

stwa izraelskiego, jakim była wiara w Boga JHWH. To w rezultacie zrodziło dwie formy opozycji. Pisząc do Żydów, którzy w tym czasie żyli pod okupacją, autor Ksiąg użył Eliasza i Elizeusza – dwóch proroków przeciwstawiających się Izebel – do dyskusji nad dwoma odmiennymi modelami walki z obcym najeźdźcą. Interesujący jest fakt, iż te same dwa modele są widoczne także w literaturze i filozofii Polski podczas zaborów – jest to podejście romantyczne i pozytywistyczne. Artykuł pokrótce omawia dwa rodzaje walki patriotycznej i przedstawia, jaki model był preferowany przez autora biblijnego, a jaki przez polską elitę pod zaborami.

Key words: Elijah, Elisha, Jezebel, Poland, independence, opposition, insurrection, romanticism, positivism.

Słowa kluczowe: Eliaasz, Elizeusz, Izebel, Polska, niepodległość, ruch oporu, powstanie, romantyzm, pozytywizm.

