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איש האלהים – Fiction or Function?

A few observations on the title "man of god" in the Elisha cycle

Summary

The Elisha cycle appears as a bundle of anecdotes loosely strung together in a block of narrative material within the Books of Kings. Contradictions therefore occur, as might be expected. Hence one aim of my dissertation is to examine the Elisha stories from a redaction critical point of view and trace their literary growth. The other objective is to examine the religion historical type of "prophet" which is represented in Elisha. One major role for this purpose will play Elisha's appellation as "man of god".

The presented short paper therefore outlines my first observations on the religion historical question concerning the term איש האלהים and the function that is associated with it. One result is that original short anecdotes about Elisha already had that title איש האלהים as well as Elisha's name. Hence, the title is not merely redactional as some scholars stated. Contrariwise, there is no sign at all that the central character of the original short miracle stories already was connected with the title נביא. This implies that if anything the term נביא could be understood as marker for redactional activity.

Furthermore, the paper sets out to be a foresight into the second third of my dissertation and therefore likes to be understood as a first collection of religion historical observations due to be examined and discussed by the respondent.

Unfortunately, the biblical analyses of title איש האלהים has not given any information on the religion historical problem of typology and give a homogenous explanation for what איש האלהים actually means. Hence, the paper takes a first look on parallel text prior and posterior to the Old Testament. It has to be stated that there are no direct literary parallels to Elisha's typology or the title איש האלהים neither prior nor posterior to the Old Testament. Therefore, it is not possible to tell, if איש האלהים represents a historical function that is to say an archaic profession but at least we can state that the author and the reader of the original Elisha stories must have had an idea what was implied with that term. Though there is a lack or direct parallels, the general character of a miracle worker is not unique but occurs several times in folk tales and stories about pious and specially gifted men in history. These stories predominantly originate from the Hellenistic period and occur as well in pagan Hellenistic as in Jewish-Hellenistic texts. Some examples of these texts are taken into consideration for a further examination.