

ELISHA'S GAUNTLET

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CAST: ELISHA: age 60-70. Peter O'Tool
 SERIAH: man, age 35-45, common sycophant
 KOHELA: teenage boy, suppressed into humility by his culture
 OFFSTAGE VOICE: playable by director

SET: All furniture is crude cut wood. Pottery is unadorned sienna or gray.
 A narrow bed left or right of center stage set on diagonal.
 A night stand at down stage end.
 At least 2 low benches upstage center with clothing on them.
 A basin and cup on the night stand. Rugs and mats strewn around the floor

AT RISE Elisha is lying in bed, head down stage.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Elisha... Elisha.

[ELISHA awakes thinking it's the voice of God.]

ELISHA

I am here, Lord.

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Master.

ELISHA

Oh! [Wipes his eyes and stretches]

OFFSTAGE VOICE

You have a visitor, Master.

ELISHA

What hour is it?

OFFSTAGE VOICE

Midday. You have a visitor from Jerusalem.

ELISHA

Who?

OFFSTAGE VOICE

A Danite named Seriah ben Asher.

ELISHA

What does he want?

[Muffled conversation off stage]

OFFSTAGE VOICE

He says he was your disciple long ago when Joram was king of Israel.

ELISHA

Fine. What does he want?

[Muffled conversation off stage]

OFFSTAGE VOICE

He says he has gifts and messages from the assembly of elders.

ELISHA

Oh. Okay. Wait a moment. [Gets up. Puts on robe.] Show him in.

[Enter SERIAH followed by KOHELA carrying a pillowcase size bag full of objects.]

SERIAH

Master, how good it is to see you.
May Elisha live a thousand years.

ELISHA

Seriah... Oh yes, I remember you now.

SERIAH

My master looks as strong as the oxen of King Joash.

ELISHA

Right. And the tongue of Seriah has certainly not lost its honey. I would guess it has gotten you far in the court of Judah.

SERIAH

[to Kohela] Behold the wisdom.

Yes Master, your pupil has been greatly blessed by the Most High. I am a court prophet to his majesty, and highly honored among the priests of the temple, and all of it thanks to your excellent instruction.

ELISHA

Terrific.... Well, please sit down.

[removes the clutter from the benches.]

You must be weary of the journey.

SERIAH

Thank you, Master, but first my gifts.

[KOHELA empties the contents of the bag onto the floor.]

SERIAH

All Jerusalem mourns your tragic illness. We pray daily for you. Sacrifices too, of course. The elders have sent me with these tokens of our affection.

ELISHA

This?

SERIAH

There's more on the camels.

ELISHA

Oh.

SERIAH

Healing herbs and fresh balms from Gilead.
These cloths are from Gaza. They make excellent bandages.

ELISHA

Thank you. Actually it's an ailment of the belly,
but I'm sure these will be put to good use.

SERIAH

Master, may I present my nephew, Kohela,
the son of Berak the scribe.

ELISHA

Son of a scribe, eh.
Do you plan to follow the footsteps of your father?

SERIAH

Kohela could easily follow those footsteps. He is among the brightest stars of the school. But despite the wealth and honors of the scribal life, Kohela seeks a higher calling.

ELISHA

He "seeks" a "calling"?

SERIAH

Yes. And he's called! Yes, most assuredly called.

ELISHA

[to Kohela] Called to what?

SERIAH

The lad would, with your blessing...

ELISHA

Let the boy speak.

KOHELA

Your servant would join the sons of the prophets here at Carmel, Master.

ELISHA

Mh. How old are you, boy?

KOHELA

Fourteen years, Master.

ELISHA

And God has called you to this?

KOHELA

I think so.

ELISHA

How did He call you? [pause] A voice?... A dream?... What?

SERIAH

[pause] If I may, Master...

ELISHA

[motions for Seriah to shut up]

Did God appear to you in a dream?

KOHELA

No, Master.

ELISHA

Did you hear a voice like I'm talking to you now?

KOHELA

No.

ELISHA

Me neither. Just checking. But tell me boy, were you aware of this "calling" before your uncle suggested it to you?

[ELISHA awaits an answer as KOHELA looks at the floor.
ELISHA turns to Seriah for explanation.]

SERIAH

Actually all Abraham's seed are called in one way or another. It's more a matter of hearing than calling. Go ahead, boy. Tell him how you feel about it - your own words.

KOHELA

A man has to be something, Master. All day long we read about great men of God. I've watched old scribes bent over scrolls copying, and copying again. If it is good to write about them, is it not better to be one?

ELISHA

Ahh, greatness. It is so very attractive, especially when it's all for God's glory, right?

KOHELA

Yes Master. I want to be a great man of God, just like you and uncle Seriah.

[ELISHA is stunned at the comparison, but does his best to hide it.]

SERIAH

Well Kohela, that's flattering, but actually there's no real comparison between the Master and myself. He's twice the man of God I ever was.

[ELISHA, still stunned, sits on the bed.]

SERIAH

-a thousand times!

KOHELA

Is something wrong, Master? You look pale. Is he alright? I'll go get somebody.

[ELISHA motions for Kohela to stay.]

SERIAH

You want some rest? We could come back later.

ELISHA

I'm alright. I'm alright.

SERIAH

Just a little attack from Baal, huh? [conventionally pronounced BALE] Nothing a man of God can't handle.

ELISHA

Baal! Is that what they're saying in Jerusalem? -that I'm being attacked by Baal?

SERIAH

Some of them. Of course I reminded them that you defeated the prophets of Baal right here on Mount Carmel.

ELISHA

That wasn't me! That was *Elijah* with a "jah". God! That's what I get for choosing a sound-alike name. [to Kohela] Don't ever emulate anyone, boy. You'll live to regret it.

SERIAH

Anyway, the reason for your illness has been a matter of dispute - no small dispute, I might add.

ELISHA

I see. And you were no doubt hoping to clear up the mystery for them.

SERIAH

Well one can hardly blame us. You've been healing people and doing very impressive things for a long time. And now...

ELISHA

I can't even heal my own body.

SERIAH

So it would appear to many. And it's, uhh...

ELISHA

Causing theological controversy among men who are paid very highly to know what God is all about.

SERIAH

You have that way of putting things. But yes, we're quite divided on it. My guess is that you simply choose not to heal yourself... for whatever reason.

ELISHA

It is?

SERIAH

Yes.

ELISHA

Hmm. I've apparently misjudged you then. I would have thought you would suspect me of some sin, possibly a little impropriety with a housemaid.

SERIAH

Ach! Not I, I assure you. I know you better. Although some have speculated..

[ELISHA picks up a cup from the night stand and takes a sip.]

ELISHA

Goat milk?

SERIAH

Uh, none for me, thank you. Kohela?

[KOEHLA nods negatively.]

ELISHA

Of course we have wine too.

SERIAH

We're fine.

ELISHA

Unfortunately I can't have any. No fruit, no vegetables, no spice, ... just soft bland things.

SERIAH

Yes, those belly problems can be...

ELISHA

Oh shut up! [pause] So they want to know why, do they? And they send you. Okay. Tell me Seriah, is wisdom good?

SERIAH

Yes, very good.

ELISHA

And what happens if one gets too much wisdom?
[second thought] Look who I'm asking.

SERIAH

Too much wisdom? How can anyone have too much wisdom?

ELISHA

Okay, let's try this. Wine is good, but too much of it makes you sick, right?

SERIAH

Drunk.

ELISHA

And sick if you get too much. Okay?

SERIAH

Okay.

ELISHA

Back when I was a disciple of Elijah, he asked me what I wanted. I didn't even stop and think. I told him I wanted twice what he had. Long story short - I got it. When I was younger - no problem. But now I find that the body of man was never meant to handle that much.

SERIAH

Oh. So you're saying you have too much... uh...
What exactly did you get too much of?

[ELISHA sighs.]

SERIAH

God? God's spirit? What?

[ELISHA takes a sip of goat milk.]

SERIAH

But how can a man get too much of God?

ELISHA

[sighs] You gag on a biscuit, and you ask for a loaf.

SERIAH

I don't get it.

ELISHA

Exactly. That's what it means.

SERIAH

But surely those who live righteously will prosper. Only sinners will be afflicted. The books of Moses make it clear.

ELISHA

Yes, well, my experience makes the books of Moses a lot clearer.

SERIAH

But if man is created in the image of God...

ELISHA

Go back and tell Jerusalem that... uh... God does as He pleases, and... No. [pause] No, tell them the truth. Tell them that you do not have what it takes to understand the answer to their question.

SERIAH

[pause] Very well, if that is your wish, that is what I will tell them.

ELISHA

No you won't. You'll make up some lie.

SERIAH

I beg your pardon!

ELISHA

Don't play that game with me! I'm a prophet, remember? I know stuff. It's what I do.

SERIAH

Well! Apparently you don't know how to heal yourself.

ELISHA

Would you like a sample of what I know? [takes a drink]
I know you brought your nephew here because you don't expect me to live long, and you want him to be able to say he was a disciple of Elisha. Not just for him, but for you - your whole family. You, young man, do not want to be a prophet. You want the *honor* of a prophet, which is a start, but it's not enough. You'll wash out just like your uncle did.

SERIAH

I had to go home and help my father! He needed me.

ELISHA

Bullshit! [takes a drink] Your uncle is one of a large group of people who gave up on honesty when they were about your age. Reality proved more than they could handle, so they chucked it. Everything became matters of opinion and attitude. True and false are way too harsh, so they rub out the line wherever they can. They live in a world of bullshit, and without a bit of shame, because they think bullshit is all there is. And of course, they may be right, but it doesn't even matter if they are, because then there's nothing. Everything is bullshit; even bullshit is bullshit.

SERIAH

Such language!

ELISHA

[to Kohela] And their God is an asshole.

SERIAH

Blasphemy!

ELISHA

[to Kohela] Resist them with everything you are. They are poison.

SERIAH

I'll have you know,
the high priest himself asks counsel of me!

ELISHA

Does he truly? Then perhaps you would be willing to test my blasphemy against your great wisdom.

SERIAH

I know of no such test.

ELISHA

Elijah tested his God against the prophets of Baal.

SERIAH

I am not a prophet of Baal!

ELISHA

No, but you accuse me of blasphemy. Therefore, let us both ask God to correct whichever of us is wrong.

SERIAH

"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

ELISHA

I didn't say test God, fool. I said test your knowledge of God against mine.

SERIAH

It is the same as testing God.

ELISHA

Is it? I say it is not. If I be wrong may God correct me.

SERIAH

If you wish to bring judgment on yourself.

ELISHA

Will you not join me in the same prayer?

SERIAH

I have no desire for God to judge you.

ELISHA

Not *me*, fool. *You*. Ask God to correct *you* if you be wrong.

SERIAH

I have asked that all my life.

ELISHA

Then ask it again now. [looks up] God, I pray you correct either me or Seriah. [back to Seriah] Join me in that prayer?

SERIAH

That would prove nothing.

ELISHA

Would it not? I say it would. Do it and prove me wrong.

SERIAH

I will not.

ELISHA

[looks up] God, either Seriah, is wrong, or I am wrong.
I pray you correct whichever of us be further from the truth.
[back to Seriah] Say it.

SERIAH

This is madness.

ELISHA

[looks up] By any means within your power, God.

SERIAH

I will not test my God.

ELISHA

Put your life where your mouth is or *shut the fuck up!*

SERIAH

I'm a member of the king's council!

ELISHA

You're a perfumed fart in a prophet's mantle!

[finishes the cup]

SERIAH

I will not take this! [gets up and motions for Kohela to do likewise.]
Kohela.

KOHELA

[Gets up.] But uncle Seriah, the blessing!
You promised to ask Elisha to give me a blessing.

SERIAH

Ask him yourself.

[SERIAH exits.]

ELISHA

What would you have me do, boy? -
lay a hand on your head and tell you sweet things?

KOHELA

No, truth. I just want truth. Really.

ELISHA

That's good. But the truth is, I don't know what kind of man you'll be, or what blessings you deserve. And you're probably better off not knowing.

[KOHELA sorrowfully exits.]

[ELISHA has conversation with God.]

ELISHA

I know, but he *is* a fool. [pause]
How can I not judge a fool to be a fool? [pause]
Very well, I repent of saying it. [pause]
What's wrong with "perfumed fart in a prophet's mantle"?
He's a politician, and that's all he is. [pause]
What? "Perfumed politician in a prophet's..." Naw!
That's nowhere near as good. [pause]
Okay, okay, It's not worth... [I] repent of the "fart" part,
okay. But I still liked it better. Anything else? [pause]
Good.

[KOHELA appears at the doorway with a fresh cup of goat milk.
Upon hearing Elisha, he decides to listen.]

[ELISHA doesn't see him.]

ELISHA

Bullshit! Bullshit! All is bullshit. Or so it would appear.
I hardly blame them. It makes much more sense to blame *you*.
But we've done all that, haven't we? What's the point?
Is there anything worth anything anywhere? Is there any
pleasure that doesn't cost more than it's worth?
Certainly not sex. Money, power, spiritual greatness -
So what? I'm the greatest son of a bitch that ever lived,
and I'm a pompous ass. How long must I endure this
ridiculous life?

[KOHELA enters, walks to the night stand, sets the cup of milk on it,
and starts to exit. On his way past Elisha he touches Elisha on the shoulder.]

[ELISHA looks up as though perceiving something from God.]

ELISHA

Wait.

[ELISHA stands.]

[KOHELA stops & turns.]

ELISHA

Come here.

[KOHELA approaches.]

[ELISHA puts his right hand on Kohela's head,
and waits for inspiration to say something.]

ELISHA

You will never be a prophet. You don't have the guts for it. But you love truth; that can be a cornerstone. Let no man take it from you, and no God either. Go back and be a scribe, and be a good one. But don't just copy; originate. Write down your own thoughts, and don't be afraid of them. But test them to see what's true. When you're wrong, admit it quickly, and don't pretend to know what you don't. If you sell out, you will become a rich and respected piece of shit like your uncle. If you cling to the truth, hardly anyone will understand you, and those who do will not believe you. They will take your writings and twist them, and sanitize them, and clean out all the semen to make them safe for women and children. They will cut, and embellish, and toss it like a salad until it says what they want to hear. Then they will call it great writing. They will praise it to the heavens until some damn fool calls it the very words of God. Then they will carve it in stone for all eternity. But fortunately by then your name will be forgotten, and some other man will get the credit for it. Now go. Don't let your uncle see you crying, or he'll just ask a bunch of stupid questions and try to make you lie to him.

[KOHELA exits.]

[ELISHA picks up the cup of milk, raises it in a toasting gesture toward God, and takes a sip.]

Fade out.