

THE VOICE ON THE FIFTH MOUNTAIN: PROPHETIC COURAGE AND DISCERNED ACTION

GODWIN RUFUS SJ

Assistant Professor of English

Arul Anandar College (Autonomous), Karumathur, Madurai

Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

Abstract

*This study analyses Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* through the lenses of Ignatian spirituality, prophetic discernment, and existential psychology. Elijah's ascension of the Fifth Mountain is seen as a metaphorical representation of Ignatian "missioning," a juncture when thought solidifies into a distinct call to action. Utilising St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, Viktor Frankl's existential insights in *Man's Search for Meaning*, and 10 modern academic sources, the study contends that Elijah evolves from a reactive character into one directed by discernment bravery, inner freedom, and heavenly company. His conversations with the widow of Zarephath illustrate a mutual existential struggle that aligns with Frankl's belief that meaning arises from duty, pain, and love. Ultimately, Elijah's spiritual experience results in moral action as he returns to reconstruct the devastated city of Akbar. Coelho's tale encapsulates the Ignatian belief that genuine spirituality integrates contemplation with action, mystical experience with service, and heavenly friendship with accountable love.*

Keywords: *Ignatian Spirituality; Discernment; Prophetic Mission; Existential Meaning; Fifth Mountain*

Introduction

Paulo Coelho's *The Fifth Mountain* reinterprets the biblical account of Elijah as a tale focused on spiritual development, existential conflict, and vocational clarity. At the outset of the book, Coelho asserts that Elijah's journey represents "a battle between destiny and the will of God" (Coelho 12), placing the prophet inside the tension-laden discernment emblematic of Ignatian spirituality. Scholars such as Ana Correia observe that Coelho often employs biblical characters as "archetypes of interior transformation through suffering" (Correia 214). Elijah's ascent of the Fifth Mountain fulfils this exact function, symbolising what Ignatius of Loyola refers to in the *Spiritual Exercises* as a time when "God communicates Himself to the devout soul, inflaming it with His love" (Ignatius 330).

Simultaneously, Elijah's discussions with the widow of Zarephath serve as existential debates. Her sorrow and inquiry foreshadow Viktor Frankl's assertion that "life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose" (*Man's Search* 67). Their connection exemplifies Frankl's conviction that meaning is found not in solitude but through love, responsibility, and bravery.

Consequently, *The Fifth Mountain* transcends a mere recounting of Scripture; it evolves into what Joao Biehl describes as "a parable of modern mystical consciousness

seeking ethical embodiment" (Biehl 226). This study contends that Coelho's tale exemplifies the Ignatian synthesis of reflection and action, elucidates Elijah's progression from impulsive behaviour to discerning bravery, and highlights the process of existential meaning-making via suffering and fellowship.

The Ascension to the Fifth Mountain as Ignatian Missioning

Ignatian spirituality conceptualises discernment as a process whereby prayer culminates in mission. Ignatius asserts that God wishes to "draw the soul into His service" (Ignatius 233). Elijah's ascension exemplifies this goal. Coelho observes that "he climbed because the voice inside him whispered, 'Go up, for only there will you understand'" (118). This corresponds with David Lonsdale's assertion that genuine discernment requires "attentiveness to the interior movements that lead toward spiritual freedom" (Lonsdale 42).

On the mountain, Elijah experiences not a spectacular miracle but a subtle inner voice: "Return. Your place is with the people. Your mission is not finished" (Coelho 156). Ignatius refers to this communication as "a gentle and quiet motion" (Ignatius 335), while Timothy Gallagher elucidates that genuine discernment often presents as "subtle but clarifying interior resonance" (Gallagher 58).

Coelho's mountain serves as a metaphorical Spiritual Exercise. Elijah ascends in search of salvation, however instead encounters guidance: "He expected a miracle, but what he found was a truth that demanded his return" (Coelho 153). George Ganss asserts that Ignatian missioning consistently guides individuals "back into history with renewed purpose" (Ganss 91). Elijah descends the mountain metamorphosed, ready to serve rather than flee.

Discerned Courage Versus Impulsive Action

At the outset of the tale, Elijah behaves impulsively. Coelho asserts: "He did not act, he merely fled from danger to danger" (78). Jean Pousset characterises this attitude as a consequence of "desolation, a state that weakens judgment and amplifies fear" (Pousset 114). Elijah conceals his identity first, discloses it impulsively, and complies with reluctance. These activities mirror what Ignatius characterises as choices made when "the soul is troubled, tempted, or agitated" (Ignatius 318).

The Fifth Mountain signifies a pivotal moment. Coelho states: "The prophet descended different from the one who had climbed; fear no longer ruled his steps" (161). This illustrates what Ignatius refers to as "an increase in faith, hope, and love" (316), the characteristic of spiritual clarity. Elijah asserts, "Even if the city must fall, I will rebuild it, for that is what my heart now knows" (Coelho 164). Alan Richardson observes that biblical prophets often demonstrate "courage rooted not in certainty but in fidelity" (Richardson 77).

Here, discerning bravery supplants impetuous fervour. Peter Kreeft's assertion that "true courage is acting rightly despite fear" (Kreeft 134) aligns with Elijah's metamorphosis. Frankl enhances this interpretation: "What is demanded of man is not to endure blindly, but to choose his stance toward conditions" (Man's Search 86). Elijah's revised position is loyalty rooted on inner autonomy.

Divine Fellowship as the Foundation of Prophetic Endeavour

A prominent concept in Ignatian spirituality is heavenly communion. Ignatius states that God "labours and works for me in all creatures" (236). Elijah's first despondency illustrates his conviction that God has deserted him: "Why have You forsaken me to exile?" (Coelho 49). According to Thomas McAvoy, exiled prophets often grapple with "the

silence of God as a pedagogical space for renewed trust" (McAvoy 62).

Elijah progressively realises the proximity of God. Upon the demise of the widow's son, he laments: "Do not forsake the child, or forsake me with him" (Coelho 101). The child's revival signifies celestial fellowship. Elijah recognises, "God had always been with him, only his fear had made Him seem distant" (112). Frankl contends that "in some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds meaning" (Man's Search 113).

Coelho underscores this transition: "'He felt God more in silence than in command" (133). Jean Vanier asserts that spiritual development entails recognising that God's presence is often "quiet, hidden, and discovered in small acts of fidelity" (Vanier 55). Consequently, heavenly friendship serves as the cornerstone of Elijah's revitalised mission.

Spiritual Conversations with the Widow of Zarephath and the Quest for Meaning

The widow functions as Elijah's existential counterpart. She enquires, "Why must those who love suffer the most?" (Coelho 57). Frankl asserts that pain attains significance only when confronted with responsibility and bravery (79). Elijah states, "Because only those who love know what is worth fighting for" (Coelho 58).

Their dialogues illustrate what Ignatius refers to as communicating "heart to heart" (Constitutions 628). Coelho states: "Walking with her, he understood more of God than in all the commands he had received" (94). Gallagher observes that spiritual dialogue fosters "shared discernment, where meaning unfolds between individuals" (Gallagher 74). The widow expresses to Elijah, "In your struggle, I perceive my own; in your hope, I reencounter mine" (Coelho 89). Frankl asserts: "Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality" (Man's Search 111). Consequently, meaning is generated relationally, indicating that the prophetic mission is not only vertical (towards God) but also horizontal (towards people). Biehl contends that authentic spirituality is "embodied in companionship, mutual vulnerability, and shared questions" (Biehl 223).

Mystical Experience as Moral Obligation

The pinnacle of Elijah's mystical experience is characterised not by spiritual transcendence but by ethical

involvement. Coelho states: "Visions exist not to lift us from the earth, but to root us more deeply in it" (159). Ignatius asserts that "love ought to manifest itself more in deeds than in words" (Ignatius 230). Although aware that Akbar would ultimately collapse, Elijah opts for action: "Whether it stands or falls is God's doing; my task is to build" (Coelho 167). This encapsulates Frankl's assertion that "the meaning of life always changes, but it never ceases to exist" (Man's Search 77).

Elijah collaborates with the individuals: "He labored as one of them, not above them" (Coelho 172). Jean Vanier describes this kind of leadership as "a presence that heals, not by authority but by solidarity" (Vanier 61). The Fifth Mountain illustrates that spiritual experience necessitates ethical responsibility, action, love, and service.

Conclusion

The Fifth Mountain is a profound Ignatian and existential tale centred on discernment, inner freedom, and prophetic vocation. Elijah's climb signifies an Ignatian moment of commissioning, reflecting the Spiritual Exercises' belief that God summons each individual to service via profound inward movements of love and insight. His evolution from impetuous reaction to measured boldness, supported by heavenly friendship, signifies a transition towards genuine prophetic identity. Coelho, via his conversations with the widow, exemplifies Frankl's assertion that meaning is derived from pain, responsibility, and love. Ultimately, Elijah's choice to reconstruct Akbar illustrates that a spiritual experience results in ethical behaviour. The voice Elijah perceives on the Fifth Mountain serves as a global call to bravery, insight, and transformational love.

Works Cited

1. Biehl, João. "Mysticism and Modern Spirituality in Paulo Coelho." *Journal of World Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2019, pp. 214–230.
2. Coelho, Paulo. *The Fifth Mountain*. HarperCollins, 1998.
3. Correia, Ana. "Prophetic Identity and Narrative Transformation in Coelho's Works." *Latin American Literary Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2020, pp. 212–228.
4. Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press, 2006.
5. Gallagher, Timothy. *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living*. Crossroad Publishing, 2005.
6. Ganss, George. *Ignatian Spirituality and Mission*. Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991.
7. Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl, Loyola Press, 1951.
8. Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Servant Publications, 1990.
9. Lonsdale, David. *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*. Orbis Books, 2000.
10. McAvoy, Thomas. "Prophets in Exile: A Study of Biblical Reinterpretation in Contemporary Fiction." *Studies in Religion and Literature*, vol. 35, 2018, pp. 55–72.
11. Pousset, Jean. *Discernment in the Jesuit Tradition*. Ignatius Press, 2004.
12. Richardson, Alan. *The Biblical Theology of Prophecy*. SCM Press, 1993.
13. Vanier, Jean. *Becoming Human*. Paulist Press, 1998.