

Elijah the Prophet

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Troy, Michigan
United States of America

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Elijah the Prophet

One of the most powerful figures in the OT is that of Elijah the prophet. Though not the first prophet, he, along with his successor Elisha, are without question the best known of the non-writing prophets to the northern kingdom. Who was Elijah, and why did God send him? These are questions, which shall be explored in this study.

The Times of Elijah

No event of significance happens in a historical vacuum. This is as true of sacred history as well as secular history. To better understand the background upon which the story of Elijah is narrated, the following areas are very important.

The Divided Kingdom

Most people are aware that after Solomon's death, the monarchy of Israel divided. However, most people are unaware of the wide range of factors, which precipitated this political crisis. Before the monarchy, the tribes of Israel were loosely confederated, bound together primarily by their faith. The tabernacle, their festivals and their clergy were the cohesive elements. However, when faced with the national crisis of the Philistine threat, the clans united under a king. Three kings ruled the united state, Saul, David and Solomon. Of these, David was the one who really consolidated the nation, gave it a new capital, and made preparations for a stable religious center. Upon David's death, his son Solomon took the throne.

Solomon's Reign

The reign of Solomon is at best paradoxical. While he succeeded in keeping the nation together during his reign, he also planted the seeds for its rupture.

Internal Revenues: Solomon was, if anything, an ambitious ruler. He embarked on an elaborate building program of 20 years, which not only included the temple of which David had dreamed, but also a new palace for himself. Revenues were needed, and taxation was Solomon's answer. For the first time in their history, Israel's citizens were levied. Solomon reorganized the nation into 12 administrative districts, each with a governor (1 Kings 4:7-19). Each district was obliged to provide revenues for Solomon's court one month per year. While retaining the traditional number "twelve," Solomon's

action tended to break down former tribal distinctions. The people unquestionably felt a groundswell of alarm when the old lines were no longer observed!

The Corvee: David had begun using forced labor drawn from conquered peoples to work on state building projects (2 Sa. 12:31). Solomon continued this practice (1 Ki. 9:20-23), but he also extended the corvee to Israel herself (1 Ki. 5:13-16). Such forced labor was a far cry from the voluntary rally of freeborn citizens during the days of the judges.

Foreign Policy: Solomon's foreign policy, rather than warlike, consisted of maintaining peaceful alliances with his vassals and neighbors. These types of alliances were sealed by the marriage of foreign noblewomen whom Solomon took into his harem. In all, Solomon collected some 700 wives and 300 concubines; the most distinguished being the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Ki. 3:1; 11:1-3). With the influx of foreign royalty came a blossoming of pagan religion (1 Ki. 11:4-8). This religious syncretism became the historical reason why Yahweh allowed the national split (1 Ki. 11:9-13).

The Fiscal Strain: The financial burden of Solomon's ambition eventually drained the economy. Since in Solomon's reign conquest had ceased, there was no tribute coming from defeated nations as in the days of David. Though his trade policies were enormously profitable, even they could not bridge the gap between expenditure and income. This is especially to be seen in the fact that Solomon was forced to cede 20 Galilean cities to a foreign king in order to pay his debts (1 Ki. 9:10-14).

Internal Tensions: Solomon's administration only exacerbated the tensions. Continued areas of uneasiness were:

- ♦ Conflict between a mentality of tribal independence and the demanded allegiance to the state
- ♦ Conflict between the memories of a charismatic leadership under the judges and the current dynastic throne succession
- ♦ Conflict between the policies of the state and the ancient faith of the nation

Secession of the North

At the death of Solomon, Rehoboam his son ascended to the throne (1 Ki. 11:43). He was accepted in Judah, the southern tribe of David, without incident. However, when he went to Shechem to be acclaimed by the northern tribes, he met opposition. As conditions for their allegiance, the northern tribes demanded that the corvee be abolished and a tax relief instituted (1 Ki. 12:1-4). When Rehoboam insolently rejected their terms, they seceded while Rehoboam helplessly fled for home (1 Ki. 12:5-19). The northern tribes elected Jeroboam as king, a former corvee master

under Solomon who had been exiled to Egypt and had recently returned (1 Ki. 11:28, 40; 12:20).

The Northern and Southern Nations

When the northern tribes seceded, the empire collapsed. For the remainder of their history they coexisted as rival states, sometimes in alliance and sometimes at war. Both states were reduced to second-rate powers, vulnerable to the outside. Neither was able to maintain control over Philistines to the west (1 Ki. 15:27; 16:15) or the transjordan to the east. The famous Moabite Stone, a large black basalt stone with 34 lines of writing on it, was discovered in 1868 in Dibon, Moab.¹ It tells of the reconquering of Moab, years later, by Omri, an Israelite king. Damascus to the north and Edom to the southeast, both of which had revived their animosity toward the Israelites in the reign of Solomon (1 Ki. 11:14, 23-25), continued as threats. Solomon's trading empire practically stopped because of the loss of control over the coastal and transjordan trade routes.²

Annexation of Benjamin

Of immediate concern to Rehoboam in view of the secession of the northern tribes was the vulnerability of his capital, now just scant miles from his northern border. Apparently, the tribe of Benjamin originally attempted to join the northern secession (1 Ki. 12:20). Though Rehoboam was persuaded by Shemiah not to induce a civil war (1 Ki. 12:21-24), Benjamin was apparently annexed and remained part of the southern nation (2 Chr. 11:5-12). Thus, the northern border was extended to provide a secure buffer zone for the capital (1 Ki. 11:32).

An Influx of Northerners to the South

Not everyone in the north was enthusiastic about the split. The Levites migrated in mass to the south to be near the temple, and following them; sincere worshipers from other of the northern tribes came as well (2 Chr. 11:13-16).³ Thus, while the southern nation was predominantly composed of two tribes, minority groups from the other tribes also lived there.

Dynastic Changes

For the remainder of its history, the southern nation remained loyal to the dynasty of David. In the north, however, dynastic changes were not infrequent as is

¹ J. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 121-123.

² J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 228.

³ C. Keil, *The Books of the Chronicles*, trans. Andrew Harper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 245-346; H. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 243.

evidenced by the military coups (1 Ki. 15:28-30; 16:8-20). By the time of Elijah, Israel was in her 4th dynasty.

The Religious Milieu

The religious situation of the north is extremely important to the Elijah stories.

The Rival Religious Cult

The problem of theological legitimacy was especially acute for Jeroboam. The secession of the north was far more than a political event since the national religious shrine, the temple, stood at the southern capital (1 Ki. 12:26-27). Therefore, Jeroboam established two rival shrines, one in the north at Dan and the other near the southern border at Bethel, as well as rival festivals and a rival priesthood (1 Ki. 12:28-33). The golden bulls were probably intended to represent a pedestal upon which an invisible Yahweh was conceived as standing or enthroned, a common idea in Canaanite religion.⁴ This attempt to worship Yahweh in an alternative way was too closely associated with the Canaanite religion, and it opened the way for widespread religious syncretism.

The Canaanite Pantheon⁵

The Canaanite religion was polytheistic in contrast to Israel's monotheism. El presided over the assembly of the gods and had a wife-goddess named Asherah. The exact identity of the Asherah shrines is unknown. They may have been groves of trees (so KJV), images or poles (so NIV; 1 Ki. 15:13).⁶ El and Asherah produced a family of 70 Elim (gods and goddesses) of whom the best known was Baal, god of fertility. Devotees to Baal worshipped at phallic pillars (the male element in the fertility cult), which corresponded to the Asherahs (the female element). Chambers were maintained for sacred prostitution by male and female prostitutes (1 Ki. 14:23-24). Primarily, the Canaanite religions were obsessed with sex and fertility.

Religious Syncretism

There is little question but that the shrines at Dan and Bethel made the introduction of Baal worship much easier in the time of Elijah. Syncretism had already begun under Solomon (1 Ki. 11:4-8), and in the southern nation it continued under the succeeding kings (1 Ki. 14:22-24; 15:11-14, 25-26, 33-34).

⁴L. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 304; Bright, 234.

⁵C. Pfeiffer, *Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 69-77.

⁶A. Lemaire, "Who or What Was Yahweh's Asherah?", *BAR*, (November/December 1984) 42ff.; W. Reed, "Asherah," *IDB* (1962) I.250-252.

The International Situation⁷

Late in Solomon's life, the 21st Dynasty in Egypt, with whom Solomon had been allied by marriage, was overthrown by a Libyan named Shishak. Seeking to reassert Egyptian authority in Asia, he invaded Judah with terrific force (1 Ki. 14:25-28; 2 Chr. 12:1-12). Archaeological data indicates that he ranged as far north as Esdraelon in the northern nation. A relief has been uncovered describing his invasion and a list of about 120 towns, which he captured, many of them in Israel as well as Judah.⁸ Fortunately for both Israel and Judah, Shishak was forced to return home due to internal problems in Egypt.

The sectional warfare between Israel and Judah did not abate, though Shishak's invasion certainly dampened it (1 Ki. 14:30; 15:6, 16-17, 32). Both nations vied for neighboring countries as allies (1 Ki. 15:18-22).

The Prophets⁹

Though the Bible uses the term prophet as early as the time of Abraham (Ge. 20:7), it is during the monarchy that one increasingly reads of prophetic phenomena. In Samuel's time there was a guild of prophets (1 Sa. 10:5). David was confronted by both Nathan (2 Sa. 12:1ff.) and Gad (2 Sa. 24:11-12). Jeroboam's kingship was predicted by Ahijah (1 Ki. 11:29-33). Baasha was condemned by Jehu (1 Ki. 16:7, 12).¹⁰ Sometimes prophets are mentioned but unnamed (1 Ki. 13:1-3, 11-12).

The prophet was a man or woman of God's word. His/her primary function was to speak the messages of God to God's people. They might be predictive, but frequently they were also a proclamation of Yahweh's values over against the values of the nation. Thus, when Elijah the prophet appears in Israel's history, he appears in a prophetic tradition already long established.

Deuteronomic History

Scholars recognize a special relationship between the books of 1 and 2 Kings and the book of Deuteronomy, a relationship that is especially apparent in the phrases and expressions common to both in the Hebrew text.¹¹ Although the author of the kings is unknown,¹² certain things about his sources and his purposes are worth

⁷Bright, 229-230.

⁸F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 41.

⁹J. Motyer, "Prophecy, Prophets," *NBD* (1982) 975-983.

¹⁰Not to be confused with the Israelite king by that same name.

¹¹R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 722ff.

¹²Both books are anonymous. Jewish tradition cites Jeremiah as the author, but this suggestion has serious difficulties, cf. E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 188.

mentioning.

Sources

It is clear that the author was not interested in giving an exhaustive history of the two nations, for he plainly tells his readers that if they want the details they should go to the royal archives (1 Ki. 14:19; 15:7, 23, 31; etc.). He apparently has used these archives himself and names three primary sources:

- ♦ The Book of the Annals of Solomon (1 Ki. 11:41)
- ♦ The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (1 Ki. 14:19)
- ♦ The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (1 Ki. 14:29)

None of these sources are extant today.

The Connection with Deuteronomy

The core of the Hebrews' understanding of their relationship with God was in terms of the covenant, a solemn promise made binding by an oath. The Mosaic covenant was patterned after a suzerainty treaty, a common type of oriental covenant between an overlord and his vassals.¹³ In this case, Yahweh was the overlord and Israel was the vassal. The structure of the suzerainty treaty became the underlying organizational principle for the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁴ The last section of the treaty, the blessings and cursings section (Dt. 27:15--29:1) is especially significant for studies in 1 and 2 Kings. The history of the monarchy, both united and divided, is interpreted precisely in terms of the covenant faith. Yahweh brings blessing when there is obedience and tragedy when there is disobedience (cf. 2 Ki. 14:6).¹⁵

The statistics are not cheerful! Not a single king in the northern nation escapes condemnation. In the southern nation, 10 are condemned, 6 are acceptable though not perfect, and only 2 (Hezekiah and Josiah) are exemplary.¹⁶

The Structure:¹⁷

The structure of the Deuteronomic history in the Books of the Kings follows a skeletal outline with only slight variations. It is as follows:

Judah

Israel

¹³S. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 113-126.

¹⁴P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 20-29.

¹⁵B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 194-195.

¹⁶Anderson, 196.

¹⁷Anderson, 195.

In the year, so and so, king of Israel, so and so, king of Judah began to reign.	In the year, so and so, king of Judah, so and so, king of Israel began to reign.
Facts about his age, duration of reign, name, and queen mother.	Facts about the length of his reign and the place of his capital.
Evaluation of his standing in comparison to “David his father.”	Censure for the fact that “he did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and walked in the way of Jeroboam and his sin which he made Israel to sin.”
“Now the rest of the acts of so and so are they not written in the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Judah”?	“Now the rest of the acts of so and-so, are they not written in the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Israel”?
Concluding statement that he slept with his fathers, and so and so reigned in his stead.	Concluding statement that he slept with his fathers, and so and so reigned in his stead.

The Immediate Setting for Elijah's Ministry

The Omri Dynasty

The dynasty of Omri marked the 4th royal change in the northern nation. Omri's kingship emerged from a severe power struggle. After a brief 2- year reign, Elah was assassinated while at a drunken orgy by one of his chariot commanders (1 Ki. 16:8-10). The chariot commander, Zimri, executed the entire royal family that preceded him (1 Ki. 16:11-13). Hearing the news, Omri, head of the Israeli army, proclaimed himself as king and marched the army to Tirzah, the capital. After a short but successful siege, Omri broke into the city (1 Ki. 16:15-17). Zimri, meanwhile, had fortified himself in the palace citadel where he burned the building down around him (1 Ki. 16:18-19). His reign lasted a scant seven days (1 Ki. 16:15).

Omri was not yet secure, however, because a faction had developed which supported another military leader, Tibni. A civil war of some 3 or 4 years ensued.¹⁸ Omri was eventually successful and gained ascendancy over the entire nation (1 Ki. 16:21-23).

¹⁸ Compare 1 Ki. 16:15, 23,29, cf. Theile, *A Chronology of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 33-34.

A New Capital

When the monarchy had originally divided, Jeroboam may have selected Shechem for his capital (1 Ki. 12:25), but shortly the capital was established at Tirzah.¹⁹ Later still, Omri purchased crown property in a central location and began to build a royal city, the city of Samaria, on its tall, defensible hill (1 Ki. 16:24); a project completed by Ahab, his son (1 Ki. 22:39). Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the Omri-Ahab constructions indicating that the city was beautifully designed and magnificently constructed. The royal quarters, where Ahab later built a palace of ivory, were built in at least two stories and occupied the summit. A large rectangular pool was unearthed to the north of the city, presumably the Pool of Samaria where Ahab's blood was later washed from his chariot (1 Ki. 22:38). Over 500 fragments of carved ivory (mostly inlays) were found which once graced wall panels and inlaid furniture (cf. Am. 6:4).²⁰

Omri's Reign

Omri is not given much special attention in 1 Kings, but archaeology has shown him to be an important king to the surrounding nations. The Moabite Stone indicates that Omri subdued the Moabites in the transjordan. Assyrian records frequently describe the northern nation as "the house of Omri."²¹ One thing is certain: Omri did nothing to prevent the rising tide of religious syncretism (1 Ki. 16:25-28).

Ahab, the Son of Omri

While Omri was more significant to outside nations, his son Ahab was more significant to the Deuteronomic historian. Ahab has the disreputable distinction of being the most evil of all Israel's kings (1 Ki. 16:30-34). Three particular evils are singled out in his life:

He Continued the Sins of Jeroboam

The alternative worship centers at Dan and Bethel were treated by the Deuteronomic historian as unacceptable from the very beginning (1 Ki. 13:1-3; 14:6-16; 15:25-26; 16:1-4, 11-13, 18-19, 25-26). They had become an open door for idolatry. Ahab not only maintained Jeroboam's cultic centers, he considered them to be trivial compared to his new projects.

¹⁹ Pfeiffer, 308; Wood, 309.

²⁰ G. Van Beek, "Samaria," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) IV. 182ff.

²¹ Pfeiffer, 312.

Jezebel and the Baal Cult

Ahab made a political treaty with Ethbaal, a Phoenician king. He married the Sidonian princess, Jezebel, to seal the alliance, and he set up a cult center for Baal worship, Jezebel's national religion, in the new capital.

The Baal cult was a particularly offensive transgression of the covenant. Hadad, the fertility god par excellence of the Canaanite pantheon, was Baal (*ba'al* = lord, master, husband). The limited data of the OT concerning Baal can be supplemented by the Ras Shamra texts that depict Baal Hadad as the god who emerges victorious over death, infertility and floodwaters. He was the king of the gods.²² As mentioned earlier, a central part of Baal worship was sacred prostitution. Baal's female consort, Asherah, was also worshipped.

The Rebuilding of Jericho

Ahab also permitted the rebuilding of Jericho, the accursed city that was destroyed by Joshua (Jos. 6:16-19, 21, 24, 26). The phrase "at the cost of his firstborn" seems to refer to the child's death, perhaps due to a blood fluke parasite found in excavations there and causing a high infant mortality rate.²³

The Elijah Stories

The narratives of Elijah were apparently written very soon after they happened, because the stories are in the purest classical Hebrew.²⁴ There are six episodes in his life during the reigns of Ahab and his son Ahaziah.

1. His prediction of the drought and his flight
2. The Mt. Carmel contest with the false prophets
3. The flight to Horeb
4. The judgment against Ahab over the Naboth incident
5. The oracle about Ahaziah
6. His translation to heaven

The primary concern of these stories revolves around the failure of Israel to keep her covenant with Yahweh and the dire threat of the Baal cult.

Elijah's Name: Names in the OT are especially significant, because they were considered to be the essence of one's personality. Nabal (*nabal* = fool, cf. 1 Sa. 25:25) and Jacob (*ya'aqov* = he grasps the heel, or figuratively, he

²²D. Payne, "Baal," *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd. ed., ed. J. Douglas (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982) 109-110.

²³R. Boling and G. Wright, *Joshua* [AB] (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 214.

²⁴B. Smith, "Elijah," *NBD* (1982) 319.

deceives, cf. Ge. 27:36) are excellent examples. The name Elijah (*eloyyahu* is a compound meaning "Yah is El" or "Yahweh is God." In light of the Baal cult, and especially in light of the acclamation at the Mt. Carmel contest (1 Ki. 18:39), Elijah's name is important.

His Land: Elijah is said to be from Tishbeh, a word meaning either that he was from the area of Naphtali to the northwest of Galilee (Tobit 1:2), or more likely, from Gilead, the mountainous region to the east of the Jordan.

His Clothing (2 Ki. 1:8): Elijah dressed in a distinctive garb made of animals' hair, a type of clothing that eventually became the hallmark of the prophetic office (Zec. 13:4; Mt. 3:4).

The Prediction of Drought and Subsequent Flight (1 Ki. 17:1-24)

The worship of Baal in the Baal cult included a variety of cultic names associated with different places (i.e., *Baal-peor*, *Baal-perazim*, etc.) The particular manifestation of the Baal cult that Jezebel sought to establish in Israel was that of the Phoenician god of storm and fertility.²⁵

The Prediction (1 Ki. 17:1)

Elijah appears suddenly without any introduction, a literary phenomena typical of the Books of the Kings. This abruptness is probably deliberate and reinforces the impact of Elijah's word from Yahweh. The prediction of an extended drought was a direct attack upon the Baal cult. Baal, who was alleged to be the master of rain and good crops, was directly challenged. The question was, "Could Baal bring rain when Yahweh said there would be none?"²⁶

The Oath

Elijah's beginning words, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives," is a standard form of oath-taking.²⁷ It simply means that a curse is invoked upon oneself if the truth was not spoken.²⁸

"Few Years"

At the beginning, the predicted length of drought was undetermined. Later, the

²⁵M. Mulder, *TDOT* (1975) II.181-200.

²⁶Wood, 313.

²⁷T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 172.

²⁸P. Levertoff, "Oath," *ISBE* (1943) IV. 2172.

reader will be told that it was 3 years (1 Ki. 18:1; cf. Ja 5:17).

Flight to the Wadi Kerith (17:2-6)

As Elijah predicted, no rain fell. Yahweh directed his prophet back to the transjordan for preservation. The precise location of the Wadi Kerith is unknown, but it was somewhere in the rocky land of Gilead near the edge of the desert.²⁹ Wadis in the Near East are gullies or streambeds; often dry but carrying water in the rainy seasons. Ravens, the birds by which Elijah was fed, were scavenger crows.

Flight to Zarephath (17:7-24)

When the Wadi Kerith became dry, Elijah was sent by Yahweh to a widow in Zarephath of Sidon. The significance of this city is to be seen in that it was located in Phoenicia, the origin of Jezebel's Baal cult. Beyond the fact that God preserved the life of his prophet, the point of the story is to prove that Yahweh was not provincial--that he controlled the weather and fertility not only in Palestine but in Phoenicia too! Also, it is significant that although Ahab was conducting an international search for Elijah, God chose to preserve his prophet in the home county of Jezebel, of all places (cf. 18:10)! Historically, it is interesting to note that Josephus quotes Menander of Ephesus who knew of such a drought in the days of Ethbaal (Jezebel's father).³⁰

The widow of Zarphath, even though she was a Gentile living in another nation (cf. Lk. 4:25-26), still worshipped Yahweh as is evident by her oath (17:12). While Elijah was there, two miracles accompanied his stay, the miraculous multiplication of flour and oil and the raising of the widow's son from death.

The Mt. Carmel Contest (1 Ki. 18:1-46)

Of all the episodes in the career of Elijah, the Mt. Carmel contest is surely the most dramatic. It was now the third year since there had been rain, and the full impact of Yahweh's power over Baal was clear with a deadly certainty.

Elijah Appears in Israel (18:1-15)

After some 3 years, Yahweh directed Elijah to return to Israel to address Ahab, for the drought was almost over. During Elijah's absence, several different events transpired.

²⁹E. Blaiklock, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Atlas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969) 111.

³⁰F. Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. Wm. Whiston (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1873) 213.

The Search for Fodder

Although not strictly forbidden, charioteering was frowned upon by Yahweh (Dt. 17:16). The king was forbidden to acquire horses from Egypt. In the last years of David, chariots were beginning to be seen in Israel (1 Ki. 1:5), and during Solomon's rule, they greatly increased (1 Ki. 4:26, 28, 9:19; 10:26). In direct disobedience to the covenant, Solomon acquired his horses from Egypt (1 Ki. 10:28). Years later, Ahab continued the practice. In excavations at Megiddo in Esdraelon, archaeologists have uncovered a vast network of stables, probably to be attributed to either Solomon or Ahab.³¹

Due to the drought, Ahab was in danger of losing his horses. According to the Assyrian annals of Shalmanezar III, Ahab sent 2000 chariots to the Battle of Karkar.³² Ahab and his overseer, Obadiah (not to be confused with the prophet by the same name), were actively seeking out grass upon which to pasture the livestock.

The International Search for Elijah

At the same time, Ahab was conducting a determined search in all the neighboring countries for Elijah (18:10). However cavalier he may have taken Elijah's prediction of drought at first, there was no question that he now took it seriously!

Jezebel's Purge of Yahweh's Prophets

Meanwhile, Jezebel was conducting an extinction crusade against Yahweh's prophets. Very possibly, she wreaked her vengeance on them because she could not lay hands on Elijah.³³ This action was one more step in the attempt to eliminate the historic faith of Israel by Baalism.

Obadiah, for his part, had demonstrated his loyalty to Yahweh by managing to salvage a hundred prophets by hiding them in caves.

Elijah's Appearance

Elijah's appearance to Obadiah was disconcerting, to say the least. At best, Elijah must have made a strange appearance in sophisticated Samaria--clad as he was in a hair mantel and leather girdle. Obadiah was in consternation. Only after Elijah swore to remain did Obadiah set out to find Ahab.

³¹C. Pfeiffer, *Baker's Bible Atlas*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 143-144.

³²Pfeiffer, *Baker's*, 159-160.

³³A. Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 407.

The Summons (18:16-19)

When Ahab returned with Obadiah, his first words were an accusation. Elijah, however, turned Ahab's words around by reminding him that the drought was not a prophet's whim but Yahweh's judgment for the broken covenant and the worship of Baal. Elijah laid down the gauntlet. Who was really in charge of the weather and fertility? "Meet me at Carmel," Elijah demanded, "and bring your cultic prophets with you. Summon all the people."

In light of the drought, Ahab could hardly fail to comply. His cooperation was crucial in this summons, for the Baal devotees certainly had nothing to gain by such a contest. Also, the king's sanction was necessary if the spectators were to attend without fear of reprisal from Jezebel.³⁴

The Contest (18:20-46)

Mt. Carmel was strategically located for Elijah's showdown. The mountain was over 1600' in elevation, and it jutted out into the Mediterranean at the border of Israel and Phoenicia, the home of Jezebel.³⁵

The Question (18:21)

The exact meaning of the question is not certain, but it very possibly might be translated, "How long will you hobble on two crutches,"³⁶ or "How long will you limp between two opinions?"³⁷ Elijah was not interested in some theoretical discussion of religion. It was either Yahweh or Baal!

The Proposal (18:22-24)

Elijah proposed a contest. Sacrifices were to be prepared for both Baal and Yahweh. The spectators all agreed that the deity who responded by fire was to be God. Elijah's name is especially appropriate here, because it means "Yahweh is God."

Baal's Chance (18:25-29)

Elijah magnanimously gave Baal the first chance. His prophets prepared their bull and began their incantations. By noon there was still no response. At that point, Elijah began a tirade of biting sarcasm. The idiomatic Hebrew is adequately captured by the paraphrase in the Living Bible:

³⁴Wood, 313.

³⁵Edersheim, 409.

³⁶R. Harris, et al. eds., Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) II. 729.

³⁷Anderson, 215.

"You'll have to shout louder than that," he scoffed, "to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be awakened!"³⁸

Elijah's Altar (18:30-35)

By evening, Baal was still silent. Elijah stepped forward to take his turn, carefully synchronizing his actions to the daily afternoon oblation that was offered far to the south at the Jerusalem temple.³⁹ He repaired an ancient altar to Yahweh that had fallen into disuse by using 12 stones to represent the covenantal unity of the two nations under one faith. To add insult to injury, he drenched the sacrifice, wood and altar with 12 jars of water (perhaps symbolizing rain to the 12 tribes). In effect, Elijah was saying, "I can create the most impossible situation, and Yahweh will not at all be thwarted!"

Elijah's Prayer (18:36-39)

Elijah's prayer was quite simple (only 34 words in the Hebrew text). It recalls the ancient roots and faith of the nation in Yahweh's choice of Abraham, Isaac and Israel. The name Israel is probably a double entendre, indicating both Israel as a nation as well as Jacob the patriarch. The concluding phrase, "turning their hearts back again," would become the NT description of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:17).

Yahweh answered by a blazing fire--a fire that consumed the water, the altar and everything on it. The spectators fell to their faces crying out, "Yahweh, he is God." (Notice the play on meanings between this acclamation and Elijah's name.)

The Extermination of the Cultic Prophets (18:40)

At Elijah's word, the false prophets were summarily seized and executed according to the stipulations of the covenant (Dt. 17:2-7). It is possible that they were killed by being cast over the 1400' precipice to the Kishon River below.⁴⁰

The Drought Ends (18:41-46)

After sending Ahab off to eat, Elijah ascended Mt. Carmel once more to pray (cf. Ja. 5:18). Seven times he sent his servant to scan the horizon over the Mediterranean. When a small cloud finally appeared, Elijah gave word to Ahab to find shelter. Ahab kept a county home at Jezreel (some 15 miles to the southeast),⁴¹

³⁸The Hebrew phrase "gone aside" is a euphemism for relieving oneself, cf. Anderson, 215.

³⁹Bruce, 45.

⁴⁰Edersheim, 412.

⁴¹C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The First Book of Kings* (rpt. Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1970) 251.

and he set out for it with Elijah running ahead of him under the power of Yahweh.

The Flight to Horeb: 1 Kings 19:1-21

The victory of Elijah at Mt. Carmel might easily give the impression that the Baal cult was destroyed once and for all. This was not the case. Not many years later, there was still a thriving Baal temple and priesthood (2 Kg. 10:18-21). Furthermore, Jezebel was still the power behind the throne of her husband!

Elijah's Fearful Escape (19:1-9)

One can well imagine Jezebel's reaction when she heard the outcome of the Mt. Carmel contest from Ahab. Instead of the successful supremacy of the Baal cult, her prophets were dead. However, like Lady Macbeth, she was nothing daunted.

The Written Threat (19:1-2)

Jezebel immediately dispatched a messenger to Elijah. "As surely as you are Elijah and I am Jezebel, so let the gods do to me and more also..."⁴² With this oath, Jezebel gave Elijah a scant 24 hours. Why she sent a messenger rather than an executioner is open to speculation. Perhaps she herself was fearful of Elijah, or perhaps she merely wished to intimidate him into flight. In any case, Elijah's absence opened the door for Jezebel to take full advantage of any disillusionment on the part of the people who had so recently vowed their allegiance to Yahweh. It is not too much to assume that she spread her own version of why he had left. Further, it is not improbable that Jezebel took vengeance on those who had openly supported Yahweh.⁴³

Elijah Runs (19:3-5a)

The humanness of Elijah is vivid here. After confronting the 950 prophets of the Baal cult without a quiver, he ran for his life from one woman. As James said in the NT, "Elijah was a man just like us" (5:17a). His heroism is juxtaposed with his frailty. He not only left the borders of Israel, but he went all the way to the southern desert of Judah to Beersheba in the Negev. Like a broken and despondent man, he prayed for death, though of course, had he really wanted to die it would have been much easier to simply stay in Jezreel. Jezebel would have obliged!

Elijah Goes to Horeb (19:5b-9a)

While Elijah was sleeping, an angel interrupted him twice with special food.

⁴²This first phrase is in the Septuagint, cf. F. Farr, "Elijah," *ISBE* (1943) II.931.

⁴³Wood, 314.

On the strength of that food, he traveled 40 days to Horeb, better known as Mt. Sinai (some 200 miles further south). Mt. Horeb is probably to be identified with the modern Jebel Musa in the Sinai Peninsula.⁴⁴

The Theophany at Horeb (19:9b-18)

What prompted Elijah to continue south to Horeb is not specifically stated in Scripture. Perhaps in view of the Baal threat, he wished to renew his covenant faith in Yahweh at the same site where the covenant was originally given.

Yahweh's Question (19:9b-10)

When Yahweh asked Elijah why he was there, a rebuke was not necessarily intended. Elijah responded in covenantal terms. Israel had rejected the Sinai covenant. Jezebel's threat had apparently completely unnerved Elijah. Perhaps he had expected the Mt. Carmel incident to completely dissolve the Baal threat, but Jezebel's resolution was not about to break down. In his despair, Elijah stooped all the way to self pity, completely forgetting the faithful Israelites like those who cried, "Yahweh is God," or Obadiah and the 100 prophets who were saved in hiding. Now, at the original scene of the covenant, he questioned the roots of his faith. His statement, "I have been very zealous" may even have been tinged with resentment that Yahweh had not immediately exacted vengeance on the whole nation.

God's Presence (19:11-13a)

After Elijah's complaint, Yahweh told his prophet to leave the cave and stand outside on the slopes of Horeb. There he would see the presence of Yahweh pass before him.

Theophany: Not only did Yahweh speak to his prophets by visionary means (cf. Nu. 12:5-8), at crucial junctures he allowed himself to be "seen" in special forms called theophanies or epiphanies. It was normative in the OT that one who saw Yahweh could not be expected to survive (cf. Ex. 33:20; 19:21; Jg. 13:22). Therefore, such appearances are marked off by special emphasis. Often, theophanies were accompanied by a major development in the progress of revelation, such as, the renaming of the viewer, the giving of a new commission, or the ordering of new divine injunctions.⁴⁵

The Face of Yahweh: What the English versions of the OT usually translate as the presence of God is quite literally the *panim* (= face) of God. It was Yahweh's "face" that went with Israel in the desert (Ex. 33:14). Here, Elijah

⁴⁴N. Hillyer, "Sinai, Mount," *NBD* (1982) 120.

⁴⁵W. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 85.

is called to stand before God's face.

The Sound of Silence: Elijah was confronted by the awesome elements of nature -- a powerful wind, a shattering earthquake, and a blazing fire (or lightning, since the Hebrew word for fire can mean either). Yahweh was not in any of them. Finally, there was a "sound of silence" or a "sound of a thin whisper."

<u>daqqah</u>	<u>demamah</u>	<u>qol</u>
fine	silence	a sound of
thin	whisper	
small		

When Elijah heard it, he covered his face to avoid seeing Yahweh directly and stood outside the mouth of the cave.

The Significance of the Horeb Experience

At this point it will be well to draw out the meaning of this strange experience in the desert mountains. As can be clearly observed, Elijah's flight to Horeb has strong similarities with the giving of the covenant through Moses at Sinai. Notice the following parallelisms:⁴⁶

- a) Elijah's 40-day journey parallels the 40-year sojourn of Israel in the desert.
- b) The divine sustenance of Elijah with bread and water from God parallels the manna and water from the rock during Israel's sojourn.
- c) Mt. Horeb itself is the site of the Sinai covenant.
- d) The cave in which Elijah was sheltered from the devastating wind, earthquake and lightning parallels the cleft in the rock in which Moses was sheltered from God's presence (cf. Ex. 33:21-23). In fact, the cave has a definite article in the Hebrew text. It is the cave, not just a cave.
- e) The wind, earthquake and lightning parallel the same phenomena in Moses' day (Ex. 19:16-19).
- f) The theophanic language of Yahweh "passing by" parallels the language of Ex. 33:19. Elijah stood with his head covered before God's "face" while Moses was sheltered by God's hand from seeing his face (Ex. 33:20-23).

All these parallels could hardly have been accidental. They clearly suggest a renewal of the covenant faith. However, an important difference between this scene and the Sinai scene in the exodus is to be observed. There may very well be an indication of a new type of prophetic ministry, one not bound up in the dramatic

⁴⁶Anderson, 216-218.

measures of the Mt. Carmel contest, but one grounded in the gentleness of mercy.⁴⁷ At Sinai, Yahweh was in the wind, earthquake and lightning (Ex. 19:18). At Carmel, Yahweh was in blazing fire. But at Horeb, he was not--he only came in gentle stillness.

Also, it may be significant that while Yahweh was proved to be the master of storm, unlike Baal he was not a nature deity. Nature is not God and God is not nature--nature only responds to God's presence.

The New Commission (19:13b-18)

The original question was repeated to Elijah, "What are you doing here?" Elijah gave the same response as before. Then Yahweh spoke three divine orders prefaced by a command for Elijah to "go back." Elijah's despondency and wish for death were selfish expressions. Yahweh was sending him back to his mission. The three orders were of immense significance. The anointing of Hazael to be king over Aram and the anointing of Jehu to be king over Israel were both the fomenting of political revolutions that would wipe out to the last person the family of Ahab and Jezebel. The third order was regarding the selection of Elijah's successor, Elisha. (The two royal anointings were actually carried out by Elisha in the office of Elijah.) Together, these three appointments spelled doom to Ahab and Jezebel. Finally, as both a rebuke and a reminder to his self-pitying prophet, Yahweh declared that 7000 in Israel had not succumbed to the Baal cult.

The Call of Elisha (19:19-21)

At Abel-Meholah in the Jordan Valley,⁴⁸ Elijah discovered Elisha, the son of a wealthy farmer (12 plows and 24 oxen were far beyond the average). Elijah's act of throwing his cloak around his successor was symbolic, since the hairy mantle was a sign of the prophetic vocation. The 12 yoke of oxen may even have a symbolic significance for Elisha's ministry to the tribes of Israel.⁴⁹ The phrase, "What have I done to you," probably indicates that Elisha was not constrained to follow but was free to make a choice in the matter. Elisha enthusiastically made the transition--from a wealthy farmer's son to a prophet's servant!

A Time of War: 1 Kings 20:1-43

The next chapter in the story of the northern kingdom does not mention Elijah, even though it took place in his lifetime. The circumstances take the reader back into

⁴⁷Wood, 314.

⁴⁸Pfeiffer, *Baker's*, 103.

⁴⁹Keil, 261.

ancient Near Eastern politics, and especially, into an environment of holy war that is strange to modern eyes. There are primarily two points which the author of 1 Kings makes: 1) Yahweh was still the God of the northern nation, ready to faithfully keep his covenantal promises to the end. He would still fight for the nation as he had promised. 2) Ahab, despite what might seem to be positive qualities, continued his disobedience to Yahweh. He failed to keep the rules of holy war, and God pronounced judgment on him because of it.

Holy War and the Covenant

Holy war may indeed seem barbarous to us, but instead of making a value judgment, it will be profitable to try to understand it in the context of Israel's covenant.

Yahweh of Armies

A familiar designation in the OT for God is the Lord of Hosts (rendered in the NIV by either "the LORD Almighty" or "God Almighty"). Yahweh was a warrior *par excellence* (Ex. 15:3-10), especially a warrior who would defend his people (Ex. 15:13-18). The imagery of a warrior in the history of Israel taught God's people that they must depend totally on his protection and sustenance and not on themselves.⁵⁰ This is the point of the reduction of Israel's armies in the days of Gideon (Jg. 7:2-8a) and of David's challenge to Goliath (1 Sa. 17:47). The angel's message to Zerubbabel, though not in a context of war, still echoes this dependency on the Lord of Hosts (Zec. 4:6). In fact, the earliest account of Israel's triumphs is called "The Book of the Wars of Yahweh" (Nu. 21:14).

War as a Holy Act

Whenever Israel was in danger, a leader summoned the armies of God's people to willingly offer themselves to war in the name of Yahweh (Jg. 5:2, 7-12). The response of the clans to war was a test of covenant loyalty (Jg. 5:13-18). Furthermore, the wars of Israel were not just ordinary secular wars; they were to be a religious action.⁵¹ Certain disciplines were expected, such as abstinence from sexual intercourse (1 Sa. 21:4-5; 2 Sa. 11:11). Enquiry was made to Yahweh about the best moment for attack (2 Sa. 5:23-24).

⁵⁰D. McCarthy, *Kings and Prophets* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1968), 16.

⁵¹Anderson, 134.

The Holy Ban:⁵²

In holy war it was often required that there be a *herem*, that is, a sacrificial ban of items or persons which were irrevocably given over to God, such as at Jericho (Jos. 6:21, 24, 26; 7:19-21). Usually, such a ban meant utter destruction (Dt. 7:1-6), and this included people as well as things (Lv. 27:28-29). Saul's failure to completely carry out the ban cost him his kingship (1 Sa. 15:2-3, 9-26, 32-33). Ahab had already shown his contempt for the holy ban by permitting the rebuilding of Jericho (1 Ki. 16:34).

The Threat from Aram (1 Ki. 20:1-12)

The rise of the kingdom of Aram (alternatively known as the kingdom of Damascus) became a significant political threat to Israel. The ruler Ben-Hadad mustered his army to attack Israel.⁵³ It is not improbable that the name Ben Hadad includes cultic overtones, for it means "son of [the god] Hadad," and Hadad was another name for Baal.⁵⁴ So here, in a military setting, was one more threat from Baalism.

The Siege and the Demand (20:1-4)

Ben-Hadad's army, accompanied by 32 various tribal princes, chieftains and kings of northern desert cities, put Samaria, Israel's capital, under siege. It would appear that Israel was already a vassal state under Aram as is evidenced by Ahab's meek surrender to terms. Such demands were standard requirements of a vassal.

The Further Demand (20:5-12)

Ben-Hadad was not content with Ahab's verbal submission. He intended to send officials to inspect Ahab's palace and take whatever seemed of value. Upon the advice of his counselors, Ahab refused the demand. However, it would have been well known to him that to refuse such a demand was to invite war. As expected, the Aramean king prepared for battle. Ahab's only answer was an appropriate maxim.

The First Battle (1 Ki. 20:13-21)

At this point an unnamed prophet came to Ahab with a word from Yahweh. Predicting victory for Israel, the prophet indicated that Yahweh would use the provincial cadets to win the battle. These may have been unmarried soldiers

⁵²Harris, I. 324-325.

⁵³Ben-Hadad is a throne name (as opposed to a proper name) and more than one king of Aram is designated by it (1 Ki. 15:18-19; 2 Ki. 6:24; 13:3, 24), cf. G. Jones, *1 & 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) II.339.

⁵⁴R. Bowman, *IDB* (1962) I. 381.

comparable to shock troops or commandos.⁵⁵ At midday, they marched out toward the Aramean camp, so few in number compared to their enemy that Ben-Hadad decided they could be captured alive. However, the young cadets soon proved otherwise, and with the army following them, they routed the soldiers of Ben-Hadad. Here, again, was abundant proof to Ahab that Yahweh was still the defender of his people.

The Second Battle (1 Ki. 20:22-30)

When the battle was over, the prophet warned Ahab that after the winter Ben-Hadad would be back. Usually, due to severe weather, military movements had to be confined to the dry season.⁵⁶ Mud and chariotry were incompatible. For their part, Ben-Hadad's advisors recognized that the losses were due to Israel's God (or gods, as they perceived it). However, they interpreted the Israelite deity as a geographical god and determined to fight on other terrain. After a change in officers, the Arameans and the Israelites faced each other at Aphek. (Aphek was possibly east of Galilee, but its location is uncertain.⁵⁷) Once more, Yahweh's prophet predicted victory for Israel. Once more, Yahweh upheld his covenantal promises. Both in battle and in a freak architectural collapse, the Arameans were soundly defeated.

Ahab's Failure to Carry Out the Ban (1 Ki. 20:31-34):

The loss of most of his standing army left Ben-Hadad in a precarious position. He and his advisors determined to throw themselves on the mercies of Ahab. They dressed in clothes that indicated their willingness to be subjugated,⁵⁸ and presented themselves before the Israelite king. Ahab's leniency was surprising! He entered readily into a treaty with Aram, only taking back the cities that were formerly Israelite and arranging for commercial interchange.

Ahab's motive in leniency may well have been related to the threat of Shalmaneser III. Should the great Assyrian general come toward Palestine, the Aramean kingdom would make not only a good ally but also an admirable buffer zone to the Mesopotamian threat. As it happened, in a few months, Shalmaneser did come, and both Israel and Aram joined in the coalition against him.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Jones, II, 343.

⁵⁶J. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1972) 144.

⁵⁷A. Millare, *NBD* (1982) 54.

⁵⁸Jones, II. 346.

⁵⁹Wood, 312.

The Condemnation of Ahab (1 Ki. 20:35-43):

To fail to execute the ban of holy war was a serious offense, however. Saul had discovered that when he conquered the Amalekites (1 Sa. 15). Ahab, likewise, had ignored the *herem* of Jericho, and now he had refused to execute Ben-Hadad. In an acted parable, a prophet confronted Ahab with this failure and condemned him. (Note the use of the word *herem* in 20:42). As might be expected, Ahab was "sullen and angry."

The Naboth Incident: 1 Kings 21:1-29

Next to the Mt. Carmel contest, the Naboth incident is probably the most well known of the Elijah episodes. It is the occasion on which Elijah predicted the extermination of Ahab's family. Here is the story of a vacillating man, an unscrupulous woman and the righteous judgment pronounced by Yahweh's prophet. The story makes it clear that God was interested in social justice, not just theological correctness, and it becomes an excellent preface to the social message of the 8th century prophets to come later.

The Offer and the Refusal (21:1-3)

Ahab had a country house at Jezreel to which he had returned after the Mt. Carmel contest. Close by was a vineyard owned by Naboth, a freeborn Israelite citizen. Ahab made an offer, and apparently a generous one, but Naboth refused on religious grounds.

Naboth's grounds for refusal were rooted in covenantal law. The importance of family-owned property was emphasized strongly in Torah (cf. Nu. 27:8-11; 36:5-9). Yahweh, himself, was considered to be the true owner of the land, and the Israelites were stewards of the property (Lv. 25:23). Land grabbing and speculation were ruled out (Lv. 25:13-17). If for reasons of poverty a person was forced to sell family land, the sale was still only temporary. The man was obliged to redeem the property when he was able, and if he could not, it would revert to his family anyway at the Jubilee (Lv. 25:24-28).

Jezebel's Plot (21:4-10)

Jezebel seems to have had a great deal in common with Lady Macbeth of Shakespeare's renowned play. When Ahab returned home like a sulking child, Jezebel determined to take action. Ahab was apparently inclined to submit to Naboth's refusal. Israelite law was unquestionably on Naboth's side. However, Jezebel had different notions of kingship and the prerogatives of royalty. Coming as she did from a nation of despotic rule, she saw the throne as a position of absolute power. Consequently, she set up a plot that would not only procure Naboth's

vineyard, but it also bent God's law to her purpose of intrigue. Note the following:

The Two Witnesses

Two witnesses at a minimum were always required to secure a death penalty under Israelite law. (Nu. 35:30; Dt. 17:6).

The Scoundrels

The Hebrew text here is "sons of Belial," an idiomatic expression that indicates consummate evil or worthlessness.⁶⁰

The Accusation

To accuse someone of blasphemy was a very serious matter in Israel. The idea of cursing God was so objectionable that it was never spoken of directly but was spoken of in an idiomatic way, i.e., "You blessed God and the king." As such, the verb "to bless" becomes a euphemism for cursing.⁶¹ To curse God was punishable by death (Lv. 24:10-16). Furthermore, since the property of such a criminal was *herem* (Dt. 13:12-18), it would be easy for Jezebel to seize it.

The Murder of Naboth (21:11-16)

The city father carried out Jezebel's plot to the letter. When Naboth had been executed (and possibly also his sons, cf. 2 Ki. 9:26), Jezebel informed her sulking husband, and he quickly moved to annex Naboth's vineyard to his royal properties.

Elijah Pronounces Yahweh's Judgment on Ahab's Family (21:17-26)

Yahweh's word came to Elijah instructing him to pronounce doom upon Ahab who had so tamely submitted to his wife's scheme. Murder and larceny were the charges. Yahweh's judgment consisted of a total extermination of Ahab's household, both slave and free, just as the families of Jeroboam and Baasha had been exterminated (cf. 1 Ki. 15:25-30; 16:1-4, 8-13).⁶² Furthermore, Jezebel would be eaten by pariah dogs. The final comment, added by the author of 1 Kings, is that Ahab was the worst of Israel's kings as he was spurred on by the wicked Jezebel.

⁶⁰BDB, 116. The roots of the name Belial are uncertain, cf. B. Otzen, *TDOT* (1975) II.131.

⁶¹Jones, 356. The same euphemism is used in Job 1:11.

⁶²The phrase that appears in 21:21 in the KJV, regarding urinating against the wall, is simply another way of speaking of male descendants. While crude and culturally unacceptable to us, it was not unacceptable to the Hebrew culture. The NIV has simply avoided the idiom altogether and translated the intention of the author rather than his words.

The Postponement of Judgment (1 Ki. 21:27-29)

Elijah's words should well have struck terror into the heart of Ahab! To receive such a prediction from the man who correctly promised that it would not rain was a tremendous shock, so much so, that it even produced at least a temporary remorse. Sackcloth, a coarse material usually black in color and woven from goat's hair, was a sign of mourning for personal or national disaster.⁶³ It was usually worn next to the skin (2 Ki. 6:30). Ahab clothed himself in this material and humbled himself before Yahweh. Accordingly, God postponed the judgment to the time of Ahab's son who would succeed him. It should be noted that Ahab's sin was not simply pushed off onto an innocent victim. His son, Ahaziah, was well deserving in his own right for judgment from God, as is evident later.

The Death of Ahab: 1 Kings 22:1-40

This chapter is a continuation of the account of the Syrian wars begun in chapter 20, thus bringing the count to three major campaigns. The account concludes with the death of Ahab as a grim fulfillment to the predictions of Elijah during the Naboth incident. Once more, the reader enters the strange world of holy war, and in this case, catches a glimpse of tension and contradiction within the prophetic circles.

Between the first two Syrian wars and the third one, an international event of consequence occurred. Shalmaneser III (859-823 B.C.) of Assyria invaded the West and was met by a Palestinian coalition at the Battle of Qarqar on the Orontes River. We owe our information to Shalmaneser's own record of the battle (it is not recorded in the Bible), a battle to which Ahab took 2000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers. Shalmaneser claimed to have had a complete victory.⁶⁴

The Call for Holy War (22:1-5)

It had been three years since the second Syrian war (1 Ki. 20:26ff.), and during this time Israel had joined Judah and Aram in the confrontation with Shalmaneser III. At the close of the second Syrian war, Ben-Hadad had agreed to return all the Israelite cities that he controlled (1 Ki. 20:34), but Ramoth Gilead in the transjordan had not been released. Thus, Ahab⁶⁵ wished to secure the help of Judah in the cause of holy war. Jehoshaphat of Judah clearly seemed to acknowledge his responsibility to uphold the ancient ideals of holy war. However, his willingness depended upon his assurance that Yahweh would favor them (cf. 1 Sa. 30:7-8; 2 Sa. 5:17-19).⁶⁶

⁶³J. Thompson, *NBD* (1982) 1043-1044.

⁶⁴Bruce, 47.

⁶⁵Ahab is not mentioned by name until 22:20 and 22:39. He is simply designated "the king of Israel."

⁶⁶S. Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 37.

Prophet Against Prophet (22:6-28):

A central problem in the era of the monarchy was the problem that arose when prophetic oracles disagreed. According to the Deuteronomic code, false prophets were supposed to be executed (Dt. 18:20-22), but since the test for falsehood lay in the proof of history, there was no way to clearly discern authenticity at the time of prediction (except, perhaps, on the basis of past successes). Later, the conflict of prophet against prophet became more pronounced (cf. Ho. 4:5; Mi. 3:5-7). Some prophets were intimidated into giving favorable oracles (Is. 30:10-11). Others made use of their office to gain power (Je. 23:9-40; Eze. 13:1-23). Here is recorded one of the early confrontations.

The Prediction of Success (22:6)

At Jehoshaphat's request, Ahab called upon the prophetic guild to predict Yahweh's favor. It is to be noted that these were not Baalist prophets but prophets who spoke in Yahweh's name. (22:5, 6, 11 use the names Yahweh and Adonai.) Their oracle was to proceed in the holy war.

Jehoshaphat's Reluctance (22:7-9)

The reader is not informed of the reasons for Jehoshaphat's misgivings, but he was clearly suspicious and wanted an independent second opinion. Ahab reluctantly recommended Micaiah, a prophet whom he had evidently encountered previously.

The Prophetic Conflict (22:10-28)

The Spokesman for the 400 (22:10-12): A prophet named Zedekiah was the leader of the 400. Together they predicted success.

The Attempt to Manipulate Micaiah (22:13-14): After being summoned, Micaiah was privately coached as to what he should say. Agreement with the 400 was expected of him.

Micaiah's Sarcastic Agreement (22:15): In accord with what was expected, Micaiah also predicted success. However, for some reason (perhaps by tone or gesture), his words did not ring true.

Ahab's Suspicion (22:16-18): Even Ahab could see that Micaiah was not sincere. When Ahab pressed the prophet, the message was altogether different. It was a prediction of disaster.

Micaiah's Vision (22:19-23): Micaiah's vision is intriguing and bizarre. To account for the discrepancy between the oracles, Micaiah explained that Yahweh had allowed a lying spirit to speak through the 400 in order to entice Ahab to his death.

The Prediction to Zedekiah (22:24-25): Zedekiah, the spokesman for the 400, was understandably angry. His satire and violent denial notwithstanding, he was informed that the day would surely come when he would seek refuge, running until he found an inner room in which to hide. (No further mention is made of how this prediction was fulfilled.)

Micaiah's Final Word (22:26-28): In disgust, Ahab ordered Micaiah incarcerated and put on a prison diet until he should return safely from battle. Micaiah's parting word was that Ahab would not return in safety.

The Third Syrian War (22:29-40)

While Ahab was angry at Micaiah's oracle, he sufficiently respected it to try to avert the fate that had been predicted.⁶⁷ Disguised as a regular chariot soldier, Ahab entered the battle without his distinctive royal clothing. Jehoshaphat was left alone to provide the royal morale for the armies. Ben-Hadad, for his part, was intent upon finding Ahab. However, a random bowshot, neither planned by Ben-Haddad nor expected by Ahab, mortally wounded the Israelite king. Losing blood rapidly, Ahab lasted until evening. According to Elijah's prediction, his blood was lapped by the pariah dogs of Samaria (cf. 21:19).

The Oracle About Ahaziah: 1 Kings 22:51--2 Kings 1:18

1 and 2 Kings (like 1 and 2 Samuel) are a single book in the earlier form of the Hebrew Bible, however, at the translation of the Septuagint (the Greek version of the OT produced in the 2nd--3rd centuries B.C.), the two single books were divided into four books (I, II, III, IV Kingdoms). This division has been preserved in succeeding versions, except that since the time of the Latin Vulgate they have been called 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings in Western traditions. Thus, a transition from 1 Kings to 2 Kings will not pose any major differences in authorship, attitude or literary background.⁶⁸

The Throne of Ahaziah (1 Ki. 22:51-53)

Upon the violent death of Ahab, his son Ahaziah succeeded him. Though he only reigned two years, he continued in his parent's sin and in maintaining the alternative cult centers of Jeroboam I. Baal worship continued, no doubt augmented by the still living Jezebel.

⁶⁷J. Gray, *1 & 2 Kings*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 454.

⁶⁸G. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 282, 287.

Ahaziah's Injury (2 Ki. 1:1-2):

Ahaziah was not the military leader his father had been. Moab, which had been a vassal under Israel for most of the Omri dynasty, finally gained full independence from Israel. This fact is verified by independent historical evidence from the archeological discovery of the Stele of Mesha (9th century B.C.) upon which is inscribed:

"I, Mesha.... king of Moab.... reigned after my father. Omri, king of Israel, humbled Moab many years. And his son followed him and he also said, 'I will humble Moab.' In my time he spoke, but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel has perished for ever."⁶⁹

Shortly after his reign began, Ahaziah was in the upper story of the palace, a floor called a "house of windows" because of its open platforms and balconies. The lattice, or wooden screen, admitted air but excluded the strong glare of the sun and provided privacy.⁷⁰ The many small pieces of jointed wood were fragile, and Ahaziah had crashed through the lattice, perhaps after tripping, and injured himself in the fall. He sent couriers to Ekron of Philistia to consult *Baal-Zebub* (= Lord of the Flies) about his recovery. There were many "fly-gods" in the ancient religions, because power over flies often meant power to send or withhold plagues and diseases.⁷¹

Elijah's Message (2 Ki. 1:3-8)

The very idea that Israel's king should stoop to consulting a pagan deity was detestable in the extreme. At Yahweh's word, Elijah intercepted Ahaziah's couriers on their way to Philistia and gave them a message of death to give back to their master. When they had reported the incident and described the prophet, Ahaziah recognized by their description the distinctive clothing of Elijah.

The Reaction of Ahaziah (2 Ki. 1:9-17)

Ahaziah immediately dispatched a regiment of 50 to Elijah. Units in the Israeli army were composed of 1000, 100, 50, and 10 men.⁷² While the text does not say why he sent them, we should probably assume that they were to arrest the prophet.⁷³ Elijah refused to be intimidated, and he called down fire from heaven that annihilated the regiment that was considered to be an instrument of a will opposing Yahweh's

⁶⁹Thompson, 120-123.

⁷⁰Gray, 462-463; Jones, 377.

⁷¹Jones, 377.

⁷²R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) I. 226.

⁷³P. Ellis, "1 - 2 Kings," *IBC* (1968) I.197.

will. Another regiment was sent with the identical result. It is possible that there is more here than meets the eye. If the soldiers had addressed the prophet sarcastically, making a jest of Elijah's prophetic office (as Elisha was later jeered, cf. 2 Ki. 2:23-25), and if their words were disrespectful to Yahweh, Elijah's God, then immediate judgment is more understandable.⁷⁴ In any case, it will be well to suspend judgment on the ethics of the incident without further information. One can certainly say that Jesus would not tolerate such a response among his followers (cf. Lk. 9:51-56).

The third regiment was understandably meeker, and their lives were spared. Elijah went with them to Ahaziah, not as a prisoner but as a prophet who came to deliver his oracle in person. According to Yahweh's word, Ahaziah did not recover. Joram, Ahaziah's younger brother (2 Ki. 3:1), took the throne.

Elijah is Translated: 2 Kings 2:1-18

The final episode of Elijah's life was his translation to heaven, a fitting climax to his powerful ministry.

Elijah Goes to the Transjordan (2 Ki. 2:1-8)

The fact that Elijah was to be translated seems to have been commonly understood within the Israelite guild of disciple-prophets (i.e., those individuals of strong Yahwistic faith who lived a common life in loose associations). The locations of Gilgal, Bethel and Jericho were apparently the seats of such prophetic guilds. The intensity of Elisha's expectation is evident by his refusal to allow Elijah out of his sight. Why Elijah seemed to test the attachment of his official successor is unknown, but it is clear that Elisha intended not to be excluded, regardless of the circumstances.

From Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho the two went together. Like Moses at the Red Sea (Ex. 14) and Joshua at the Jordan (Josh. 3), they crossed over to the transjordan near where Moses had been buried by God (Dt. 34:5-7).

Elisha's Request (2 Ki. 2:9-10)

Elisha had already been selected by Yahweh to succeed Elijah (1 Ki. 19:16, 19-21). However, his famous request for a "double portion" of his master's spirit may indicate that he had not been fully informed of his role. The idea of a "double portion" is based on the rights of the eldest son to receive the leading share of the father's belongings (Dt. 21:17). Elisha wished to make sure that it was he himself, and not one of the other disciple-prophets, who was to be Elijah's spiritual successor as leader of the prophetic guild. This is the significance of Elisha's cry, "My father!

⁷⁴M. Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Marshallton, DL: National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d.) II. 928; Keil, 287.

My father," when Elijah was taken up. (The notion that the "double portion" refers to Elisha performing twice as many miracles as Elijah is ingenious but unsupported in the Bible.)⁷⁵

The Translation (2 Ki. 2:11-12)

While the two were walking, Elijah was separated from his disciple-servant and taken to heaven in a whirlwind with a chariot and horses of fire. The prophet who had twice called fire from heaven went to heaven himself in a blazing exit. The appellation "prophet of fire" is quite appropriate!

Elisha's tearing of his clothes is a common Semitic gesture of sorrow and mourning (cf. Ge. 37:34). The reference to "Israel's chariots and horsemen" probably means that Elisha identified the otherworldly couriers as being from the heavenly hosts of Yahweh who fought on Israel's side in holy war.

Elisha Returns (2 Ki. 2:13-18)

Picking up Elijah's mantle that had fallen to the ground, Elisha returned to the Jordan River to test his powers. In the sight of the prophetic guild on the other side, he divided the waters and crossed. Fifty of the disciple-prophets went to look for Elijah, but as Elisha had told them, it was no use. Elijah was gone.

Elijah, the Counterpart to Moses

Something should be said here regarding the parallelism to be seen between Moses and Elijah. The obvious connection between Moses' Sinai experience and Elijah's Horeb experience is clear. However, the mysterious burial of Moses and the translation of Elijah, both in the same area of the transjordan, should not be missed. Just as Joshua had accompanied Moses and succeeded him in spirit (Dt. 31:7-8, 23; 34:9; Jos. 1:1-3), so Elisha had accompanied Elijah and succeeded him. In both cases, the miraculous crossing of the Jordan was Yahweh's sign to establish the transition of office (Jos. 3:15-16; 4:14). Thus, it is no surprise that in the later Jewish *Haggadah* (non-legal interpretations of the law) Elijah is viewed as the counterpart to Moses.⁷⁶

The Extension of Elijah's Ministry

The figure of Elijah, though his life was over, still loomed large in four important events after his departure.

⁷⁵Keil, 292-294.

⁷⁶B. Smith, "Elijah," NBD (1982) 321.

The Anointing of Hazael (2 Ki. 8:7-15)

When Elijah was at Horeb, Yahweh had instructed him to anoint two new kings, one over Aram and the other over Judah (1 Ki. 19:15-16). The prediction regarding the career of these two kings was tantamount to a declaration of holy war by Yahweh against Israel and the dynasty of Ahab (1 Ki. 19:17). The first of these anointings occurred in the office of Elisha, Elijah's successor (just as Moses' leadership of Israel into Canaan was ultimately accomplished in the office of Joshua).

Ben-Hadad of Damascus was ill and sent a courier to Elisha to discover if his sickness would be fatal. Elisha's prophecy was that the sickness itself would not be fatal (even though Ben-Hadad would die).⁷⁷ Accompanying this prediction, Elisha also prophesied of Hazael's coup d'etat, an assassination that took place almost immediately. Hazael's oppression of Israel occurred just as Elijah and Elisha had predicted (2 Ki. 8:28-29; 9:14-15; 10:32-33; 13:3, 22).

A Posthumous Letter (2 Chr. 21:12-15, 18-19)

This event, not found in the Kings narratives, is difficult to place since it would seem to have occurred after Elijah's translation (cf. 2 Ki. 8:16-17). There is no biblical indication that the letter came from heaven (though some have thought as much), so it is not unlikely that we should understand it to have been written prophetically before Elijah's departure.⁷⁸ In any case, it still concerns the dynasty of Ahab inasmuch as Jehoram, the new king of Judah, had married a daughter of Ahab (2 Ki. 8:18; 2 Chr. 21:6). Because of his continued idolatry (2 Chr. 21:11), Elijah's prophetic oracle predicted that he would die of an intestinal disease (perhaps a chronic diarrhea, ulcers or a rectal prolapse).⁷⁹

The Anointing of Jehu (2 Ki. 9:1-13)

Besides Yahweh's instruction to Elijah to anoint Hazael as the new king over Aram (accomplished by Elisha), another royal anointing was to occur in the Kingdom of Israel. This one, like the other, was also carried out by Elisha, Elijah's successor. Besides the message that Jehu was to ascend to the throne, he was also told to exterminate Ahab's family. Jehu's fellow officers immediately recognized Jehu as king, and they began action to depose Joram, Ahab's son.

⁷⁷The Hebrew text varies here between ("say, 'You will certainly not recover'") and ("say to him, 'You will certainly recover'"). The NIV text follows this latter reading, cf. BHS (1983).

⁷⁸H. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 307.

⁷⁹Williamson, 308.

The Final Extinction of Ahab's Family (2 Ki. 9:14--10:17)

Jehu was anointed king while Joram was absent due to a battle wound. A careful plot was constructed so that Joram would not be warned ahead of time of Jehu's coup d'etat in order to gather forces of resistance. With the backing of the army, Jehu was virtually assured of a successful overthrow. When Jehu drew near Jezreel, where Joram had retired to the summer palace to recover, Joram went out to meet his general. Jehu personally completed the assassination at the annexed vineyard of Naboth and also managed to fatally wound the King of Judah (not to be confused with Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, by the same name).

When Jezebel, the queen mother, had heard the news, she determined to meet Jehu boldly, not groveling at his feet for mercy but as a grand queen who refused to give her enemy the satisfaction of seeing her flinch. Jezebel was a cruel and powerful woman who was fanatically loyal to her pagan Baal, but she was no coward!⁸⁰ She applied her cosmetics and waited for her death.⁸¹ In arrogant sarcasm, she greeted her assassin by calling him Zimri, a biting memory of the predecessor of Omri who had lasted as king only 7 days after his coup d'etat (1 Ki. 16:15). At Jehu's command, she was thrown from the window. He ran her down with his chariot. As Elijah had predicted, she was repaid in full for her murderous plot against Naboth.

Jehu's purge did not stop here until he had arranged the massacre of Ahab's entire family and anyone else who was loyal to Ahab. Nothing is given here of Jehonadab, but from Jeremiah 35:6-19 we learn that he was the founder of an extremist Yahwist sect who reacted against the sedentary life and committed themselves to live as desert nomads like the earlier Israelites before the monarchy. They were evidently a "back to the desert" right-wing group.

The Eschatological Elijah

Elijah made a profound impression upon the imagination of the nation Israel. It has already been pointed out that he was thought of as a counterpart to Moses. However, even beyond this, there is an eschatological significance to the figure of this prophet of fire that bears upon later NT imagery.

⁸⁰J. Black, *Rogues of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930) 109-126.

⁸¹The painting of the eyes (more properly, the eyelids and eyebrows) was a custom widely practiced in the ancient world. A black powder (made by burning almond shells and frankincense) was applied by small utensils of ivory or wood. The utensils were dipped in rosewater, then in the powder, and then drawn under the eyelids, cf. Freeman, 175-176. The ancient practice seems to have been quite similar to the cosmetics of mascara and eyeshadow which women use today. In ancient times, the painting of the eyes was not only fashionable, but was also performed as a protection device from sun-glare, cf. K. Kitchen, "Cosmetics and Perfumery," *NBD* (1982) 236.

Malachi's Prophecy (4:5-6)

Malachi, the last of the writing prophets, addressed the remnant that had returned from exile--a remnant that lived in an uneventful waiting period with little to offer in tangible evidence of God's presence. The time of miracles had passed, the post-exilic leaders Zerubbabel and Joshua were dead, and the presence of God had not yet returned to fill the rebuilt temple (cf. Eze. 43:1-5). It was a time of crisis for their faith.⁸²

Malachi called for the remnant to rekindle their faith (3:6-7) in view of a coming day when Yahweh would once more become active for his people (3:16-18; 4:1-3). As a forerunner of that time, Yahweh promised to send an Elijah-like figure that would become a moral catalyst for the nation to turn them back to God.

Intertestamental References to Elijah

The expectation of a future Elijah captured the hope of Israel. The predictions of Malachi were recalled in Sirach 47:24b--48:12 as the one who would restore the tribes of Israel (written about 180 B.C.).⁸³ Even in the Qumran Scrolls there is a reference to a "prophet" as a messianic herald, and in the Mishnah, the Elijah-figure was the expected harbinger of the age to come.⁸⁴ Though not in our possession today, we have evidence of an intertestamental work entitled the Apocalypse of Elijah, a writing quoted by several early Christians as the source of some NT sayings.⁸⁵ All these things help prepare us for the NT references to the eschatological Elijah.

The NT References

There are two foci in the NT with regard to the eschatological figure of Elijah. One has to do with John the Baptist and the other with an apocalyptic figure of prophecy and judgment.

John the Baptist

The NT writers clearly connected the ministry of John the Baptist with the predictions of the eschatological Elijah. Before John's birth, the angel predicted that John's ministry would be like Elijah's in that he would become a moral catalyst for reconciliation and openness to God's impending action (Lk. 1:13-17).

⁸²J. Baldwin, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1972) 211.

⁸³Harrison, 1232.

⁸⁴S. Szikazai, "Elijah," IDB (1962) II.90.

⁸⁵D. Russell, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 68. The phrases, "Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not" (1 Co. 2:9) and "Awake, you who sleep" (Ep. 5:14) are attributed to this book.

When John was grown, he began his desert ministry deliberately dressed to match his OT counterpart (Mk. 1:6; 2 Ki. 1:7-8). The Jews were not slow to catch this significance, and they asked John point-blank if he was Elijah, but he denied it (Jn. 2:21). Nevertheless, though he was not Elijah raised from the dead, there is a sense in which he came in the office of Elijah as a fulfillment to Malachi's prediction (Mt. 11:13-14; 17:3, 10-13).

The Apocalyptic Elijah

Because Jesus said, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things," some have thought that there is yet a fulfillment to Malachi's prophecy to be accomplished at the end of the age.⁸⁶ However, such an interpretation is probably somewhat forced since Jesus' words need not mean anything more than that the scribes were correct in their interpretation but wrong in their assessment of recent history.

There is, though, a cryptic allusion to an Elijah-like figure in the Revelation (11:3-12). The references to the fire, which devours enemies, and to the power, which closes the heavens so that they cannot bring rain, are clearly Elijah allusions (11:5-6). Early Christians thought that this passage described the return of Elijah and Enoch, although Elijah and Moses seem more consistent with the descriptions.⁸⁷ Whether these two witnesses are intended to be symbols or historical persons is heavily debated, but at least one may say that there is yet envisioned an Elijah-like ministry to be performed before the end of the age.⁸⁸

⁸⁶D. Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 309-313.

⁸⁷G. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 183.

⁸⁸See commentaries by G. Ladd, G. Beasley-Murray, R. Mounce, M. Wilcock, L. Morris and J. Walvoord.