

# AT THE FOUNTAIN OF ELIJAH

## Phase I Formation Lesson 9 Required Reading

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*Elijah and Mary—Search for Identity*

The move to Europe and the rapid expansion of the Order in the second half of the thirteenth century led to a search for identity among the younger Carmelites. What could they say to people about their origins when they were unable to specify a date of foundation or point to a founder like Francis or Dominic? The first recorded attempt to answer the questions about Carmelite origins came in the opening lines of the Constitutions of the Order drawn up at the General Chapter held in London in 1281. The answer is known as the *Rubrica Prima*:

We declare, bearing testimony to the truth, that from the time when the prophets of Elijah and Elisha dwelt devoutly on Mount Carmel, holy Fathers both of the Old and New Testament, whom the contemplation of heavenly things drew to the solitude of the same mountain, have without doubt led praiseworthy lives there by the fountain of Elijah in holy penitence unceasingly and successfully maintained.

It was these same successors whom Albert the patriarch of Jerusalem in the time of Innocent III united into a community, writing a rule for them which Pope Honorius, the successor of the same Innocent, and many of their successors, approving this Order, most devoutly confirmed by their charters. In the profession of this rule, we, their followers, serve the Lord in diverse parts of the world, even to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

As Joachim Smet observes in his history of the Carmelites, this was the seed from which the tradition about Elijah was to grow. The Carmelites saw themselves as successors to the school of prophets that had existed on Carmel and also to a long tradition in the Christian era of hermits who had chosen Carmel as their home. The notion that Carmelites were in a line of descent from Elijah and Elisha was taken at a later date to involve a literal succession and became the cause of bitter disputes. The Rubric when first written was intended to situate the emerging Order in a tradition and also to see Elijah as an archetype and exemplar. The notion of Elijah as one who stood before God in prayer and witnessed to God's truth before the powerful resonated with late thirteenth-century Carmelites as they tried to bridge the hermit and mendicant elements. Paul Chandler comments on the Order's tradition about Elijah:

It has always seen him as the first Carmelite and a rich model of the Carmelite way of life . . . we consider him as a man on a journey, always on the way from 'here' to 'there' in response to God's call; and in this sense, we see that the Elijah of the Scriptures and the Elijah of Carmelite tradition are one. God's grace does not allow him to be still. It calls him to grow and become. It was not easy for him; his weaknesses and fears had to be overcome. But in the care of God's love and in the strength that comes from his grace, the journey was not too long.<sup>2</sup>

The journey image is powerful—in its essence, it is always about our journey into the core of our being; but it is also the pilgrimage to the East to Jerusalem, or, as with Elijah, to Cherith when God is experienced.

The Carmelite tradition about Elijah and to a lesser extent Mary, is found in the *Liber de Institutione Primorum Monachorum*. This document in its present form is the work of Felip Ribot, who was Prior Provincial of the Catalanian Province, and the probable date of compilation is 1370. The Australian Carmelite Paul Chandler has done much to make this document accessible to the contemporary reader.

After the Rule, it is possibly the key work in any understanding of Carmelite spirituality and certainly from 1400 onwards dominated the Carmelites' historical thinking and their vision of the Order. It contains all the key themes of Carmelite spirituality: allegiance to Christ, openness to Scriptures, the sense of silence and solitude, and the undivided heart. Marian elements also emerge, but above all, there is an underlying sense of God's presence and protection found in intimate prayer. The work is full of symbols: the mountain, the desert, the brook Cherith and the little cloud that prefigures Mary.

The work is a synthesis of older Carmelite traditions and the way Carmelites of that period read Scripture. What is crucial is the way it came to color Carmelite thinking about the very essence of the Order; and above all, it is an expression of the Elijah tradition.

Paul Chandler raises an issue about the work that helps our understanding in a most positive way. He sees in these writings the early Carmelite imagination constructing a myth. The role of myth is always valuable, and in a religious context, myth has profound significance. It is the way the community reflects on its key experiences that shapes them so that the experience can then be handed on as a formative story:

In this work we are able to observe the medieval Carmelite imagination at work in the construction of a myth. This myth expresses the order's sense of the nature and purpose of its vocation in the church and gives imaginative form to the values and aspirations which it wished to see expressed in its life as a religious community. Its principal building blocks are the Scriptures, which are ingeniously interpreted to construct a continuous history of the 'Elijah Institute' over the centuries from the time of its foundation by the prophet until his followers were converted to Christianity. Our first reaction may be to laugh at this apparent naiveté, but a more careful and sympathetic reading will show a profound spiritual dynamic at work. The essential elements and ideals of Carmelite life—the inspiration of the Spirit, the opening of the heart and mind to the Messiah, the dynamic of the communal discernment, the importance of the word of God, and much else besides—are projected into the past and given concrete 'mythic' form. Once we have the key to interpreting these stories, we can see unfold the spiritual itinerary of the Carmelite and the inner dynamic and central values of the Carmelite vocation.<sup>3</sup>

The *Institute* is divided into seven books of eight chapters. The key text is God's command to Elijah to go and hide in the brook Cherith (1 Kings 17:3-4). It is this command and the journey that follows which create the central theme of the work. There are two journeys—one where Elijah is transformed by love and the other is the historical development of the Order as the Sons of the Prophets.

I would like to concentrate on Book 1 of the *Institute* where Elijah is shown as the model of monastic life and also, as a consequence, a model for Carmelites. The *Institute* is presented as a dialogue between John, 44<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century, and the monk Caprasius. Caprasius is asking about the origins of the Order. He is introduced to the life and the works of Elijah. Elijah is seen as the first leader of the monks from whom 'the holy and ancient institute took its origin'.

Elijah is commanded by God to go and hide himself in the valley to embrace solitude. The text is taken as the basis for this withdrawal, and so becomes a key text, is from the First Book of Kings: 'The word of Yahweh came to him, "Go away from here, go eastwards, and hide yourself in the Wadi Cherith which lies east of Jordan. You can drink from the stream, and I have ordered the ravens to bring you food there"' (1 Kings 17:2-4 JB).

The author asks us to reflect on these words in what he calls their mystical sense, by which he means that he is interested in showing how the prophet and then the reader can be transformed by love. We should try to achieve a pure heart, that is, we should avoid anything that is not inspired by love, and it is when we are hidden in Cherith that we can achieve this. If we do achieve a pure undivided heart, then even in this life we can experience something of the divine presence of God. However, in order to achieve a pure heart, there is a need to follow four steps so as to ascend to the peak of perfection and be able to drink of the torrent.

The first step is renunciation of earthly things. As one reads the *Institute*, it is easy to see that much of what is said sounds familiar. The vision, the full expression of it all, will appear in the works of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. They in their turn had the *Institute* as part of their formation. These are the holy Fathers of our Order that Teresa mentions in her writings. John of the Cross, with his teaching about ‘todo’ (‘all’) and ‘nada’ (‘nothing’), is obviously expressing the essence of the sense of renunciation that the *Institute* calls for, while the torrent of the presence of God is expressed in John’s vision of the mystical union of spiritual marriage.

For the author of the *Institute*, possession of riches does not close the gate to the Kingdom. It is rather a matter of what we set our heart on. However, once we have possessions, the worries and anxieties they bring are like weeds choking the growth of a plant. But then he asks, what are riches compared to the gift of eternal life? This short passage on our attitude to possessions is a marvelous weaving together of comment and passages from Wisdom literature and the Gospels.

The next step is the renunciation of sin and self-will. Here the key concept is that we must take up the cross and enter into the Passion of Christ so that we can come to resurrection, to a new purified life. The image for change is that of the journey ‘towards the East’ to the Wadi Cherith—in the opposite direction of our desires. The key example of renunciation of self-will is Jesus who came from heaven to do the Father’s will and who stripped himself of glory. Jesus becomes the model here so that asceticism is rooted in his saving actions and in his spirit of loving obedience.

The third step to perfection is silence, solitude, and celibacy. Here the author sounds somewhat like Nicholas the Frenchman, who saw the city and crowds of people as hostile to growth in perfection. On the other hand, given the overall tenor of the work, the ideal of solitude is stressed as a value even for those who are working among the people. There is also a realization of human frailty and the need to gather ourselves together rather than be fragmented by business. Celibacy is counseled as an ideal that goes with seeking the Kingdom as the primary value. It is not a denial of relationships, but rather implies that giving oneself to God is the most powerful of dynamics. Silence in this context is vital for a dialogue with God as it creates the condition for listening. Likewise in a community setting, silence symbolizes respect for others and their needs and is a genuine antidote to superficiality in relationships.

The fourth step to perfection is growth in love. To be in Cherith, which means love, is the ideal. This is the gospel call to us to give our whole being unreservedly to God. Again the call is for purity of heart so that the only object of love is God. However, the writer stresses that such a pure love will mean loving our neighbor, as the sincerity of our love is shown when we love our brothers and sisters. If we do not love those we can see, how can we love the God we do not see? The other love we must have is of ourselves, because if we are lovable to God, then we need to value ourselves. God is the source of our joy and our being. If we live in this threefold love, then we will also find forgiveness, because the more we love, then the more we will find and live forgiveness. The vision that emerges from this section shows us how love sets us free for loving service and how, by our very being with others, we will do good.

These four steps should bring us to the experience of perfect love. This experience is described as drinking from the stream. It becomes possible when we are purified and offer no obstacle in our hearts to union with God. The writer promises that

those who cling to him with a pure heart will enjoy as their reward, an abundance of divine conversation so that hidden and even future things will be revealed to you by God. Then you will abound in unspeakable delights and shall gladly lift up the face of your mind to contemplate God.<sup>4</sup>

This closeness to God is not meant to be continuous state—it is a gift and a grace. The awareness of God’s closeness will come and go so that we do not become complacent; but more to the point, the more we long for that closeness, the more intense the union, the experience, will become. However, in the intervening periods, we will

be fed by God's word by his prophets. In this passage, it is possible to see the seeds of John of the Cross's teaching on the Dark Night—the sense that we are called to a light beyond the lights we have known.

O Light Invisible, we praise thee!  
Too bright for mortal vision.  
O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less;  
The eastern light our spires touch at morning.  
The light that slants upon our western doors at evening,  
The twilight over stagnant pools at bat flight,  
Moonlight and starlight, owl and moth light,  
Glow-worm glowlight on a grass blade.  
O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!

We thank Thee for the lights we have kindled,  
The light of altar and of sanctuary;  
Small lights of those who meditate at midnight  
And lights directed through the colored panes of windows  
And light reflected from the polished stone,  
The gilded carven wood, the colored fresco.  
Our gaze is submarine, our eyes look upward  
And see the light that fractures through unquiet water.  
We see the light but see not whence it comes.  
O Light Invisible, we glorify Thee!

T.S. Eliot<sup>5</sup>

The second book of the *Institute* presents Elijah as the perfect model of the religious life. The first book looked at the spiritual meaning of the scriptural text. Now the historical sense is taken up. Elijah, the first monk or hermit, is presented to us. This section begins to weave scriptural and patristic texts reflecting on Elijah as the first monk. One authority, the Scriptures, is supported by another, the Fathers. Elijah is seen as dying to the flesh (Romans 7) and imitating the angels in his purity. Isidore, Jerome, and Cassian are all quoted to testify that Elijah was the first to practice the virtue of chastity. St. John Chrysostom praises him for his poverty: 'How was Elijah marvelous?—in his renunciation of possessions.' He was also totally available to the will of God in the service of his people. Again he is praised for his repentance, dying to sin so that he is ready to be open to God. His encounters with God deepen his ardor and enable him to trust evermore in God's providence. This leads him to a wisdom, a sense of discernment, qualifying him to be master of his disciples.

Paul Chandler observes that while the biblical Elijah is a mysterious and solitary person who appears from the desert and then leaves in the fiery chariot, this is not the picture painted in the Carmelite tradition. In the Carmelite working of the Elijah myth, he is the founder and father of a growing community of disciples. The first Carmelites did not simply take the biblical story about Elijah, but reflected on it and linked it to their story. Such a reading of the Scripture is not one that fits in with twentieth-century Scripture studies, but it was a lived experience for the medieval Carmelite. The text, like any written text, is always open to interpretation; and the relation between reader and text has its own special dynamism.

Book VI of the *Institute* links the Elijan and Marian traditions of the Order. Early references speak of the church on Mount Carmel being dedicated to Mary, and papal documents speak of the hermit brothers of Mary of Mount Carmel. In 1282, when the Prior General, Peter Milau, wrote to Edward I of England asking for his support on behalf of the Order, he spoke of the Order being founded in honor of Mary. The constitutions of 1324 add a paragraph to the rubric giving the Elijan origin: 'After the Incarnation, their successors built a Church there (on Mount Carmel) in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and chose her title; therefore, from that time, they were by apostolic privilege, called the Brothers of B.V.M. of Mount Carmel.'<sup>6</sup>

This reference to the successors of the prophets building a church on Carmel in early Christian times is the beginning of the weaving of Mary into the myth of Carmelite origins. John Baconthorpe (d. 1348), who was one of the first notable Carmelite theologians, a native of Blakeney in Norfolk, wrote at length about Mary and Carmel. Over and above his theological interest in Mary, he was a great defender of the Order and its position. He was the first to see the small cloud of 1 Kings 18:44 as a symbol of Mary: ‘The servant said, “Now there is a cloud, small as a man’s hand, rising from the sea”’ (JB). Baconthorpe saw Mary as the one who enables the rains of mercy and grace to restore all things. As she was in harmony with God, she could be a means of God’s grace to her brothers and sisters. Ribot takes the vision on Carmel of the little cloud that ends the drought as a way of drawing Elijah and Mary together. Mary is the cloud of pure rain rising from the salty sea. The salty sea is an image of sinful humanity.

Christopher O’Donnell, in an unpublished article on Mary in the Carmelite tradition, gives a helpful synthesis of Book VI of the *Institute*:

The main Marian treatment is in Book Six. Throughout this book, Ribot is concerned with the Order’s title, ‘Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel’; he also allows that ‘Carmelites’ is a legitimate title. A fundamental idea which he developed was a spiritual, somewhat arbitrary interpretation of the little cloud seen by Elijah (see 1 Kings 18:44). The key to its Marian symbolism is that the cloud of pure rain, that is Mary, arose from the bitter, salty sea, which is the image of sinful humanity. The prophet received by divine illumination, four mysteries about the future redemption of the human race which he communicated to his followers: 1. the birth of the future redeemer from a virgin-mother who from her origin would be free from any stain of sin; 2. the time when this would be accomplished; 3. the deliberate decision of the future mother to keep herself always a virgin, consecrated to the service of the Lord; 4. the fecundity of her virginity, foreshadowed by the rain, which would relieve the condition of humankind.

In imitation of Elijah, who was the first Old Testament virgin, Mary would vow virginity and be the first woman to do so. The successors of Elijah also took such a vow. This established a similitude and a deep empathy between them and Mary so that they called her their sister and themselves Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The notion of sister does not, however, eliminate the word ‘mother’, which is delicately insinuated: ‘Before he (the Word) was incarnated, there was only a fraternity of paternity, because from the same Father of whom the Son was eternally generated, was also created the human race...before he was incarnated, there was not a fraternity of maternity, since the Son was not yet born of his mother.’ The implication is that after the Incarnation, there was a new basis of fraternity in the motherhood of Mary.

The by now traditional title of ‘Patron’ is allied also with virginity. The Carmelites took care to serve the Virgin with special devotion. They were eager especially to choose this virgin as a patron for themselves, because they knew that she alone was singularly like them in the first-fruits of spontaneous virginity. For just as spontaneous virginity for God was first begun by the ancient followers of this religion and introduced to men, so the same virginity was afterwards first introduced and begun among women by the Mother of God.

Thus we see in Ribot a synthesis through virginity of the traditional notions of Mary and the Order—Mother, Patron, and Sister. And all of these ultimately stemmed from the author’s contemplation of the spiritual meaning of the little cloud. However, it is not so much that Ribot is adding something new to the Order’s Marian consciousness; he reads into the little cloud what was the Order’s attitude to Mary, but gave more clearly than previous writers its basis as virginity. Indeed, he uses a false etymology for the word ‘Carmel’ to indicate ‘knowledge of circumcision’ which he then interprets as virginity for God, sought first by Elijah and his followers, and then by Mary.<sup>7</sup>

Ribot is as anxious as Baconthorpe to defend the validity of the Marian titles of the Order and, like Baconthorpe in his myth-making, articulates the Order's consciousness of being in the service of Mary.

The *Institute* was a key text for medieval Carmelites and continued as such into the sixteenth century. The stories told about Elijah and the virtues practiced by the prophet and his disciples represented a Carmelite Utopia. These values and aspirations became, for fourteenth-century Carmelites, the model for their way of life. It is useful to list the ideals of Elijah, as these Carmelites saw them:

1. faithfulness to the Word of God;
2. total availability to the will of God in the service of his people;
3. knowledge of the truth about this world;
4. solitude, which is an option for God above all else;
5. not only repentance for personal sins, but intercession for the sins of others;
6. living the life of love, and so he is a mystic drinking from 'the stream of delight', with the fire of divine love burning in his heart;
7. a total trust in the Providence of God, an awareness that God cares for those who seek first God's Kingdom and its justice;
8. a loving wisdom that comes from his closeness to God; and
9. a sense of care and responsibility towards his disciples.

The Carmelite tradition about Elijah was rich and complex. For the medieval mind, he was seen more and more as the model for religious life. The *Institute* shows Elijah moving from the solitary to be ever more at the center of a community of disciples who live after his example.

The *Institute* places great emphasis on the text where Elijah goes East to hide in Cherith. However, towards the end of the work, another text is used which has a central importance. It is the passage from Acts 2 that speaks of the Jerusalem community: 'They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread.' This vision of the apostolic community at Jerusalem as an ideal is very much part of the Rule. Appearing where it does in the *Institute*, it seems like the second pillar or foundation of the Carmelite life. The Carmelite meditates, comes to Eucharist with a burning heart, and, strengthened by the Risen Christ, can go out and be ready for mission.

The *Institute* enabled generations of Carmelites to have both a vision of their origins and a dynamic for the present. Sadly, in the seventeenth century, attention became focused on trying to prove the historical element in the book. Endless efforts went on in a controversy whereby enthusiasts tried to establish an actual lineage from Elijah to the first Carmelites in the twelfth century. The project was flawed, the understanding of the myth was lost, and it has been only in the last few decades that the value and meaning of the text has been grasped again. What we do know is the fact that John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila were nourished by the *Institute* and found in it seeds of inspiration for their project.

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Staring, *Medieval Carmelite Heritage* (Carmelite Institute, Rome, 1989), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Chandler O. Carm (ed.), *A Journey with Elijah* (Carmelite Institute, Rome, 1991), p.14.

<sup>3</sup> *A Journey with Elijah*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Liber de Institutione Primorum Monachorum*, draft trans. Paul Chandler O. Carm.

<sup>5</sup> 'Choruses from "The Rock"' in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-62* (Faber, London, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> *Medieval Carmelite Heritage*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Chris O'Donnell O. Carm, 'Mary and the Carmelite Tradition' (unpublished article), pp. 18-19.