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### Errata

There is an error on page 285 in the article by Charles A. Gieschen, “The Relevance of the *Homologoumena* and *Antilegomena* Distinction for the New Testament Canon Today: Revelation as a Test Case,” *CTQ* 79 (2015). The sentence in the first paragraph that reads, “It is ironic that the two primary proof-texts . . . are both from the *antilegomena*” should read: “It is ironic that one of the two primary proof-texts for the divine nature of the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Peter 1:21, is from the *antilegomena*.”

The Editors

# Reflections on the Ministry of Elijah

Walter A. Maier III

The account of Elijah and his ministry in 1 and 2 Kings teaches us much about God. This narrative presents to us theology for our edification. We learn about the character of God in the manner in which he deals with the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with King Ahab, with the Phoenician woman, and with Elijah himself.

## I. The Northern Kingdom

The Northern Kingdom of Israel, starting with its first king Jeroboam I, had entered into a corrupt form of the worship of Yahweh. Jeroboam had set up a golden calf in Bethel, the southernmost point of his realm, and at Dan, at the northern end (1 Kgs 12:25–33). He presented these images as pedestals on which stood the invisible Yahweh, and thus as alternatives to the ark of the covenant in the temple in Jerusalem. Jeroboam also maintained a priesthood, but not the Aaronic priesthood ordained by God, and he kept a religious calendar, but not the one given by God through Moses. Jeroboam introduced these changes for political reasons, so that his subjects would stay loyal to him and not go down to Jerusalem to worship, where they would be won back to the house of David. All his innovations, however, were contrary to the Torah, and he set the Northern Kingdom on the wrong spiritual path. As a result, the large majority of the people had incorrect ideas about Yahweh, they were weakened spiritually, their lives became increasingly wicked, and some even abandoned monotheism and began to practice aspects of pagan idolatry.

Clearly, the situation in the Northern Kingdom was very bad, but it became even worse with the ascent of Ahab and his Phoenician wife Jezebel as king and queen. Jezebel had a plan, and she influenced her husband to go along with her. She wanted to establish her religion—Canaanite polytheism—in the Northern Kingdom (1 Kgs 16:31–33; 21:25–26). More than that, she apparently desired to make Baal the chief god of the realm and Canaanite polytheism the main religion, pushing the

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Yahwism of Jeroboam I (which at least had *some* connection to the true God) into a secondary position. As for the remnant of true, genuine Yahwism that yet continued in her kingdom, she tried to eliminate it altogether (1 Kgs 18:4, 13; 19:10, 14).

This was now a major crisis for Israel, specifically, for the Northern Kingdom. When earlier in its history Israel had been in an extremely bad circumstance, God in his grace, love, and mercy raised up a great leader for the benefit of his covenant people. That previous predicament had been the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt, and the man God gave them as his instrument to deal with this critical situation was Moses. To meet and oppose the deadly threat posed by the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Yahweh, again in his grace, love, and mercy, provided the prophet Elijah.

On the one hand, Moses should be seen as in a class by himself. One can say, echoing the wording at the end of Deuteronomy, that there was no other prophet during the Old Testament era who met with the Lord so many times “face to face” and who did such awesome miracles in the sight of *all* Israel (Deut 34:10–12). Also, the Torah came from Moses, while, according to the plan of God, Elijah did not author any books, or if he did, none of his writings have been preserved. On the other hand, there are definite similarities between Moses and Elijah and their ministries, and comparisons can be, and have been, made.

1. Both men are outstanding examples of what a prophet of the Lord was: one who received messages directly from God himself and then communicated that word to others, and who was used by God to have an impact on the people. Both were zealous for the honor, and word, of God.

2. Through or in connection with Moses and Elijah, God performed miracles. For the most part, though, the wonders associated with Moses were on a grander scale, while those that involved Elijah were more private in nature. With both there was a miraculous dividing of water: with Moses, of the sea, and with Elijah, of the Jordan River. Both men were associated with a miraculous provision of food: Moses, with the manna, and Elijah with the flour and oil in the Phoenician widow’s house.

3. Both men had to deal with a hostile political power or government: Moses with Pharaoh Amenhotep II, and Elijah with Ahab and Jezebel.

4. Both Moses and Elijah were in a contest with paganism. Both men were used by God to attack pagan gods (Exod 12:12; 1 Kgs 17:1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The plagues have been seen as an attack on the gods of Egypt. The chief deity of Jezebel and Ahab, Baal, was believed to be the storm god, who sent the rain and dew so

5. Both at one point in their life were afraid and fled: Moses from Egypt, with Pharaoh Tutmoses III trying to kill him, and Elijah from the Northern Kingdom, with Jezebel desiring to execute him.

6. Both men opposed state-sponsored enemies: Moses, the magicians in Pharaoh's court, and Elijah, the prophets of Baal and the prophets of the pagan goddess Asherah, who were supported by Ahab and Jezebel (especially the latter: Elijah described them as those "who eat at Jezebel's table" [1 Kgs 18:19]).

7. Moses had an encounter with the supernatural at a bush, Elijah at a broom tree.

8. Both men led Israelites to experience an awesome revelation of God at a mountain location: Moses at Mount Sinai, and Elijah at Mount Carmel.

9. Moses and Elijah both acted as intercessors for Israel (Exod 32:11-13; Num 14:17-19; 21:7; 1 Kgs 18:36-37, 42-44).

10. Both met with God on Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai. God and his glory passed by (עָבַר) Moses in the hole in the rock on Mount Horeb (Exod 33:19-23), and God passed by (עָבַר) Elijah in the cave on the same mount (1 Kgs 19:11).<sup>2</sup>

11. Moses and God dialogued, as did Elijah and God.

12. Both men at one point in their ministries asked God to take their lives (Num 11:15; 1 Kgs 19:4).

13. God said to Moses, "Go, return (לֵךְ אֶרֶץ) to Egypt" (Exod 4:19).<sup>3</sup> God said to Elijah, "Go, return (לֵךְ אֶרֶץ) to Damascus" (1 Kgs 19:15).<sup>4</sup>

14. God provided Moses with an assistant, Aaron; later the assistant for Moses was Joshua, who would succeed Moses as leader of Israel. God

necessary for life in the ancient Near East (see the discussion below). The contest in 1 Kings 18 proved that Yahweh was God, not Baal.

<sup>2</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 433. Frank Cross notes that Elijah came to "the cave" (1 Kgs 19:9), which he thinks is "the hole of the rock" (Exod 33:22) where Moses had been hidden. Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 193.

<sup>3</sup> All translations are the author's.

<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 433.

provided Elijah with an assistant, Elisha, who would succeed him as prophet.<sup>5</sup>

15. Both Moses and Elijah departed this earth east of the Jordan River (Deut 34:1–6; 2 Kgs 2:6–14). One could suggest that Elijah intentionally travelled into the Transjordanian territory in order to have the place of his assumption into heaven match the general location of Moses's death.

16. After their earthly departures, the body of Moses could not be found, nor could Elijah be found, though fifty men went looking for him, searching for three days.

17. Of course, both men met with Jesus on the mountain during the transfiguration of Christ. Some have held that Moses was there as the first great prophet of Israel, and that Elijah was present as the representative of all the subsequent prophets in Israel's history. One remembers the twofold division of the Hebrew Bible: the Law and the Prophets. Also, the names of both were mentioned toward the end of the Old Testament era by Malachi, who wrote as his book came to a close, "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and fearful day of Yahweh comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (Mal 3:23–24a; ET 4:4–6). Both Moses and Elijah pointed ahead to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

With these similarities, God was in essence saying, "With Elijah I raised up another great messenger for Israel, my instrument to help the people, as I did earlier, when I gave Moses to the nation. Elijah is to be viewed in the same way as Moses, as my authorized spokesman, to accomplish my will in mighty ways." Throughout the history of the New Testament church, God has continued to provide his people with leaders for the benefit of his people, especially in times of crisis or of dire need. God has called us to be professional workers in the church.<sup>7</sup> Though not inspired as were Moses, Elijah, and the apostles, we have God's inspired word, and God uses us to his glory and for the spiritual welfare of many people. With his help, we will remain faithful to our calling. That someday might involve our having to take a stand in opposition to the secular

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<sup>5</sup> Cross observes: "Elisha plays the minister of Elijah . . . as Joshua is minister . . . to Moses, succeeds him, and crosses Jordan on dry ground in the path of Joshua" (Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 192).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Exod 34:28 and Deut 9:9, 18 with 1 Kgs 19:8.

<sup>7</sup> This article was originally presented before an audience that consisted mainly of those who were or would be pastors and deaconesses. It is of course understood that God uses the efforts of faithful laity in ways that are of utmost importance for the present and future church.

government if that political authority should ever demand us to live, teach, or accept various matters in opposition to the word of God.

Even as God was using Elijah to point the people backward in their history toward Moses, he was at the same time causing them to look forward toward Christ, the Messiah. Because of certain Old Testament passages, especially Deuteronomy 18, the Israelites knew that one of the roles the coming Savior would fill was that of prophet. The prophetic office, then, was a type or foreshadowing of an aspect of the work of Jesus; individual Old Testament prophets with their life and ministry gave the Israelites a glimpse of what Christ would do and accomplish as prophet. This was especially true with the great prophets Moses and Elijah. Many of the similarities already presented between those two men would obviously also apply to Jesus as prophet. For example, all three prophets were spokesmen for the Lord and were zealous for the word and honor of God.

Focusing on Elijah, it can be stated in addition that both he and Christ demonstrated God's mastery over nature: Elijah, by saying to Ahab that it would not rain in the Northern Kingdom except at his word, and Jesus, by his speaking a word and stilling a storm at sea. Both experienced angelic ministry (1 Kgs 19:5-8; Matt 4:11; Luke 22:43).<sup>8</sup> Both prophets brought the dead back to life. Elijah and Jesus both ascended bodily into heaven.

While believers in the Old Testament era would have made some connection between Elijah and the Messiah, Elijah's foreshadowing of still another prophet would have been largely unknown to them, at least until Malachi wrote his book. We, from our New Testament vantage, know the actual name of that prophet: John the Baptist. We clearly perceive the relationship today, because certain evidence and passages in the New Testament make it absolutely certain that John was a second Elijah.

First, the angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah (Luke 1:13-17) that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son who would go on before the Lord "in the spirit and power of Elijah" and who would "turn the hearts of the fathers to their children" (Luke 1:17; cf. also Mal 3:23-24; ET 4:5-6). Second, both Elijah and John had a profound effect on their countrymen: Elijah, especially with his God-given victory on Mount Carmel, and John, with his preaching and baptizing at the Jordan River. Third, Elijah and John had the same distinctive style of dress. They both wore a garment of hair, with a leather belt around their waist. Fourth, both men faced a hostile political authority throughout their ministries. In particular, as Raymond Dillard

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<sup>8</sup> It could also be noted that both Elijah and Jesus were provided with food in a wild place by God (1 Kgs 17:2-6; 19:4-8; Matt 4:11).

and Tremper Longman have pointed out, the main enemy for both was a woman, a queen, who was seeking their lives. For Elijah, it was Jezebel, and for John, it was Herodias.<sup>9</sup> Fifth, coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus indicated to Peter, James, and John that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come, in fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy (Matt 17:10-13).

The similarities that Elijah had with John, as well as with Moses and Jesus, display the omniscience and omnipotence of God, who so controlled the events and life of Elijah that the believers in Israel were given encouragement from their past history and hope for the future. We stand in awe of this almighty ruler of the universe, who is furthermore a God of wondrous grace, love, and mercy. His word stands forever; all the promises contained therein have been, or will be, fulfilled.

This theme of God's concern for the spiritual welfare of his wayward people of the Northern Kingdom is evidenced by his sending fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice and altar of Elijah on Mount Carmel. Yahweh gave Elijah a great victory over the prophets of Baal and Asherah and proved in dramatic fashion who indeed was God. But also through the "regular" ministry of Elijah, which the prophet conducted before and after the incident on Mount Carmel, the Lord gave to many Israelites (albeit, a small minority of the Northern Kingdom) needed, vital spiritual nourishment. Through the prophet's preaching and teaching, God worked for their spiritual health, and also by allowing them to have altars in their vicinity.

During Ahab's reign altars to Yahweh existed in various parts of the Northern Kingdom, which Elijah mentions with implied approval in 1 Kings 19, despite the emphasis in the Torah on centralization of worship around the ark of the covenant. Elijah himself built an altar to Yahweh on Mount Carmel. A partial parallel to the Yahweh altars of Elijah's time were the Yahweh altars of Samuel's day. In the Torah God had made provision for his people to build altars in addition to the one at the central sanctuary (Exod 20:24-26). The understanding is that these were to be erected at God's express command, and/or in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., a crisis, or a theophany), and that they were temporary worship sites (even when the altars continued to stand). The Yahweh altars of Elijah's day were of such a nature. An additional consideration is that Jezebel perhaps tried to prevent loyal Yahwists in her kingdom from traveling to the

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<sup>9</sup> Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 187.



Jerusalem temple, thus causing the need for the faithful to erect altars at other locations.

*Excursus: Elijah and Paul*

Before proceeding, one additional observation is in order—namely, a comparison between Elijah and the apostle Paul, who wrote that after his conversion he “went away at once into Arabia” (Gal 1:17). “Arabia” in Paul’s day was an imprecise term, covering a vast area to the south and southeast of Palestine without specific boundaries.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Paul wrote that Mount Sinai was in Arabia (Gal 4:25). We recall that Elijah left Mount Sinai and was told to go to Damascus (1 Kgs 19:15) and that Paul left Arabia for Damascus (Gal 1:17).

Why did Paul go to Arabia? One can propose that he did so in order to meet with Christ and be taught by the Savior in seclusion. But might there have been another reason? N. T. Wright suggests that there was.

Paul wrote that he “was far more zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:14). That zeal meant not only his intense study and scrupulous observance of the Torah, but also his having zeal against those Jews he considered to be violating, and moving away from, the law—namely, Christians.<sup>11</sup> Wright explains that Paul’s zeal “led him into physical violence against those whom he saw as the heirs and successors of . . . the Baal worshippers of 1 Kings 18 (see Acts 22:3–5). He ‘was persecuting the church with great violence and was trying to destroy it’ . . . (Gal 1:13).”<sup>12</sup>

Elijah encountered Jezebel, whom he had opposed, and ended up going to Arabia (where Sinai was located). Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus, whom he had opposed, and went there too.<sup>13</sup> Wright thinks that Saul of Tarsus, “having taken the Elijah of 1 Kings 18,” which relates Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal and his having them executed, “as his role model in his persecuting zeal, [and he] took the Elijah of 1 Kings 19,” which reports Elijah departing for his life from Jezebel and ending up in Arabia, “as his role model when confronted, after his zealous triumph, with a totally new reality that made him question [similar to Elijah] his

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<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 434–35; N. T. Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1:17),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 4 (1996): 686.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 435; Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah,” 686.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah,” 686.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 435.

whole life and mission to date.”<sup>14</sup> In Arabia, Paul could have gained a greater appreciation of the fact that, to use Wright’s words, “it was the death of Jesus at the hands of pagans, not the defeat of the pagans at the hand of the heaven-sent zealous hero, that defeated evil once and for all. . . . The cross offered the solution to the problem that ‘zeal’ had sought to address.”<sup>15</sup>

## II. Ahab

When one considers how God dealt with King Ahab through the prophet Elijah, probably the first thought that comes to mind is that God took an entirely negative stance toward the king—that is, one of judgment and condemnation. This is because Ahab was an idolater. 1 Kings 16:31–33 reports that Ahab “went and served Baal and worshipped him. And he erected an altar to Baal [in] the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made the Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him.” Elijah told Ahab, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and the house of your father have, when you abandoned the commandments of Yahweh your God and went after the Baals” (1 Kgs 18:18). Later the author of Kings states, “Yet there was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife instigated. He acted very abominably, going after the idols, according to all which the Amorites did, whom Yahweh drove out before the Children of Israel” (1 Kgs 21:25–26).

1 Kings 16:31 hints that Ahab, however, was not devoid of any trace of Yahwism in his religious history. This verse, occurring at the beginning of Ahab’s story, starts the mixed portrayal of this king presented in 1 Kings: “Now it came to pass (did it appear trifling, his going in the sins of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat?) that he took as wife Jezebel . . . and went and served Baal and worshipped him.” The implication is that initially Ahab practiced a semblance of Yahwism (the distorted form of Jeroboam I). After his marriage to Jezebel, he began to venerate Baal.

Moreover, Ahab retained a modicum of recognition of, even respect for, Yahweh and his word after Jezebel became his wife. That this was indeed the case is illustrated by the biblical text in two basic ways: by indicating what Ahab did not do or have a part in, and by reporting what he did do. Jezebel killed the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:4, 13), not Ahab; the prophets of Baal and Asherah ate at Jezebel’s table (1 Kgs 18:19), not Ahab’s; after the Mount Carmel event Jezebel threatened to slay Elijah

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<sup>14</sup> Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah,” 687–688.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, “Paul, Arabia, and Elijah,” 691–692.

(1 Kgs 19:2), not Ahab; and Jezebel plotted and brought about Naboth's death (1 Kgs 21:1-16), not Ahab.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Ahab followed a summons of Elijah and met with him (1 Kgs 18:8-16). Furthermore, the king permitted prophets of Yahweh to talk with him, and he listened to them. When Elijah told him to gather Israelites and the prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mount Carmel, Ahab did so (1 Kgs 18:18-20). He ate and drank and got in his chariot and rode to Jezreel at Elijah's bidding (1 Kgs 18:41-45). Ahab heeded another prophet of Yahweh concerning how he was to defeat Ben-Hadad King of Syria (1 Kgs 20:13-21). When a prophet of Yahweh condemned him for releasing the captured Ben-Hadad, Ahab "went to his house sullen and vexed" (1 Kgs 20:43). After Elijah spoke a fierce word of condemnation on the house of Ahab because of Naboth's murder by Jezebel, Ahab humbled himself before Yahweh (1 Kgs 21:27-29). The last chapter of 1 Kings indicates that the king had listened to Micaiah, a true prophet of God. When Micaiah appeared before Ahab and Jehoshaphat and spoke an obviously sarcastic message, Ahab responded, "How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me only the truth in the name of Yahweh?" (1 Kgs 22:16).

Two other facts reported by 1 Kings demonstrate traces of Yahwism in Ahab. First, when Naboth refused Ahab's fair offer for his vineyard, the king refrained from forcing Naboth into the sale and simply returned home "sullen and vexed" (1 Kgs 21:4). By this he showed an awareness of, and some respect for, the Torah regulations concerning the selling of a family's property (Lev 25:23-24). Second, Ahab gave his children Yahweh names, that is, names containing an abbreviated form of God's covenant name: Ahaziah, Jehoram, and Athaliah.

What does this evidence concerning Ahab indicate? While Jezebel was totally devoted to the worship of Baal and hated Yahwism, Ahab was actually a syncretist. Certainly, his main religion was Baalism, and Baal was his chief god. But Ahab had not altogether rejected or abandoned Yahwism; the strings were not completely severed in his heart. To him, Yahweh was a god who existed and could foretell and accomplish certain things, and thus Yahweh's prophets were to be heeded, to a limited extent.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, Ahab is indirectly involved by his not exercising control over, or restraining, his wicked wife.

<sup>17</sup> John Bright describes Ahab as "a nominal Yahwist" (246), and observes that his building the Baal temple in Samaria "was no more than Solomon had done for his

As Ahab's personal religious situation was complex, so also were Yahweh's dealings with him through Elijah. To be sure, the prophet delivered plenty of harsh, fierce law to the king because of his idolatry, but he did so in part also to drive the king to the small amount of gospel that he still knew but had rejected.<sup>18</sup> That consideration, coupled with the fact that Yahweh again and again showed Ahab who the true God really was, leads to the conclusion that the Lord in his grace, mercy, and love was trying to convert Ahab and to bring him to a sincere, full confession of faith in Yahweh, and in Yahweh alone. God presented the truth to Ahab when he had Elijah say to the king, "As Yahweh, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there will not be these next years dew nor rain except according to my word" (1 Kgs 17:1), and this is exactly what took place, just as God foretold. Baal worshipers believed that Baal was the storm god, whose spear was the lightning bolt, the fire that came from heaven, and the one who sent the rains (and dew) that was so necessary for life in the ancient Near East.<sup>19</sup> Thus the announcement of the prophet, whose name

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foreign wives (ch. 11:1-8) and something that the ancient mind would tend to accept as a matter of course; it is probable that only the 'narrow-minded' objected." John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 245. Bright also proposes that Ahab permitted a state policy fostering Baalism because he "felt that he could not rely solely on Yahwism as the basis of his rule" (245).

<sup>18</sup> From the time Yahweh pronounced Gen 3:15, the worship of Yahweh also included belief in the promised God-man who would be the Savior. Over the following centuries God gave further information about this deliverer through the messianic prophecies. It can be assumed that even the corrupted Yahwism introduced by Jeroboam I retained a vestige of this messianic hope. Further, Ahab knew what Elijah preached and taught.

<sup>19</sup> There has been considerable discussion concerning the identity of the Baal imported by Jezebel into the Northern Kingdom. Some hold that this is a different god from the one presumed elsewhere in the Old Testament (the ancient Semitic storm god, whose worship was widespread across the ancient Near East). Rather, they think, the Baal promoted by Jezebel and Ahab, and opposed by Elijah in 1 Kings 18, is to be equated with the Tyrian deity Melqart, "king of the city [Tyre]," unless *qrt* refers to the netherworld/underworld. Regarding Melqart possibly being a god of the underworld, see William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1953), 81 and 196n29; William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1957), 307; Daniel I. Bock, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology*, 2nd ed., Evangelical Theological Society Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 52; Bright, *A History of Israel*, 245n51; George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 43 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 175-179. Heider also observes that most scholars believe there were solar aspects to Melqart's character (*The Cult of Molek*, 177). I side with those scholars who reject the opinion that Melqart was the Baal advanced by Jezebel and Ahab. One such scholar is John Day, who writes, "(i) The Baal of 1 Kings 18 [cf. also

“Elijah” meant “my God is Yahweh,” and what actually transpired, were a direct assault on Baalism. The truth was unmistakable: Yahweh was the ruler, he controlled nature, and Baal was helpless before Yahweh. In fact, Baal did not even exist.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the truth was made evident to Ahab through Elijah’s showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel when Yahweh, not Baal, sent fire from heaven (1 Kgs 18:16–39); when Elijah told Ahab that rain again was going to fall, and then that is what happened (1 Kgs 18:41–45); when Elijah, in the power of Yahweh, ran before Ahab in his chariot to Jezreel (1 Kgs 18:46); and when a prophet of God informed Ahab that Yahweh would deliver his enemies the Syrians into his hands, and then Ahab was victorious each time in battle (1 Kgs 20:1–30).

Nevertheless, despite these repeated, distinct demonstrations of who the true God really was, Ahab did not change spiritually because of his own hardness of heart. The closest Ahab came to genuine, saving repentance was when, after Jezebel had Naboth murdered, Elijah proclaimed God’s harsh, fearful judgment on Ahab, Jezebel, and Ahab’s whole house (1 Kgs 21:1–24). The prophet’s words were so fierce that, as the author of Kings reports, Ahab “tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about meekly” (1 Kgs 21:27). The king humbled himself before Yahweh to such an extent that Yahweh decided not to bring the disaster involving Ahab’s family in Ahab’s day but rather his son’s (1 Kgs 21:28–29).

One can draw from the narrative in 1 Kings that this change in Ahab, though, was not a repentance unto life. First, there is no report of God saying, “I have forgiven Ahab.” Second, in the very next chapter, 1 Kings 22, Ahab is back to his old ways, listening to false court prophets. Third, God, who had again and again tried to win Ahab over to his side, now, in view of the king’s continuing unbelief, allows an evil spirit to enter Ahab’s

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1 Kgs 17:1] is clearly a god who was believed to bring lightning and rain; classical sources, however, reveal that Melqart was thought of as being asleep during the winter months when these phenomena abounded. (ii) The treaty between Baal king of Tyre and Esarhaddon king of Assyria in the 7th century B. C. clearly distinguished [three] . . . deities, who manifest themselves in the storm, from the god Melqart (ANET, 534).” John Day, “Baal (Deity),” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 548. While the identity of Baal Shamem, another Tyrian deity, is disputed, he perhaps was identical with the Baal attested elsewhere in the Old Testament. See, e.g., Richard J. Clifford, “Phoenician Religion,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 279 (August 1990): 60; Day, “Baal (Deity),” 548.

<sup>20</sup> Without question, Elijah stood for monotheism (versus polytheism), of which Ahab was well aware.

court prophets to entice the king to his death in battle. Fourth, Ahab shows contempt for a real prophet of God named Micaiah. Ahab says about him, "I hate him because he does not prophesy about me good, but bad" (1 Kgs 22:8). Micaiah goes on to foretell that Ahab will be slain in the upcoming battle. Even now through this prediction of the prophet, one can see God trying to reach Ahab, to shake him up and bring him to his spiritual senses before it was too late. However, Ahab still does not get it. He hardens his heart against the truth and commands that Micaiah be put in prison and given nothing but bread and water until, as Ahab said, "I return safely" from the battle, to the capital city Samaria (1 Kgs 22:27). We know that Ahab did not come back in safety but was brought to Samaria as a dead man (1 Kgs 22:35-37).

It is possible that God will have each of us, as church workers or laity, present his word to a person or people who has, or have, rejected his word in the past, and who will continue to turn away from it. We must maintain our witness for the Lord, as the opportunity exists, not knowing whether the person or people will persist in unbelief or be brought to faith. God gives the harvest; the results are in his hands. We just keep on preaching and teaching and speaking the truth, asking God to help us be as winsome as possible, knowing that God is the one who makes a person a believer.

### **III. The Phoenician Woman**

Hiding from Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah had been given food by the Lord's use of ravens and had been drinking from the brook Chereth. When the stream dried up, God told him to go to Zarephath in Phoenicia, where Elijah took up lodging in the home of this Gentile woman. God miraculously provided the widow, her children, and the prophet with food by never letting her jug of oil and her jar of flour run out (1 Kgs 17:2-16).

Some time later, though, the woman's son became ill, grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing (1 Kgs 17:17). Why did God preserve the life of the boy, saving him from starvation, only to let him die? His mother thought that it was because of her past sin (1 Kgs 17:18). Probably she had come to believe in Yahweh, the God of Israel, due to Elijah's witnessing to her and her seeing the miraculous supply of food. But in her grief she lashed out at the prophet, the man of God, believing that his residing in her house had brought God's focus on her abode, and thus on her and her transgressions. She reasoned, as Paul Kretzmann has surmised,

that her own sinfulness stood out in a more dramatic manner by contrast with the “holiness” that she ascribed to the prophet.<sup>21</sup>

Most likely, though, it was not because of her sin that her son died. John 9 reports about the man who had been blind from birth, not because of his sin nor that of his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. So also the widow’s son died for reasons other than the woman’s previous violations of God’s will. Based on the text and the rest of Scripture, a few of these reasons can be adduced in this paper.

God in his grace, love, and mercy was working so that this experience turned out to be for the widow’s good. She already appreciated Yahweh as the one providing her with food—something that Baal, the chief god of Phoenicia, had not been able to do. When the prophet of Yahweh restored her son to life, her faith in the God of Israel was made firmer. *He* was the Lord over death, which could not be claimed for Baal, who periodically, according to pagan theology, had to submit to Mot, the Canaanite god of death and the underworld. Yahweh, she saw in clearer fashion, was the supreme God—in fact, the only God. She was brought to confess to Elijah, “Now this I know [that is, with increased certainty], that you are a man of God, and that the word of Yahweh in your mouth is truth” (1 Kgs 17:24).

As such, she was the forerunner of the many Gentiles who would be made believers in the true God during the New Testament era. That was another reason why God let the boy die and then revived him through Elijah. God was foreshadowing mass Gentile conversions. God’s plan of salvation had always included both Jews and Gentiles. The Messiah came to be the Savior of the whole world.

#### IV. Elijah

In the way he dealt with his prophet, God revealed his grace, love, and mercy; he acted for the benefit of Elijah. For example, another reason God let the widow’s son die was that, through this experience with the Phoenician woman and the dead boy, Elijah emerged as a man even stronger in the faith. He was led to wrestle with the Lord in prayer, asking God in very bold language, “Yahweh my God, even on the widow with whom I have been sojourning have you brought calamity, to kill her son?” (1 Kgs 17:20). The bitterness of the moment forced Elijah to grasp with firmer tenacity the encouragements and promises of Scripture, that believ-

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<sup>21</sup> Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible*, The Old Testament, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1923), 1:591.

ers can pour out their hearts to the Lord, approach him with confidence, bring any petition to him, and rely fully on God's grace, love, and mercy.

Elijah's faith was drawn to such a point through Scripture that the prophet asked God to perform a miracle—one that had never before occurred—to make a dead person alive again. Elijah, with heightened reliance on the Lord, stretched himself on the child three times, no doubt because of his belief in the persons of the Trinity. He trusted that God would use him, Elijah, as his instrument to raise the boy from death.

In turn, God used this incident to show Elijah and other Old Testament believers that the chief, the greatest, and the most important prophet would also raise people from death. Jesus Christ brought back to life the son of the widow of Nain; the daughter of Jairus; and Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary. Furthermore, what happened in the Phoenician woman's house pointed ahead not only to the Messiah raising himself from death, but also restoring life to corpses through the apostles and raising all people on the Last Day.

In 1 Kings 19 we see God ministering to his minister. That chapter recounts how, after the contest on Mount Carmel, Ahab reported to Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and that he had executed with the sword all the prophets who had eaten at Jezebel's table. Furious, Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, "Thus may the gods do to me, and more so, if at this time tomorrow I do not place your life like the life of one of them" (1 Kgs 19:2). Following this in the text comes a famous problem: does the text say that Elijah "saw" and set out to save his life, or that he "was afraid" and set out to save his life? The Hebrew verb (אָרַא) can be rendered either way.

Many of those who favor the "saw" translation think that Elijah simply could not have given in to fear, and that this was a strategic retreat on the part of the prophet. Those who propose the "afraid" rendering believe that the verb in question, coupled with the next phrase in the text, which literally says, "he arose and went for his life," indicates that Elijah was desperate, which naturally leads one to conclude that he was afraid.

The position I take, while translating the verb as "was afraid," combines both an aspect of seeing and an aspect of fearing. Elijah saw that, despite his tremendous God-given victory over the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel—when it was vividly revealed that Yahweh, and he alone, was God—nothing really changed in the Northern Kingdom. Worship of Baal and other false deities continued. The Israelites were not tearing down the altars and shrines of Baal. Elijah concluded that few, if any, other believers were left in the Northern Kingdom, and that he was



the last true prophet in the realm. Jezebel still ruled and was more dangerous than ever. Ahab appeared not at all transformed by what happened on Mount Carmel—even though he witnessed Yahweh, not Baal, sending the fire from heaven—and he remained under the influence of his evil wife. To Elijah it seemed that his ministry had been for nothing.

Elijah had become discouraged and despondent. Yet it was wrong for him to fall into such a condition. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil 4:4), which was, and is, God’s will for all believers of all times and places. Elijah was a sinner, as are we all. As Charles Spurgeon said, “The best of men at best are only men.”<sup>22</sup>

Elijah gave in to discouragement and despondency because he had fallen into focusing on himself. What he said to God later on Mount Horeb reveals as much: “I have been very zealous for Yahweh, the God of hosts. . . . I am the only prophet left” (1 Kgs 19:10). It seems that Elijah had moved from thinking, “See how the Lord is using me,” to “Look what I have done for God.” Seeing disappointing results, Elijah thought, “I have failed. I did not get the results that I hoped for.” Simon DeVries comments that “there can be little doubt but that the Elijah of our narrative is so weak and filled with despair because he has suddenly cut himself off,” that is, distanced himself unknowingly, “from the fountain of his strength, the God of Israel, who is also the God of heaven and earth. All that he can remember that is positive is his own prophetic authority and authenticity.”<sup>23</sup>

Discouraged and despondent, Elijah then became afraid. Why? No word from the Lord came to him telling him what to do. Previously, after Elijah had announced to Ahab that there would be neither dew nor rain, God told the prophet to hide in the Cherith Ravine. When the Cherith Brook dried up, God told him to go to the home of the Phoenician widow. Later, the word of the Lord came to Elijah telling him to go and present himself to Ahab; this was shortly before the meeting on Mount Carmel. But now, with an enraged Jezebel seeking to kill him, no message came from Yahweh guiding him as to his next move. Overtaken by fear, Elijah set out to save his life, traveling to the southern point of the Southern Kingdom of Israel.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Elijah Fainting,” in *The Treasury of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.), 795.

<sup>23</sup> Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 12 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 236–237.

Discouraged, despondent, and afraid, Elijah did not think clearly or correctly. He went from the Northern Kingdom in order to save his life and then prayed to God to take his life (1 Kgs 19:4). But if, as he thought, he was the only prophet of Yahweh left in the Northern Kingdom, and probably the only believer, that was a strong reason for him to want to live. His life and ministry were then most needed in his land.<sup>24</sup>

That Elijah had no word from the Lord did not mean, of course, that God erred or committed a mistake. God sent his word when he wanted, and his timing was always perfect. God delayed giving a message to Elijah because he knew what was going on inside of the prophet and that his servant needed a counseling session.<sup>25</sup> God could foresee that, by withholding an immediate message from Elijah, the prophet, despondent and discouraged, would become afraid and leave the Northern Kingdom. That is exactly what God wanted—for his servant to take a break from his work and to take a break from the territory where he had labored, so that Elijah would be free from any pressure. In that different setting and in his present emotional and psychological condition, Elijah would “let it all out” before the Lord. God ultimately had Elijah go to Mount Horeb, apparently having communicated his will to the prophet through an angel, who gave Elijah miraculous food (1 Kgs 19:5–8). Elijah must have realized the significance of going to Horeb—there God had met and communicated with Moses, and the encounter at Horeb had marked a new phase in the ministry of Moses.

On the mountain God came to Elijah not in the fierce wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in a gentle whisper. The Lord taught the prophet that although he, the Almighty, could deal with people through awesome displays of his might and majesty—as he just had on Mount Carmel—his usual way of operating was through his word. As Peter Leithart put it, “1 Kgs. 19 emphasizes that Yahweh is more fundamentally associated with his word than with any other phenomena.”<sup>26</sup> God gave

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<sup>24</sup> Spurgeon, “Elijah Fainting,” 797.

<sup>25</sup> Brevard Childs believes that Elijah misunderstood the significance of the contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) and “expected God to continue the fireworks. . . . Chapter 18 dealt with the issue of national apostasy, whereas 19 focuses on one’s individual faith. Chapter 18 portrays the outer battle of faith, 19 deals with the inner struggle. Chapter 18 has a wealth of extra-biblical parallels, whereas 19 shares no parallels, but reflects a uniquely biblical concern. . . . Together they [1 Kings 18 and 19] reflect the tension between the public and private struggle in which the dialectic between faith and unbelief is carried on.” Brevard S. Childs, “On Reading the Elijah Narratives,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 136.

<sup>26</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 142.

Elijah evidence of this reality: “I have preserved in Israel seven thousand—all whose knees have not bowed to Baal and all whose mouth has not kissed him” (1 Kgs 19:18). This was the result of Elijah’s preaching and teaching, the outcome that *God* wanted to, and did, achieve, through the prophet’s ministry. The news about the seven thousand must have startled Elijah, leading him to understand that he did not know, or see, everything. Elijah might have wanted a higher number, but it corresponded exactly to God’s plan.

In addition, God gave Elijah new assignments to carry out (1 Kgs 19:15–16). Through the word that God spoke to his prophet on Horeb, God reenergized his servant, renewed him spiritually, encouraged him, and empowered him for further service. Despite the fact that Elijah wanted to give up, God had more work for the prophet, which he enabled Elijah to accomplish.

God truly acted for the good of Elijah; he led him in the right path. Elijah had prayed to die, but God willed otherwise. The prophet came to realize that God had the better plan. We can be sure that, in the end, Elijah preferred staying alive so that he could meet with God on Horeb, pronounce God’s judgment on Ahab and Jezebel, carry out other work for the Lord, and train his successor Elisha.<sup>27</sup> God answered Elijah’s prayer not as the prophet had requested, but in the best possible way.

Elijah knew why Yahweh could be, and was, gracious to him—because of the coming Messiah. Moreover, God in his grace, love, and mercy crowned Elijah’s ministry with a wonderful act of vindication. Jezebel had been determined to kill Elijah, and the prophet had prayed to die. The Lord in essence said, “I’m going to show everyone who is in control. Elijah will come to heaven according to *my* timetable, and in fact, he will *not* die.” Elijah’s assumption (2 Kgs 2:1–12) not only testified to his being a true prophet of God; this also was a slap at Baal, who supposedly lived in the heavens, and at the Canaanite god Mot, supposedly the god of death. Again, Elijah’s departure from this earth foreshadowed the ascension of the greatest prophet, Jesus, into heaven.

## V. Conclusion

What we learn from the theology derived from the narrative of God’s relationship with Elijah is clear enough, and this gives us guidance not only as individuals, but also for our work in the church. Stand *for* the Lord

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<sup>27</sup> Spurgeon, “Elijah Fainting,” 800.

and his word, stand *on* his word, and be *in* his word and sacrament. Be on guard against discouragement. Remember that our labor in the Lord is never in vain. Through his word and sacraments, God achieves results, which are according to his will. We are simply instruments used by the Lord. Always trust in God, who guides us, works for our good, and answers our prayers in ways that are beneficial to us.

One might counter, however, that Elijah's ministry in the end should be deemed a failure, because finally the Northern Kingdom, for the most part given over to idolatry, came to an end with numerous Israelites taken into exile. Our response to that claim: Wrong! God, through the work of Elijah, brought the elect of his day to faith and preserved them in that faith. Due in part to the blessing of God on Elijah's efforts, enough of the truth remained among the Israelites that God could go after them in their place of exile and through his word restore many of them to himself, as the Book of Hosea indicates. Also, Elijah's faithful ministry, by God's grace, stands as an encouragement to us today.

As we are living in a society that is degenerating at a rapid pace and slouching towards Gomorrah,<sup>28</sup> the same basic points can be made about our working in the church today. That is, God uses our efforts for the salvation of the elect, the preservation of the truth, and the encouragement of future generations of church workers. Thanks be to God! To God be the glory!

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<sup>28</sup> To borrow the title of Robert Bork's book, *Slouching towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* (New York: Regan Books, 1996).