

Reading Elijah's Exhaustion at Mount Horeb: A Pastoral Approach to Ministry Burnout

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Abstract

The phenomenon of burnout in Christian ministry has become a critical pastoral concern amidst intensifying organizational demands and elevated spiritual expectations. Often, physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion are inadequately addressed, leading to their mischaracterization as failures of faith or personal spiritual deficiency. This article examines the narrative of Elijah's exhaustion on Mount Horeb (1 Kgs 19:1–18) through a pastoral lens, employing a *religious coping* framework to provide a constructive theological response. By utilizing a methodology of biblical narrative analysis in dialogue with pastoral theology and empirical research on ministerial burnout, this study contends that Elijah's crisis reflects the profound human fragility inherent in divine service. The narrative reveals a sophisticated model of religious coping mediated by the divine presence, evidenced through the validation of somatic needs, the provision of a therapeutic space for lament, and the reaffirmation of vocational identity. The findings indicate that divine restoration is not invariably manifested through spectacular interventions but through empathetic and restorative relational processes. This study concludes that the Horeb narrative serves as a vital pastoral model for the contemporary church. It challenges the prevailing culture of ministerial perfectionism and advocates for a holistic framework—integrating spiritual, psychological, and communal dimensions—to address burnout. By reframing exhaustion not as the termination of a calling but as a potential *locus* for theological transformation, this research offers a praxis-oriented approach for sustaining leaders in an era of increasing vocational instability.

Keywords

Elijah; Ministry Burnout; Pastoral Theology; Religious Coping; 1 Kings 19.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary ecclesiastical ministry faces a complex array of challenges that extend far beyond traditional theological and spiritual mandates. In the current socio-cultural climate, the interplay between congregational care, organizational leadership, and the relentless pressure of moral and spiritual expectations places clergy in a state of chronic occupational strain. As research by Nganga and Ndung'u (2024) indicates, this multifaceted environment contributes significantly to the prevalence of



ministerial burnout, which adversely impacts mental health, spiritual well-being, and the long-term sustainability of the prophetic vocation.

Burnout, conceptually defined by Maslach and Leiter (2000) as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment resulting from chronic interpersonal and occupational stressors, takes on a distinctively heightened dimension in the ministry. Because the work of the clergy is inextricably linked to their divine calling and religious identity, the threshold for recognizing and addressing exhaustion is often obscured. As noted by Hart (1984), many ministers struggle to acknowledge their fatigue openly, frequently constrained by ecclesial constructs that prioritize self-sacrifice and spiritual stoicism over healthy human vulnerability.

This pervasive silence surrounding ministerial burnout often results in the misinterpretation of physical and emotional fatigue as a failure of faith or a deficiency in spiritual discipline. When such experiences are not granted adequate theological reflection, they frequently escalate into existential crises and profound alienation from the very source of the minister's calling (Muasa, 2022). Consequently, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between empirical psychological findings and robust biblical-theological frameworks to provide a more nuanced, sustainable understanding of pastoral resilience.

The narrative of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1–18 offers a poignant and authoritative biblical testimony to the reality of prophetic exhaustion. Far from a stoic figure, Elijah is portrayed as a vulnerable servant of God whose post-Carmel desolation captures the paradox of ministry: that significant public success does not serve as a prophylactic against deep psychological and spiritual fragility (Brueggemann, 2000). His journey into the wilderness and his subsequent encounter at Horeb provide a critical lens through which to examine the dynamics of despair and the restorative processes of divine care.

This article addresses the prevailing research gap by synthesizing these biblical insights with contemporary studies on *religious coping*. By applying the framework developed by Pargament (2001), this study reframes Elijah's experience as a *locus* of theological and personal transformation rather than a mere failure of endurance. By integrating these dimensions, this research proposes a holistic, praxis-oriented pastoral model designed to sustain leaders, ensuring that the response to burnout remains grounded in both psychological health and theological integrity.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in a library research design, synthesized through an interdisciplinary dialogue between critical biblical exegesis and pastoral psychology. The analytical process involves a rigorous narrative-theological examination of 1 Kings 19:1–18, which is

then critically engaged with Maslach and Leiter's (2000) conceptual framework of burnout and Pargament's (2001) theory of *religious coping* to establish a coherent interpretive model. By integrating foundational pastoral insights—specifically drawing upon the scholarly contributions of Marbun et al. (2022)—the research systematically maps the relationship between prophetic vulnerability and spiritual restoration, ultimately generating a descriptive-analytical synthesis that bridges ancient text-based testimony with contemporary pastoral praxis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Paradox of Ministry: Existential Desolation and the Failure of Heroism

The narrative of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 captures the sharp transition from the theological triumph at Carmel to existential desolation, serving as a critical case study for contemporary ministerial burnout. Elijah's sudden withdrawal into the wilderness—specifically his act of leaving his servant at Beersheba—signifies a move toward total social and spiritual isolation, a core symptom of the depersonalization common in modern pastoral contexts. This physical retreat is deeply symbolic, representing the prophet's attempt to sever his connection with the very mission that has exhausted him (Maslach & Leiter, 2000).

Elijah's prayer, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life," reveals a radical theological honesty that transcends mere physical fatigue. In this moment, the prophet discards the mask of heroic piety to present his existential despair directly before the divine (Brueggemann, 2000). Such transparency is strikingly rare in contemporary ministry, where the prevailing ecclesiastical culture often demands an outward display of unwavering faith and stamina, effectively prohibiting the expression of internal fragility.

The dissonance between Elijah's expectation of immediate national reform and the harsh historical reality of Jezebel's threat highlights the inherent, often brutal, tension in prophetic labor. As scholarly research indicates, ministers often struggle with the "hero complex," an unconscious belief that their singular efforts determine the success of God's mission (Muasa, 2022). When these high expectations fail to materialize into tangible societal changes, the resulting cognitive dissonance frequently precipitates a profound crisis of faith.

In the context of *religious coping*, this phase represents a severe struggle with *religious strain*, where the dissonance between the prophet's convictions and his lived experience leads to a breakdown of his meaning system (Pargament, 2001). Elijah's assertion that he is "no better than his ancestors" is a devastating self-evaluation, suggesting that his burnout is not merely an occupational hazard but a collapse of his identity as an agent of history. This internal struggle mirrors the experience of many modern clergy who question the lasting value of their ministry.

Ultimately, Elijah's burnout is not a sign of spiritual inferiority, but a predictable consequence of the structural and emotional intensity of his vocation. By recognizing this post-Carmel desolation as a documented narrative event, we can validate the experiences of modern ministers who suffer in silence. This perspective provides a necessary biblical foundation for acknowledging burnout as a legitimate occupational crisis rather than a moral or spiritual failure.

Divine Intervention: Holistic Restoration and Somatic Regulation

God's response to Elijah's burnout is fundamentally non-judgmental, prioritizing somatic and affective regulation over immediate theological interrogation or corrective rebuke. Instead of demanding a justification for the prophet's fear, the narrative records divine interventions that involve the provision of food, water, and restorative sleep. This divine methodology underscores a critical theological insight: the preservation of the physical body (*basar*) is the essential prerequisite for the renewal of the soul (*nephesh*).

This divine approach resonates deeply with modern understandings of holistic pastoral care, where the biological and psychological needs of a leader are recognized as inseparable from their capacity for service (Marbun et al., 2022). In many church traditions, the persistent neglect of one's physical health is unfortunately spiritualized, leading to severe and prolonged burnout. The Horeb narrative actively challenges this destructive trajectory by positioning rest as a divine mandate rather than a secondary concern.

By addressing these basic physiological needs, the narrative establishes that God concerns Himself with the minister's humanity before requiring further prophetic action. This provides a clear template for institutional church policy, where the provision of rest, sabbatical time, and health resources should be treated as a high theological priority. Ignoring these needs, as the narrative implies, is to fundamentally misread the divine design for those called to leadership.

Furthermore, the transition from physical care to emotional space at Horeb facilitates a therapeutic environment for Elijah to finally articulate his trauma. The divine question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" is not a request for data, but a pedagogical tool that invites the prophet to externalize his grief (Brueggemann, 2000). This non-judgmental space constitutes the essence of effective pastoral counseling, allowing the sufferer to process internalized pain without the fear of condemnation.

By allowing Elijah to repeat his lament, the narrative demonstrates that the restoration of a burned-out minister requires time and space for the iteration of their personal narrative of pain. This process of articulation is essential for moving toward *positive religious coping*, as it allows the individual to safely unload their distress before the divine. Thus, the divine interventional process serves as the vital, bridge-building link between physical exhaustion and spiritual reorientation.

Reframing the Call: The Shift Toward Collaborative Ministry

The transformation of Elijah's despair into renewed purpose serves as a masterclass in shifting from a hero-centered mindset to a collaborative model of service. Through the revelation that seven thousand others remained faithful, God actively corrects Elijah's cognitive distortion of being a solitary actor, effectively utilizing *benevolent religious reappraisal* to integrate the prophet back into a larger, ongoing divine mission (Pargament, 2001). This transition is crucial because it helps the prophet see his exhaustion as a temporary state rather than a permanent verdict on his life's work.

This transition to collaborative ministry is the ultimate preventative measure against ministerial burnout, as it effectively shifts the crushing burden of leadership from a single individual to a community of shared accountability. This structural change is as much a theological necessity as it is a management strategy, ensuring that the mission of the church is not fragily dependent on a single individual's endurance (Marbun et al., 2022). By expanding the perspective of the ministry, the leader is freed from the unsustainable weight of sole responsibility.

The narrative also highlights the vital importance of institutional support in facilitating this change. Just as God provided Elijah with a successor in Elisha, the contemporary church must proactively design systems that allow leaders to share the weight of their duties through mentorship and team-based leadership. This involves educating congregations on the inherent limitations of their leaders, thereby reducing the immense pressure to meet impossible, superhuman expectations.

Furthermore, this collaborative model emphasizes that the health of the leader is fundamentally linked to the health and grace of the community. A church that cares for its leader's vulnerability is a church that is better positioned to model grace to the world at large. The transition from Elijah's isolation to the partnership with Elisha proves that community-building and shared responsibility are essential components of sustainable *religious coping*.

In conclusion, the Horeb narrative reveals that the end of burnout is the beginning of a more sustainable, communal form of ministry. By framing the restoration of the leader within the context of their continued role in the community, the narrative offers a hopeful vision for all who labor in the vineyard. It serves as a necessary reminder that no one is called to be a hero; rather, we are all called to be part of a larger, divine story that persists beyond our own exhaustion.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that ministerial burnout is a profoundly complex phenomenon that intersects psychological, spiritual, and theological dimensions, rendering it impossible to reduce to mere personal deficiency or a lack of faith. By reading the narrative of 1 Kings 19 in dialogue with *religious coping* theory, Elijah's exhaustion is revealed as a crisis of meaning arising from the tension

between the intensity of his prophetic vocation and the reality of his human fragility. His restoration—initiated through the validation of somatic needs, facilitated by the creation of a non-judgmental space for lament, and solidified through the *qōl demāmā daqqāh*—highlights a divine intervention that is holistic, empathetic, and ultimately transformative. The research further integrates the perspective of Rencan Carisma Marbun, which emphasizes that spiritual health acts as the foundational defense against the erosion of identity in high-stress ministry. By reframing the experience of burnout as a *locus* of theological encounter rather than a terminal point of failure, this study proposes that *religious coping* serves as an essential interventional tool. It allows leaders to navigate their vulnerability by anchoring their identity in the grace of God rather than the weight of their own accomplishments. In summary, the Horeb narrative provides a robust, praxis-oriented pastoral model for the contemporary church. It mandates a shift from a culture of heroic individualism toward a collaborative model of ministry supported by institutional care, clear boundaries, and communal accountability. Ultimately, burnout is not the end of a calling but a critical transformative moment; when met with appropriate care and a healthy theological framework, it leads to a more sustainable, resilient, and faithful engagement with the mission of God.

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