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“The Motif of Life and Death in the Elijah-Elisha Narratives and its Theological Significance in 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 13”

Gary E. Yates, Ph.D.

Introduction

Prior to Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan, Moses exhorts the people to choose “life” over “death” (Deut 30:15-17). Following Yahweh and his commands will bring life because Yahweh himself is their life (Deut 30:20). The alternative facing Israel is that turning away from the Lord and following other gods will bring death. In the context of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, “life” takes the form of the covenant blessings that the Lord has promised a faithful Israel (cf. Lev 26:3-13; Deut 28:1-13), while “death” manifests itself as the covenant curses that he has threatened as punishment for disobedience (cf. Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:15-68).

The central section of Kings (1 Kgs 17-2 Kgs 11) focuses on the story of the apostate Omride dynasty in Israel and particularly on the reign of Ahab and his sons.¹ In this section, the dominating figures of Elijah and Elisha take center stage, while the rulers of Israel move to the periphery. Israel’s apostasy has led to the forfeiture of Yahweh’s gift of life and to the experience of the covenant curses associated with death. In light of these realities, this paper will develop how the motifs of life and death serve as a unifying literary focus in the stories of Elijah and Elisha and the kings to whom they minister. Studies of the Elijah and Elisha narratives have often discussed the fragmentary nature of the stories and the complex redactional process behind the accumulation of legendary material related to the prophets.² This study will instead attempt to demonstrate the literary unity and cohesion of the Elijah-Elisha materials when life and death are seen as their primary theme. Rather than simply looking exclusively at the accounts that directly involve Elijah and Elisha, this paper will focus on the whole of 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 13 that covers the span of their ministries. This paper will develop how life and death serve as the primary theme of this section of Kings in four key ways: 1) the life-and-death struggle between Elijah-Elisha and the house of Ahab and how the prophets triumph over the kings; 2) the offer of life through the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and the enjoyment of this blessing by the faithful remnant; 3) the kings of Israel as a source of cursing and death in the land; and 4) the polemical contrast between Yahweh as a god of life and Baal as a god of death.

¹Jerome T. Walsh (*1 Kings*, Berit Olam [Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical, 1996], 373) provides the following chiastic structure for the book of Kings: A) Solomon and the united monarchy (1 Kgs 1-11); B) Separation of the northern kingdom (1 Kgs 12); C) Kings of Israel and Judah (1 Kgs 13-16); X) The Omride Dynasty (1 Kgs 17-2 Kgs 11); C’) Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Kgs 12-16); B’) Fall of the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17); A’) Kingdom of Judah alone (2 Kgs 18-25). Both the length and the central position of the materials on the Omride dynasty reflect their overall importance to the message of Kings.

²See, for example, Susanne Otto, “The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History,” *JSOT* 27 (2003): 487-508. Otto argues for a four-stage development of 1 Kgs 16:29-2 Kgs 10:36. She also provides extensive bibliography of earlier studies on the compositional history of the Elijah-Elisha stories.

Prophets and Kings in a Life-And-Death Struggle

At the dedication of the temple, Solomon had warned of the possibility of the covenant curses if Israel turned away from the Lord (cf. 1 Kgs 8:33-51), and this warning became a reality during the reign of Ahab's family over Israel. As demonstrated in the chart below, the catastrophic events experienced by Israel as a result of their apostasy in the days of Elijah and Elisha correspond in numerous ways to the specific curses that the Lord had threatened to bring against Israel as punishment for covenant unfaithfulness:

Drought and lack of water ³	Lev 26:19; Deut 28:22-24	1 Kgs 17:2; 2 Kgs 2:19
Crop failure and lack of vegetation	Lev 26:20; Deut 28:18; 29:23	1 Kgs 18:5; 2 Kgs 2:29
Famine, shortage of food, and starvation	Lev 26:26; Deut 28:53-56; 32:34	1 Kgs 18:2; 2 Kgs 4:2; 6:25-27
Loss of livestock	Deut 28:18	1 Kgs 18:5
Destruction of sanctuaries	Lev 26:31	2 Kgs 10:27; 11:8 (destruction of sanctuaries of Baal) 2 Kgs 12:17-18 (plundering of Jerusalem temple)
Military attack and siege	Lev 26:25-26; Deut 28:25, 49, 52-53, 55-57; 32:23-24, 41-42	1 Kgs 20:1, 12, 22, 26; 2 Kgs 6:8-9, 14-15, 24; 12:17-19; 13:20
Exile and captivity	Lev 26:33-34, 36, 38, 39, 41, 44; Deut 4:27; 28:36-37, 41, 63-64, 68; 30:4	2 Kgs 5:2
Military defeat, occupation and oppression from enemies, loss of territories	Lev 26:16, 17, 32; Deut 28:33, 43-44, 48, 68; 32:21	1 Kgs 20:42; 22:29-38; 2 Kgs 3:5, 18-19; 5:1; 8:12, 20-22; 10:32-33; 13:3, 7, 22
Cannibalism as a result of siege	Lev 26:45; Deut 28: 55, 57	2 Kgs 6:28-29
Provoking of God's anger	Deut 31:29; 32:16, 19	1 Kgs 16:33; 22:53; 2 Kgs 3:27
Denial of burial/corpses eaten by animals and birds	Deut 28:23, 26	2 Kgs 9:10, 25-26, 35-37; 10:8
Disease, illness, and injury	Lev 26:14; Deut 28:221-22; 27-28, 35, 59-61	2 Kgs 1:2; 5:27; 7:3; 8:29
Loss of family	Lev 26:22; Deut 28:41, 48; 32:25	1 Kgs 21:23-24; 22:38; 8:12; 9:7-10; 10:7-10, 17
Destruction by fire	Deut 28:24; 32:22	2 Kgs 1: 10, 12
Attack from wild animals that take away their children	Lev 26:22	2 Kgs 2:23-24

³This chart has followed the helpful categorical breakdowns of the covenant curses in Lev-Deut provided by Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC 31 (Waco, Tex: Word, 1987), xxxii-xlii.

The ultimate covenant curse is death itself (cf. Deut 4:26; 28:20-22, 44, 48, 51, 61; 30:15, 18, 19), and in the Elijah-Elisha narratives, death is particularly visited upon the worshippers of Baal and the family of Ahab. At the end of the contest on Mount Carmel, Elijah and the people put the 450 prophets of Baal to death (1 Kgs 18:40). Jehu's rise to power involves the slaughter of the worshippers of Baal and the destruction of Baal's house (2 Kgs 10:18-29). Through this slaughter, Jehu removes Baal worship from Israel. Even in Judah, the coup that results in the execution of Ahab's daughter, Athaliah, also involves the destruction of Baal's house and the killing of Mattan, the priest of Baal (2 Kgs 11:1-16). One of the clear designs of the Elijah-Elisha narratives is to demonstrate that Baal is a god of death who brings death upon those who are devoted to him.

Death for the House of Ahab

Throughout their ministries, Elijah and Elisha are engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the house of Ahab. The kings and family of Ahab are the target of judgment because they do "evil" in the eyes of the Lord (1 Kgs 16:30-33; 21:20, 25; 22:52; 2 Kgs 3:2) and serve the Baals (cf. 1 Kgs 22:53; 2 Kgs 1:2, 3, 6, 16; 8:18, 27). The sentence of death on Ahab's family falls upon Ahab, Amaziah, Jehoram, Jezebel, the seventy sons of Ahab in Samaria, those who left of Ahab's family in Jezreel, and the members of David's royal family related to Ahab (Amaziah and Athaliah).

At the beginning of this life-and-death struggle, circumstances are unfavorable for the followers of Yahweh. Jezebel is successful in killing off the prophets of the Lord (1 Kgs 18:4, 13), and in her first appearance in the narrative, she bursts on the scene breathing fire and swearing that Elijah will be dead by the end of the day (1 Kgs 19:2). Elijah counters Jezebel's oath in two specific ways. First, Yahweh commissions Elijah to anoint Hazael, Elisha, and Jehu as the human instruments who will bring about the downfall of Ahab's family (1 Kgs 19:16-17). Second, after Ahab and Jezebel conspire to put Naboth to death, Elijah issues a death sentence from Yahweh on the house of Ahab (1 Kgs 21:21-24). The Lord will cut off every male in Ahab's family just as he has done with the previous dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha. Jezebel is especially singled out in this announcement of judgment. Thus, the Elijah narratives begin as a conflict between a "queen who kills prophets" and a "prophet who causes death."⁴ The plot and narrative tension revolve around which edict will prevail over the other—the oath of Jezebel or the prophetic pronouncement of Elijah.

The death sentence against the house of Ahab begins to work itself out in the context of Israel's military conflict with Aram in 1 Kings 20-22. Elijah and two other prophets each pronounce a death sentence upon Ahab, and ironically, Yahweh's messengers attribute Ahab's death to a life that was spared and also to a life that was taken. An unnamed prophet tells Ahab ("king of

⁴Phyllis Trible, "Exegesis for Storytellers and Other Strangers," *JBL* 114 (1995): 6.

Israel”) ⁵ that he will die because he failed to execute Ben-Hadad when the Lord had placed the Aramean king “under the ban” (1 Kgs 20:42). And then, Jezebel’s legal murder of Naboth leads to Elijah’s prophecy that the entire line of Ahab will be wiped out (1 Kgs 21:21-24). As Brueggemann has poignantly noted concerning Yahweh’s standards of justice, “The destruction of one peasant evokes total dismissal of the dynasty.”⁶ Ahab’s final refusal to heed the words of a prophet of Yahweh (Micaiah) leads to his death by a random arrow in battle against the Arameans. The Lord brings about Ahab’s death by sending one of the members of his heavenly council to act as a lying spirit while speaking through the false prophets in persuading the doomed king to go into battle. Ahab’s death and the dogs licking up his blood as it is washed from his chariot brings about the fulfillment of Elijah’s personal word against the king from the previous chapter.

Ahab’s death sets in motion the successive demise of each member of his dynasty. Ahaziah is the next to die, and like Ahab, the death of this ruler is also attributed to the prophetic word. Elijah announces three times that Ahaziah will die from the injuries suffered in a fall at his palace because he sought an oracle of healing from Baal Zebub rather than from Yahweh (2 Kgs 1:4, 6, 16), and the king died in accordance with the prophet’s word (2 Kgs 1:17). The final execution of Elijah’s prophecy of judgment against the house of Ahab comes in 2 Kings 9-10 in the account of Jehu’s military coup and rise to power. The text highlights that Elijah’s prophecy serves as the agent of destruction for the house of Ahab even though the prophet himself is no longer present. The Lord had commissioned Elijah to anoint Jehu as Israel’s new king (1 Kgs 19:17-18), and there are recurring references to Elijah’s prophecy that God would cut off Ahab’s entire family and that dogs would devour Jezebel (2 Kgs 9:7-10, 25-26, 36-37; 10:10-11, 17). When Elijah’s prophecy was first delivered, Jehu had even been providentially present and had heard the word of judgment against Ahab’s family (2 Kgs 9:25-26).⁷ Now as the prophecy comes to its fulfillment, Jehoram and Ahaziah providentially meet up with Jehu at the location of Naboth’s vineyard, the very site that Yahweh had designated as the place where Ahab’s family would meet its end (2 Kgs 9:21). Elijah’s prophecy of the overthrow of the house of Ahab is so powerful that it is set in motion not by Elisha but by an anonymous נְעָרִים from the “sons of the prophets” who anoints Jehu as king of Israel (cf. 2 Kgs 9:1-11).⁸

⁵ For the historical debate over whether the “king of Israel” in 1 Kings 20 and 22 is in fact Ahab, see Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 472-73. Some suggest that a redactor has attached later stories concerning Jehoahaz and Joash to Ahab. Such historical issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶Walter Brueggemann *1 and 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 261.

⁷The repetition of the root שָׁגַע in 9:11, 20 also highlights that Jehu’s actions are the fulfillment of the prophetic word. When the young prophet comes to secretly anoint Jehu as king, the other officers want to know why this “madman” (הַמְּשָׁעֵט) has come to see Jehu. Later, when Jehu is driving his chariot to assassinate Jehoram, a watchman observes that Jehu drives his chariot “recklessly” (or, “like a madman,” שָׁגַעוֹן).

⁸Elisha commands the prophet to anoint Jehu (9:3), and the prophet adds to Elisha’s instructions by also charging Jehu to wipe out the family of Ahab (9:7-10). Some commentators view the young man as speaking

Jehu carries out the massacre of the house of Ahab and the worshippers of Baal with systematic effectiveness, and the narrative suggests that Jehu is a man who enjoys his work. The three acts of killing in chapter 9 where Jehu wipes out the dynasty of Ahab correspond to three further episodes of killing in chapter 10:

- A Jehu kills King Jehoram of Israel (9:16-26)
- B Jehu kills King Ahaziah of Judah (9:17-29)
- C Jehu has Jezebel (the devoted Baal worshipper) killed (9:30-37)
- A' Jehu massacres Ahab's kin (10:1-11)
- B' Jehu massacres the relatives of King Ahaziah (10:12-14)
- C' Jehu massacres the worshippers of Baal (10:15-28)⁹

In chapter 9, servants and members of the house of Ahab repeatedly ask the question, “Is all **שְׁלוֹם**?” (cf. 9:11, 17, 19, 22, 31) when it is obvious that they are about to experience anything but **שְׁלוֹם**. Jehu's response “How can there be **שְׁלוֹם**?” in light of Jezebel's idolatry (9:22) reflects that this family is receiving just retribution for the evil they have perpetrated in Israel. The doom of Ahab's family is also reflected in how quickly close associates of the family become a part of Jehu's conspiracy. The soldiers sent out to intercept Jehu fall in line with him as he furiously drives to Jezreel to assassinate Jehoram (9:17-20). The eunuchs in the palace throw Jezebel out of the window (9:32-33). The officials in Jezreel and even the guardians given the responsibility of protecting Ahab's younger sons carry out the slaughter of Ahab's family in Samaria (10:5-7). In the end, even those closest to the relatives of Ahab violently repudiate their right to rule in Israel.

The narrative highlights Jehu's violence against the house of Ahab with “carnivalesque” language that involves parody, grotesque imagery, and scatological humor.¹⁰ The narrator is as unsympathetic to the violence against Ahab's house as Jehu himself. When Jehu kills Jehoram, the narrator “with relish reports in forensic style the exact path of the arrow as it brings Jehoram down in his chariot” (9:24).¹¹ The text becomes particularly graphic in recounting the details of Jezebel's death. Brueggemann comments that “the narrator warms to the subject and leads the reader into every savored detail concerning the queen who we are to despise.”¹² References to Elijah's specific prophecy against Jezebel frame the recounting of Jehu's acts of killing in chapter 9 (cf. 9:9, 36-37). When Jezebel is thrown from the window, her body slams to the pavement below with blood spattering the palace walls. Jehu tramples her body with his chariot and he then goes into the palace to eat and drink while Jezebel's body becomes a meal for the dogs below. Jezebel's blood spattering “against the wall” in verse 33 recalls the reference to the

presumptively, but it seems more that his words indicate the familiarity of Yahweh's prophets with Elijah's earlier prophecy against the house of Ahab.

⁹Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical, 2000), 65-66.

¹⁰Francisco O. García-Treto, “The Fall of the House: A Carnivalesque Reading of 2 Kings 9 and 10,” *JSOT* 46 (1990): 47-65.

¹¹Cohn, *2 Kings*, 68.

¹²Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 387.

males in Ahab's house who urinate "against the wall" in verse 8, and after her body is consumed by the dogs, Jezebel will become like manure in the field that had belonged to Naboth (v. 37). Jezebel's reign of terror ends with the formidable queen becoming nothing more than urine and feces. The execution of the prophet's sentence of death is serious business.

The violence continues to escalate in chapter 10 as it is now directed against groups rather than individuals—the 70 sons of Ahab in addition to other kin, officials, friends, and priests that are loyal to Ahab in Jezreel (vv. 1-11), the 42 relatives of Ahaziah and the members of Ahab's family that remain in Samaria (vv. 12-17), and the prophets, priests, and worshippers devoted to Baal (vv. 18-27). When the officials and Ahab's family guardians bring the severed heads of Ahab's seventy sons to Jehu, he has them stacked in two piles outside the city gate of Jezreel.¹³ Jehu's killing culminates with the extermination of the worshippers of Baal. The destruction of the house of Baal is necessary because it is this god who has provided divine legitimacy to the house of Ahab. Jehu's execution of the devotees of Baal is the counterpart and completion of Elijah's killing of the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18. Elijah "slaughtered/sacrificed" (שחט) the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:40), and Jehu invites the worshippers of Baal to a "great sacrifice" (זבח ברול) (2 Kgs 10:19). Elijah's contest involved the prophets of Baal presenting an offering to their god (1 Kgs 18:22-24); Jehu himself presents sacrifices and offerings as part of his ruse to entrap the worshippers of Baal (2 Kgs 11:19-25). After Jehu presents the sacrifices to Baal, the worshippers themselves become the sacrifice.¹⁴ The reference to the house of Baal becoming a "latrine" (v. 27) parallels the scatological imagery used with reference to the death of Jezebel in the preceding chapter.

When assessing the character of Jehu, his violence and brutality need to be understood at two levels. At one level, Yahweh praises Jehu for carrying out his desires against the house of Ahab and rewards him with the promise that his dynasty will endure for four generations (2 Kgs 10:30). The violence inflicted on Ahab's family is fitting punishment for their horrible crimes. In Yahweh's covenant with Israel, idolatry is a capital offense, and Jehu's execution of the devotees of Baal is the moral equivalent of Elijah's slaughter of the prophets of Baal at Carmel. There is no explicit condemnation of Jehu's killings within the narrative. Hobbs comments, "The writer of 2 Kings was not concerned to pass judgments of a political or sociological nature on the events he is describing. His motivations are rather found in the presentation of the history he records as the outworking of the will of Yahweh."¹⁵ From the covenantal perspective of

¹³T. R. Hobbs (2 Kings, WBC 13 [Waco, Tx: Word, 1985], 127) notes that Assyrian royal records portray Esarhaddon and Shalmeneser III carrying out similar practices. Jehu is perfectly comfortable with the most brutal demonstrations of his military might.

¹⁴There is also irony in the warning in 10:19 that anyone not coming to the service for Baal will be put to death when that is in reality what will happen to those who participate in this ceremony.

¹⁵Hobbs, 2 Kings, 119.

Kings, the events portrayed in connection with the demise of Ahab's family "are not the results of historical accidents, but are expressions of the judgment of God upon unfaithfulness."¹⁶

At another level, the excessiveness of Jehu's actions provides its own condemnation. Hobbs writes that Jehu's behavior is "characterized by a brutality that goes beyond reason and a religious zeal which in its results has little to commend it."¹⁷ Cohn concurs with this assessment of Jehu's actions:

. . . the narrator refrains from judging Jehu directly, but his actions and words project a figure increasingly taken up by his own historical role. While in the assassination of Jehoram, Jehu simply enacted the oracle given to him, in the murder of Jezebel he displays both viciousness, and in his scatological interpretation of her remains, sick perversity. Furthermore, the writer's spotlight on Jehu's underhanded strategy with the guardians of Ahab's descendants and his terroristic use of their severed heads illuminates a man who relishes the vengeance he feels called upon to wreak. And his extension of the bloodbath beyond the house of Ahab . . . takes his actions even beyond his own elaborations of Elijah's prophecy.¹⁸

Though again there is no explicit condemnation of Jehu, his murder of King Ahaziah of Judah appears to have been especially excessive and without divine sanction. House notes, "The prophecies of Elijah and Elisha say nothing about killing *David's* descendants."¹⁹ Jehu then proceeds to slaughter the relatives of Ahaziah that have come north to greet the royal family "without any real reason for doing so."²⁰ Jehu perhaps fears that these relatives of Ahaziah have designs on the throne in Israel, but "even this possibility stretches the limits of credibility."²¹

The Deliverance of Elijah and Elisha from Death

Brueggemann observes, "In our common life, the king almost always defeats the prophet."²² Such is not the case, however, in the conflict between Elijah and the house of Ahab. The prophetic word brings death to Ahab's family, but Jezebel's oath by her gods to put Elijah to

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Cohn, *2 Kings*, 72-73

¹⁹Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 293.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid. House suggests that this violence against the house of David is what leads to the condemnation of Jehu's actions at Jezreel in Hosea 1:4-5. A better possibility is that Hosea 1:4 is simply stating that the violence that characterized the beginning of Jehu's reign will also bring an end to the dynasty of Jehu. The irony is that the new dynasty is no better than the old and falls under the same sentence of divine judgment. For further discussion of this view, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 338-39; Duane Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 56; Thomas McComiskey, "Hosea," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 1: 20-21; and Gary V. Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 47.

²²Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 291-92.

death proves ineffective. Yahweh, not Baal, is the one who is sovereign over life and death, and it is the word of the prophet of Yahweh that has the power to effect life and death. There is rich irony in the fact that the prophet whom Jezebel threatened to kill and who fled out of fear for his life does not die at all.²³ Elijah's non-death demonstrates the Lord's power to conquer death. The contrasting fate of Elijah and the members of the house of Ahab provides a promise of life for those who follow Yahweh and death for those who are devoted to Baal. Elijah's ascension also appears to serve as a reminder of the ongoing vitality of the prophetic word and points to the continuing ministry of Elisha and the other prophets who will come after Elijah.²⁴ Israel's experience of "life" depends upon its response to this prophetic word.

In very specific ways, the narrator contrasts the end of Elijah with the demise of individual members of the house of Ahab. In 1 Kings 22, Ahab dies after being wounded in his "chariot" while fighting against the Arameans at Ramoth Gilead (vv. 34-35), and the dogs later licked up the king's blood when it was washed from the chariot (v. 38). In Elijah's ascent to heaven, the "fiery chariot" of the heavenly army separates Elijah from Elisha as he makes his upward ascent in the storm (2 Kgs 2:11-12). The connection between the death of Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1 and the translation of Elijah is even more direct. There is the contrast between the king who will not "go down" (רָד) from the bed to which he has "gone up" (עָלָה) (2 Kgs 1:4, 6, 16), and the prophet Elijah who "went up" (עָלָה) to heaven (2:11). Groups of fifty messengers also play an important role in the narratives of 2 Kings 1-2. There are the three delegations of fifty soldiers that Ahaziah sends to retrieve the prophet Elijah and the two groups of fifty prophets who interact with Elijah prior to his ascension into heaven.²⁵ Ahaziah's first two squadrons are destroyed by fire from heaven, a scene that recalls the fire that came down on Mount Carmel and was the impetus for the execution of the prophets of Baal (2 Kgs 1:10-12). These soldiers share Ahaziah's fate because of their lack of respect for Elijah's prophetic authority. In chapter 2, Elijah is like Ahaziah in that there are two groups of fifty prophets who participate in the final episode of the prophet's life (vv. 3, 5). These prophets show honor and respect to Elijah and participate at a distance in Elijah's miraculous transport. The fifty prophets at Jericho later confirm that Yahweh has indeed taken Elijah away. Ahaziah's messengers are associated with death, and Elijah's messengers with life. The heavenly fire that destroyed Ahaziah's messengers serves as an instrument of Elijah's deliverance from death (2 Kgs 2:11).

The account of Jezebel's death that comes later in 2 Kings 9 particularly contrasts the fate of the queen with what happens to Elijah at the end of his life.²⁶ Unlike Elijah's upward ascent into

²³ House, *I, 2 Kings*, 258.

²⁴ Deut 18:18 had promised that Yahweh would raise up a prophet like Moses for the people of Israel (a promise of a collective series of prophets who would continue Moses' ministry of revealing the word of Yahweh to the people). The fact that Elijah does not experience death indicates that his ministry even transcends that of Moses in that Moses died and was buried by God (cf. Deut 34:5-6). See House, *I, 2 Kings*, 258.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 294.

²⁶ See David M. Hoffeditz and Gary E. Yates, "Femme Fatale Redux: Intertextual Connection to the Elijah/Jezebel Narratives in Mark 6:14-29," *BBR* 15 (2005): 217.

heaven, Jezebel is thrown down to her death (2 Kgs 9:33). Unlike the chariot and horses of fire that escort Elijah to heaven, Jehu's chariot tramples over Jezebel's body (2 Kgs 9:33). The sons of the prophets who search for Elijah are unable to "find" (אָפֵּן) him because the prophet has gone up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:16-18); the attendants who seek to recover the corpse of Jezebel are unable to "find" (אָפֵּן) her because the dogs have already consumed her body (2 Kgs 9:35).

The life-and-death struggle between the prophet and the house of Ahab continues with the ministry of Elisha. Like Jezebel, King Jehoram issues an oath during the siege of Samaria that Elisha will be dead by the end of the day (2 Kgs 6:31). His oath proves to be as ineffective as that of Jezebel and "vanishes like a child's temper tantrum."²⁷ Elisha will set in motion the events that result in the fulfillment of Elijah's earlier prophecy of the destruction of Ahab's house when he sends the anonymous prophet to anoint Jehu as the king of Israel (2 Kgs 9:1). The prophet Elisha outlives and outlasts the house of Ahab as testimony to the power of the prophetic word. While Elisha will not avoid physical death in the same way as Elijah, there is evidence of his prophetic power over death. On his deathbed in 2 Kings 13, Elisha orders and rebukes the king of Israel and provides one more promise of victory for Israel over its enemies. The prophet's strength contrasts with the impotence of King Ahaziah in his earlier deathbed scene in 2 Kings 1. The strange episode in 2 Kings 13:20-21 where a dead man comes back to life after coming in contact with Elisha's bones demonstrates that "even in death, the presence of Elisha makes a difference."²⁸ Unlike the house of Ahab, the prophet's power and voice cannot be stilled or silenced by death.

Yahweh's Provision of Life through the Prophets

The triumph of Elijah and Elisha in their life-and-death struggle with the house of Ahab is consistent with the larger theme in the Elijah-Elisha narratives that Yahweh offers and provides life for those who trust and obey him. The prophets themselves are the channels of that blessing. There is the real possibility and potential for the nation of Israel to enjoy the blessing of life. At Carmel, the people turn from their wavering between Yahweh and Baal and acknowledge that Yahweh is truly their God. However, Israel's experience of the blessings of life is partial at best. Military victories and other blessings are mingled with crushing defeats and judgments of increasing severity. Israel never fully turns away from its apostasy, and partial obedience can at best result in partial blessing. In the Mosaic covenant, the curses and blessings are national in scope, but the Elijah-Elisha narratives highlight in a new way how faithful individuals enjoy the covenant blessings even when the Lord is bringing judgment on the nation as a whole. The contrast between Yahweh's blessing of faithful individuals and judgment of the nation as a

²⁷Robert LaBarbera, "The Man of War and the Man of God: Social Satire in 2 Kings 6:8-7:20," *CBQ* 46 (1984): 647.

²⁸Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 450.

whole is a dominant theme in the Elijah-Elisha narratives. The fact that the Elijah-Elisha narratives focus on foreigners as the recipients of the blessings of life (the Zerephath widow in 1 Kgs 17 and Naamaan in 2 Kgs 5) highlights further how Yahweh bypasses national blessing of Israel with the blessing of faithful individuals who are not even Israelites.

Life and the Ministry of Elijah

The provision of life for the faithful is the dominant theme in 1 Kings 17-19 as Yahweh overcomes increasingly severe threats of death facing those who obey and trust in him in the context of Israel's national apostasy.²⁹ In 1 Kings 17, Yahweh first overcomes the threat of death facing the prophet Elijah. He sends Elijah away from Ahab to the brook Cherith (v. 3), but there is then the very real possibility that the prophet will die from starvation because of the drought he has announced against Israel. Yahweh intervenes to provide food from two highly unexpected sources. Yahweh first commands the ravens to bring food to Elijah at the brook (vv. 4-6). When the brook dries up and the threat of death is again present, Yahweh sends Elijah to Zerephath and commands a widow to provide food for the prophet (v. 8).³⁰ The possibility of death is now even greater because Yahweh must provide nourishment for the starving widow and her son in addition to the prophet. The woman confesses that Yahweh is a living God (v. 12), but she sees no practical benefit for herself in that confession and lacks the faith to believe that Yahweh can provide for her when Elijah initially asks her for food. After Elijah's reassurance to not be afraid and the promise that her flour and oil will not run out, the woman feeds the prophet and finds his promise to be true (vv. 13-16). The Lord's miraculous supply of food demonstrates his power to provide and sustain life.

These events are only the prelude to death's greatest challenge in chapter 17—the death of the widow's son. Hauser writes, “Death no longer threatens; it acts presumptively, seizing the widow's son.”³¹ Even in this surprising scene of death, the narrative highlights Yahweh's control over life and death. The twofold repetition of the verb מוֹת (in the *hiphil* stem) in verses 18 and 20 views the Lord as directly responsible for the boy's death. The woman states that Elijah has “killed” the boy as punishment for her sin, and Elijah in turn accuses the Lord of “causing the boy to die.” The two offsetting uses of the root חַיָּה in verses 22-23 highlight the transformation when Yahweh brings the boy back to life. The connection of Elijah's “your son lives” in verse 23 to the earlier “as Yahweh lives” in verses 1 and 12 also make the point “that

²⁹ For development of this theme, see Alan J. Hauser, “Yahweh Versus Death: The Real Struggle in 1 Kings 17-19,” in *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, ed. A. J. Hauser and R. Gregory, Bible and Literature, 19, JSOTSup 85 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 9-89.

³⁰ The raven and widow are surprising sources of sustenance because both are said elsewhere themselves to be in need of God's special kindness and provision (for the widow, cf. Deut 10:18; Pss 68:5; 146:9; for the ravens, cf. Job 38:41; Ps 147:9). Additionally, the raven is a bird of prey and unclean (cf. Isa 34:11; Prov 30:17). Yahweh is uniquely resourceful in how he provides the blessing of life. See Jopie Siebert-Hommes, “The Widow of Zarephath and the Great Woman of Shunem,” in *On Reading Prophetic Texts: gender-specific and related studies in memory of Fokkelein Van Dijk-Hemmes*, ed. B. Becking and M. Kijstra (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 233-34.

³¹ Hauser, “Yahweh Versus Death,” 19.

the boy lives because Yahweh lives.”³² All in all, the four challenges by death in chapter 17 “are answered by four life-giving responses from Yahweh.”³³

The fact that the narrative in chapter 17 focuses on how the Lord bestows life on a non-Israelite outside the land of Israel speaks of how Israel as a nation has forfeited the covenant blessing of life. An important feature of 1 Kings 16-18 is that the widow of Zarephath “is sketched in striking contrast to the other Sidonian woman in the Elijah cycle: Jezebel.”³⁴ The Israelite queen is devoted to Baal, while the widow puts her trust in Yahweh. Jezebel feeds the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19) but murders the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:4, 13). The widow feeds and keeps alive the prophet of Yahweh.³⁵ As a result of their choices, there is also a contrast in what happens to the sons of these two women. After the widow’s boy died, Elijah “brought him up” (עלה) to the “upper room” (עליה), placed him on a “bed” (מטה), and prayed for Yahweh to restore the boy to life (1 Kgs 17:19-21). When the boy was restored to life, the prophet “brought him down” (ירד) to his mother (1 Kgs 17:23). When Jezebel’s son, Ahaziah, was mortally ill after falling through an “upper room” (עליה) (2 Kgs 1:2), Elijah announced that the king would die and that he would not “come down” (ירד) from the “bed” (מטה) to which he had “gone up” (עלה).³⁶

The threat of death moves to a more national level for Israel in chapter 18. The drought and resulting famine are so severe that they threaten all of the land. At the beginning of this chapter, death especially closes in on those who are loyal followers of Yahweh. Jezebel has cut off the prophets of Yahweh, and Obadiah, the official of Ahab who has protected Yahweh’s prophets, fears that his announcement of Elijah’s arrival to Ahab will result in his death when he returns with the king and Elijah is no longer present (vv. 7-15).³⁷ Cohn argues that Obadiah’s name has symbolic value and that the threat to this “servant of Yahweh” “is meant to represent the peril of any Yahwist in Ahab’s kingdom.”³⁸ Like the widow in the preceding chapter, Obadiah balks at obeying the prophet out of fear for his life. Also, like the widow, Obadiah ultimately acts on the assurances of the prophet, and his life is preserved.

Ultimately, it is the followers of Baal who experience death in 1 Kings 18 as a result of the contest on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal appear to be secure because they enjoy royal protection and greatly outnumber Elijah. However, the defeat of Baal by Yahweh results in the

³²Ibid., 20.

³³Ibid., 21.

³⁴Siebert-Hommes, “The Widow of Zarephath,” 238.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid. Siebert-Hommes also notes how the contrast between the widow and Jezebel brings out the irony of the widow’s statement in 1 Kgs 17:18 that her son has died because the Lord is punishing her for her sins. In fact, it is the son of Jezebel who will die because of the sins of his mother.

³⁷The threefold repetition of the verb *הרג* in 18:12-14 highlights the severity of the threat against Obadiah. His impending “murder” at the hands of Ahab (vv. 12, 14) is linked to Jezebel’s previous “murder” of the prophets of Yahweh (v. 13).

³⁸Robert L. Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 338-39.

slaughter of the prophets of Baal, and these false prophets die because Baal himself is dead and unresponsive to their cries. The contest emphatically demonstrates the difference between Yahweh as a god of life and Baal as a god of death.

There is a significant reversal in the movement from Yahweh's victories over death in chapters 17-18 to Elijah's fear and flight in response to Jezebel's threat in chapter 19. Elijah runs in triumph ahead of the chariot of Ahab in 18:41-46, but now he runs away from Israel in fear because the threat of death has reasserted itself in a very real and personal way. The Lord has returned the נִפְּשׁ of the widow's dead son (1 Kgs 17:21-22), but now the prophet fears for his own נִפְּשׁ (1 Kgs 19:2).³⁹ Up to this point, Elijah has complied with every command of Yahweh without the slightest hesitation or fear (cf. 1 Kgs 17:2, 9; 18:1), but the oath of Jezebel changes his disposition. The prophet who has challenged the faith of the widow and Obadiah in the face of death now has his own crisis of faith. Elijah's request for Yahweh to take away his life is ironic at two levels. First, if Elijah had really wanted to lose his life, then Jezebel would have been happy to have facilitated his request. Second, the greater irony is that Elijah is asking "Yahweh to forsake the role of sustainer for that of killer."⁴⁰

The narrative in 1 Kings 19 highlights the contrast between the weakness of the prophet and Yahweh's continued sovereignty over life and death. Gregory writes that in this account, "Elijah is seen as he really is; he is a prophet plagued by his own ego and exaggerated importance."⁴¹ Up to this point, Yahweh has preserved life through the agency of Elijah; now he will preserve life in spite of the prophet. Yahweh will also ultimately triumph over the apostasy of the house of Ahab.

The Lord first of all acts to preserve Elijah's life. Jezebel's "messenger" (מִלְאָךְ) of death (v. 2) is replaced by Yahweh's "messenger" (מִלְאָךְ) of life, with the provision of food and drink functioning again as the specific means of countering death (vv. 5-7). The provision of food in a barren place recalls the feeding of Elijah by the ravens at the brook, and the "cake" (עֵגֶה)—cf. 1 Kgs 17:13) and "jug" (צִפְחָה)—cf. 1 Kgs 17:14, 16) recall the supply of flour and oil at Zerephath. However, the prophet seems oblivious to Yahweh's life-sustaining power as he "sleeps" both before and after the meal that the Lord has provided. Hauser explains that "Elijah's repeated inclination to sleep indicates that death has gained control of him . . . and has turned him from an active, enthusiastic supporter of Yahweh into a passive, fearful defeatist."⁴² Instead of returning to Israel and his prophetic calling, Elijah journeys to Horeb on his own initiative and expresses his continuing fear of death with the exaggerated claim that he alone

³⁹The sevenfold repetition of נִפְּשׁ in 1 Kgs 19 demonstrates its significance in this chapter (cf. vv. 2[2], 3, 4[2], 10, 14).

⁴⁰Russell Gregory, "Irony and the Unmasking of Elijah," in *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, 110.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 102.

⁴²Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 65. Note how the sleep of Baal in 1 Kgs 18:27 suggests that the god is actually dead.

remains faithful to the Lord (vv. 8-10).⁴³ At Horeb, the Lord counters Elijah's fear and resignation with his theophanic presence, not just in the dramatic power of the wind, earthquake and fire but most dramatically in "a soft whisper" (NET Bible) (vv. 11-13). As Cohn explains, this small voice "which Yahweh vouchsafes to Elijah alone" serves to provide divine affirmation of Elijah and to repudiate the prophet's resignation of his calling.⁴⁴ However, Elijah remains oblivious and repeats the lament that he stands alone since all of the other prophets of Yahweh have been put to death (v. 14).

More than just fearing for his own life, Elijah believes that his calling is hopeless and that the covenantal breach between Yahweh and Israel is beyond repair. Twice he states to the Lord, "The Israelites have rejected your covenant" (vv. 10, 14). Through the contest on Mount Carmel, it appeared that Israel had experienced a great national conversion. Before the contest, the people remained silent when Elijah had asked them why they wavered between Yahweh and Baal (1 Kgs 18:21), but after the fire came from heaven, the people fell on their faces and acknowledged that Yahweh was God (1 Kgs 18:39). The people seized the prophets of Baal and put them to death. The covenant curse of "no rain" (1 Kgs 17:1) was lifted as Yahweh sent showers upon the land (1 Kgs 18:1, 41-45).

After these hopeful events, Jezebel's threat restores the status quo and plunges the prophet into despair. The showdown on Mount Carmel has not dealt a fatal blow to apostasy and Baal worship in the land of Israel. As Walsh explains, Elijah's problem is that "he sees no middle ground between defeat and total victory."⁴⁵ In the events at Mount Carmel and later at Horeb, Elijah appears as a second Moses. Elijah's gathering of Israel at Carmel (1 Kgs 18:19) recalls Moses gathering the people at Sinai (Exod 19:17), and Elijah repairs the altar with twelve stones, just as Moses had built an altar with twelve pillars (Exod 24:24). The killing of the prophets of Baal and the subsequent theophany to Elijah at Horeb recall the events of Exodus 32-33 where the Levites had put to death the worshippers of the golden calf (Exod 32:27) and Yahweh had personally appeared to Moses after a time of national apostasy (Exod 33:21-23). Elijah was in "the cave" (of Moses) when Yahweh "passed by" (עבר), and Yahweh had "passed by" (עבר) Moses when he was in a cleft of the rock at Sinai. Both Moses and Elijah observed the theophanic elements of wind, earthquake, and fire at Sinai (cf. 1 Kgs 19:9-11; Exod 19:16-20; 20:18).⁴⁶ With Elijah emerging as a new Moses, there appears to be the real possibility of Israel experiencing covenant renewal. However, even this "prophet like Moses" is not going to turn Israel from its apostasy. The continuing apostasy of Jezebel stands in the way of this renewal,

⁴³Walsh (*I Kings*, 272) notes that Yahweh's question "What are you doing here?" in v. 9 reflects that he expected the prophet to be elsewhere. The messenger had strengthened Elijah to return home, but Elijah had chosen instead to go to Horeb. The prophet's journey to Horeb "therefore embodies a continuing refusal to take up once again his prophetic duties."

⁴⁴Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," 342.

⁴⁵Ibid., 261.

⁴⁶For these features and a further development of the Moses typology in the Elijah narratives from 1 Kgs 17-19, see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 39-45; and Walsh, *I Kings*, 284-89.

and the narratives detailing Ahab's defiance of the prophetic word in 1 Kings 20-22 in effect erase any of the positive benefits of the conversion of Israel at Carmel. Israel will not turn away from death in order to experience life. Even the prophet Elijah himself has failed miserably. As Walsh notes, the Moses typology in 1 Kings 19 is designed to highlight more the differences between Moses and Elijah than their similarities.⁴⁷

Elijah's despair over the prevalence of death in Israel is understandable, but Yahweh's words to the prophet correct Elijah's misperception that his calling is to a lost cause. Yahweh remains sovereign over life and death, even if not in the manner that is expected or desired by the prophet. The vindication of Yahweh at Carmel is not the final victory that Elijah had envisioned, but merely one episode in a struggle that will play itself out beyond the time of Elijah. Israel's continuing apostasy means that the nation will only enjoy the covenant blessing of life in limited ways.

In announcing his intentions for the future, Yahweh stresses more how he will punish Israel with death than how he will bless with life. Jehu's coup will bring an end to the dynasty of Ahab, and Hazael's military actions along with Elisha's prophetic word will inflict death upon apostate Israel (1 Kgs 19:15-17). While imposing death on the nation at large, Yahweh also promises that he will preserve a faithful remnant in Israel (1 Kgs 19:18). In 1 Kings 19, Yahweh sustains the life of Elijah, even when the prophet's faith is sorely lacking.⁴⁸ The faithful experience life but only in the context of national judgment and death. In spite of this note of failure, Yahweh's work will continue with the succession from Elijah to Elisha.⁴⁹

Life and the Ministry of Elisha

Life and death continue to be major motifs in the Elisha narratives. As with Elijah, Elisha's message and miracles demonstrate that he is "a life-bringer" and "a powerful force for life with a capacity to transform circumstances of death."⁵⁰ Brueggemann provides this summarizing perspective on the life of Elisha:

⁴⁷Walsh, *1 Kings*, 288.

⁴⁸John W. Olley ("YHWH and His Zealous Prophet; the Presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings," *JSOT* 80 [1998], 25-51) and P. J. Kisling (*Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha*, JSOTSup 224 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 96-148) argue for a more nuanced portrait of Elijah in Kings as a whole, in which the prophet acts independently of Yahweh or arrogates authority by asserting his word as the word of Yahweh. Despite their careful analysis, these works seem to miss the point of the authority that is invested in the person and words of Elijah and that his forceful and presumptive personality is an appropriate response to the apostasy of the house of Ahab. The point of 1 Kgs 19 is that even a prophet like Elijah cannot ultimately turn the tide of apostasy in Israel.

⁴⁹In the brief account of the call of Elisha in 19:19-21, his slaughter of the oxen seems to look back to Elijah's sacrifice on Carmel (cf. 1 Kgs 18:33-38) and his provision of food to the people looks ahead to Elijah's future miracles of providing food for Israel. In spite of Yahweh carrying out his death sentence on apostate Israel, this scene returns the story to its focus on Yahweh's provision of life through the prophets.

⁵⁰Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 432.

Thus, he is the one who turned deathly water whole (2:19-22), who gave life to the besieged widow (4:1-7), who rescued the pot of food from death (4:38-41), who fed the hungry (4:42-44), who healed the foreign leper (5:14), who recovered a lost ax head (6:1-7), who turned war to feast (6:7-23), who provisionally ended famine (7:1), and who turned out the deathly dynasty of Omri (9:1-37). Quintessentially, he is the one who raised the son of the Shunammite woman from death to life (4:32-37), a wonder subsequently reckoned as a “great thing” in Israel (8:4-5).⁵¹

The powerful acts recounted in the more expanded account of Elisha’s ministry are in fact a replication of the mighty works of Elijah in the more condensed record of his prophetic vocation. Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kgs 2:9), and Levine comments, “Elisha’s miracles not only double Elijah’s but seem to parallel and multiply them in their themes, elements, and language.”⁵² Cohn also notes specific parallels between the Elijah and Elisha stories, “Both prophets feed widows (1 Kgs 17:8-16; 2 Kgs 4:1-7), resuscitate dead boys (1 Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:8-37), and send oracles to mortally ill kings.”⁵³ Cohn further develops how the Elisha stories echo the Elijah stories in both theme and sequence:⁵⁴

Elijah cycle—1 Kings	Elisha cycle—2 Kings
17:2-6 Elijah drinks from a wadi in a time of drought	3:9-20 Israel drinks from a wadi in a time of drought
17:8-16 Elijah multiplies oil and grain for a widow	4:1-7 Elisha multiplies oil for a widow
17:17-24 Elijah resuscitates boy	4:8-37 Elisha resuscitates boy
18:20-39 Famine and the true God; miracle precipitates conversion	5:1-27 Leprosy and the true God; miracle precipitates conversion
19:1-3 Pursuit of Elijah; oath by pursuer	6:8-14, 31-32 Pursuit of Elisha; oath by pursuer
21:1-29 False witness denies man his land by royal directive	8:1-6 True witness rewards woman her land by royal directive
2 Kgs 1:1-18 Elijah sends oracle to mortally ill king	8:7-15 Elisha sends oracle to mortally ill king

Philip Satterthwaite argues that the literary coherence of 2 Kings 2-8 revolves around the contrast between the impact of Elisha’s life-giving miracles on his faithful followers versus their impact on Israel as a whole.⁵⁵ In 2 Kings 2, the dividing of the Jordan by both Elijah and Elisha,

⁵¹Ibid., 432-33.

⁵²Nachman Levine, “Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha,” *JSOT* 85 (1999): 25.

⁵³Cohn, *2 Kings*, 92.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵See Philip E. Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2-8,” *Tyn Bul* 49 (1998): 1-28. The national significance of Elisha’s miracles is also seen in that unlike Elijah, his miracles all take

Elisha's succession to complete the unfinished work of Elijah, and Elisha's healing of the waters at Jericho suggest an exodus-conquest typology and an opportunity for Israel's national renewal.⁵⁶ Elisha's healing of Jericho's water supply provides life and also reverses Joshua's ancient curse against the city (2 Kgs 2:19-22; cf. Josh 6:26). However, this incident is followed by an event where a curse from Elisha's own lips brings death. Elisha calls down a curse on a group of youths who taunt him and then are mauled by two she-bears (2:23-25).⁵⁷ The contrast of Elisha sustaining life in miraculous ways for the faithful, while announcing death on those who are apostate, will continue throughout his ministry. Moving from the Elijah to the Elisha narratives, there is also a distancing between Yahweh and Israel in that Elisha never addresses the people of Israel as a whole (contrast Elijah at Mount Carmel) and never calls upon the people or king of Israel to change their ways.⁵⁸

The first incident involving Elisha's interaction with the king of Israel (Jehoram) in 2 Kings 3 reflects that Yahweh offers life and blessing to Israel as a nation but also that this potential blessing is largely unrealized. There is a small glimmer of hope at the beginning of chapter 3 in that while Jehoram does what is evil in the eyes of the Lord, his apostasy is not as extensive as that of Ahab and Jezebel (3:2-3). Brueggemann describes this king as "a not-so-bad Omride."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the hostility between Jehoram and Elisha becomes evident when the king forms an alliance with the kings of Judah and Edom in an attempt to bring Moab back under Israelite control. The king of Israel fails to inquire of the Lord before going into battle against the Moabites but then blames the Lord for the impending demise of his coalition (cf. 3:13). When Jehoram and his allies belatedly inquire of Elisha, the prophet encourages the king to go to the

place within the land of Israel (Jericho, Shumen, Gikal, and Baal-shalishah). See Olley, "YHWH and His Zealous Prophet," 32.

⁵⁶Allison, *The New Moses*, 42.

⁵⁷For a discussion of how to assess this difficult incident from an ethical perspective, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 199-209. Taken in isolation, this episode would suggest a vindictive and irrational response on the part of Yahweh and his prophet to playful kidding by some young boys. However, the larger context indicates that the taunts of the youths are a reflection of Israel's disrespectful unbelief toward the prophetic word that has plunged the nation into apostasy. The references to Elisha as a "bald man," rather than merely mocking his physical appearance, perhaps suggest that he is an unworthy successor to Elijah, who was a "hairy man" (2 Kgs 1:8). By calling for Elisha to "go up" (עלה), the boys are sarcastically urging Elisha to ascend up to heaven like Elijah had done and perhaps calling into question the truthfulness of Elisha's version of Elijah's departure (cf. 2 Kgs 2:11). This incident takes place outside of Bethel, which was the site of Jeroboam's idolatrous cult that had been opposed by Yahweh's true prophets. This incident at the beginning of Elisha's ministry parallels the disrespect shown to Elijah by the messengers of Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1:9-12. Two of the king's officers command Elijah to "come down" in the same way that the youths now command the prophet to "go up" (cf. 2 Kgs 1:9, 12). Just as the officers were destroyed by fire, the boys are deserving of a similar judgment. The verb "to jeer" (צלק) used for the taunting of the youths suggests scornful mocking rather than playful jesting (cf. the use of this root in Jer 20:8; Ezek 22:4-5; Ps 79:4). Chisholm (p. 207) concludes: "The attack on the children, while difficult for the Western mind to justify makes sense when understood within the framework of ancient Israelite concepts of corporate responsibility and guilt, where divine punishment could and did sometimes target a sinner's offspring." The fathers' sin of rejecting the prophetic word is visited upon their children as they imitate their fathers' behavior and suffer the consequences (cf. Exod 34:7).

⁵⁸Siebert-Hommes, "The Widow of Zarephath," 248.

⁵⁹Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 305.

gods of his family and states that the godly Jehoshaphat's involvement in the alliance is the only reason he bothers to provide an oracle (3:14). The first surprise element in the narrative of 2 Kings 3 is that Elisha promises that Yahweh will provide water for Jehoram's armies⁶⁰ and that his coalition will enjoy complete and total victory over the Moabites (3:17-19). Despite Jehoram's disobedience and the overall apostasy of the house of Ahab, Yahweh is still committed to providing life for Israel. However, the second surprise element after Elisha's promise of victory is that the campaign against Moab ends unsuccessfully with Israel's retreat following an outbreak of "wrath" (רָצַח) when the king of Moab sacrifices his son on a city wall (3:26-27).

After surveying the various solutions to the problem of Elijah's "unfulfilled" prophecy against Moab in 2 Kings 3, Chisholm concludes that the prophecy of total victory was unrealized because of Jehoram's failure to fully carry out the prophet's words.⁶¹ Other approaches have viewed Elisha as practicing deception or only speaking partial truth in luring the apostate king of Israel into defeat, pointing to the exchange between Ahab and Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 as a parallel.⁶² There is clearly the possibility that Yahweh may harden the heart (as he does with Pharaoh) or deceive in response to rejection of previous revelation, and Elisha himself gives a deceptive message for the Aramean Hazael to deliver to Ben-Hadad (cf. 2 Kgs 8:10, 14).⁶³ However, God's potential deception through the word of the prophet in 2 Kings 3 is not a precise parallel to 1 Kings 22. In 1 Kings 22, Micaiah speaks a message to Ahab concerning Israel's success in battle that "is an outright lie."⁶⁴ Even Ahab recognizes that Micaiah is speaking facetiously and/or not delivering his intended oracle. Micaiah then delivers the "true" oracle, announcing that Israel will be defeated and that Ahab will be killed in battle. The real deception in this passage comes from Ahab's prophets who promise victory under the influence of the lying spirit sent out from the Lord himself. Yahweh clearly deceives Ahab, but the deception is not actually carried out by Micaiah himself.

There is no indication that such deception occurs in 2 Kings 3. Jehoram is apostate but not to the extent of his father Ahab, and Ahab already stands under a prophetic death sentence before the

⁶⁰The miracle of providing water in 3:17 parallels Elisha's miracle involving the healing of Jericho's water in 2Kgs 2:19-22. The way in which the enemies of Israel confuse this water for "blood" in 3:22-23 parallels the contrast between the "blood" of the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:28) and the water/rain associated with Elijah (cf. 1 Kgs 18:33-35, 41-46) in the contest on Carmel.

⁶¹Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Did Chemosh Defeat Yahweh? Israel's Retreat and the 'Failure' of Prophecy in 2 Kings 3," Paper presented at the ETS National Meeting, San Diego, California, November 14, 2007, 8-13.

⁶²See, for example, Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBC (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1995), 183-84; Joe M. Sprinkle, "Deuteronomic 'Just War' (Deut 20, 10-20) and 2 Kings 3:27," *ZABR* 6 (2000): 285-301; and Jesse C. Long, Jr., "Unfulfilled Prophecy or Divine Deception? A Literary Reading of 2 Kings 3, *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7 (2004): 101-17. Cited in Chisholm.

⁶³Chisholm, "Did Chemosh Defeat Yahweh?", 13. For further exploration of the issue of God practicing deception as a punishment for unbelief, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Does God Deceive?" *BSac* 155 (1998): 11-28 and J. J. M. Roberts, "Does God Lie? Divine Deceit as a Theological Problem in Israelite Prophetic Literature, *VTS* 49 (1998): 211-20.

⁶⁴Chisholm, "Did Chemosh Defeat Yahweh?", 13.

incident with Micaiah in 1 Kings 22. Elisha is later truthful with Jehoram in his messages dealing with Israel's conflict with Aram and the deliverance of Samaria in 2 Kings 5-7. One of the reasons that Elisha delivers an oracle to Jehoram in 2 Kings 3 is his regard for Jehoshaphat, and it seems unlikely that the prophet would then purposely deceive the kings of the coalition, though one could certainly question the wisdom of Jehoshaphat's involvement in the first place.

Chisholm notes that Elisha's promise of victory "was aborted only when Israel retreated."⁶⁵ Thus, Israel's partial success was the result of their unbelief and partial obedience to the Lord's directives. While there are striking similarities between 1 Kings 22 and 2 Kings 3, it appears that a better explanation of the "failed" prophecy in 2 Kings 3 is found when comparing this episode to the incidents in 1 Kings 20 and 2 Kings 13. Ahab experiences only a partial victory in 1 Kings 20 because of his failure to execute the *herem* against Ben-Hadad (1 Kgs 20:31-34, 42-43). In 2 Kings 13, Elisha once again promises victory to Israel in battle, but this victory will only be partial because Jehoahaz half-heartedly strikes the ground with the arrows in response to Elisha's promise (2 Kgs 13:18-19). It seems likely that Elisha's prophecy against Moab in 2 Kings 3 is similarly not realized in its totality because the Israelite coalition retreats from battle and fails to fully press the attack against Kir-hareseth, perhaps in fear of repercussions from the god Chemosh or the Moabite army as a result of Mesha's sacrifice of his son (vv. 26-27). A connection between the incidents in 2 Kings 3 and 13 is also suggested by the use of the root קצף in both passages, referring to the "fury" that breaks out against Israel in their assault on Kir-hareseth (3:27) and Elisha's "anger" over Jehoahaz's muted response to the oracle of victory (13:19).⁶⁶ The incident in 2 Kings 3 demonstrates that Israel as a nation is unable to fully experience Yahweh's blessing of life. Konkel observes, "Neither the presence of Jehoshaphat nor the word of Elisha can turn the tide of judgment against Israel. Joram cannot achieve his goal to

⁶⁵Ibid., 13.

⁶⁶The nature of the קצף that breaks out against Israel in 2 Kgs 3:27 is ambiguous in the text and much debated by commentators. The fact that the noun קצף refers to divine wrath or anger in 24 of its 26 OT occurrences (with the exceptions being late passages in Est 1:18 and Ecc 5:17 [16]) suggests that some form of divine wrath is in view here. The connection of this divine wrath to the act of child sacrifice might suggest that Chemosh breaks out in fury against Israel because he is appeased by Mesha's sacrifice, but this idea seems problematic for the theology of Kings, which elsewhere attributes even the military victories of other nations to Yahweh (cf. 2 Kgs 5:1; 17:20; 13:3; 23:26-27; 24:1-4, 10-17). There may be purposeful and rhetorical ambiguity here to suggest both the idea that Israel perceived that Chemosh was fighting against them (cf. 2 Chron 28:23) but that Yahweh's anger over Israel's lack of faith was the real reason that the battle against Moab did not end in success. August Konkel (*1 and 2 Kings*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 397) comments: "It must be inferred that only the wrath of Yahweh, who grants deliverance, can cause army foes to retreat. In Deuteronomistic theology, the cause must be a failure of Israelite faith." The use of the root קצף to refer to human anger in 2 Kgs 5:11 and 13:19 might also suggest that the fury of the Moabite army is in view here. In the OT as a whole, the verb קצף refers to divine anger (or the provoking of divine wrath) 19 times and to human anger 12 times. However, it should be noted that Elisha's anger as Yahweh's prophetic messenger in 2 Kgs 13:19 is likely a reflection of Yahweh's anger at Israel, and divine wrath seems the primary focus in 2 Kgs 3:27 as well. Provan's argument that understanding 3:27 to refer to the Lord's anger requires that one allow for a link between divine action and human sacrifice misses the point (see Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 186). Yahweh's wrath is not the result of the human sacrifice but rather of Israel's apparent fear as a result of this pagan act.

subjugate Mehsa; rather he is forced to retreat precipitately.”⁶⁷ Israel’s hollow victory in 2 Kings 3 cannot ultimately reverse the covenant curse of its loss of territorial gains and military dominance over foreign nations (cf. 2 Kgs 3:4; Deut 4:25-28).⁶⁸

While Israel as a nation is unable to fully experience Yahweh’s blessing of life, such blessing is available to those who constitute a faithful remnant. After the Moabite campaign, the story line in chapter 4 turns to a series of four powerful acts which Elisha performs on behalf of various faithful persons. The first two episodes recount provision of life for an individual family—oil for the widow in 4:1-7⁶⁹ and a son and his later resuscitation from death for the Shunammite woman who has shown hospitality toward the prophet in 4:8-37. The next two miracles deal with a larger group—the sons of the prophets—and there is movement from death to life as Elisha provides food in the context of famine (4:38-44). As Satterthwaite has suggested, the movement from individual to a larger group seems to indicate that Elisha’s followers are increasing and that this faithful remnant might be “the ‘first-fruits’ of a restored Israel.”⁷⁰

The story reverts to Elisha’s dealings with the nation of Israel as a whole in the context of Israel’s conflict with Aram in 2 Kings 5-8. Events begin unfavorably with the Lord giving Aram victory over Israel (2 Kgs 5:1), but the Lord ultimately acts to deliver Israel. Yahweh heals the Aramean general Naaman, leading to a softening of hostilities as Naaman acknowledges the greatness of Israel’s God (2 Kgs 5:1-19). Then, the Aramean soldiers are blinded so that Elijah can deliver them over to the king of Israel, who offers a feast for the enemy that puts an end to Aramean raids into Israel (2 Kgs 6:8-23). The greatest act of all is Yahweh’s deliverance of Samaria from the horrible siege when Aram attacks Israel once again (2 Kgs 7:1-20). However, in this context of national salvation, the response of Jehoram in the midst of the siege of Samaria demonstrates that Israel will not turn away from its apostasy and unbelief. When a woman shares with Jehoram her story of how she has lost her son because of an agreement with another woman to cook and eat their children, the king explodes in a rage and vows by God that he will put Elisha to death that very day (6:31). When the king sends messengers to Elisha, the prophet recognizes the king’s intent and refers to him as a “murderer” (6:32). The king persists in his anger and states that he will no longer wait on Yahweh, which is sadly ironic because Yahweh is about to perform the deliverance that the king so desperately desires. These events and the king’s own words reflect that the king “is now thoroughly estranged from YHWH and Elisha.”⁷¹ Both an officer of the king (7:2) and the king himself (7:12) are skeptical of Yahweh’s ability to deliver Samaria from its enemies, and both will pay for their unbelief with their lives (cf. 7:17-

⁶⁷Konkel, *1 and 2 Kings*, 397.

⁶⁸Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 38-39. As Hobbs notes, the loss of Moabite territory specifically reverses the earlier victories that Yahweh had given to David (cf. 2 Sam 8:2-6).

⁶⁹The widow describes her deceased husband as Elisha’s “servant” and as one who “fears Yahweh” in 2 Kgs 4:1, recalling the description of the faithful Obadiah in 1 Kgs 18: 3, 9, 11, 12 as a one who “fears Yahweh” and is the “servant” of Elijah.

⁷⁰Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives,” 15.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 23.

20; 8:28-29 and 9:24-26). Unbelief and apostasy continue to prevent Israel from experiencing the covenant blessing of life on a national level.

The narrative of Elisha's healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 sends a mixed message concerning both national Israel and the remnant that is associated with the prophet. While the healing of their archenemy clearly benefits Israel, it is ironic that this gift of healing is bestowed on a foreigner who has inflicted great suffering on Israel (cf. Exod 15:26; Deut 7:15). Naaman's confession that Yahweh is the only "god in all the earth" (2 Kgs 5:15) and his recognition of the futility of worshipping the Syrian storm god Rimmon (5:18) contrasts to how the kings of Israel have divided their loyalties between Yahweh and Baal. Because Naaman obeys the prophet, he is healed from his malady and his skin becomes like that of a "small child" (קטן נער) (5:14), a description that recalls the negative use of קטנים נערים in 2:23 to describe the Hebrew youths who mock Elisha and are mauled by the bears. Naaman possesses a faith in Yahweh and his prophet that is missing in Israel.

Naaman learns of the healing powers of Yahweh and Elisha from a young Israelite servant girl (5:2-3). The servant girl maintains her faith even in the midst of her captivity and is a most positive example of the believing remnant. However, at the end of chapter 5, the attempt of Elisha's own servant to manipulate and exploit the prophet's powers for monetary reward demonstrates that even the tiny minority closely aligned with the prophet will not be an instrument of national renewal (cf. 2 Kgs 5:20-27). Gehazi's oath in the name of Yahweh and the fact that he has observed Yahweh's powers firsthand make his deception and selfishness even more treacherous. If Elijah and Elisha represent a second Moses and Joshua offering Israel a new beginning, then Gehazi assumes the role of Achan, taking silver and garments as plunder and bringing himself under a sentence of judgment from Yahweh (cf. Josh 7:16-26). The narrative in chapter 5 comes full circle when the disease attached to Naaman at the beginning of the story afflicts the unfaithful servant of the prophet at the end.⁷² What has transpired in this story is that the foreigner Naaman emerges as the more faithful servant than the Israelite Gehazi.⁷³ As with the Zerephath widow in the Elijah narratives, a foreigner whose faith exceeds that of what is found in Israel becomes a prominent member of the believing remnant.

Following this episode, Elisha's miraculous acts on behalf of the faithful are rather minimal. The prophet recovers a lost ax head for one of the sons of the prophets (6:1-7) and restores the Shunammite's land with the help of the Israelite king (8:1-6). In this latter act, Yahweh's life-giving blessing is restricted to a single family, and the recurring pattern of Elisha's powerful acts on behalf of the faithful come to an end. Overall, one is struck by the minimal and mundane

⁷² Ironically, when Yahweh provides the large-scale deliverance of Samaria from famine in 2 Kgs 7, four lepers are the heroes, and these lepers act in a manner that is exactly opposite that of Gehazi. They initially hoard for themselves money, clothing, and other spoils (2 Kgs 7:8) but then report what they have found (2 Kgs 7:9-11) so that the people of Samaria can share in their find. LaBarbera ("The Man of War and the Man of God," 650) notes specific correspondences between the story of the lepers in 2 Kgs 7 and the Achan account from Josh 7.

⁷³Cohn, *2 Kings*, 42.

nature of some of Elisha's mighty acts for the faithful. After bringing a dead boy back to life, what is so significant about making a bad pot of stew taste good (cf. 2 Kgs 4:38-41) or the recovery of a single lost ax head? These incidents clearly testify to Yahweh's life-giving powers and are a reminder of his ability to meet the needs of the faithful even in a time of famine and national crisis. However, the mundane nature of these miracles testifies to the limited scope of the blessing that Yahweh confers upon Israel because of its apostasy. The faithful enjoy life-giving blessings, but this blessing does not even begin to compare with the abundance and prosperity that Yahweh had intended if his people had only been faithful to the covenant commandments.

Israel's experience of life and death in the Elijah-Elisha narratives reflects the outworking of the covenant blessings and curses for the nation. However, these narratives and the Deuteronomistic History as a whole do not present Israel's history with Yahweh as the outworking of a mechanistic process of reward and retribution. There is mystery in Yahweh's providential direction of Israel's history, and the wheels of justice turn slowly in Kings. In the Elijah-Elisha narratives, Israel experiences both life and death, and there are partial victories and blessings for Israel even as Yahweh inflicts punishment on his people for their covenant unfaithfulness. At one level, these partial victories are the appropriate consequence of Israel's partial obedience. The Lord cannot fully bless his people because Israel is at best partially obedient to him. At another level, these partial victories are a demonstration of Yahweh's mercy toward Israel and his extreme reluctance to bring the covenant curses associated with death upon his people. The Lord's disposition is to be a god of life and not a destroyer. When the Lord announces Israel's impending military defeat and exile in response to Jeroboam's apostate sanctuaries in 1 Kings 14:15-16, one anticipates this sentence of defeat to be swiftly executed, but the reality is that Yahweh provides numerous opportunities for Israel to repent before the full sentence of judgment is carried out. The various instances of Israel's defeat or oppression at the hands of a foreign power in the Elijah-Elisha narratives clearly evoke the curses of the Mosaic covenant, particularly the scene in the siege of Samaria where mothers are reduced to eating their own children in response to the severe famine. Nevertheless, the Lord does all that he can do to avoid the finality of the exile. With Judah in the south, Yahweh delays judgment because of his covenant promises to the house of David (2 Kgs 8:19), but the Lord's covenant promises to the patriarchs prompt a similar unwillingness to fully destroy Israel (2 Kgs 13:23).

The final life-giving scene involving the resuscitation of the corpse thrown into Elisha's grave in 2 Kings 13:20-21 points to the fact that Yahweh will restore Israel to life even after the nation has experienced the ultimate covenant curse of exile. Provan observes that the verb שָׁלַךְ used in 2 Kings 13:31 with reference to the "throwing" of the corpse into Elisha's grave is repeated in verse 23 with regard to Yahweh's unwillingness to "throw" (שָׁלַךְ) Israel away from his presence.⁷⁴ Ultimately, however, the Lord will run out of patience with his people and "throw"

⁷⁴Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 230.

(שִׁלַּח) them into exile (2 Kgs 17:20). Exile will be like death for Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 13:33; Ps 88:3-12), but the incident with Elisha's grave points to the fact that the prophetic word has the power to restore Israel to life. Provan comments: "Yet even in exile, there is hope. If contact with the great prophets of the past is retained, through obedience to their teachings (we presume), death may yet be followed by unexpected resurrection (cf. Ezek. 37:1-14), defeat by victory. For God's love is ultimately strong enough to overcome death."⁷⁵ Both during and after the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, Yahweh refuses to abandon his people to death.

The Kings of Israel (and Judah) as a Source of Curses and Death

The Kings in the Family of Ahab

When the Elijah-Elisha narratives are read in light of the larger context of 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 13, a clear contrast is highlighted between the prophets who bring life and the kings of Israel (and Judah) who bring death. The kings of Israel are not only themselves the objects of prophetic death sentences but also the instruments of the covenant curse of death for the nation as a whole. Elijah and Elisha confront an Omride/Ahab dynasty that is lacking divine legitimacy. The kings of this dynasty are the antithesis of the type of king that the Lord desires to rule over his people.⁷⁶ The ideal king that emerges from the prayer (royal psalm) of Psalm 72 stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of the dynasty of Ahab in the Elijah-Elisha narratives.⁷⁷ Psalm 72 opens with a request for God to endow the king with a sense of justice so that he might defend the poor (vv. 1-4).⁷⁸ The king will have a special concern for the oppressed and view their blood as precious (vv. 12-14). In contrast, Ahab and Jezebel steal the vineyard of Naboth and incur the wrath of Yahweh by spilling his blood. The ideal king brings שְׁלוֹמַי that is like rain showers (vv. 5-7), and there will be agricultural abundance in the land (v. 16). Ahab's loyalty to Baal brings severe drought to Israel, and in this time of drought, Ahab is presented as going off in search of grass for the royal livestock, rather than looking out for the needs of his people (cf. 1 Kgs 18:5). Ahab wishes to turn the vineyard of Naboth into his own personal

⁷⁵Ibid., 230-31.

⁷⁶The Israelite king was not to marry many wives, lest "his heart turn aside" (Deut 17:17), and it was Ahab's foreign wife Jezebel that had enticed him to do evil (1 Kgs 16:31; 21:25). The king was not to acquire large numbers of horses (Deut 17:16), and it is not a coincidence that Ahab and Jehoram are each wounded in a chariot (cf. 1 Kgs 22:33-35; 2 Kgs 8:28-29; 9:23-24). The king was to write his own personal copy of the law to be reminded of Yahweh's ethical demands (Deut 17:18-20), but Ahab "sold himself to do evil" (1 Kgs 21:25), and his sons followed in his footsteps. When the people had asked for a king, Samuel had warned them that these kings would "take your fields and vineyards" (1 Sam 8:14), and Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard stands as a prime example of this type of royal confiscation.

⁷⁷For the message of Psalm 72 and its presentation of the Israelite ideal for kingship, see Knut M. Heim, "The Perfect King of Psalm 72: An 'Intertextual' Inquiry," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995): 223-48.

⁷⁸For the king's responsibility to promote justice in Israel and the ancient Near East at large, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Keith W. Whitlam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1979).

vegetable garden (cf. 1 Kgs 21:2). During the reign of Jehoram, a severe famine places the city of Samaria in grave danger (cf. 2 Kgs 6:25-29).

The psalmist prays for the ideal ruler to have international influence as his enemies bow down before him and bring tribute from distant lands (Ps 72: 8-11, 15), but the small victories won by Ahab and his sons on the battlefield are offset by their humiliating defeats.⁷⁹ In Psalm 72, the people pray in hyperbolic terms for the king and his dynasty to endure for all time (vv. 5-17), but the dynasty of Ahab is violently overthrown with God's approval and each member of the house of Ahab dies an untimely death.

Since Ahab's house represents the worst that Israelite kingship has to offer, royal power is diminished and even marginalized throughout the Elijah-Elisha narratives. The prophets determine if and when and how the Israelite kings will be successful in battle, and both Elijah and Elisha are known as "the horses and chariots of Israel" (cf. 2 Kgs 2:12; 13:14). The word of the prophet is more essential to Israel in battle than the army of chariots and horses belonging to the king. The impotence of the king and his military power to be a source of life and blessing for Israel is an especially prominent theme in the accounts of the conflict between Israel and Aram in 2 Kings 5-7. Prophetic power and authority prevail over kings and armies from both sides, and the blessing of deliverance comes not from the king but rather from the weak and the powerless. LaBarbera describes this section as "a clearly constructed satire on the ruling elite of the day" in that "kings, officials, and soldiers are without effect in every military situation, despite all their horses and chariots."⁸⁰ In 2 Kings 5, Namaan, the **אִישׁ גְּדוֹל**, learns of Elisha's healing power from an Israelite **נַעֲרָה קַטְנָה** who is the captive servant of his wife (2 Kgs 5:1-2). Namaan seeks this healing through royal channels, but the king of Israel knows nothing of Yahweh's life-giving powers (2 Kgs 5:7). When Namaan is healed, Israel experiences at least temporary respite from Syrian military pressure. The slave girl who believes in Yahweh, not the king of Israel, is the source of blessing and life.

Israel's reprieve from military pressure is short-lived because Aram is at war with Israel again in 2 Kings 6:8, but the Aramean king's strategies are consistently trumped by Elisha's knowledge of the movements of his troops. The narrator skillfully uses word plays and repetition of "to see" and "horses and chariots" to demonstrate royal impotence. The king of Syria commands his advisors to go and "see" (**רִאֵה**) where Elisha is staying and then sends his "horses and chariots" to capture the prophet at Dothan (2 Kgs 6:17). When Elisha's servant is frightened by the Aramean fighting force, the prophet prays that the servant will "see" (**רִאֵה**) that Yahweh's "horses and chariots" are superior to those of the Syrians (2 Kgs 6:18). The Syrian soldiers

⁷⁹The book of Kings additionally fails to mention one of Ahab's greatest military successes. An Assyrian inscription of Shalmeneser III (858-824 B.C.) reflects that Ahab was a major partner in the western coalition that opposed the Assyrian army at Qarqar and that halted the Assyrian western advance. For a translation of the inscription, see *ANET*, 278-79. The biblical writer downplays Ahab's military accomplishments in order to highlight his religious failures.

⁸⁰LaBarbera, "The Man of War and the Man of God," 637.

attempt to take Elisha, but the prophet prays for the soldiers to be stricken with blindness so that they can no longer see and fulfill their mission from the king (2 Kgs 6:19).⁸¹ Elisha leads the blind soldiers to Samaria and prays for Yahweh to open their eyes, and when they are able to “see” (ראה), they find themselves standing before the king of Israel (2 Kgs 6:20). As the king of Israel becomes part of this scene, he “sees” (ראה) the enemy troops but does not know what to do with them, asking Elisha if he is to put them to death (2 Kgs 6:21). Elisha instructs the king to prepare a lavish feast for the soldiers instead, and this act of friendship puts an end to the Syrian raids. Deliverance is provided in a way that completely circumvents the king and his military power—the enemy is won over by a party.⁸²

The lavish feast in 6:23 contrasts to the severe famine in 6:24 when the Aramean troops return to besiege Samaria. Yahweh and his prophet once again bring about a deliverance that leaves the king of Israel and his troops as nothing more than spectators. When two women seek the king’s help as he inspects the city, the king who has not followed the Lord makes the ironic declaration that only Yahweh can help them (2 Kgs 6:26-27). The king’s inability to help the women resolve their conflict over their dead and living children also reflects an intertextual connection to the earlier episode in 1 Kings 3:16-28 where Solomon in his wisdom had brought about a just resolution to a similar conflict between two mothers.⁸³ Solomon’s wise decision represented the height of royal potential and possibility in Israel, but there is no illusion here of the king’s positive help or influence.

It belongs to Elisha to announce to deliverance of Samaria, and rather than the king being Israel’s source of deliverance, that privilege belongs to four outcast lepers who happen upon the abandoned Aramean camp (2 Kgs 7:3-10). These lepers, rather than the king’s army, are the ones who plunder the Aramean spoils.⁸⁴ The Aramean army had abandoned their camp because they had heard the sound of “chariots and horses.” The army of Syria is once again no match for the heavenly armies of Yahweh, but the armies of Israel are equally inept. The “horses and chariots” of Israel show up only to confirm what the lepers have already discovered (2 Kgs 7:14-16).

Through their disobedience and apostasy, Israel’s kings had violated the ideals and standards of kingship that Yahweh himself had established. As a consequence, Israel’s kings forfeit the right

⁸¹Ibid., 643. LaBarbera notes the irony between vv. 13 and 19. The king of Aram had commanded his troops to “go” (הלך) and “see” (ראה) where Elisha was staying. In v. 19, it is Elisha who enables these soldiers to carry out the king’s orders. The verb הלך is used three times to describe the movement of the soldiers under Elisha’s direction, and Elisha’s prayers enable to soldiers to “see” when they arrive in Samaria. This irony further highlights the power of prophet over king.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³For development of the parallels between the two accounts and their significance for the message of Kings, see Stuart Lasine, “The Ups and Downs of Monarchical Justice: Solomon and Jehoram in an Intertextual World,” *JOT* 59 (1993): 37-53.

⁸⁴LaBarbera (“The Man of the War and the Man of God,” 648) notes that the laws requiring isolation of the lepers in Lev 13-14 would have excluded them from military service.

to be a source of life and blessing for the people. Yahweh graciously delivers but he delivers through the word of the prophet and through unlikely sources like a slave girl and destitute lepers. As Satterthwaite observes, this section of Kings demonstrates that “YHWH has delivered Israel using unconventional means.”⁸⁵ He adds, “Never in these episodes does an Israelite take up a weapon; the peace Israel now enjoys has been the unaided work of YHWH.”⁸⁶

The Kings in the Family of Jehu

With Jehu’s coup against the house of Ahab and his purging of Baal worship from Israel, the stage appears to be set for the king to be a source of blessing and life for the people of Israel. Jehu is the only king in the north said to do what is “right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kgs 10:30), and this estimation of his actions comes from the Lord himself and not merely the narrator or editor of Kings. Yahweh also gives a royal grant to Jehu, modeled after the one earlier given to David (cf. 2 Sam 7:14-16), which rewards Jehu’s faithfulness by promising that his family will rule for four generations over Israel (2 Kgs 10:30).⁸⁷ Unlike the dynasty of Omri and Ahab, the reign of Jehu’s family has divine approval and sanction. However, the potential for blessing with which Jehu’s reign begins is unrealized because he and his sons continue the pattern of royal disobedience and unfaithfulness toward the Lord. The dynasty that begins with such promise in the end is only more of the same. The statement that Jehu did what was right in Yahweh’s eyes is framed by references to the fact that he disobeyed the Lord by continuing in Jeroboam’s cultic sins (2 Kgs 10:29, 31). The royal grant to Jehu is restricted to four generations because his obedience to Yahweh is not complete. After the lengthy account of Jehu’s extermination of the house of Ahab and the removal of Baal worship from Israel, the only event mentioned from the remainder of Jehu’s reign is the Lord’s removal of territory from Israel through the military actions of Hazael (2 Kgs 10:32-33).

The king continues to be a source of cursing, rather than blessing, for the nation of Israel, and this pattern remains unchanged with Jehu’s successors. The estimation of each of the remaining kings in Jehu’s dynasty is that he did “evil in the eyes of the Lord” (cf. 2 Kgs 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9). The sins of Jehoahaz, Jehu’s immediate successor, cause Yahweh’s anger to burn so that Hazael continues to dominate Israel (2 Kgs 13:2-3). The military victories that Israel experiences during the reigns of the kings in Jehu’s line are due to the compassion and covenant loyalty of the Lord, rather than the faithfulness of the king (cf. 2 Kgs 13:4-5, 22-23; 14:26-27). The narrator intentionally diminishes the role of the king as the mediator of these victories. Yahweh delivered Israel from the Arameans in the reign of Jehoahaz, but Israel’s military forces had been greatly reduced before the victory was achieved (2 Kgs 13:4-7). Jehoash’s defeat of the Arameans is recorded in an account that follows the brief summation of his reign, death, and burial in 2 Kings 13:10-12, thus in a sense removing the victory from the list of the king’s

⁸⁵Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives,” 21.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷For development of this royal grant to Jehu and its literary and theological significance, see E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., “The Royal Dynastic Grant to Jehu and the Structure of the Book of Kings,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 193-206.

accomplishments. Elisha plays the dominant role in promising victory to Jehoash, and the king's reference to Elisha as "the chariots and horsemen of Israel" recognizes that the prophet's word is the real source of Israel's success (2 Kgs 13:14-19). The king is in fact condemned for not seeking a more decisive defeat of the Arameans (vv. 18-19), and his victory over the Arameans and recapture of Israelite territory is briefly summarized in one verse. Similarly, Jeroboam II's significant accomplishment of restoring Israel's territory to its Solomonic proportions is only briefly recounted and is attributed more to the oracle of the prophet Jonah and the compassion of Yahweh toward Israel than to the military prowess of the king (cf. 2 Kgs 14:25-28).

The Kings of Judah (Just Like the Kings of Israel)

This section of Kings not only indicts the kings of Israel for being a source of cursing and death rather than life. Because of Jehoshaphat's ill-advised alliance with the house of Ahab, the kings from the house of David also become a source of death for the nation of Judah. Twice, Jehoshaphat goes into battle with Israelite kings and professes on both occasions that his soldiers and military resources are as one with the armies of Israel (cf. 1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7). The results are disastrous in both instances. In the first campaign, Jehoshaphat is nearly killed and Ahab is fatally wounded by the Arameans. In the second, the allied armies of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat must retreat before being able to decisively defeat the Moabites. Jehoshaphat strengthens the ties between the houses of David and Ahab by having his son Jehoram marry Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab (2 Kgs 8:18). The result of this intermarriage is even more catastrophic for Judah than the military partnership.

To stress the devastating effects of this alliance, the narrator will use "mirroring" as a literary technique in order to demonstrate that the history of Judah at this time closely resembles the history of Israel. The intertwining of the dynasties of Omri/Ahab and David is reflected by the fact that they share kings with the same names (Jehoram and Ahaziah), which is appropriate because it is difficult to distinguish the behavior of the kings from the north and south. Because of his marriage to Athaliah, Jehoram walks in the sins of Ahab (2 Kgs 8: 18), and the same is true of his son Ahaziah (2 Kgs 8:27). During the reign of Jehoram in the south, Edom rebels (פּשַׁע) against Judah (2 Kgs 8:20-22), just as Moab "rebelled" against Israel in the reign of Joram (Jehoram) in the north (2 Kgs 3:5). This loss of territory is the result of covenant disobedience, and both kings fail in their attempt to reassert control over their former vassal (cf. 2 Kgs 3:26-27; 8:21-22). Like Jehoshaphat, Ahaziah goes into battle with Joram (Jehoram) against the Arameans, and Joram is wounded by an archer like his father Ahab (2 Kgs 8:28-29). The two kings are killed together in Jezreel by Jehu as he begins his military coup (2 Kgs 9:21-29).

After the death of Ahaziah, Judah comes to have its own Jezebel, as Athaliah asserts authority over the throne. Athaliah also seeks to exterminate the royal line of David in the same manner

that Jehu had annihilated the royal line of Ahab.⁸⁸ In attempting to kill the members of her own family, Athaliah's wickedness exceeds even that of Jezebel. Athaliah's plot to destroy the royal line is foiled by Jehosheba's rescue of Joash, who is hidden away for six years. Athaliah's reign is marginalized in that her six years of rule are passed over in one verse. When it is finally time to dispose of Athaliah, Jehoiada the priest plays the role of Judah's Jehu in putting to death the wicked queen mother.⁸⁹ Jehoiada's restoration of a legitimate Davidic ruler brings "rest" to Judah (2 Kgs 11:20). There is a rare mention in this section of the people "celebrating" (שמחה) Joash as their new king and enjoying Yahweh's blessing of rest (cf. 2 Kgs 11:14, 20).

However, the problems for the monarchy in Judah do not end with the rise of Joash to power. Joash's accession reestablishes the Davidic dynasty in Judah, but Joash is later killed by his servants and replaced by his son Amaziah (cf. 2 Kgs 12:20-21). In turn, Amaziah is also assassinated as part of a conspiracy against the throne and replaced by Azariah (cf. 2 Kgs 14:19-20). What transpires could be described as a "flip-flop" between Israel and Judah. While Jehu and his successors reign securely in Israel because of a dynastic grant from the Lord, the house of David becomes characterized by the conspiracy and murder that had plagued Israel's royal history because of its dynastic instability.⁹⁰ The corruptive influence of the house of Ahab continues on even after Athaliah's coup is foiled and she has been removed from power.

Unlike the house of Ahab, the house of David is ultimately spared, both because of Yahweh's covenant to David (cf. 2 Kgs 8:19) and the mitigating influences of various righteous members belonging to the line of David. The royal grant to Jehu's family has an expiration date, while

⁸⁸Cohn (*2 Kings*, 77) calls attention to how the narrator passes over the details of Athaliah's killing of the royal family "in a formalized and sanitary way," in contrast to the grisly portrayals of Jehu's killing of Ahab's kin. He writes: "Even though she does no more than what Jehu had done in Israel, liquidation of the royal house, she is not viewed ambivalently."

⁸⁹There are striking parallels between the events of 2 Kings 9-10 and the coup of Jehoiada against Athaliah. In 2 Kings 9, the prophet anoints Jehu as king (vv. 6-10), and Jehu's reign is acknowledged with a shout and the blowing of a trumpet (vv. 13-14). Similarly, Jehoiada anoints Joash and there are shouts of "Long live the king" amid celebration and blowing trumpets (2 Kgs 11: 12-14). When she realizes what is happening, Athaliah cries out "Treason, treason" (קשר קשר) (11:14), just as Jehoram had cried out "Treachery" (מרמה) at Jehu (9:23). The root קשר is also used in 9:14 to describe Jehu's "conspiracy" against Jehoram. When wiping out the devotees of Baal, Jehu posts guards at the house of Baal and sternly warns them not to allow anyone to escape alive (2 Kgs 10:25-27); Jehoiada posts guards at the house of Yahweh to protect the life of Jehoiada and to put to death anyone who approaches the king (2 Kgs 11:4-8). While Jehu turned the house of Baal into a house of death, Jehoiada refuses to put Athaliah to death at the house of Yahweh (2 Kgs 11:15). Yahweh's house is a sacred source of life and is not to be defiled even by the legal execution of a pretender to the throne. Athaliah instead is put to death on the palace grounds (2 Kgs 11:15-16), just as Jezebel was thrown from her palace window (2 Kgs 9:30-37). The reference to the seizing of Athaliah at the horse's entrance recalls the horses trampling Jezebel's body at Jezreel. After the execution of Athaliah, Jehoiada destroys the house of Baal, destroys its sacred objects, and kills the priest of Baal, just as Jehu had done in Israel (cf. 2 Kgs 11:18-19). Jehu's actions purged Israel of Baal worship (2 Kgs 10:28), and Jehoiada's actions restored the Davidic heir to the throne, a vital component of Yahweh's covenant with the nation. Ultimately, the differences between Jehu and Jehoiada stand out even more than the similarities. Cohn (*2 Kings*, 80) comments: "Unlike Jehu's rampage against the house of Ahab and Athaliah's own massacre of her husband's descendants, Jehoiada restores the house of David by a single execution. In contrast to Jehu and Athaliah, Jehoiada has scruples implicitly attributed to his priestly office."

⁹⁰See Mullen, "The Royal Dynastic Grant to Jehu," 199-200.

Yahweh's covenant promises to David are perpetual. The reign of Joash brings "rest" and "rejoicing" to Judah (2 Kgs 11:20), because the king and people renew their covenant commitment to Yahweh (2 Kgs 11: 17). However, there is also clearly a sense in which the demise of the "houses" of Ahab and Baal prefigure the eventual fate of the house of David and the Jerusalem temple. García-Treto comments, "In 2 Kings 9 and 10 the author shows us the very line and the actual plummet that are to mark Jerusalem's fate, even as they signal Samaria's."⁹¹ The house of David is nearly destroyed for imitating the house of Ahab, but even after a divine reprieve, the line of David will return to its imitation of Ahab. King Manasseh becomes the Ahab of Judah as he sets up altars for Baal, builds an Asherah pole, and worships idols just like Ahab (2 Kgs 21:3, 11, 13; cf. 1 Kgs 16:33; 21:26).⁹² As a result, the Lord announces that he will destroy Jerusalem just as he did Samaria and Ahab's dynasty (2 Kgs 21:12-13). Even Yahweh's dealings with Manasseh's righteous grandson, Josiah, parallel the treatment of Ahab. Josiah humbled himself and tore his robes at the reading of the book of the law and the warnings of the covenant curses, just as Ahab had done after hearing Elijah's message of doom on his house (cf. 2 Kgs 22:15-20; 1 Kgs 21:27-28).⁹³ The judgment on Judah would not fall in Josiah's lifetime, just as the Lord had delayed the destruction of Ahab's house until after Ahab was gone (cf. 2 Kgs 22:19-20; 1 Kgs 21:25-29). Josiah's righteous reforms stalled the divine judgment but could not turn Yahweh's anger away from Judah. Provan comments, "The parallels drawn between the house of David and the house of Ahab in 2 Kings 21-23 clearly imply that the destruction of David's house will be total. There will no escape of the kind which occurred in Athaliah's day."⁹⁴

Life and Death and the Polemic Against Baal Worship

A major reason for the focus on life and death in the Elijah-Elisha narratives is how these stories function as a polemic against Baal worship in Israel.⁹⁵ Yahweh is a god of life, while Baal is a

⁹¹García-Treto, "The Fall of the House," 61.

⁹²For this parallelism, see Iain Provan, "The Messiah in the Book of Kings," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, 74-75.

⁹³Ibid., 75. The Chronicler goes further with the Ahab-Josiah connections, noting a striking correspondence between the deaths of these two rulers (see 2 Chron 18 and 35). Both kings are warned not to go into battle, both disguise themselves before going into battle, and both cry to be taken from battle "for I am wounded" (the only three uses of the pual of the verb *חלה* are found in 2 Chron 18:33// 1 Kgs 22:34; and 2 Chron 35:23). The portrayal of Josiah's death in 2 Chron 35 is much different from the account in 2 Kgs 23 and clearly presents the king's death as an appropriate punishment for a foolish and sinful choice. For further discussion of the portrayal of Josiah's death in Chronicles, see Christine Mitchell, "The Ironic Death of Josiah in 2 Chronicles," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 421-35. Mitchell argues that the Ahab-Josiah parallel is not a statement on Josiah's life and reign, but merely upon his foolish choice in ignoring the warning of Yahweh spoken through Neco about not going into battle against the Egyptians. Mitchell also notes parallels between the death of Josiah and those of Joram and Amaziah, two kings that are also closely connected to Ahab.

⁹⁴Ibid., 75.

⁹⁵For the Elijah-Elisha narratives as anti-Baal polemic, see Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship*, Pretoria Oriental Series 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1968); F. Charles Fensham, "A Few

dead god. Bronner classifies the miracles of Elijah and Elisha into eight major motifs or types: the motifs of fire, rain, oil and corn, child-giving, healing, resurrection, ascent, and river.⁹⁶ In the Canaanite literature, these powers and spheres of operation belong to Baal, and Fensham explains that the purpose of the biblical narratives is “to show that in every walk of life, and especially in those areas in which Baal was regarded as superior, Yahweh is the only God and not Baal.”⁹⁷ The Elijah-Elisha narratives demonstrate that Israel is to trust exclusively in Yahweh for the necessities of life.

When assessing the connections between the Ugaritic texts and the Elijah-Elisha narratives, several issues must be considered: 1) the different times and milieus of the documents; 2) the identity of the Baal introduced into Israel in the ninth-century B.C. (possibly Phoenician Baal, Baal-Carmel, Baal-Shamem, Baal-Melqart of Tyre, Hadad the storm god, Baal-Lebanon, Baal-Hermon or some combination thereof; and 3) the extent to which the Ugaritic conceptions of Baal pervaded Canaanite culture as a whole.⁹⁸ At the very least, Saint-Laurent appears correct in concluding that the Baal of Ugarit was a “typical Canaanite Baal, if not in fact the same Baal whom Jezebel was later to export.”⁹⁹ Brevard Childs was critical of the effort to find parallels between the Ugaritic texts and the Elijah narratives, arguing that such an approach reduced the historical narrative in the biblical text to “only a construct of ancient mythological patterns transferred from one deity to another.”¹⁰⁰ It would appear instead that a cautious exploration of the parallels enables the reader to more fully understand the literary and rhetorical depth of the Elijah-Elisha narratives. At times, the parallels between the Canaanite and biblical materials may reflect nothing more than a common Semitic milieu, but it seems beyond dispute that the biblical writers use Canaanite mythological motifs for polemical purposes.¹⁰¹

The polemic against Baal worship is especially prominent in 1 Kings 17-18. Baal was a storm and vegetation god who brought rain and agricultural bounty. However, Yahweh brings drought upon Israel at the very time when the people are trusting in Baal as their source of provision. The Canaanites associated drought with Baal’s defeat by Mot, the god of death, and Baal’s

Observations on the Polarisation between Yahweh and Baal in 1 Kings 17-19,” *ZAW* 92 (1980): 227-36; George E. Saint-Laurent, “Light from Ras Shamra on Elijah’s Ordeal upon Mount Carmel, in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. C. D. Evans, W. W. Hallo, and J. B. White (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 123-39; James R. Battenfield, “YHWH’s Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. A. Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 19-37); and John A. Beck, “Geography as Irony: The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Elijah’s Duel with the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18),” *SJOT* 17 (2003): 291-302.

⁹⁶Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha*, 50-138.

⁹⁷Fensham, “A Few Observations,” 233.

⁹⁸For discussion of these issues, see Fensham, “A Few Observations,” 228-31; Battenfield, “YHWH’s Refutation of the Baal Myth,” 29-33; and Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 177-281, esp. 260-62.

⁹⁹Saint-Laurent, “Light from Ras Shamra,” 129.

¹⁰⁰Brevard S. Childs, “On Reading the Elijah Narratives,” *Int* 34 (1980):131.

¹⁰¹See further, Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “The Polemic Against Baalism in Israel’s Early History and Literature,” *BSac* 150 (1994): 267-83; and “Yahweh Versus the Canaanite Gods: Polemic in Judges and 1 Samuel 1-7,” *BSac* 164 (2007): 165-80.

descent into the underworld. When Baal descends, the “furrows of the field are cracked” (CTA 6 iv 25-26, 36-37) and he takes his clouds, winds, thunderbolts, and rain with him (CTA 5 v 6-7). Mot swallows Baal and scorches “the olive(s), the produce of the earth, and the fruit trees” (CTA 5 ii 5-6). In contrast, Yahweh is able to provide food for Elijah and the widow and her son even in the midst of drought. It is also significant that Yahweh acts in Zarephath in Phoenician territory. Even with “home-field advantage,” Baal is no competition for Yahweh. There is the irony of Israelites in the land of Yahweh suffering famine because they trust in Baal, while Elijah and a Phoenician family have plenty of food in the land of Baal because they trust in Yahweh.

Elijah’s resuscitation of the widow’s son (and the parallel miracle by Elisha in 2 Kgs 4) demonstrates that Yahweh has power over life and death. When Baal is defeated by Mot, the gods lament, “Mightiest Baal is dead, the prince lord of earth has perished” (CTA 5 v 8-10). Baal acknowledges to Mot, “I am your servant, yes, yours for ever” (CTA 5 ii 11-12, 19-20). While Baal must be rescued from the underworld by Anat (cf. CTA 6 ii 30-37), Yahweh is the one who rescues from death.¹⁰² By raising the widow’s son, Yahweh displays his absolute power over death.¹⁰³

In 1 Kings 18, the Lord once again demonstrates his sovereignty over the terrible drought in Israel by announcing to Elijah his intention to send rain (18:1). The drought in Israel has lasted for three years, and the famine was severe. The geographical location of Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal is significant in that Mount Carmel was the southern boundary of Phoenicia and an important sanctuary for Baal.¹⁰⁴ The verdant lushness of the mountain and its surrounding area (cf. Isa 35:2; Jer 50:19; Amos 1:2; Micah 7:14) made Carmel an ideal site for a rain and fertility god to show his powers.¹⁰⁵ The altar of Yahweh from an earlier time has been torn down (1 Kgs 18:30), so Yahweh must act in this contest to reassert his sovereignty over the mountain.

Proportion is one of the key devices by which a biblical narrator reflects his focus, and in describing the actual contest on Carmel, the narrator particularly highlights the protracted and frantic efforts of the prophets of Baal to rouse their god and Elijah’s mockery of their efforts (1 Kgs 18:26-29). Both features stress that Baal is a dead god. Even though the prophets of Baal

¹⁰²After Baal is rescued from the underworld, he and Mot engage in another fierce battle in which neither is able to prevail over the other. However, Mot bows before Baal in acknowledgement of his authority and kingship. See CTA 6 vi 16-35.

¹⁰³In the legend of Aqhat, Daniel calls on Baal to bring down various birds of prey until he finds Aqhat’s corpse in one of their bellies. Baal assists Daniel in recovering his son’s body for burial, and while Baal revives the birds of prey that Aqhat has split open, he does not revive the dead son. See CTA 19 iii 106-48. Anat had previously offered Aqhat immortality in exchange for his prize bow (CTA 17 v 26-32), but Aqhat appears wise in recognizing the emptiness of her promise (CTA 17 v 33-38). Bronner (*The Stories of Elijah and Elisha*, 119) argues that if the Aqhat legend was preserved in its entirety, it would depict the resurrection of Aqhat. However, Jon D. Levenson (*Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* [New Haven: Yale University, 2006], 139-40) argues that fertility would have been restored by the birth of another son and not by the resurrection of Aqhat.

¹⁰⁴Beck, “Geography as Irony,” 297-99.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 298.

dance, work themselves into frenzy, and lacerate themselves, there is no response from Baal. Self-laceration is perhaps a mourning rite and an act of sympathetic magic, imitating the responses of El and Anat to the news of Baal's death.¹⁰⁶ The expression "there was no voice" (אין קול) used to describe Baal's unresponsiveness is also used in 2 Kings 4:31 with reference to the dead boy that Elisha brings back to life.¹⁰⁷ Baal's inability to answer when his prophets "cry out" (קרא) to him (1 Kgs 18:26) also contrasts to how the Lord had heard Elijah "cry out" (קרא) (1 Kgs 17:20-21) to him and had brought the widow's son back to life. It is particularly significant that Baal is unable to send fire from heaven, in that as a storm god, his powers included control over lightning and fire.¹⁰⁸ The fact that Baal cannot send fire seriously undermines his claims to be a god.¹⁰⁹

Elijah's taunt of the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:27) drives home the fact that Baal is dead, even non-existent. Childs comments, "Actually this is not really a contest between two gods. Elijah does not believe that Baal is a god at all. The confrontation is between Yahweh, God of Israel, and a sheer delusion."¹¹⁰ Elijah suggests that the prophets are not speaking loudly enough for Baal to hear, which is ironic considering how intensely they have cried out for several hours.¹¹¹ Elijah also affirms "Surely, Baal is a god," the very thing that Baal's unresponsiveness has disproven. Elijah's reference to Baal being on a journey could possibly refer to his descent into the underworld, though that connection is not clear in this passage.¹¹² And finally, Elijah suggests that Baal is asleep. Sleep is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as a euphemism for death (cf. Job 3:13; Ps 13:4; Jer 51:39, 57; Dan 12:2).¹¹³

After giving the prophets of Baal the first opportunity and every other advantage to prove the power of their god, Elijah prepares the altar of Yahweh. The fact that Elijah douses the altar with large amounts of water demonstrates his confidence in the Lord's ability to send both fire to

¹⁰⁶Cf. CTA 5 vi 18, 21-23; and 6 i 1-6.

¹⁰⁷In the Ugaritic texts, the "voice" of Baal is associated with the storm and thunder. In CTA 4 v 68-71, the sounding of Baal's "voice" is connected to his sending rain and releasing his lightning bolts. In CTA 4 vii 29-37, the "voice" of Baal shakes the earth (cf. Ps 29 for how the storm reflects the power of Yahweh's קול). To be without rain is to be "without the sweet sound of Baal's voice" (CTA 19 i 46).

¹⁰⁸The famous Baal stele from Ras Shamra (2nd millennium B.C.) shows Baal holding a lightning rod in his left hand (see *ANEP*, 168, 307). Baal claims, "I understand lightning, which the heavens do not know" (CTA 3 iii 23). Another text (R.S. 24.245.3) offers this description of Baal: "Seven lightning bolts he casts, eight magazines of thunder, he brandishes a spear of lightning." In demonstrating Baal's association with fire, Bronner (*The Stories of Elijah and Elisha*, 60-61) notes how Baal's palace is tested and reinforced by fire in CTA 4 v 22-35.

¹⁰⁹Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 40.

¹¹⁰Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," 132.

¹¹¹Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 41.

¹¹²In the text, "Baal Fathers a Bull," Anat arrives at Baal's house and is informed that "Baal is not in his house" and that he has gone out hunting. See Simon Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, SBL Writings from the Ancient World, 9 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 183. This text shows that the prophets of Baal could have understood the possibility of their god being away on a journey.

¹¹³Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, 300. See also H. Jagersma, "שׁ in 1.Konige XVIII 27," *VT* 28 (1975): 674-76.

consume the sacrifice and the promised rain (1 Kgs 18:34-35; cf. v. 1).¹¹⁴ Proportion again demonstrates the narrator's emphasis on Elijah's act of pouring water on the altar and sacrifice (he does this three times), and the pouring of water enhances God's miraculous act.¹¹⁵ The sending of fire and the consumption of Elijah's altar is prelude to the sending of rain, and so Yahweh once again usurps two key prerogatives of Baal in Baal's own territory. The Canaanite belief was that Baal's return from the underworld was what prompted the return of rain and fertility. When Baal returns to life, the "heavens rained oil, the ravines ran with honey" (CTA 6 iii 12-13).¹¹⁶ However, the fact that Baal has not awoken from his sleep means that his absence or subsequent return has nothing to do with drought and fertility. The rains come from Yahweh in response to the prayers of Elijah.

This pattern of Yahweh performing the works of Baal and thereby usurping Baal's authority continues throughout the Elijah-Elisha narratives. The appearance of Yahweh to Elijah at Horeb is accompanied by the manifestations of a storm god (fire, wind, and earthquake), but Yahweh is not bound to these elements like Baal and speaks instead in the "soft whisper" (1 Kgs 19:11-13). Elijah calls down fire from heaven to consume the soldiers sent by Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:9-12). Baal is the "Rider of the Clouds," but Elijah ascends into heaven accompanied by a fiery chariot and horses (2 Kgs 2:11-12). While Baal defeats Yam ("Sea") and Nahar ("River"), it is Elijah and Elisha as the prophets of Yahweh who split the Jordan and cross over on dry ground. Elisha performs a variety of miracles involving food and water and announces that the Lord will bring an end to the terrible famine in Samaria (cf. 2 Kgs 2:19-22; 3:16-17 and 20-23; 4:1-7, 38-41, 42-44; 7:1-20).¹¹⁷ In the legend of Aqhat, Baal petitions El for the childless Daniel, and El blesses Daniel with a son, but in the biblical narrative, Yahweh gives a child to the Shunemite woman through the agency of Elisha (2 Kgs 4:11-17).¹¹⁸ The lifeless body of Elisha is able to revive a dead man (2 Kgs 13:20-21), demonstrating that the prophet's "lifeless body can achieve more than the living Baal."¹¹⁹ While not every one of these events in the Elijah-Elisha narratives may have a direct connection to Canaanite beliefs and practices, the parallels are striking and

¹¹⁴Beck ("Geography as Irony," 300) observes in 1 Kgs 17-18 that water is regularly mentioned in association with the servants of Yahweh. Yahweh provides water for Elijah at Cherith (17:14-16), Obadiah has water for the prophets he has hidden in the cave (18:4, 13), and Elijah has a large volume of water to pour on his sacrifice (18:33-35). In contrast, the only liquid associated with the prophets of Baal is their blood as they cut themselves in their futile attempt to motivate a response from Baal.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 301.

¹¹⁶In the legend of Aqhat, Baal's absence or weakness following the death of Aqhat is also viewed as the cause of drought in the land (CTA 19 i 43-46).

¹¹⁷In the narrative dealing with the severe famine in Samaria, LaBarbera ("The Man of War and the Man of God," 647-48) notes a correlation between the king's officer referring to Yahweh opening a "window" in the heavens (2 Kgs 7:2) and the putting of the window in Baal's palace so that he could send the rains upon the earth (cf. CTA 4 vii 17-28). LaBarbera suggests that this reference to the window reflects the officer's religious preference for Baal over Yahweh. More importantly, Elisha's response affirms "that Yahweh will be as effective as the adjutant is hinting Baal would have been." There is a word play in the text on "window" (אֲרָבוֹת) and the "four" (אַרְבַּעָה) lepers (2 Kgs 7:3-4) through whom Yahweh would bring Samaria's deliverance.

¹¹⁸Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha*, 86-94. Bronner (94-97) also notes Baal's involvement in the giving of progeny to the childless Keret (see *CML*, 82-102).

¹¹⁹Ibid., 122.

convincing enough to prove that anti-Baal polemic is an important feature of these biblical stories.

The portrayal of Jezebel as the human embodiment of the Caananite Anat is also a major feature of the anti-Baal polemic in the Elijah-Elisha narratives. Anat is the sister/consort of Baal in the Caananite literature and she assists Baal in his rise to kingship and his defeat of Mot.¹²⁰ Susan Ackerman notes concerning the Baal myth, “It is almost as if Baal and Anat are reckoned as two sides of the same coin.”¹²¹ The connection between Anat and Jezebel is a natural one because of their violent tendencies. Jezebel is like the bloodthirsty Anat through her involvement in the killing of Yahweh’s prophets (1 Kgs 18:4) and Naboth (1 Kgs 21:7-16).¹²²

At the end of Jezebel’s life, there is a turning of the tables where Jezebel, instead of inflicting violence upon others, becomes herself the victim of violence. Jezebel receives the treatment that Anat inflicts upon her enemies.¹²³ When preparing for battle, Anat beautifies herself with henna and the scent of coriander and murex (CTA 3 ii 2-3), and Jezebel also beautifies herself as an act of defiance as Jehu approaches the palace (2 Kgs 9:30). Anat returns from battle with the heads and hands of her defeated foes attached to her belt (CTA 3 ii 11-13). After Jezebel is killed, it is the skull and hands of Jezebel that remain as trophies for the victor (2 Kgs 9:35). Appler comments that “Jezebel leaves behind the symbols of her Canaanite goddess.”¹²⁴ Anat has an appetite for bloodshed, magically transforming the furniture of her palace into soldiers and then wading into the blood and gore of her slaughtered enemies (CTA 3 ii 21-30). After her violent appetites are sated, the blood is wiped from the palace and the goddess washes her hands in the blood of her enemies (CTA 3 ii 30-35). In contrast, it is the blood of Jezebel that is spilled on the palace wall when she is thrown from the window (2 Kgs 9:30). In the Baal myth, Anat kills Mot in retribution for the death of Baal and then grinds his body into dust that she sows in a field

¹²⁰Richard S. Hess (*Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 100-101), notes that some scholars have seen parallels between the wars of Anat and Yahweh. Common motifs include a mountain venue, the potentially universal scope of the battle, heaps of skulls, feeding on captives, drinking of blood, wading in blood, drunkenness and laughter (cf. Num 23:24; Deut 32:42; Isa 49:26; Pss 58:10; 68:23). Previous studies have also argued for the use of Anat imagery in the portrayal of Deborah and Jael in Judg 4-5. See P. Craigie, “Deborah and Anat: A Study of Poetic Imagery (Judges 5),” *ZAW* 90 (1978): 174-81; and Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 59-61.

¹²¹Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress*, 56.

¹²²Jezebel’s actions in the Naboth incident seem to especially parallel the actions of Anat in the legend of Aqhat. Anat has Aqhat murdered when he refuses to give her a magical hunting bow. In both stories, there is the coveting of a divinely-bestowed gift, a refusal to relinquish the gift, a false accusation against the innocent party, and the taking of the desired object by murder. Ultimately, both Anat and Jezebel fail to retain what they have taken by murder. See Michael S. Moore, “Jehu’s Coronation and the Purge of Israel,” *VT* 53 (2003): 106, n. 54; and Hoffeditz and Yates, “*Femme Fatale Redux*,” 206-207.

¹²³Hoffeditz and Yates, “*Femme Fatale Redux*,” 218-19. Moore (“Jehu’s Coronation,” 100-14) presents the entire account of Jehu’s purge of the house of Ahab as a parody of the story of Baal-Anat and thus draws parallels between Jehu’s violent actions (his killing of Joram and Ahaziah compared to Anat’s dispatching of Gapnu and Ugar, his use of the “bow,” his stacking of “heads,” his treatment of Jezebel, etc.).

¹²⁴Deborah A. Appler, “From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative,” *Semeia* 86 (1999): 58.

(CTA 6 ii 26-35). Elijah had prophesied that Jezebel's body would become like refuse on the ground in Jezreel (2 Kgs 9:37). While Anat inflicts death, Jezebel experiences death. The polemic thus stresses the illusion of the life-giving powers of the Canaanite gods. In the end, Jezebel has devoted herself to a lost cause and experiences the same fate as the misguided prophets of Baal put to death after the contest at Carmel. This parody on the story of Baal-Anat also serves as an effective means of describing the demise of the royal family that attempted to promote Baal worship in Israel.

Conclusion

The dominant theme of life and death in the Elijah-Elisha narratives has a covenantal context. The blessings and curses come as a result of Israel's response to Yahweh and his commands. In the stories of Elijah and Elisha, life and death are experienced in dramatic ways. Yahweh provides life miraculously and resourcefully to demonstrate that he is worthy of Israel's exclusive loyalty and trust. Because of Israel's national apostasy, death appears in these stories in ways that are excessively violent, grotesque, and unsettling (especially to postmodern readers of the text). Prophetic history (and the preaching of the prophets themselves) in the Old Testament does not flinch at presenting the savage consequences of covenant infidelity toward Yahweh. In the final setting of Kings, this reminder of how Israel experienced death when they turned away from Yahweh is to the exiles both a call for repentance and a reminder that Yahweh as the god of life is their hope of future restoration and renewal.