

The cloth of Elijah: Reimagining sustainable leadership in the context of uncertainty

**Author:**Thinandavha D. Mashau¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Christian Spirituality, Church History, and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Tshwane, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Thinandavha Mashau,
mashatd@unisa.ac.za

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Difficult times in the history of humanity, such as global pandemics, global wars, ecological degradation, drought, poverty and unemployment, require not just leadership, but sustainable leadership. Inspired by the leadership model of Nelson Mandela, this article sought to tap into the resourcefulness of the missional reading of 2 Kings 2:1–18 and use the leadership model of prophet Elijah to unpack what it means to be a sustainable leader in the context of uncertainty. Relying upon literature analysis and a missional reading of 2 Kings 2:1–18, this article concluded that sustainable leadership, taking after the model of prophet Elijah, has five distinctive features, that is, human, missional, mentorship, management of transitions, and transformation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article investigates the issue of sustainable leadership in the context of uncertainties such as global pandemics, global wars, ecological degradation, among others. It contributes to the disciplines of missiology and missional hermeneutics, biblical theology, and sustainability theories, in particular issues of Christian leadership.

Keywords: cloth; prophet; Elijah; sustainable; leadership; uncertainty; 2 Kings 2:1–18.

Introduction

This article flows from the need to reimagine the notion of sustainable leadership and its implications for leadership calling and responsibilities in the context of uncertainty. The task of reimagining sustainable leadership is undertaken within the context of global pandemics such as COVID-19 and gender-based violence (GBV). Other related challenges that global communities are faced with include global wars, ecological and environmental degradation, and the collapse of global socio-political and global markets, among others. Church praxis in such a changing and challenging context is not only different but requires a different type of leader who is able to read the signs of their times, the matter of creating an experience of the Kingdom of God and navigate the storms and the uncharted waters.

While this article draws inspiration from the exceptional leadership style of the first democratic president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, the author intends to reflect on the leadership style of prophet Elijah as described in 2 Kings 2:1–18. President Mandela had a clear vision for a Rainbow Nation, one sustained by efforts to drive the spirit of social cohesion, embedded in ubuntu ethos and call for national reconciliation and unity in a country highly polarised along tribal and ethnic divides. Mandela embraced not only the spirit of forgiveness, but reconciliation as well (Garba & Akuva 2020:49). Netshitenzhe (2016:21) asserted that 'reconciliation was, in fact, an instrument of revolutionary change'. Mandela's leadership style, for instance, included what Bendell and Little (2015:16) consider to be interesting adjectives that speak to sustainability, that is servant, democratic, authentic, situational (contextual) and transformational. Nelson Mandela was a charismatic leader who mobilised the whole nation to embrace his vision, but what is noteworthy and outstanding, something that prompted the author to undertake this research, are elements of sustainable leadership in his approach. Mandela was a great master of transitions – a revolutionary leader. He moved from the struggle sight of fighting apartheid to prison, and from prison to the Union Buildings to lead a government of national unity and then a democratic government. It is clear from the foregoing that Mandela had the ability to manage transitions as part of his leadership cloth. He served one term as a democratic leader and allowed himself to become a ceremonial leader of the government while allowing the then Deputy President, Thabo Mbeki, to run the day-to-day affairs of government. It is asserted that:

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Yet during his five years as president, Mandela led a peaceful transition from a discordant, racially segregated country to a democracy based on a universal franchise, sustained by a progressive constitution and an impressive bill of rights. (Pietersen 2015:61)

Mandela was also a leader who would listen and allow himself to be persuaded by his comrades on critical matters such as the succession debate within the African National Congress (ANC) as to who should become his apparent heir. His preferred candidate was the current President, Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa. He allowed a situation where Ramaphosa left the government for business, while Thabo Mbeki took over as his successor. Mandela was able to quit political power at the right time as a sign of being a selfless visionary leader (Garba & Akuva 2020:57). This leadership style is similar to the one of Elijah as recorded in the biblical narrative of 2 Kings 2:1–18. While other scholars describe Elijah's leadership style as a failed project (Fetherolf 2017; Lockwood 2004), the authors' thesis in this article is that Elijah's cloth was a sign of sustainable leadership in many ways. During his tenure as a prophet in Israel, Elijah navigated challenging times and managed transitions very well. The main question is: what and how sustainable was Elijah's leadership approach? A missional reading of 2 Kings 2:1–18 suggests that Elijah had five distinctive features of sustainable leadership, namely human, missional, mentorship, management of transitions, and transformation. However, giving rise to this transition is the depressing episode in the desert and the discernment of the voice amid the cacophony on Horeb.

Literature review on the cloth of Elijah and sustainable leadership in context

Defining the cloth of Elijah

The notion of a cloth is used in this article to refer to a literal cloth or mantle that Elisha inherited from Elijah when he was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Ki 2:13), but it is also used metaphorically to refer to the leadership style of Elijah, of which Elisha also desired a double portion. The cloth of Elijah is therefore used to refer to his prophetic ministry and its mandate, including the spirit to perform miracles (see Levine 1999:25, cf. Olley 1998:32). It defined his calling and the authority that Elijah's prophetic office carried. Even though the picking up of the cloth of Elijah by Elisha marked a defining moment of God's anointing, Elisha's call went through different stages. Elijah was informed of the need to anoint Elisha as his successor, followed by Elisha leaving his family and trade to join Elijah as a follower to be mentored. When Elisha picked the cloth of Elijah, it was an affirmation of his calling, but at the same time, Elisha also received the same spirit of Elijah and the authority with which he prophesied. This is captured as follows:

After Elijah's departure, Elisha picks up Elijah's mantle, signifying the transference of authority. The association between

the mantle and the *ruach* is here unmistakable. It is the same mantle that was thrown on Elisha that communicated to him his calling. (Maré 2009:78)

What is more significant in terms of the liminality to the transference is that Elisha had to tear his garment before donning Elijah's cloth. The cloth of Elijah, literally and metaphorically, signifies the prophetic charisma, the calling of the prophet and the leadership style of the prophet, and the Spirit of God through whom both Elijah and Elisha derived their mandate and authority to serve as prophets and perform miracles (Maré 2009:79). Consequently, for Elisha to inherit the cloth of Elijah, it was not just authentication of Elisha as a prophetic successor of Elijah, but a sign that Elijah was a prototype of the kind of leader Elisha should turn out to be. Elisha was called to build on the foundation laid by Elijah; hence Elisha would have requested for a double portion of the *ruach* of Elijah (2 Ki 2:9). The foregoing suggests that the cloth of Elijah was a cloth of sustainable leadership in terms of the prophetic calling and ministry in Israel. For this purpose, the next section explores what sustainable leadership is.

Sustainable leadership

The notion of 'sustainable leadership' presupposes a sense of a leader who intentionally makes efforts to leave a legacy for their leadership vision, style and ministry. Speaking in the context of business and the need to create sustainable organisations and societies, Tideman, Arts and Zandee (2013) made efforts to provide a broader scope within which sustainable leadership should be premised, defined and operationalised as follows:

SL is distinct in that it starts with recognising the disruptive and transformational changes that occur in the context of business and society today, while many other leadership approaches start from the viewpoint of the leaders and/or the current status quo of their organisation. By recognizing the importance of world-views, mind-sets and attitudes of both leaders and followers, SL implies the need for leadership transformation as the driver and necessary condition for sustainable transformation and development. From this, it follows that future leaders will need to take up practices through which they can discover and adjust new mind-sets, beliefs and attitudes and develop the relevant skill set for the unprecedented transformational sustainability journey ahead. (p. 30)

This broader definition and understanding of sustainable leadership presupposes an interplay between:

- environmental disruptions (Bendell & Little 2015:16),
- the ability to read the signs of one's time as pushed into the agenda of your calling and ministry by disruptions that life brings,
- consciousness within the leader to adapt and change one's leadership style in pursuit of new direction and results envisaged,
- managing new and transformational paradigms in efforts to create a new path, which is driven by sustainability.

Sustainable leadership, therefore, presupposes the ability to turn the tide against unsustainability (Bendell & Little

2015:17). It is about envisioning the future by tapping into the resourcefulness of the past (including past failures and baggage). It is opined that:

[S]ustainable leadership, improvement and change connect the future to the past through coherent life narratives and compelling social visions about where the society has been and where it is headed. (Hargreaves 2007:232)

The cloth of Elijah and sustainable leadership: Framing the context

The immediate context that requires our attention within which concepts '[t]he cloth of Elijah and sustainable leadership' must be understood is the historical context of Elijah and his ministry. Several national calamities befell Israel, which necessitated God's prophetic intervention through the prophet Elijah, that is:

- socio-economic conditions in Israel that perpetuated growing *inequalities between the wealthy upper classes and ordinary citizens in Israel*,
- *oppressive economic policies of the empire King Ahab*, which resulted in the killing of Naboth and the repossession of his land or garden,
- *the battle between the two deities and ideologies*. According to Van der Walt (2021:223), 'Ahab, son of Omri, opened the door to Baalism for Israel during the period of the Omride Dynasty (874–853 BC)'. Accordingly, his marriage to Jezebel, daughter of the king of the Sidonians, further exacerbated the matter. It resulted in intense battles between 'Ahab and Elijah' and between 'Jezebel and Elijah'. But it was more of a struggle for the religious soul of Israel. It is opined that:

The conflict between Ahab and Elijah is not only the struggle between two individuals, rather it is a struggle between two ideologies – Yahwism and Baalism. The names 'Yahweh' and 'Baal' stood for more than a god to worship, but represented a social system in which to live. (Farisani 2005:51)

- While *the question of the barrenness and fertility of humanity and the land* seems to occupy a central place in the given conflict, Elijah appears to demonstrate the sovereignty of God. It is asserted that 'This dominant theme of Yahweh's triumph over Baal in the Elijah stories, then, presents Yahweh, not Baal, as the *real* God of fertility' (Moore 2018:786). The foregoing suggests that Elijah was surrounded by as many controversies and challenges during his ministry.

Elijah as a 'man of God' but a 'human prophet' in sustainable leadership

'[The] understanding of "man of God" is equally attested in the Elijah and Elisha narratives' (Gunda & Machingura 2013:20). It insinuates that the man of God is a man who stands out above all mortal beings as a special person with a special relationship with God and one who does exceptional acts on behalf of God. Gunda and Machingura (2013) capture this as follows:

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is always hovering around the 'man of God', suggesting that proximity to the 'man of God' is essentially proximity to Yahweh. This creates the impression that Elijah "will stride the earth like some Yahwistic *übermensch*, unperturbed by the droughts and distances of earth. He is the prophet who 'stands before the Lord'." (p. 20)

However, as part of sustainable leadership, the narratives of the prophet Elijah also demonstrate that he was a human prophet. It is, therefore, correctly observed that:

Modern literary readings of prophetic narratives in the book of Kings have not been kind to poor Elijah. They exhibit the tendency to question his good character and undermine his reputation as a faithful servant of Yahweh. (Hadjiev 2015:434)

Elijah is said to be 'selfish and disobedient' (Hadjiev 2015:433), a zealous prophet (Oley 1998:25). Prophet Elijah is said to be a prophet who failed in his mission. After having slaughtered the prophets of Baal, Elijah ran for his life because Jezebel wanted to kill him (1 Ki 19). This is said to be a flight of a prophet who departed from his journey and mission (Roi 2012:26). In his ministry, the prophet Elijah showed signs of fear, anxiety, depression, and at times expressed faithlessness or lack of trust in God and the sovereignty of God. While others will perceive this as a lack of leadership, this is an explicit demonstration that Elijah was also a human prophet who needed God's power, strength and encouragement during difficult times.

Missional intent and praxis in sustainable leadership

A missional reading of 2 Kings 2:1–18 gives a clear expression that Elijah was more of a missional leader. His name means 'YHWH is God' and '[i]t embodies his entire message and mission: To point out to Israel that there is only one God – YHWH' (Van der Walt 2021:222). According to Roxburgh (1998):

Leadership is a critical gift, provided by the Spirit because, as the Scriptures demonstrate, fundamental change in any body of people requires leaders capable of transforming its life and being transformed themselves. (p. 183)

My interpretation of this kind of leadership presupposes four elements with a missional intent, namely a sense of calling to be in the service of the *missio Dei* and humanity in a particular context, a transformational vision or agenda to be able to impact and change lives (both human and created order), a servanthood attitude and approach to ministry, and a sense of accountability to the *missio Dei* and the context within which sustainable leadership is practised. This includes the notion of being ethical or having ethical leadership.

The foregoing elements are traceable in the leadership of Elijah as a missional leader. Firstly, Elijah was a prophet who was called to be the servant of the *missio Dei* [mission of God] in Israel. According to Carroll (1969:404), 'The charisma and the word of Yahweh identified the prophet as the man of

God, and he became Yahweh's spokesperson and messenger for his generation'. It is therefore critical for leadership agency to discern God's will in every given context.

Secondly, Elijah had a transformational agenda of equipping and empowering others for service. But as a change agent, Elijah transformed the lives of many sons of the prophets to become discerning agents of change themselves. At the time when a replacement of Elijah was sought, the sons of the prophets were mature enough to understand that there could only be one successor, and they were all willing to endorse Elisha. Thirdly, Elijah was a human being, a servant of the people and for the people. He spent more time in the streets, but also with the sons of the prophets in their immediate contexts. Lastly, Elijah demonstrated a great sense of accountability – leading in obedience and accounting to God at all material times. God's master plan for his people was Elijah's master plan for his ministry. Elijah understood that he had to follow God to lead others. The Spirit of God led and guided him, and he followed.

Prophetic, royal and priestly elements of sustainable leadership

Elijah's cloth was a symbol of his infused prophetic, royal and priestly calling. The three elements manifested in three diverse but not isolated instances, which will be cited as examples in this article. Firstly, Elijah and the widow in Zarephath (1 Ki 17:8–24). In this instance, Elijah demonstrates that he was a priest who did not just intercede for Israel and its people in the hour of need, but also served the tables of those in the margins. The provision was in abundance. This notion of abundance or plenty was a sign of the reign of God, which is also captured in the great Isaiah hymns and various other places but stretches back past Elijah to the promise of the land of plenty. When there was a drought in Israel, Elijah prayed to God to provide food for the widow and her son (1 Ki 17:8–16). Instead of the prophet, the widow and her son facing death after eating the last meal, Elijah's intervention and priestly intercession ensured that the widow's oil and flour replenished themselves as a sign of life that Elijah's priestly ministry brought to Israel (Branch 2003:298). In executing his priestly responsibilities, Elijah also brought back to life the son of the same widow (1 Ki 17:24). The death of the widow's son brought hopelessness in her life, but Elijah's intervention brought back hope (Branch 2003:299). In a similar being, the conquest of death is also attached to the reign of God. Here is a conflation of post biblical ideas of priesthood and the institution of the priesthood in the ancient Israel.

The second example concerns Elijah's confrontation with king Ahab (1 Ki 18). As a prophet, Elijah never fell short of being prophetic to the powers that be. He confronted the injustices of his times, especially those that happened within the temple courts, like in the case of Ahab. When Ahab took the Vineyard of Naboth, as a faithful witness to God's justice,

Elijah condemned the king and his actions (1 Ki 21:1–16). The third example concerns the contestation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Ki 18:20–40). The judgement and execution of the prophets of Baal demonstrate Elijah's royal ministry – powers that only kings would have to pass judgement and execute as a sign of the reign of God who is greater than earthly kings. The foregoing suggests that Elijah was a charismatic leader whose words were accompanied by miracles that affirmed him as a servant of God (Maré 2009:74).

Mentorship in sustainable leadership

Mentorship or coaching others is an essential ingredient of sustainable leadership (Boyatzis, Smith & Blaize 2006:12). The cloth of Elijah defines sustainable leadership as mentoring the next generation of leaders. Two examples speak to this matter, namely:

- Elijah, as per God's instruction, appointed Elisha as his apparent heir to the prophetic office by casting his cloth upon him, but 'Elisha did not assume power until he had received the double share of Elijah's spirit' (Carroll 1969:405).
- Elijah was a theological professor of his time and was mandated to train as many sons of the prophets from several established prophetic schools in Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan.

Elijah was an itinerant teacher who demonstrated sustainable leadership by sharing knowledge, skills and expertise. The essence of this is captured by Brueggemann (2000) as follows:

The plot of this narrative is the transition of power and authority from the master to the disciple, from Elijah to Elisha. At the beginning, Elijah is clearly the dominant force as Elisha, seemingly unwelcome on Elijah's farewell tour, trails along. By the end of the narrative, by contrast, Elijah is absent (even if yearned for), and Elisha takes up all the room in the narrative. Thus, we might think of this narrative as a careful, imaginative transfer of power. (p. 300)

While reading 2 Kings 2:1–18, it becomes clear that Elijah's cloth was more about people – creating relations with Elisha and other sons of the prophets as his mentees. He served as their role model and provided in-service training to each one of them. Elijah created enabling environment for his mentees by allowing them space to learn directly from his words and actions. This was a creative space for them to learn and grow in all aspects of the prophetic ministry. When encountering life challenges, like having to build extra accommodation for the sons of the prophets when their intake was high, Elijah went down to the Jordan River to fetch the wood to build extra rooms. When the borrowed axe fell into the river, he was there to help make it float and be received back by the borrower. When the sons of the prophets ate from the pot of death, he provided healing. Elijah's interventions were always pro-life or lifesaving. Elijah actively participated, as a change agent, in transforming and impacting the lives of others.

Managing transitions in sustainable leadership

Elijah's leadership was characterised by the ability to manage transitions as a distinct feature of his sustainable leadership. In this case, sustainable leadership should be described as the ability to pass the baton to the next generation when one has reached their sell-by date. This is the most challenging thing about leadership, especially in the African continent, where presidents and church leaders prefer to lead to their grave – with many dying with leadership batons in their hands. In Elijah's case, three critical questions arise and need to be answered when discussing this matter. The first is identified by Carroll (1969:404) as follows; 'The crux of the problem is whether there was a definitive prophetic office in Israel and whether the occupant of that office anointed his successor to be its next occupant'. The second question is how one manages his ego, especially when you have been a successful prophet like Elijah and having to appoint and anoint your successor in your lifetime. The third question is how involved the community of faith, like Israel, is in the appointment of their next prophet.

To answer these questions, this article sought to examine two unique and defining moments that speak to the succession debate during Elijah's tenure as a prophet. These are moments that God presented to Elijah to anoint his successor, and both examples unmask Elijah's sustainable leadership in managing transitions. The first incident is captured as follows:

After fleeing from Jezebel's persecution, the prophet Elijah arrived at Horeb in a state of despondency. There Yahweh ordered him to return and anoint Hazael to be the king over Syria, Jehu to be king over Israel, and Elisha to be prophet in his place. (Carroll 1969:404–405)

The second incident is when Elisha requested to be endowed with the double portion of Elijah's (prophetic) spirit. Elijah refused to grant him his wish. It was not because Elijah was reluctant to anoint his apparent heir, but he wanted to demonstrate that it was God who chose a prophet. It is asserted:

Elijah makes it clear that Elisha's request will be difficult to grant. He then makes the right of succession depend on Elisha seeing his ascension. Elijah thus indicates that it is not his prerogative to grant this request but God's prerogative. The request for a 'double portion' is not his to give but depends on Yahweh permitting Elisha to be an eyewitness to his departure. (Maré 2009:77)

Apart from affirming that God is the one who anoints prophets, in his reluctance, Elijah was also teaching Elisha to desire a double portion of the Spirit of God. A true prophet does not prophesy of his own accord, but the Spirit of God. The prophetic ministry is God's gift; therefore, the kind of leadership Elijah provided, including the miracles he performed, was possible because of the power of the Spirit of God in him. It is correctly opined that 'Exercising Yahweh's power and speaking

Yahweh's words as if one's own can only be brought about by the Spirit of Yahweh, working in and through the spirit of man' (Maré 2009:79). Contrary to our contemporary self-appointed prophets in forensic prophetic ministries, who either appoint family members or preferred candidates, Elijah demonstrated what it means to bring sustainability in ministry by not anointing his apparent heir before God's appointed time. And therefore, Wray Beal (2014:304) correctly noticed that such is 'YHW's appointment, not by heredity or designation'. In his efforts to manage transitions, Elijah did not just exercise the spirit of discernment, but one of high moral ground. This demonstrated that Elijah was not only a charismatic leader, but also ethical.

Managing transitions also involves managing your own fears and anxieties, especially when overwhelmed by contextual challenges before you, as in the case of Elijah. Even though he was an outstanding figure of faith in his generation, Elijah was also a human being. His encounter with the prophets of Baal is a typical example. If we talk about sustainable leadership, and in particular issues around theological training, we must be able to include themes such as 'taking care of your spiritual well-being as a prophet of God' or 'who looks after the well-being of prophets when they are overwhelmed by complex challenges around them'.

Transformation agenda in sustainable leadership

The need for Christians (including sustainable leaders) to be encountering and transforming agents is captured by Mashau (2018) as follows:

Christians are called to imitate God in all areas of life. The encountering God always works with human beings to accomplish His [God's] mission on earth. When God has encountered us in transforming ways, we are also expected to take the stands of God and radiate His [God's] being in the lives of others. We, therefore, become the same expressions of the very being that has transformed us. (p. 9)

The need to be a transforming agent, as captured here, is an element that is discernable in the sustainable leadership style of Elijah, and his model for social transformation remains relevant for local communities today (Woodbridge & Joynt 2019:1). One of the examples of this kind of leadership is cited as follows:

His criticism is particularly seen in the matter relating to Naboth's vineyard (1 Ki 21), when Elijah stood for social justice and the rights of small landholders against royal prerogative. (Woodbridge & Joynt 2019:2)

He also stood for the law that had apportioned land to clans and families, so as to prevent exploitation and alienation of the means of production. Furthermore, the training given by Elijah to the sons of the prophets was meant for transformation purposes. When Elisha inherited the cloth of Elijah, it helped him to continue where his master left off – performing miracles and transforming the lives of others. And therefore, Elijah's model of leadership and ministry proved sustainable

by embracing the notion of transformation and church agency. Church agency (Mashau & Mangoedi 2015:8; Pillay 2017:1) is at the heart of sustainable leadership. It is for this reason that Jentile (2020:1) suggests an incarnational approach to ministry – being there where the rubber hits the road. This approach brings in the element of ubuntu ethos – being there for others in their hour of need and being human when others need humanity to prevail. One cannot, therefore, be a good and sustainable leader unless one embraces the element of being human and a change agent to others.

Conclusion

Just like in the context of Nelson Mandela and in our context of uncertainties, Elijah's leadership demonstrated what it means to be a prophet in the service of the *missio Dei*, but also one who shows sustainable leadership. This article successfully demonstrated that sustainable leadership, as modelled by a missional reading of 2 Kings 2:1–18, has five distinctive elements, that is human, missional, mentorship, management of transitions, and transformation.

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Author's contributions

T.D.M., is the sole author of this research article.

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