

PARALLEL GUIDE 25

Elijah and Elisha

Summary: Beginning with a general discussion of the nature and function of prophets in Israel, the chapter goes on to discuss the flamboyant tales of Israel's two great pre-“classical” prophets, Elijah and Elisha. These two bring Yahweh's condemnation upon Israel at the time of her greatest apostasy under Ahab and Jezebel and their descendants.

Learning Objectives

- State Elijah's main purpose in the contest at Mt. Carmel
- State what is meant by the “still small voice” in which Yahweh appeared to Elijah
- Identify a passage that may refer to the idea that Yahweh will save a “remnant” of Israel and Judah from destruction
- Identify the prophet who had a vision of Yahweh and the “heavenly court”
- Identify the man who finally destroyed the house of Ahab

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Some scholars think that the slaying of the prophets of Baal portrays a vast human sacrifice. What modern examples of sacrifice to achieve a purpose have you known? While we abhor this, what benefits does the community reap from public sacrifice for a cause?
2. The story of Naboth's vineyard is about land and ownership of land. Some people remain attached to land, while others believe that land is a commodity to be traded. How has this changed for you in the twenty-first century and how do you think the attitude about ownership of property supports and/or assails the dignity of various peoples?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Using no more than one page, summarize the significance of Elijah and Elisha. Can you name figures who have filled similar roles in our own times?

Additional Sources

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981).

J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Fortress Press, 1962). Lindblom's definition of a prophet is found in the first chapter.

Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Fortress, 1980) and Chapter 5 of Wilson's *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament, Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (Fortress Press, 1984).

Chapter 25 ELIJAH AND ELISHA

The stories about the two great ninth-century prophets Elijah and Elisha give us a more detailed picture of conditions in the northern kingdom of Israel than is usually presented by the Deuteronomist's selections from the court chronicles. The "Elijah Source" and the "Elisha Source" may have been brought to Judah—where the entire Deuteronomic history was compiled—by Israelites fleeing from the Assyrian conquest of their land in the eighth century. The accounts are rich in detail, suggesting authorship at a period very close to the time of the events themselves. Nevertheless, obviously legendary material is freely mixed in. Legends grow profusely around great figures of any age. **In an age like that of ninth-century Israel, in which our modern distinction between "natural" and "miraculous" events was not so rigorously made,** the legendary was more easily accepted. Even so, the rapidity with which the lives of these two prophets acquired such an overlay of such legendary material indicates the great awe with which they were viewed by the people of their times.

Before we can turn to the careers of Elijah and Elisha, we need to discuss the history of prophecy up to their time and then set the historical scene into which they stepped.

Even before the historical circumstances that in a sense created Elijah and Elisha, forerunners of the so-called classical prophets, we find men and women who are called "prophets" by the Old Testament writers. We have mentioned many of these. As early as the thirteenth century BCE, Eldad and Medad, though not among the seventy elders designated by Moses, prophesy in the camp when the spirit rests upon them (Num. 11:26-30). And their activity is affirmed by Moses—over Joshua's jealous objections: "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them" (11:29b).

From the same era, Balaam of Babylon is understood to be a prophet (Num. 22-24). He speaks the word of YHWH; moreover he will speak only the word that is given him by YHWH, neither more nor less: "Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God, to do less or more" (Num. 22:18b). YHWH does "put a word in Balaam's mouth" (23:5), and we find him speaking that word as "the Spirit of God came upon him" (24:2b). It is interesting that because Balaam's word is on behalf of Israel, it sets him in conflict with the ruler who calls on him to prophesy, for in this case the ruler is Balak, king of Moab, who seeks a word against Israel.

Significantly, Moses, though he may make prophets, is not a prophet himself. YHWH does not appear to Moses as YHWH does to his prophets, in a vision or in a dream, for "he [Moses] is entrusted with all my [YHWH's] house. With him I speak face to face, clearly, and not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD" (Num. 12:7b-8a).

In the twelfth century, Deborah, whom we find judging Israel at the time of its oppression under Jabin of Canaan, is called "a prophetess" (Judg. 4:4). We are not certain why she is so designated, though when we are introduced to her, she is sitting under a tree, "the palm of Deborah," where "the Israelites came up to her for judgment." That she is sitting under a tree may indicate that the people came to her for oracles as well. Later it is she who sends Barak into battle against the superior forces of Canaan: "Up! For this is the day on which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. The LORD is indeed going out before you" (Judg. 4:14). (These words are almost exactly the same as those spoken falsely to the king of Israel by his court prophets in I Kings 22:6.) Certainly this activity, sending troops into battle with the word of YHWH on their side, is

one that came to belong to the office of prophet. Finally, Deborah may be called prophetess because she is understood—as judge—to be inspired by the Spirit of YHWH. It is true, however, that most other judges are not called prophets.

In the eleventh century both Saul and Samuel, the judge who anointed him, are called prophets. We have already discussed Saul's ecstatic utterance among the dancing band of prophets (predicted by Samuel, I Sam. 10:5ff.). When the spirit of YHWH comes upon him, he prophesies and is "turned into another man." We have also noted Samuel's willingness to hear YHWH's call (I Sam. 3:1-10) and to deliver YHWH's message of punishment to the house of Eli (I Sam. 3:11-14).

Samuel does not bring YHWH's judgment only against Eli. In his words to the elders who come asking for a king, Samuel is the first to speak the word of YHWH against the royalty of Israel. This will become a familiar pattern. We hear words like Samuel's—though differently directed—again and again: "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons. . . . He will take your daughters. . . . He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards. . . . He will take one tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves" (I Sam. 8:11ff.).

In the tenth century, we find the prophet Nathan speaking as an adversary of King David on several occasions. Nathan warns David against building a temple—he should not build a house for YHWH; rather YHWH will build a house for him (II Sam. 7); Nathan excoriates David for taking Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah the Hittite—it is an abuse of kingly power and a failure in covenant (II Sam. 12); Nathan gives counsel to Solomon's mother, that her son might succeed David. In all these instances, we find the prophet involved in the activities of the royal court; he may seem even to be an official of that court. "Prophet" may indeed have been a court office at this time. Another tenth-century prophet, active during the reign of David, is Gad (II Sam. 24:11ff.) who speaks YHWH's word and is described as "David's seer."

After David—more accurately, after the division of the kingdom—there seems to be a proliferation of prophets, particularly in the northern kingdom. During the reign of Jeroboam I, Ahijah the Shilonite (I Kings 11:29ff.; 14:1-20) and two anonymous prophets (I Kings 13) appear. Meanwhile, Shemiah brings God's word to Rehoboam

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in the south. During the reign of Ahab appear Micaiah, the son of Imlah (I Kings 22), another anonymous prophet (I Kings 20), and Elijah and Elisha. We discuss Micaiah ben Imlah here in order to define more particularly what the biblical writers mean—and what we mean—by calling someone a "prophet." The story of Micaiah the prophet is found in I Kings 22:1-28.

Read I Kings 22:1-40

We find in I Kings 22:5 that prophets were sought as oracles—the Hebrew word translated "inquire" is a technical term applied to the seeking of oracles from a prophet or medium (as the witch of Endor in I Sam. 28:6ff.). Here what is sought does not seem to be so much the word of the Lord as religious sanction for a political move, war against Syria for the territory of Ramoth-gilead.

Verse 6 shows that there were prophets who "traveled" in schools. This particular school belongs to Ahab (vv. 22-23), who addresses to it a question that can be answered "yes" or "no." Against this guild of royal prophets stands Micaiah ben Imlah, who "never prophesies anything favorable about me [Ahab], but only disaster" (v. 8). We find this characteristic of Elijah and most of the classical prophets—they stand in adversary relationship with the powers that be.

In verse 11, one of the guild prophets, Zedekiah ben Chenaanah, makes for himself horns of iron and acts out

the defeat of the Syrians. Apparently it was not uncommon for prophets to act out as well as speak the word of God, sometimes in actions we would consider bizarre (e.g., Isa. 20; Jer. 13:1-11, 19:1-13, 27:1-15; Ezek. 4:1-5:17). Whatever the pressures on Micaiah ben Imlah to “speak favorably,” a “word . . . like the word of one of” the court prophets, he must refuse. Like Balaam to Balak, he must say that “whatever the LORD says to me, that I will speak” (vv. 13-14). This is a key element of continuity in the history of prophecy among the people of Israel. Whatever the cost, the authentic real prophets speak the word of YHWH, simply because it comes from YHWH.

Verse 15 is confusing. Several explanations have been advanced. Possibly Micaiah, too, has been temporarily affected by the lying spirit, but it could be that he is mocking the favorable word of the court prophets.

The prophecy of Micaiah begins typically: “Therefore hear the word of the LORD. . . .” The prophet claims to have seen YHWH on his throne, his court around him. This may be another way of indicating that Micaiah is an authentic prophet, for the true prophet, according to Jeremiah 23:9ff., is the one who stands in council of YHWH. More than a “claim” is involved; Micaiah is proved the true prophet when his prophecy comes true. “If you return in peace,” he tells the king finally, “the LORD has not spoken by me” (v. 28). Ahab does not come back in peace—or any other way. Micaiah has spoken truly; his word clearly was from YHWH.

This passage provides us with many of the characteristics of the prophet. He or she claims to speak the word of God, and if he or she is authentic for real, the word is of God and comes true. In adherence to the word, the prophet cannot manipulate the message.

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The content of the oracle and the style in which it is given—the prophet’s engagement in, or more properly engagement by, ecstatic activity—are also noted. It may also be said that in this case, at least, the prophet appears in threatening times—impending war—with a word to trouble the king. How far these characteristics apply to Elijah and Elisha we soon see. Taken together, they may provide at least the beginnings of a definition of prophet.

Any definition of such a complex phenomenon must be incomplete, but the definition by J. Lindblom in *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* is a good one: A prophet is one who is characterized by a special call (obligation) to perform certain acts (or speak certain words), in a state of intense inspiration from God (pp. 1-6).

The four elements of this definition—call, speech, action, and inspiration from YHWH—apply to both the classical and pre-classical Old Testament prophets. Moreover, taken more generally, they apply to prophetic phenomena across time and space. The oracle of Delphi in Greece, associated with the worship of Apollo, certainly claimed to speak a word from the god, a word moreover spoken in the inspiration of a “madness superior to knowledge,” to quote Plato. Moreover, Middle Eastern prophetism—and Hittite prophetism as early as the fourteenth century BCE—partake of the same elements. The experience of Mohammed (seventh century CE), undoubtedly influenced by the Hebrew prophetic tradition, can be discussed in similar terms. Israel’s prophetic experience did not happen in a vacuum. Rather its prophets used means of expression available to humankind in general, but they used them in a special way, in the service of YHWH.

Elijah and Elisha are then first of all in the service of YHWH. Their concerns are primarily with service to YHWH. This service is not unrelated to political life in the kingdom of Israel, but it is more directly related to religious life.

Politically, Ahab seems to have been quite astute. In that he was the son of his father. “Omri inherited a reduced and threatened Israel” (Bright, p. 241), but the foreign policy he established—much of which was carried out under Ahab—was a shrewd one and generally successful. “Omri’s policy for Israel’s recovery was patterned in its major features on that of David and Solomon; it called for internal peace, friendly

relations with Judah, close ties with the Phoenicians, and a strong hand east of the Jordan, particularly against the Arameans” (Bright, p. 241). This strategy, carried out in a series of steps, was generally successful, but one foreign policy tactic, the marriage of Ahab to **Jezebel, the daughter of Ittobaal, king of Tyre**, was to have unfavorable internal repercussions.

“All the evidence suggests that Israel under the Omrides enjoyed a considerable material prosperity. Best witness to this is the new capital at Samaria” (Bright, pp. 243-244). There is much additional evidence, including the fortification of several key cities. But as the house of Omri and indeed the nation as a whole became wealthier as well as stronger, there is also evidence—in Kings—that the lot of the lower classes was becoming worse and worse. Increasingly, the poor were at the mercy of the rich. John Bright cites the story of Naboth’s vineyard (I Kings 21) as a case in point. It may not have been typical, but it could scarcely be an isolated

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example. The practices that Amos knew a century later hardly developed overnight. Israel was full of people who, like Jezebel, had no conception of covenant law or, like Ahab, had little concern for it.

We find Jezebel at the heart of all contention in the Elijah story. To talk about her is to talk also about what can only be described as a religious crisis in Israel. **The daughter of the king of Sidon**, Jezebel worshiped the gods of Sidon, Baal, Melqart, and Asherah. According to the custom of the time—there is nothing surprising in this—she was allowed to continue this practice after she came to Israel. **There could have been little effective objection even when a temple to Baal was built in Samaria.** But Jezebel could not stop there. Devoted to Baal “and no doubt contemptuous of the cultural backwardness and austere religion of her adopted land, [she] apparently sought to make the cult of Ba’al the official religion of the court” (Bright, p. 245). In this she seems to have been remarkably successful. “Though Ahab himself remained a nominal Yahwist, as the names of his sons [Ahaziah, “YHWH has grasped,” and Jehoram, “YHWH is high”] indicated, the court and the ruling class were thoroughly paganized; prophets of Ba’al and Asherah enjoyed official status” (I Kings 18:19)—with the result that the prophets of YHWH for the first time faced persecution. “As for the mass of native Israelites, we may suppose that while some resisted (19:18) and others became frankly pagan, the majority—as majorities are wont to do—went ‘limping with two different opinions’”(18:21) (Bright, p. 246).

I Kings 17-II Kings 9I

Into this situation steps Elijah, prophet of the God of Sinai who would suffer no others before him. A man of ultimately unshakable faith and iron will, an eerie and lonely figure who was nevertheless to wield great power, Elijah was to challenge Jezebel and defeat her, for such was the will of YHWH. It is to Elijah’s story—and that of his disciple Elisha—that we now turn.

Elijah appears suddenly. No background is given for him other than the place of his origin, Tishbe in Gilead. The “Elijah Source” must have begun less abruptly in its original form; the D editor seems to have dropped the beginning on the assumption that no lengthy introduction to this great figure was required. In Jewish tradition Elijah would come to be ranked second only to Moses. His stature increased particularly in later post-exilic Judaism. The Book of Malachi, probably written in the fifth century BCE, ends with the prophecy, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6). His name also figures in the New Testament: Jesus is identified by some people as Elijah returned to fulfill Malachi’s prediction, and on the mountain of the transfiguration Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. According to Matthew, Jesus himself identifies John the Baptist as the “Elijah who is to come” (11:14). Even today at the Jewish Passover a glass of wine is poured for Elijah, and a chair at the table is reserved for him.

The prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries were in many ways greater than Elijah. Certainly they contributed more profoundly to the theological insights of biblical religion. The impact of Elijah on the kingdom of Ahab and the sharp con-

trast which he drew between loyalty to YHWH and the easy syncretism of Israel, made him a folk hero in his own time. Legends about him grew, and the story of his final departure added a note of mystery. He went up to heaven in a fiery chariot, his body nowhere to be found. Such a figure, alone with the patriarchal Enoch in being “assumed” directly to heaven, would become an obvious candidate for the one who would “return” at the time of YHWH’s coming.

The Contest at Mt. Carmel

A major characteristic of the fertility god Baal, whose Phoenician form Jezebel introduced from Sidon, was that he provided rain for the crops—he is in fact, first of all, a god of rain. In the mind of the people of Israel in the ninth century, this Baal and YHWH may well have become confused. From the standpoint of the D editor, two hundred years later, there was no confusion and the evils of syncretism were clear. In the ninth century, the people were familiar with YHWH and with Baal mainly as deities encountered in the cultic festivals. The stories of YHWH’s mighty acts in Israel’s history were no doubt known, but to the Israelite the things that were done at the cultic centers devoted to YHWH would not have seemed to differ very much from things done at the Baal shrines. From the standpoint of the strict morality of Israelite law—D’s standpoint—the difference was clear: cultic prostitution for the increase of the fertility of the soil is incompatible with the worship of YHWH alone. This incompatibility could be more easily recognized after the work of a man like Elijah than it was before: cult prostitution is not sexual promiscuity, but a holy act—can it, then, be immoral? Has it not been done for untold generations as service to “the Lord”? YHWH is Lord, but “Baal” means “Lord.”

I Kings 17:1-7 Elijah Announces a Three-year Famine

The difference is clear to Elijah. Israel’s life depends on YHWH. Though she may not know it, it was YHWH who created Israel and who gave her the land; it is YHWH who continues to nourish her (cf. Hos. 2:8). YHWH is “the LORD, the God of Israel” (17:1), and Israel can have no other god. “Baal” may mean “Lord,” but YHWH is Lord. To make the distinction between YHWH and Baal so clear that all could see it, Elijah claims for YHWH Baal’s supposed control over the rain and issues a challenge to the priests of Baal in order to prove his claim.

I Kings 17:8-24 Elijah and the Sidonian Widow

Elijah announces in the name of YHWH that there will be no rain, not even dew, in Israel until he, Elijah, declares it (v. 1). Immediately following this announcement, YHWH tells the prophet to go across the Jordan “by the wadi Cherith” (v. 3) where he will be fed by ravens. The command—and the one that follows in vv. 8-9 that he go to “Zarephath which belongs to Sidon”—remove him from the area controlled by King Ahab. This suggests that Ahab is seeking to arrest Elijah and probably kill him—an assumption which will be confirmed later in the scene between Elijah and Ahab’s servant, Obadiah (18:7ff.).

Elijah goes from trans-Jordan to the Sidonian town of Zarephath, as YHWH has commanded. At the city gate he meets the widow who YHWH has declared will feed him. The famine which YHWH has brought reaches even beyond Israel to Sidon, and the woman has only enough grain and oil left for one final meal for herself and her son “that we may eat it, and die” (v. 12). Elijah tells her to prepare the meal for herself and her son, but first to make a bread-cake for him. He promises her that

YHWH has decreed that the “jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jar of oil will not fail, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth” (v. 14). YHWH’s control over the supply of food, again supposedly the province of Baal, the god of fertility, extends even into Sidon, the land of Baal himself!

The widow’s son becomes ill—“and his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him” (v. 17). The miracle that follows is duplicated with great elaboration in the Elisha cycle of stories (II Kings 4:18-37) and again in Luke 7:11-17. In the Elijah version the miraculous element is less pronounced than in the Elisha counterpart. It is possible, if one wishes, to interpret the “miracle” which Elijah performs in naturalistic terms: the boy has stopped breathing but is not dead, and Elijah, through prayer—or, as some suggest, by artificial respiration (!)—brings breath back into him. In the Elisha version, no such interpretation is possible. The resuscitation is a sheer miracle of life from death. Such an extension of the miraculous and legendary is characteristic of the Elisha cycle. It is important not to “explain away” the miraculous element in either set of Old Testament stories. The miraculous is an integral part of the Elijah narrator’s method and theology. Elijah’s ability to invoke the miraculous, whether in this homey scene, away from the crowd, or in the coming contest with the prophets of Baal before “all Israel” (18:19), indicates that he is indeed the prophet of YHWH, God of Israel.

The widow’s cry that Elijah has come “to bring my sin to remembrance” (v. 18) means that the prophet’s holiness accentuates the imperfect quality of her life—there is no intended reference to a specific sin that the prophet has come to accuse her of committing, a sin that might have caused her son’s death. At the climax of the story is the widow’s exclamation that the word of YHWH in Elijah’s mouth “is truth” (v. 24). Here the God of Israel is confessed by a foreigner from Sidon. This confession parallels that made by the crowd in Luke 7:16: “‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has looked favorably on his people!’” The “point” of the miracle in either case is that it leads to confession of faith.

I Kings 18:1-16 Elijah Returns to Israel

In the third year of the famine YHWH instructs Elijah to return to Israel and to seek out Ahab. YHWH is about to send rain: by withholding the rain for three years and then sending it again, YHWH will have demonstrated superiority over Baal. This demonstration will have effect only if the people are clearly aware that it is YHWH who has done these things. Elijah is sent back to Israel to make this clear.

Meanwhile, King Ahab is seeking a means to save his horses and mules. Horses were very important to Israel’s “national defense.” Assyrian records of the time show that Ahab was able to put two thousand chariots onto the field of battle. That would involve at least twice as many horses. The king sends his servant Obadiah in one direction, while he himself goes in another, searching throughout the land for grass for the animals.

The note in 18:3b-4 suggests that Jezebel has launched a persecution of the Yahwist prophets, perhaps sparked by Elijah’s announcement of the drought. Elijah was instructed to flee the land to trans-Jordan and to Sidonian territory; it now appears that his has not been the only life at stake. Obadiah himself—the name means “servant

of YHWH”—has secretly hidden a hundred of YHWH’s prophets and fed them. Elijah meets Obadiah and tells him to announce his return to the king. Obadiah is afraid to do so, because he fears that Elijah will be “spirited away” by YHWH, and Ahab will be furious with Obadiah for bringing him a false report. The word translated “spirit” in v. 12 is ruach (roo-AHK), which can be translated “spirit,” or “breath,” or “wind.” The

imagery of the verse is of YHWH's "storm" lifting Elijah up and depositing him somewhere else. Christian influence has affected the English translation as the "spirit" of YHWH; it is not so much a "spiritual" as a very material power that is meant. In both the Elijah and the Elisha narratives, YHWH present in very physical and effectual ways.

Elijah promises not to "run out on" Obadiah—the passage is probably intended to be humorous—and the servant goes to tell Ahab of Elijah's presence (vv. 15-16).

I Kings 18:17-19:3 The Contest

Ahab greets Elijah as the "troubler of Israel" (v. 17). Elijah points out that the troubles in Israel are caused instead by the king's apostasy. This is an important distinction often missed by those in positions of authority: the blame for disastrous policies is too often placed on the victims or on those who bring those policies to light. "Agitators" are condemned for civil disturbances, while the social injustices addressed by the "agitators" are ignored.

Elijah orders Ahab to gather the people at Mount Carmel with the eight hundred fifty prophets of the fertility god and goddess, Baal and Asherah (v. 19). The looseness with which the word "prophet" was used at this time is indicated here. One would expect Elijah to have summoned the Baalite priests, but the distinction between prophet and priest was not yet clearly drawn. Samuel, for example—as we have seen—embodied both. A "prophet" was a holy one, a man or woman of God. When the prophet delivered oracles, he or she spoke for the god, but he or she could also be called upon to make prayers to the god on behalf of the common people, to offer sacrifices, or simply to demonstrate the power of the god by the frenzy which would periodically overcome her or him. The regular cultic priest conducted appropriate activities by the authority of his position. His office was hereditary, not the result of a charismatic gift. When the priest gave an oracle from the god, it had been made known to the priest by some device such as the sacred lots—it was not given directly by inspiration. Not much is heard of priests at this period.

Elijah addresses the assembled Israelites: "How long will you go on limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (v. 21). The imagery he uses is graphic and double-edged. The word translated "limping" describes the branching of a tree limb to form a fork. Applied to human actions, it refers to a straddle-legged gait, a hopping or limping from one foot to another. Elijah's figure of speech pictures a populace in the ungainly posture of hopping back and forth between YHWH and Baal. A secondary meaning derived from this is that of a particular form of cultic dance. The cultic actors, probably in procession around an altar (as in v. 26), performed a dance that resembled hopping or limping. The awkwardness of the posture, called up by the single term, is used to ridicule both the Israelites for their indecision and the prophets of Baal for their elaborate but ineffective posturing.

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Elijah's challenge to Israel to cease "limping" between YHWH and Baal spells out the issue with inescapable clarity. Until then, the populace—and probably Ahab himself—could confuse YHWH with the fertility deities, unaware of what they were doing. As we have seen, Ahab himself gave "YHWH" names to his children—names with the root of the word "YHWH" in them. It is unlikely that he deliberately renounced Yahwism or even intentionally subverted it. But Elijah's challenge to decide cuts through the confusion.

The contest—all four hundred and fifty Baal prophets against the solitary Elijah (nothing further is heard of the four hundred prophets of Asherah)—will decide whether Baal or YHWH is God. The two sides will each have a bull; each will call on its god. The god which brings fire to the altar to consume the bull will be recognized as true God (vv. 22-24).

The description of the antics of the Baal prophets is thickly overlaid with ridicule. They call on Baal and

“limp” around the altar—that is, perform their cultic dance—but no answer comes. Elijah mocks them—“Cry aloud, surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or **he has wandered away**, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened” (v. 27). Elijah derides them scathingly. The excess of the self-induced fervor of the Baal prophets is stressed; they mutilate their bodies until blood gushes out. But no reply comes from the god.

Elijah reconstructs a Yahwist altar that had been destroyed, presumably by Baalites. (It must have been annoying to the Deuteronomic editor that Elijah built a “high place,” but there was no way for him to avoid recording it.) The threefold pouring of water into a trench around the altar is a clear visual symbol that, if fire comes, it cannot be by means of human agency. But Elijah’s invocation of YHWH states the issue of the contest: “let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding . . . that this people may know that you O LORD are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (vv. 36-37). YHWH is to come to the people to reclaim them, to establish himself as God and to turn their hearts back. This last expression or variant forms of it—the turning of the hearts of the people back to YHWH—becomes the refrain of the eighth- and seventh-century prophets. This concern appears also in the New Testament: **“repentance,” “turning back the heart” to YHWH from its apostasy, is the essence of the New Testament message of “the kingdom of God.”**

YHWH answers all of Elijah’s requests. The “fire of YHWH” consumes everything, even the water in the trench (v. 38). Many guesses have been made about what “really happened.” Some suggest that the “fire of YHWH” was lightning preceding the storm that brought rain. Perhaps it was—the expression could have that meaning. Some have even suggested that it was not really water, but naphtha, that was poured into the trench, and that a spark was struck by the prophet to ignite it! Such speculation is beside the point. We cannot know what “really happened.” We have only the report itself for data, and the report is not concerned with the modern thirst for “bare facts”—or historical ones, either. It is a witness of faith to YHWH’s lordship over every dimension of Israel’s life. The writer wants the story to be interpreted as

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telling of a direct, material action by YHWH, reclaiming the people, turning their hearts back to YHWH, and ratifying Elijah as God’s prophet. No other interpretation captures the meaning of the text. Other questions may be asked to satisfy other purposes, but the text will not provide their answers.

Elijah moves immediately to dispose of the prophets of Baal. They are all, on Elijah’s command, seized and killed (v. 40). The OAB footnote says that some scholars have seen this as a vast human sacrifice to YHWH. It could not have been so interpreted by the Deuteronomist; elsewhere D clearly shows horror at such practices. Whether it could have been seen so three centuries earlier—at the time of Elijah—is difficult to say, but it seems an unnecessary supposition: the contest was a form of warfare between YHWH and Baal, and in “holy wars” the loser was routinely committed to the *cherem*. To modern people, sacrifices may appear similar to the commitment to total destruction, since both involve killing for religious purposes—but they were quite distinct. A sacrifice is an offering of the best of one’s possessions in an act of worship to God; the *cherem* was a way of making the point that the war was YHWH’s war, and that no Israelite had a right to claim any booty from it. The victory was YHWH’s, and so were the spoils.

Although the immediate contest is now over, the story is not yet at an end. The question was not simply which god would ignite the sacrificial fire, but which would bring the rain. The coming of the “fire of YHWH” has provided a sign; the giving of rain will be the substance of that sign. So Elijah tells Ahab to break the fast he has been observing, for the rain will soon come (v. 41). And Elijah goes to the mountaintop and assumes a crouching position—again perhaps performing sympathetic magic, imitating the shape of a cloud. He sends his servant seven times to look toward the sea, and the seventh time the servant reports seeing a cloud “like a person’s hand” forming over the sea (vv. 42-44).

On Elijah's instructions, Ahab races to Jezreel, his alternate capital, trying to reach there before the rains come that will turn the plain of Jezreel into a quagmire and trap his chariot as it had Sisera's when Deborah opposed him (Judg. 4-5). Elijah races on ahead of Ahab's chariot, still under the influence of the prophetic frenzy. One would think that the story would end here, with the great victory of YHWH and of his servant, Elijah. But Jezebel is not to be bested so quickly. She threatens to kill Elijah "by this time tomorrow" (19:2). The LXX, confirmed by the version of the text discovered among the "Dead Sea Scrolls" in 1948, inserts a phrase before Jezebel's threat: "Even if you are Elijah, I am Jezebel; so may the gods do to me, and more also . . ." Jezebel must have been a formidable person to be able to reverse Elijah's exultation with a single threat! But he does flee immediately to Beersheba in Judah (v. 3).

I Kings 19:4-18 Elijah and YHWH at Mt. Horeb

Elijah has succeeded—yet he has failed. YHWH responded to his invocation and broke the drought on the land, but the prophet of YHWH has had to flee for his life before the threats of Jezebel. There has not been the wholesale conversion of the people for which he had hoped, and there promises to be no letup in the policy

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which sent the one hundred prophets of YHWH into hiding. Elijah remains alone, and he remains a failure. It is in this frame of mind that the prophet goes out into the wilderness south of Beersheba. Leaving his servant behind, he makes his lament to YHWH (v. 4).

An angel of YHWH comes to him—is it in a dream?—and feeds him twice with miraculous food (vv. 5-8). Eating and drinking are important images in the Elijah stories, and in the Elisha stories as well. In chapter 17, Elijah had fed the widow of Zarephath. Now YHWH's angel feeds him. In both cases, the feeding does not only nurture physically, it miraculously rescues from a despair that is about to lead to death. Revived by the cake and water, Elijah travels forty days and nights to Horeb (Sinai), the mountain of God. He returns to the place that symbolizes the foundation and source of Yahwist faith—this much is clear—and the reference to "forty days and forty nights" seems also intended to echo the forty years of wilderness wandering under Moses.

You may have noticed that vv. 9b-10 are similar to vv. 13b-14. It may be that in copying the text, a scribe was interrupted and, on returning, transposed the quotation in vv. 13b-14 to vv. 9b-10. It is probably best to omit vv. 9b-11a, so that the text reads: "And there he came to a cave, and behold YHWH passed by. . . ."

The spectacular forces of nature, each of which has from time to time accompanied the activity of YHWH, this time do not manifest YHWH to Elijah. The wind, earthquake, and fire that may have inspired earlier peoples to religious awe during the time of an eruption—if Horeb was a volcanic site—fail to move Elijah. For these natural forces are not God; God is their master. (Although YHWH is not these natural powers, they have sometimes revealed YHWH. This time they do not; YHWH is not in them.) Not until after the phenomena cease does Elijah become aware of the divine presence: "and after the fire a **sound of sheer silence**" (vv. 11b-12). The "sound of sheer silence" which wells up in the silence has sometimes been misunderstood as the "voice of conscience" within Elijah. Such an interpretation is entirely too human-centered for the Old Testament. If the mighty forces of nature are not to be mistaken for YHWH, certainly the interior judgments of people are to be even less so. The Hebrew word here can be translated as "an audible silence" or, in a modern equivalent, "a pregnant silence." It is the silence of mystery, so great as to inspire awe—a silence so complete as to overwhelm the ears. Such a silence falls upon Elijah.

Sensing the presence of the mystery, Elijah covers himself in his mantle in order not to look upon the divine holiness. He goes to the opening of the cave, and YHWH speaks to him (v. 13). The question YHWH asks is probably a reprimand: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He is being rebuked for fleeing before Jezebel.

Elijah recites the hopelessness of the situation, citing that even though he has earnestly maintained the cause of YHWH in Israel, the defeat of Yahwism is complete. The people have defected, the altars have been torn down, and a persecution has been launched, so complete as to leave only Elijah still alive out of all the prophets of YHWH. Now his life, too, is being sought (v. 14). Elijah's dejection is total.

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If the question to Elijah in v. 13 is a reprimand, it is a mild one. YHWH does not chastise Elijah for the prophet's (certainly understandable) loss of faith in YHWH's ability to accomplish God's purposes. Instead YHWH gives Elijah an entirely new program on which to embark (vv. 15-17). The prophet is to engage in political interventions that extend to two kingdoms and reach into the future, even past his own death. Elijah is to anoint Hazael as king of Syria, to anoint Jehu king in Israel, and to anoint Elisha as his own successor.

Nowhere prior to this in the Old Testament has it been suggested that YHWH could appoint the king of a nation other than Israel or Judah. Later prophets will speak of YHWH's using other nations as instruments of God's purposes, but in the instructions to "anoint Hazael king over Syria," God's lordship is claimed even more fully. The purpose of the three anointings—Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha—seems to be the utter destruction of the house of Omri (Omri, Ahab, and later Ahaziah and Jehoram) and all its supporters. Elijah, as it turns out, will fulfill only the third of these instructions (19:19ff.). Elisha executes the first and second (II Kings 8:15; 9:6).

Verse 18 may be translated in two ways, yielding two corresponding interpretations. It can be translated, "Yet I have seven thousand in Israel" or, "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel. . . ." If the first translation is chosen, it may be that YHWH is either continuing a mild reprimand—What makes you think, Elijah, that you are the only supporter I have in Israel?—or reassuring Elijah that he is not alone in his support of YHWH's claims. If the second translation, in the future tense, is correct, it would mark the first presentation of an idea which will be voiced by some of the later prophets—that of the "remnant" which God will leave after catastrophic judgment (cf. Amos 5:15; Isa. 10:20, 11:11).

I Kings 19:19-21 The Call of Elisha

It appears that Elisha comes from a wealthy family: to plow with twelve yoke of oxen indicates considerable affluence. Verse 20b, which sounds similar to Jesus' rejection of would-be disciples who ask to return home to complete unfinished business (Matt. 8:19-22 and Luke 9:57-62), is probably not to be so interpreted here. The casting of the mantle upon Elisha is a sign of the passing of Elijah's authority to him, and it is so understood by Elisha.

(Omit chapter 20 for the moment; since it properly goes with chapter 22, we consider the two chapters together later.)

Naboth's Vineyard I Kings 21:1-16

Jezebel Has Naboth Killed; Ahab Takes His Vineyard

A native of the valley of Jezreel, Naboth owns a vineyard in Jezreel, where Ahab has his summer palace. The king wants the vineyard for a garden, and he offers Naboth a fair price for it (v. 2). Naboth's refusal (v. 3) draws attention to an ancient principle of Israelite life: a person's land does not belong to that person in any absolute sense—the land is YHWH's and is held in trust for one's descendants. Therefore, it should not be sold (Lev. 25:23-24: this entire chapter deals with problems of property and one solution, the year of Jubilee). So long as this principle was followed, it would be impossible for the land to be progressively acquired by wealthy individuals, thereby dispossessing increasingly large segments of the population. In practice this land policy ensured, moreover, the continuation of the dignity, as well as the influence, of the

peasantry—the “people of the land”—and slowed the accumulation of

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absolute power in the hands of a monarch. The ideal view of an Israelite monarch was one who represented the people to YHWH and was responsible to YHWH for the people.

Ahab accepts the right of Naboth to refuse, but he sulks in his palace, taking to his bed and refusing food (v. 4). Jezebel does not share the Israelite notion of limitations on a king. Indeed she has no understanding of a law involving covenant. By her reckoning the king cannot be under the law, for he is the law (vv. 5-7). She promises to get the vineyard for him. The power of her person is evident here, as it was when she cast fear in the heart of Elijah by her threats. Ahab, by his silence, acquiesces. Jezebel perverts the law. She makes arrangements for Naboth to be accused of cursing God and the king. For this he will be killed. That she is able to issue the orders for this trumped-up affair in the name of the king, fixing his royal seal to the letters (v. 8), indicates the extent of her influence in the realm. Her orders are to “proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the assembly” (v. 9)—that is, to arrange a trial court. A fast was normally proclaimed in order to avert a disaster, such as would come about were someone to curse God and the king. Two false witnesses are to bring the charges (v. 10). According to the law, if two witnesses agree, the charge is accepted as true. The plot is carried out, and Naboth is stoned to death. (II Kings 9:26 indicates that his sons were killed with him, so there could be no one to inherit Naboth’s land.) On the death of Naboth, Ahab takes possession of the vineyard (vv. 15-16).

Robert Alter has called attention to the way the dialogue in this story functions, to set up “a small but significant dissonance between the objective report and the terms in which the character restates the facts” (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 77). Here the deceitful nature of Jezebel is subtly brought before us. In I Kings 21:13-15, the death of Naboth is reported three times. The first report is the narrator’s: “So they took him outside the city and they stoned him to death with stones.” A messenger brings the news to Jezebel: “Naboth has been stoned; he is dead.” Finally Jezebel, after she has given Ahab the good news that he can take possession of Naboth’s vineyard, reports that Naboth himself “is not alive, but dead.” The little tautology may be to reassure her hesitant husband that Naboth is in fact now out of the way or perhaps to postpone for a moment the blunt monosyllable ‘dead’ (met). What Jezebel of course omits strategically from her report is the ugly fact of the manner of death—by stoning as the verdict of a trial she has trumped up against Naboth (Alter, p. 78). Jezebel seems unable to deal honestly with anyone, even her husband.

I Kings 21:17-29 Elijah Condemns Ahab and Jezebel

With his courage apparently restored by the encounter with YHWH at Horeb, Elijah confronts Ahab and Jezebel. He announces a terrifying doom to both king and queen and the complete destruction of the Omride dynasty (vv. 19, 21-24), thereby demonstrating that Ahab was correct in greeting him with the words, “O my enemy” (v. 20). The dogs shall lick Ahab’s blood and shall eat the body of Jezebel, and anyone who supports Ahab will be eaten by dogs in the city or by birds in the countryside. (Verses 25-26 are editorial comments, as the translation shows by enclosing them in parentheses.)

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Apparently Ahab repents when he hears the frightening oracle, and **YHWH therefore decides to postpone the judgment for a generation**. This alteration of the prophecy was probably made to account for the fact that in II Kings 9:21-26, it is not Ahab but his (second) son Joram (or Jehoram) who is killed by Jehu in fulfillment of the oracle. But in I Kings 22:37ff.—a different tradition from the “Elijah Source”—Ahab himself is killed in fulfillment of the prediction. (YHWH’s postponement of the judgment, even if in this case it reflects a later revision to account for the facts, introduces a paradox that often plagued the prophets: judgment must

come, according to the prophets, because Israel has strayed so far from YHWH that she cannot turn back—and yet, the prophet must speak in the hope that she might repent and the judgment be modified.)

Worth commenting on with regard to this passage, too, is the relationship of YHWH to the prophet, and the way the prophet “interprets” that relationship in his prophecy. In v. 17, we find that when the word of YHWH comes to Elijah the Tishbite, it is a commanding word: it commands both action and a further word to be spoken. This word itself, though physically spoken by the prophet, remains always a word of YHWH. It is introduced by the formula, “Thus says the LORD” (v. 19), and in it we find the prophet actually speaking for God. “I will bring disaster on you; I will consume you and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel . . .” (v. 21ff.). Elijah may be voicing these words, but the “I” refers not to him but to YHWH; ultimately it is YHWH who is speaking.

The story in chapters 20 and 22—in which Ahab is eventually killed and the dogs lick his blood—is not from the same source as the Elijah narrative. Two different traditions about the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy are probably represented.

Summary

Chapters 20 and 22 describe a war between Israel and Syria. We treat those chapters in summary here. (For a more detailed discussion of 22:1-28, see above.) In chapter 20, Ben-hadad of Syria—one of several Syrian kings of that name—calls for complete surrender from Ahab, with all his gold and silver, and the fairest of his wives and children as tribute payment. Ahab agrees to the terms, but Ben-hadad adds further humiliation by announcing that he is sending servants to plunder the house of Ahab and his servants’ houses. Ahab refuses to allow this. A prophet announces victory to Israel, and the Israelite army defeats Ben-hadad. (The prophet is not named and is presumably not Elijah; these two chapters break into the Elijah story.) Ben-hadad launches a spring offensive and is defeated a second time. The Syrians ask for mercy, and Ahab agrees to a lenient peace treaty. A prophet, again nameless, rebukes Ahab for letting the enemy of Israel go free, and predicts the death of the king as punishment, though not in the words which Elijah has used.

This chapter contains two very different assessments of Ahab. In vv. 1-34, he is praised as an able and popular ruler. In v. 13 and again in vv. 22-28, the prophet of YHWH comes to Ahab with a favorable word: YHWH is on the side of the king in his battle with Ben-hadad. The change of narrative tone is immediately apparent in

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v. 35. As the OAB footnote indicates, Ahab is here suddenly and “violently criticized for what seems a noble act in v. 34.” It is interesting to note that this second prophet uses a parable to condemn Ahab out of the king’s own mouth in much the same way that Nathan used the parable of the ewe lamb to condemn David in II Sam. 12. Chapter 22 continues the story. Three years after the treaty with Syria, Ramothgilead has still not been given back to Israel as promised. Ahab persuades King Jehoshaphat of Judah to join him in a campaign to liberate the city. (Jehoshaphat is Ahab’s son-in-law.) Jehoshaphat asks for a divine oracle to make victory certain before going into battle. The four hundred prophets who are asked to prophesy all give a favorable prediction about the battle. But Jehoshaphat is not satisfied and asks if there may not be another prophet. Micaiah the son of Imlah is sought. Micaiah at first also predicts victory. The king then urges him to speak the truth—earlier Ahab has complained that Micaiah always prophesies evil for him—and Micaiah predicts that Ahab will be killed in the battle and his forces scattered.

Micaiah’s Prophecy I Kings 22:19-23

The Heavenly Court

We have discussed Micaiah ben Imlah the prophet above, but Micaiah's prophecy is also significant, because of the form which it takes. As we noted, Micaiah has a vision in which he sees YHWH on the throne, surrounded by the heavenly court. This is the picture which lies behind the Gen. 1:26 use of the plural in relation to 'elohim: "Then God ('elohim) said, 'Let us make humankind in our image. . . .'" Here the heavenly court is acting as a council of advice to YHWH. YHWH asks, "Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?" (v. 20) One of the spirits—the word again is ruach—**volunteers to cause the prophets to lie**, encouraging Ahab to go into battle to his death. Micaiah tells this vision to account for being the only prophet to predict death for the king.

There are problems connected with the prophecy. First, if the vision is taken at face value—that is, if YHWH really intends to entice Ahab to his death—is Micaiah acting against the will of YHWH by revealing it to the king? Again, what is the morality of YHWH's using prophecy itself as a means of bringing about the death of someone? Given the outlook of the times, YHWH's determination that a king such as Ahab should die creates no moral problems—but that YHWH should use self-revelation for this purpose is problematical.

Micaiah must be aware that the four hundred prophets are lying, either because he senses their submissiveness to the king or because he has a revelation of the true outcome. Is the scene of the heavenly court a figure of speech in which Micaiah frames his accusation of lying, or is it a true dream-revelation? In either case, the conclusion must be the same: since the prophets lied, YHWH must have caused it. **There was at this time no notion of a figure such as Satan to account for negative influences.**

Micaiah is imprisoned until the outcome of the battle should reveal whether or not he has spoken the truth. Ahab disguises himself so that he cannot be singled out as the king, but a chance arrow—one drawn, according to the Hebrew, in the archer's innocence, that is, without definite aim or realization of the consequences—kills

him. As Elijah had prophesied (21:19), dogs lick Ahab's blood which has run down into his chariot.

First Kings ends with Ahaziah succeeding Ahab as king of Israel, and Jehoram (or Joram), the grandson of Asa, as king of Judah. The account of the reign of Ahaziah continues without break into II Kings 1. (In the Hebrew, Kings is one scroll.) Ahaziah becomes ill after falling through the lattice on the roof-chamber of his house. He sends a messenger to the Philistine city of Ekron to inquire about his future from the god Baal-zebub. This deity's real name was Baal-zebul ("Lord Baal"), but the biblical writer ridicules him by changing his name to one which means "lord of the flies," a phrase adopted by Nobel Laureate William Golding as the title of his most famous novel, a story of such horrendous religious malfeasance that the biblical writer would probably enjoy the choice. Elijah sees this act of the king as embodying the same issue as that fought out on Mt. Carmel—which god will Israel worship? The story that follows, with its senseless display of power, seems out of keeping with the rest of the Elijah cycle. The use of fire to characterize the power of YHWH is maintained consistently throughout the Elijah story (cf. I Kings 18:38). Here the prophet stops the king's messengers with the question, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to enquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?" After determining by his dress that it is Elijah who has returned his messengers, the king sends a company of soldiers to take Elijah. (Note how closely the description resembles that of John the Baptist in the gospels.) The NRSV here characterizes Elijah as wearing "a garment of haircloth." John Gray points out, "a rough, shaggy cloak . . . was actually recognized as the insignia of a prophet" (cf. Zech. 13:4), and as such was worn not only by John the Baptist but also later by the Sufis of Islam. John is also described as wearing "a leather girdle around his waist" (Matt. 3:4), probably "to signify his status as the forerunner of the Messiah, the status accorded to Elijah in popular tradition based on Mal. 4:5 [cf. Matt. 11:7-15]" (I & II Kings, p. 464). The prophet calls down fire from heaven and destroys Ahab's soldiers. A second company comes to the same end. The captain of the third force sent against Elijah then pleads to be spared, Ahaziah dies, and his brother Jehoram (Joram) succeeds him. (The king of Judah at the time was also named

Jehoram.)

Elisha

The stories about Elisha are less significant than those about Elijah. Most are concerned with portraying Elisha as a great miracle-worker, rather than with furthering any particular cause of YHWH. Two stories are of importance: the account of Elisha's provoking Hazael to kill Ben-hadad and succeed him as king of Syria (II Kings 7-15), and the anointing of Jehu as king to replace Joram (II Kings 9:1-26). These are the acts YHWH ordered Elijah to perform when YHWH appeared to the prophet at Horeb.

Still, the stories of Elisha make fascinating reading, even when they contribute little edification. They also add some details to the story of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Trusting that you have read the entire Elisha saga, we examine in particular only the following passages: the account of Elijah's "departure" and Elisha's taking

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up his mantle (II Kings 2:1-14); the healing of the Syrian king's commander (II Kings 5); the instigation of Hazael's assassination of Ben-hadad (II Kings 8:7-15); and the anointing of Jehu (II Kings 9:1-26).

II Kings 2:1-14 The Whirlwind Takes Elijah into Heaven

Three times Elijah bids Elisha to stay behind while he goes where YHWH has bidden him. Each time Elisha vows to remain with his master. Elijah is an old man, aware that he is about to die, and is visiting prophetic centers to bid farewell to his colleagues, although in the earlier stories of the Elijah cycle, he has never been shown as associating with such prophetic bands (the "sons of the prophets"). Indeed we have not seen Elijah in the company of Elisha since the account of the latter's call (I Kings 19:19-21). Probably this account is a part of the "Elisha Source" rather than the "Elijah Source."

As Elisha and fifty of the "sons of the prophets" watch, Elijah strikes the waters of the Jordan River, and they part in two so that Elijah and Elisha can go across on dry ground (2:7-8). The similarity to Moses at the Sea of Reeds and Joshua at the Jordan is undoubtedly intended.

Elisha asks for a "double share" of the spirit of Elijah (2:9). What sounds like a desire to become more significant than his master might be interpreted as an expression of admiration and respect for the older prophet. More likely, it would signal Elisha's position as "eldest son" among the "sons of the prophets" since firstborn sons were to receive a double portion of the inheritance from the father. Elijah says that only if Elisha is able to see his departure can such a gift be made—only possession of spiritual vision can qualify Elisha to succeed Elijah (v. 10). A chariot of fire—the imagery of fire continues to be associated with Elijah to his end—and horses of fire, visible to Elisha but probably not to one without the gift of prophecy, hide Elijah from view as he is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha's cry—"Father, Father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!"—gives evidence that he has seen the vision (v. 12).

The mantle, usually shown in paintings as cast over Elisha from the chariot, lies on the ground. Elisha picks it up and tests his vocation to see if, in fact, he has received Elijah's powers. He strikes the waters of the river, calling on YHWH, "the God of Elijah," and the waters part as before (v. 14).

This story serves to introduce Elisha as Elijah's successor. The account of his call, in the Elijah cycle, was not sufficient—for this source—to begin the saga of Elisha. But this story also sets the stage for the later elevation of the status of Elijah. Only he and Enoch (according to one interpretation of Gen. 5:24) were taken directly to the presence of God without tasting death. Both figures appear in late Jewish and early Christian "apocalyptic" writing—literature which "reveals" the final events that will occur when the kingdom of God

is about to be established. (Apokaluptein is a Greek verb meaning “to reveal.”) Enoch and Elijah, having been with God since ancient times, will play important roles in the preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

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II Kings 5:1-14 Elisha Cures Naaman of Leprosy

The king of Syria—unnamed—has a commander, Naaman, who has contracted leprosy. The leper is a valiant soldier, however, so much so that it is said that YHWH has given victory to Syria through him (5:1). Here again, YHWH’s authority and rule are seen as extending beyond the boundaries of Israel (cf. I Kings 19:15). This increasingly important concept forms one of the bases of Amos’ prophecy; more immediately, it is also seen in the account of Elisha’s commissioning of Hazael as new king of Syria.

An Israelite slave girl tells Naaman’s wife of a prophet in Samaria (Elisha) who can cure the commander. The king of Syria—either confused or deliberately incendiary—sends a letter to the king of Israel—also unnamed—asking him to cure Naaman’s leprosy (vv. 2-6). The king of Israel possesses no such powers. “Am I God, to give death and life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” The king’s statement should not be regarded as overstatement. To cure someone of leprosy would be at least figuratively to resurrect that person, for leprosy meant at the very least ostracism and social death. The king of Israel assumes that Syria is trying to start war again (v. 7). When Elisha hears of this, he has Naaman sent to him.

Naaman does not come humbly but in pomp and circumstance—“with his horses and chariots.” Perhaps Elisha takes exception to this, for he sends a messenger to deal with the commander. Naaman is insulted, not only by the manner of the prophet’s reply but by its content as well—the prophet tells him to wash seven times in the Jordan (vv. 8-10). Naaman wants something more spectacular to occur. After all, he is an important person. He should have a personal audience with the prophet. He seems to assume that healing powers are being claimed for the Jordan waters themselves. But the power resides in the God whom Elisha the miracle worker serves—he could command Naaman to do something completely different and achieve the same effect.

Naaman’s servant, possibly realizing this, urges him to do as the prophet has said: “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something different, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’” (v. 13) That the story is full of legendary source material is indicated by the sevenfold washing that Naaman is instructed to perform. The legendary nature of the story throughout should not detract from its point: that YHWH, the giver of life, can heal through the prophets. It is obedience to the prophet of YHWH, rather than any special power in the waters of the Jordan, which brings the cure.

II Kings 5:15-19a Naaman Tries to Pay Elisha

In gratitude for his healing, Naaman tries to present a gift to Elisha, but Elisha refuses to take it—he serves YHWH and needs no gift (v. 16). Naaman then asks for as much Israelite soil as two mules can carry, so that he can offer sacrifices to YHWH while in Syria (v. 17). This has usually been explained by the idea—at the time almost universal—that held that a power of a god was limited to the land of the people who worshiped the god. It is this universal belief which caused the celebration of YHWH’s ability in the Exodus to confound the gods of Egypt on Egyptian soil as such a remarkable event; it is also this belief that is in the background of the

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comments on the role of YHWH in “giving victory to Syria” (5:1) and in commissioning Hazael as king of

Syria (8:7-15). It is possible to explain Naaman's desire for the earth of Israel in another way, however. If Naaman has experienced something more than healing—if in the healing he has experienced the presence of YHWH—it may be that he wants the earth simply to create a sacred spot that will remind him of an experience of God that he does not want to forget.

Naaman does (rather sheepishly) beg Elisha's forgiveness for those times when he will be forced, by royal pressure, to "bow myself in the house of Rimmon" (v. 18). This apparent act of worship to the Syrian god will hereafter be done "with his fingers crossed"!

II Kings 5:19b-27 Elisha's Servant Extorts Pay from Naaman

A generous Syrian allowed to leave without paying is too much for Gehazi, Elisha's servant. He goes after Naaman and begs a gift of money and clothing for "two young men of the sons of the prophets"—either totally fictional characters, or, perhaps, a concealed reference to himself and Elisha (v. 22). Naaman willingly makes the gift.

When Gehazi returns to Elisha and is asked where he has been, the servant, like a little child being questioned about mischief, replies, "Your servant has not gone anywhere at all" (v. 25). Elisha has been with him all the time "in spirit" and has seen the entire transaction. Elisha's extrasensory perception plays a role also in chapter 6; it seems to be another of his abilities as a prophet of YHWH. Gehazi, for his greed, is condemned to leprosy—he and his descendants forever (vv. 26-27).

Hazael Becomes King of Syria

Ben-hadad, king of Syria, becomes ill, and he sends Hazael to obtain an oracle from Elisha as to the outcome of his illness (8:7-8). Hazael's position in the Syrian court is not specified, but it clearly was a station high enough for him to succeed Ben-hadad as king. Elisha's presence and renown in Syria indicate that at this time a state of peace between the two kingdoms is in effect.

II Kings 8:7-9 Ben-hadad Asks for an Oracle from Elisha

Elisha answers Hazael's question about the king's future in a strange way: "Go, say to him, 'You shall certainly recover'; but the LORD has shown me that he shall certainly die" (v. 10). In a trancelike state, Elisha stares at Hazael until Hazael is "ashamed," or embarrassed, though we cannot be certain why. Elisha's emotions are much different. The tears well up as he envisions the afflictions Hazael will bring upon Israel (v. 12; see also OAB note.). The prophet's description of them so clearly portrays the actions of a king of Syria, that Hazael catches Elisha's suggestion: Ben-hadad's death will result in Hazael's rise to the throne. When Hazael expresses the proper rejection of such an idea, Elisha makes his meaning explicit: "The LORD has shown me that you are to be king over Aram" (v. 13).

II Kings 8:10-15 Elisha Entices Hazael to Murder

Hazael brings the false words of assurance to his master, and the next day he smothers the king in his bed. Hazael becomes king, and thus the first item in the list of instructions which YHWH gave to Elijah at Horeb is fulfilled, but by Elisha—whose call was the third item in the list—rather than by Elijah (I Kings 19:15-17). The second item, the anointing of Jehu as king of Israel, is yet to be fulfilled.

Jehu, King of Israel

Elisha sends one of the "sons of the prophets" to anoint Jehu, a commander of King Joram's army, as king of

Israel. Since this is a seditious act, the young prophet is to flee as soon as he has performed it (vv. 1-3).

II Kings 9:1-10 Elisha Sends a Young Prophet to Anoint Jehu

Once again the instability of the Israelite throne is shown: the old pattern, in which a prophet could announce YHWH's choice of a new king, began when Samuel declared that David had displaced Saul. Later it brought down the house of Jeroboam and the house of his successor, Baasha. Now it is to destroy the house of Omri because of a prophetic curse on Omri's son Ahab. The prophet carries out his assignment, repeating the curse on the entire house of Ahab and the prediction that dogs shall eat Jezebel and none shall bury her (vv. 4-10).

II Kings 9:11-16 Jehu Receives Support from the Army

When Jehu, after some coaxing, reveals what the prophet—the “mad fellow,” probably a reference to his ecstatic actions—has done, his colleagues make a carpet for him of their cloaks and sound the trumpet, proclaiming Jehu king (vv. 11-13). The prophet's announcement and the people's acclamation—though only a small sampling of the people is represented—are sufficient to make him king.

With this support, Jehu seals the city so no one can slip out to reveal the plot to Joram and goes to Jezreel—the summer palace—where the king is recovering from a battle wound.

II Kings 9:17-26 Jehu Kills Joram

Joram sends two messengers to meet the force which has been seen approaching Jezreel and to determine if the approaching group is friend or foe. The ease with which Jehu is able to persuade each messenger to join his rebel force shows the dissatisfaction with Joram which must have prevailed (vv. 17-19).

The watch recognizes Jehu's driving style. Joram, probably suspecting that his commander's approach to the city is an attack, goes out to meet him. According to II Kings 8:29, Ahaziah, king of Judah—who is related by marriage to Joram—is visiting the Israelite king during his illness. Ahaziah accompanies Joram to meet Jehu (v. 21).

Shouting accusations at the king, Jehu kills Joram and gives orders that his body be thrown on Naboth's vineyard, the original occasion for the curse against the house of Ahab. Apparently Jehu overheard Elijah pronounce the curse against Ahab; now he sees himself fulfilling YHWH's oracle (vv. 22-26, cf. I Kings 21:17-19, II Kings 8-29).

Summary

Jehu fatally wounds Ahaziah of Judah as well and continues his work as avenger of YHWH by systematically eliminating all the descendants of Ahab and their supporters. He lures the prophets of Baal and their followers by pretending to be a worshiper of the foreign god; then he massacres them. In spite of this zeal for YHWH, Jehu does not get unqualified approval from the Deuteronomist, for he did not dismantle the shrines at Dan and Bethel. Nevertheless, for ridding the land of Ahab and the Baalite cult which Jezebel had promoted, Jehu's house was to be allowed to reign for four generations.

Elisha now drops out of the narrative until II Kings 13. The Deuteronomic account of the reigns of the kings in the two kingdoms continues. In Judah, Ahab's daughter Athaliah has married King Jehoram. Upon the death of their son Ahaziah, she seizes the throne of Judah, killing all the remaining royal family except the boy Joash, Ahaziah's son, presumably by another wife. He is hidden away by his aunt Jehosheba and kept safe. After six years a palace revolt is staged, and Joash is given the throne, thus restoring Judah to the house

of David.

When Jehoahaz becomes king of Israel, YHWH saves Israel from defeat at the hands of the Syrians under Hazael, but in spite of YHWH's gracious deliverance of them, the Israelites continue to do evil—they fail to dismantle the rival shrines. At this point Elisha reappears for the final time. Joash (Jehoash), the son of Jehoahaz, has become king of Israel. Elisha is about to die. The king, apparently seeing the prophet as the main source of Israel's strength, weeps and cries out to him. Elisha predicts three more victories for Joash, but not enough to eliminate the Syrian threat entirely. Then Elisha dies. But there must be one final miracle: even his bones contained enough power to bring the dead back to life!

The court chronicle resumes. The eighth century has begun. Azariah succeeds Amaziah in Judah, and during his reign and that of Jeroboam II of Israel, the two great prophets Amos and Hosea will do their work. Elijah and Elisha are prophets of the ninth century. In Amos and Hosea, the eighth century will produce two significantly different ones.

Natural and miraculous events [back](#)

And in my supernaturalist materialist opinion, neither should we. Stuff either happens or it doesn't, and if it does, we have to deal with it.

Omri [back](#)

For more on Omri, see the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) and [Wikipedia](#).

Jezebel's father [back](#)

King of Tyre or Sidon? See the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) and [Wikipedia](#), and take your choice.

Jezebel's father [back](#)

King of Tyre or Sidon? See the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#) and [Wikipedia](#), and take your choice.

Temple to Baal [back](#)

For that matter, this was the normal practice in England for royal wives of the Roman Catholic persuasion before the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

"Baal" means "Lord" [back](#)

And "Allah" means "God."

Bring my sin to remembrance ^{back}

Don't know about you, but I feel that way, a lot of the time.

Wandered away ^{back}

He's off relieving himself.

Kingdom of God ^{back}

Well maybe, kind of.

Sound of sheer silence [back](#)

The LXX says "φωνὴ αὔρας λεπτῆς," "the sound of a gentle breeze."

Postpone the judgement *back*

Nice of Him. YHWH is evolving.

Volunteers to cause the prophets to lie [back](#)

Fscinating. It reminds me a little of the Delphic oracle's reply to Croesus: "If you go to war with Cyrus, you will destroy a great kingdom."

He and his descendants forever ^{back}

A leper would have descendants?

