

“A Sound of Sheer Silence”

sermon digest

August 17, 2014

1Kings 19:8-13

larry dipboye

A copy of the original 1938 *Superman* Action comic book in mint condition was posted on eBay last week. Within twenty-four hours the bidding was up to \$1,600,100—not bad for a ten cent comic book. A different edition of the same comic book was sold at auction in 2011 for \$2.1 million, so the price is expected to go much higher. The value placed on this piece of memorabilia reflects something of its popularity in the World War II era. While Hitler was rolling over Europe, a super hero fighting for “truth, justice, and the American way” appealed to adults and children alike. The imaginary world of the comics provided an escape from the harsh reality of the daily newspaper. The child’s game of “let’s pretend” was preferred to acknowledging a bigger-than-life enemy systematically destroying the civilized world. It appeared to most of the world that only a superhuman power could stop this enemy of humankind.

Comic strip superheroes date back to the early 20th century, but they have maintained a presence in every generation. At the age of two, our son became obsessed with superman. A towel pinned around his neck temporarily served his obsession until his mother could sew up a bone fide Superman cape. The obsession lasted for more than a year, and he still gets teased by friends and family who remember the tattered cape.

Human religion tends to look for the superhero. Although the comics never pretended to offer religion, the superhero who defies reason, overpowers nature, and defeats all of our foes appealed to a common religious quest. Like Superman, every comic superhero had a repertoire of bigger-than-life enemies out to enslave or destroy the world, resembling the powers at work in the daily newspaper. They were not far removed from a powerful influence on later Judaism, Persian Zoroastrian Religion that viewed human history as a cosmic dual between the forces of good and evil. Like Superman, Good and Evil had names, Ahura Mazda (Good) and Angra Mainyu (Evil). All of life could be explained as the cosmic battle of good and evil. The representative characters in the battle changed with time, but the same superhuman powers transcended history and engaged with every new generation and every new hero.

With different names, Superman has been around for centuries. Although lacking any clear sense of morality or justice, the gods of Greek mythology were the superheros of their culture that paralleled the development of the Old Testament. They were seldom the friends of humanity, and their stories served to entertain more than to inspire any religious drive toward worship.

The early Old Testament prophets play the role of Superman for their era. Old Testament scholar Neil Glover calls the Elijah stories “unruly pieces of literature. They shift and writhe under close examination, ultimately eluding many attempts to schematize the narrative (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol 30.4, 449-462).” He calls the Elijah story a “prophetic utopia.” Elijah appears from nowhere without parents. Apart from the need to eat, “there seems to be little human about him.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Choon-Leong Seow, *1 Kings*, Vol III p. 138) agrees: “He [Elijah] is able to bring about miracles through prayer, even raising the dead calling fire down from heaven. He is able to confront a powerful king and accuse him of sin, and he dares to challenge a large crowd of Baalists. He is able to outrun Ahab’s chariot in a seventeen-mile race.” Elijah neither lives nor dies like ordinary humans. In the end (2 Kings 2:9-12), he is taken directly into heaven on a chariot of fire drawn by a horse of fire, leaving behind his mantle for Elisha to carry forward the prophetic mission.

Biblical religion offers an alternative to the sensational demonstration of power. While the Elijah narratives in First and Second Kings read like a Superman comic book, and similar features can be found in characters throughout the Bible, including the New Testament, the God of power is also portrayed as the God of eternal patience and forbearance.

The passage from 1 Kings 19 that places Elijah on Mount Horeb in a cave hiding from Jezebel and in flight from his mission of confrontation with powerful regents is out of sync with the rest of the story. Why should this superhero fear Jezebel or resist his calling? Perhaps he is on the down side of a bi-polar slide, but the norm presents Elijah as the man who leaps tall buildings with a single bound and stops live bullets with his chest.

Many interpreters see this event as an insertion of an alternate view of God by editors of the historical material in 1-2 Kings. As a child, I was taught to approach the Bible as a solitary book with a continuous message from Genesis to Revelation. As a student of the Bible, I learned that it was not a book, but sixty-six books and that many of the “books” were edited weavings of a variety of stories. What most of us tend to do is cherry-pick our biblical stories to match beliefs about God and the world that we have already formed. From experience, I can say that the God of immediate justice and instant miracles appears in biblical stories and can be pictured through proof-texts. However, you have to ignore other pictures in the Bible of the God who comes to us in the sounds of silence.

God meets us on the reverent, holy, plane of sheer silence. The KJV language “a small still voice” has dominated our

understanding of the revelation of God to Elijah on Mount Horeb. The literal translation in the NRSV “a sound of sheer silence” is an oxymoron. How does one hear silence?

I recall a discussion one day in a Forum on Religion and Science when we encountered a similar paradox in physics. The question of an absolute vacuum caused Professor Sorensen to insist that a vacuum, an absence of air, is more than nothing. Although defined as absence, a vacuum is a real presence in the universe. The apparent contradiction presents itself to the scientists as a *nothing* that must be acknowledged among the *some things* of the natural order. So it seems that Elijah heard silence.

Carl Gregg interpreted Elijah’s experience as an alternative view of God to the popular notion that every destructive power on earth is somehow of God: God was “not in the wind” like the winds of Katrina that destroyed New Orleans. God was “not in the earthquake” (or the tsunami) such as that which struck Japan. God was “not in the fire” such as those which blazed through the southwest. But God was in the sheer sound of silence. Gregg elaborates: “if we can silence, if only for a few moments, all those other voices emerging from the whirlwind of our daily lives (the voices of the newspaper, the radio, the television – the voices of the Internet, co-workers, and others) then we might begin to hear the voice of God that is within us, with us, and beyond us in the sound of sheer silence.”

There was a time in my life when I wanted to live on Mount Carmel and to avoid Mount Horeb like the plague. Mount Carmel was where Elijah met the prophets of Baal and called down fire from heaven to prove God’s power and to destroy God’s enemies. Even folks who struggle to avoid reference to a personal God are likely to confess belief in a “higher power” that drives the universe and gives life. The God of power offers a ready appeal. I find clear evidence in the historical literature and the Bible that the messianic hope of Israel was for Superman to fly down and rescue God’s people from their enemies. The Jewish messianic superman was called “Son of Man” in the ancient documents. The expectation of an Elijah-like superman to overthrow Rome and reestablish Jewish authority led to disappointment in Jesus.

Perhaps the greatest miracle of the entire Bible is that the Jesus movement continued in spite of the cross. Jesus was taken as a lamb to the slaughter. He did not lift a hand to defend himself from the Roman killing machine. Yet, he is the one we have come to follow as Messiah, God’s anointed servant, sent for the salvation of the world. Jesus rejected the appeal of James and John to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans. He called for us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek. In his crucifixion the clearest word from the cross was, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” According to the Gospels, there was no audible word from heaven.

In January, 1970, a ten-year-old child, Laura Lue Claypool, died with Leukemia in Louisville, Kentucky. Her father was pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist Church near the seminary. At the service, a close friend and New Testament professor Bill Hull attempted to speak to the moment with a message “The Sound of Silence.” The song by that title written by Paul Simon in 1964 in response to the death of John Kennedy was heard daily on radio.

Dr. Hull recalled the sounds of the final hours when the parents were sobbing and attending the cries of their child, followed by a time of awful silence that fell on the house when death came. He reminded us of events in the Bible that were beyond the reach of human language, when the heavens meet us with an eerie silence of reverence and awe. He offered the hope of Romans 8:26-27: when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes with “groanings too deep for words.” Then he cited a word from a Trappist Monk the late Thomas Merton: “The purest faith has to be tested by silence in which we listen for the unexpected, in which we are open to what we do not yet know, and in which we slowly and gradually prepare for the day when we will reach out to a new level of being with God. True hope is tested by silence in which we have to wait on the Lord in the obedience of unquestioning faith.”