This fascinating volume draws together contributions from a wide range of theologians and practicing musicians to consider the ways that theology and belief can interact with the practice and appreciation of music, to mutually invigorating effect. It is an impressive and exciting achievement and I am sure it will be read eagerly by all those for whom music can illuminate the sacred.

—Dr. Jeremy Thurlow, University of Cambridge

Our contemporary culture is communicating ever-increasingly through the visual, through film, and through music. This makes it ever more urgent for theologians to explore the resources of art for enriching our understanding and experience of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century, edited by George Corbett, answers this need, evaluating the relationship between the sacred and the composition, performance, and appreciation of music.

Through the theme of 'annunciations', this volume interrogates how, when, why, through and to whom God communicates in the Old and New Testaments. In doing so, it tackles the intimate relationship between scriptural reflection and musical practice in the past, its present condition, and what the future might hold.

Annunciations comprises three parts. Part I sets out flexible theological and compositional frameworks for a constructive relationship between the sacred and music. Part II presents the reflections of theologians and composers involved in collaborating on new pieces of sacred choral music, alongside the six new scores and links to the recordings. Part III considers the reality of programming and performing sacred works today.

This volume provides an indispensable resource for scholars and artists working at the interface between theology and the arts, and for those involved in sacred music. However, it will also be of interest to anyone concerned with the ways in which the divine communicates through word and artistry to humanity.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Don Simone Camaldolese. Frontispiece from a Choir Book, ca. 1390. Ink on vellum, 59.4 x 44.8 cm. (irregular left edge). Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum Collection, X1015. Cover design: Anna Gatti.
11.1. Elijah’s Silent Annunciation
(1 Kings 19.8-15)

Mary Stevens

There are aspects of the biblical texts, comprising both theological themes and geographical references, which have resonances to scholars but which are not obvious to the present-day general reader. The biblical narrative depends heavily on these wider meanings, replete as it is with both concrete experience and the religious tradition of the original audiences. In preparing my collaboration with the composer, Lisa Robertson, a musician without theological training, I sought to present the essential religious and theological components of the text as well as to engage her imaginative involvement. To facilitate this, I presented both biblical and theological research, alongside a number of photographs of geographical scenes, seeking through the latter to bring her into contact with the location and external elements of the story. Although I was concerned that Robertson might feel overwhelmed with the amount of information given, this did not seem to have been the case. Instead, Robertson developed her own ideas in relation to those aspects of my research which resonated with her. Our subsequent theologian-composer conversations reflected her desire to understand the import of the text and its interpretation. As the process developed, Robertson articulated some of her inchoate plans, but I carefully tried to limit my role to aiding her own penetration of the text. This was truly a dialogue in which, as a theologian, I facilitated her understanding of the text while she, as a composer, responded both with her own questions and insights and, finally, with her fresh and original musical representation of the biblical episode. In this chapter, I try to give a sense of some of the theological research underpinning our collaboration, hopeful that it might enrich the appreciation of her piece of music and, also perhaps, that it might stimulate other artistic or theological interpretations of this seminal episode of the biblical narrative: Elijah’s encounter with God in the ‘still small voice’.

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https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0172.19
I. The Visual and Literary Dimensions of the Elijah Episode

The story from the Elijah Cycle is embedded in a specific geographical scene. Before introducing either textual or theological analysis, I sought, therefore, to highlight the visuality intrinsic to the scene: the vast and barren mountain range of Sinai where 1 Kings [Kgs] 19 is set. In the Bible, the mountain is itself a protagonist; it draws us beyond the quotidian to a place of transcendence — of encounter with God — and, at the same time, stirs a wealth of resonances from the Judeo-Christian tradition. This dual aspect of physical geography and religious tradition is the backdrop to several of the mighty phenomena that are narrated in the episode under consideration: thunder, lightning, mighty earthquake and gale. Imaginative immersion in this physical world should come prior to an unpicking of theological resonance. This is especially true for this biblical episode, which has at its heart a deliberate and major contrast between the natural phenomena shaping the setting of the ‘annunciation’ and the ‘annunciation encounter’ itself. To penetrate its meaning, one must be immersed in the images in order, paradoxically, to transcend them and receive the message held at its interstices.

Mount Horeb is situated in Sinai, though its exact geographical location is unknown. It bears a unique symbolism in the biblical repertoire, which gives it a precise symbolic and theological locus. Horeb is where Moses encounters the burning bush from within which Yahweh (YHWH) pronounced his Name, entrusting it to the people of Israel and summoning them out of Egypt (Exodus [Exod] 3). In continuity with this, and increasing the significance of Horeb, it is also the place of the Covenant (Exod 24; Deuteronomy 5.2). Additionally, the fire, thunder and earthquake of the present episode evoke the memory of the appearance of YHWH on a mountain in Sinai, immediately after the People of Israel had been led out of Egypt. On Horeb, too, there is an incident to which 1 Kgs 19 bears close resemblance: Moses was made to stand in a cleft of the rock while the glory of YHWH passed by.1

The main character in the story is the Prophet Elijah who lived in the ninth century BCE. To this day, Elijah is a powerful presence in Judaism, remembered at every Sabbath meal, Passover and ritual circumcision. He is known as the prophet who will usher in the coming of the Messiah to the people of Israel. The name, ‘Elijah’, affirms God’s choice of the people of Israel and their choice of him as their God. It is

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Fig. 11.1.1 Elijah’s encounter with God takes place on Mt. Horeb (the ‘Mountain of God’). Although the exact location is disputed, the mountain is believed to be located in the vast and largely barren mountain range of Sinai.
a compound, formed from the general Hebrew word for God (El) and one syllable (ja) from the particular name of God revealed to Moses (YHWH). The two sounds combined create the name: ‘El is YHWH’. The name YHWH is so sacred that to this day it will not be spoken by Jews and is always replaced with another name, which may be spoken without danger of blasphemy. The name Elijah therefore recalls and invokes the holiness of God and his self-revelation to Moses on Horeb.

In keeping with the project’s theme of ‘annunciation’, I focused on the moment Elijah hears the sound of a ‘still small voice’ and leaves the cave to respond to God. To explore this intimate encounter with God, I introduced the mystical writings of St John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite mystic who co-founded the Discalced branch of the order with St Teresa of Avila. The motto of the Carmelite Order is taken from the words of Elijah in this episode when he responds to God’s question ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’ with the words ‘With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts’ (zeolo zelatus sum pro Domino Deo exercituum). Members of the order emphasize attending to the ‘still small voice’ of God in contemplation. St John of the Cross directly refers to this episode, moreover, in The Spiritual Canticle, which I suggested as part of a paratext for the musical composition. Before turning to this in more detail, however, I will present a brief textual analysis of the Elijahan story in order to identify its main elements.

The structure of this Elijah episode has been described variously as chiastic, binary, and composite. The different structural identifications of the text emphasize the flexibility with which the components may be examined and the impossibility of imposing a rigid limitation on what is a dynamic and vibrant episode. All the possible structures with which it is accredited have a developmental movement to a centre and back: YHWH and Elijah are there at the beginning; the dialogue between them is repeated with slight yet significant variation; they move to a closer intimate encounter in the central silence and subsequent dialogue, before moving out in the re-commissioning. Various elements are repeated in different places: the cave appears at the beginning, the middle and the end; the same words are used in the dialogue between Elijah and YHWH in two places; to name the more obvious practical elements. With all this in mind I invited the composer to read the text of 1 Kgs 19.8-15 through the following binary structure:

“So he got up and ate and drank, and strengthened by that food he walked for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, God’s mountain.

A: Then he went into a cave and spent the night there.

B: Then the word of Yahweh came to him saying, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

C: He replied, ‘I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh Sabaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me.’

D: Then he was told, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.’

E: For at that moment Yahweh was going by.

A mighty hurricane split the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the hurricane. And after the hurricane, an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire, a light murmuring sound.

A1: And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

B1: Then a voice came to him, which said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’

C1: He replied, ‘I am full of jealous zeal for Yahweh, God Sabaoth, because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant, have torn down your altars and put your prophets to the sword. I am the only one left, and now they want to kill me.’

D1: ‘Go,’ Yahweh said, ‘go back by the same way to the desert of Damascus.’

What is the climax of the story? Is it E? Or perhaps A1 or B1? Or, conceivably, even D1? Each of these stages underlines something crucial: E is the ‘still small voice’ highlighting the difference of God from the pagan idols, and also his intimacy. A1 emphasizes the willing response of Elijah who has ‘heard’ God. Yet, did he hear God in the silence? Or was it that, hearing the silence, he was prepared for meeting God in a way even more unknown? B1 has God addressing anew the prophet and recommissioning him in a way which, given the name of Eli-jah, the Mt of Horeb, and the preceding phenomena, recalls the Mosaic drama and seems to suggest a new calling of Israel. With the episode’s structure thus laid out, we may now turn to Elijah and Carmel.
Fig. 11.1.2 Details of: (18.9a) Unknown artist, *Fiery Ascent of the Prophet Elijah* (18th century); (18.9b) Unknown artist, *Holy Prophet Elijah with Selected Saints in the Fields* (1850); (18.10) Juan de Valdés Leal, *Ascension of Elijah* (c. 1655–1645); (18.11a) Adolf von Meckel (attrib.), *Landschaft in Sinai* (c. 1893); (18.11b-g) Herbert Sanchez, *Lighting* (2010); (18.13a) Unknown Artist, *Elijah the Prophet in the Desert* (15th century); (18.13b) Unknown Artist, *Fiery Ascension of the Holy Prophet Elijah* (c. 1800); (18.14) Photograph by Wikimedia User Léna of Marc Arcis, *Elijah, Prophet of the Carmelites*; (18.15) Washington Allston, *Elijah in the Desert* (1818). The structure of 1 Kings 19.9-15 is composed of repeated motifs, separated by a description of Elijah’s dramatic experience of God. It invites readers to consider what is important about the passage: God’s repeated invitation to Elijah to reveal why he has come to God’s mountain (Mt. Horeb), Elijah’s declaration of his zealousness for God or his willing response to God’s commissions, or that intimate encounter of the ‘still small voice’ that is so unlike characteristic contact with pagan ‘gods’.
II. The Elijah Episode and Carmelite Spirituality

The Carmelite Order was founded at the turn of the thirteenth century on Mt Carmel. The first hermits who settled there were crusaders who exchanged their military existence for a hermit religious life, living in prayer, contemplation and silence. According to their ‘Rule of Life’, this group of men gathered together ‘around the spring of Elias on Mt Carmel’.  

The Carmelites had no great founder but looked to scripture for their inspiration. They were known as ‘The Brothers of the Virgin Mary of Mt Carmel’. Due to his association with Mt Carmel, Elijah became an important figure in their corporate identity, while Elijah’s silent ineffable encounter with God became a key text for their contemplative spirituality. When the Carmelites subsequently moved to Europe, and it became politically expedient to have a single founding father, they adopted Elijah. Episodes from his life, which had been the subject of the brothers’ reflections, remained central to the spiritual attitude of the Carmelite order in their contemplative searching for the ‘still small voice’ of God.

As a young Carmelite friar, St John of the Cross (b. 1542) met Teresa of Avila, his elder by twenty-seven years. She persuaded him to be involved in the reform of the Carmelite order. The two of them are known as the founders of the reformed, or discalced, Carmelite Order. This religious order is contemplative and largely silent. St John of the Cross is acknowledged as one of the greatest mystics in Christianity, and he is recognized as a doctor of the universal Church (meaning that the Church accepts his teaching as having outstanding worth for the whole people of God). The centre point and summit of his teaching concerns the most profound and intimate union of the human person with God and the way to that union. He struggles to express through his poetry the knowledge learned through mystical experience. He describes intense suffering on the way to union with God, which he understands entirely within the context of the salvific suffering of Christ. He writes of a journey of purification made at night, from which is derived the phrase ‘the dark night of the soul’; one of John’s poems begins: ‘One dark night, my soul being now at rest, I went out...’ He uses images such as ‘silent music’ and ‘sounding solitude’ in his attempt to articulate something of the experience of union with God.

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4 OCSD, ‘Rule of St Alebert and the Constitutions of the Secular Order of the Teresian Carmel’ (Ocd. pcn.net, 2003), http://www.ocd.pcn.net/ocds_Aen.htm
6 Matthew, The Impact of God, pp. 10–12. Matthew describes the experience as ‘white hot in poetry, cooled down and shared out in prose’.
The stumbling attempts of his poetry, I thought, might help to inspire a musical articulation. The following quotation from the *Spiritual Canticle* indicates St John of the Cross’ poetic attempt to talk about the experience of union with God:

My Beloved, the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,
the tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music
sounding solitude.

In his commentary on this stanza, St John of the Cross makes one of his most significant references to Elijah. He begins by attempting to describe this experience in prose:

Since this touch of God gives intense satisfaction and enjoyment to the substance of the soul and gently fulfills her desire for this union, she calls this union or these touches ‘love-stirring breezes’. As we have said, the Beloved’s attributes are lovingly and sweetly communicated in this breeze and from it the intellect receives the knowledge or whistling. She calls the knowledge a ‘whistling’ because just as the whistling of the breeze pierces deeply into the hearing organ, so this most subtle and delicate knowledge penetrates with wonderful savoriness into the innermost part of the substance of the soul, and the delight is greater than all others.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) St John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, § 14.
This attempt at a prose description continues to rely heavily on poetic imagery. The attempt to talk of the metaphysical ‘substance of the soul’ and the reference to ‘the intellect receiving knowledge’ seem a little awkward beside the more fluent imagery of the ‘wonderful savouriness’, ‘the communication in the breeze’ and the ‘whistling of the breeze’. Trying to penetrate and explain more clearly his meaning, St John of the Cross turns to the experience of Elijah on Horeb, emphasizing the direct experience, the ‘substantial knowledge’, received in his silent encounter:

Since this whistling refers to the substantial knowledge mentioned, some theologians think our Father Elijah saw God in the whistling of the gentle breeze heard on the mount at the mouth of his cave (1 Kgs. 19:11-13 [10]). Scripture calls it ‘the whistling of the gentle breeze’ because knowledge was begotten in his intellect from the delicate spiritual communication. The soul calls this knowledge ‘the whistling of love-stirring breezes’ because it flows over into the intellect from the loving communication of the Beloved’s attributes. As a result she calls the knowledge ‘the whistling of the love-stirring breezes’.8

The ineffability of the experience of God is more than a linguistic limitation imposed on the author. The experience itself is a gift beyond human categories.

In one of his Sayings, St John of the Cross writes, ‘The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul’. His words echo the opening of St John’s Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God. […] All things were made by him: and without him was made nothing that was made […] And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Book of Wisdom, furthermore, recounts how ‘when all was in quiet silence and the night was in the midst of her course, Thine Almighty Word, O Lord, leapt down from his royal throne’. Featured in Advent and Christmas liturgies, these passages may also be complemented with Isaiah 40.9: ‘Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!”’. Since a central theme in the Elijah episode is the command to go forth and proclaim God, I selected this text alongside John 1.1 and Wisdom 18.15 to serve as a paratext to 1 Kgs 19. Perhaps fittingly, the motto of the School of Divinity, St Mary’s College — in which the TheoArtistry project was developed — is In principio erat verbum [In the beginning was the Word]. With these words, then, I opened a provisional set of lyrics which wove together 1 Kgs 19 with the paratext and St John of the Cross’ Spiritual Canticle. The proposed lyrics, which were for Robertson to develop or disregard, were as follows:

8 Ibid., §14.
In principio erat verbum

The Word of the Lord came to Eliyahu⁹

‘Eliyahu! Go, stand on the mountain before me’.  
Know the storm of earthquake,  
Know the storm of fire,  
Know the storm of wind.

Eliyahu: ‘My God is not in the earthquake.  
My God is not in the fire. My God is not in the wind’.

When all was in quiet silence  
and the night was in the midst of her course,  
thine Almighty Word, Oh Elohim,  
leapt down from his royal throne.

Eliyahu: ‘Elohim! Elohim!  
My Beloved, the mountains,  
and lonely wooded valleys,  
strange islands,  
and resounding rivers,  
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,  
the tranquil night  
at the time of the rising dawn,  
silent music  
sounding solitude.’

The Word of the Lord came to Eliyahu

‘Eliyahu! Go up to a high mountain  
Joyful messenger to Zion!  
Shout with a loud voice  
Joyful messenger to Jerusalem!  
Shout without fear,  
Say to the towns of Judah  
“Here is your God!”’.

In principio erat verbum

In the collaboration, my hope was to introduce Robertson to a theological perspective from within a particular Christian spiritual tradition. I tried to build on something with which she was deeply familiar — her own personal experience and love of the wild vastness of Scotland — to help her to explore new interior, theological territory. Her uptake of ideas, reconfiguring of juxtapositions, and skilled musical use of theological themes, was exciting and stimulating for me as a theologian and Christian. Her musical response showed them to me in a fresh light. This, presumably, is one of the key purposes of all artistic and theological collaboration.

⁹ Note: the Hebrew name for Elijah is Eliyahu which has a resonance with the name he uses here for God, Elohim.
List of Illustrations


11.1.3 Juan Rodriguez Juárez, *The Virgin of the Carmen with Saint Theresa and Saint John of the Cross* (c. 1708), oil on canvas, Museo Nacional de Arts, Mexico City, Mexico, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juan_Rodr%C3%ADguez_Ju%C3%A1rez_-_The_Virgin_of_the_Carmen_with_Saint_Theresa_and_Saint_John_of_the_Cross_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg, public domain.