

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE FOCUS OF ELISHA'S MINISTRY ON ATYPICAL, FAITHFUL INDIVIDUALS

A MASTER'S THESIS SUBMITTED TO
DR. GARY YATES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR COMPLETION OF THE COURSE,

THES 690
THESIS DEFENSE

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LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

MARCH 19, 2014

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I. Introduction

Elisha is heralded as one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. As a prophet, Elisha reveals God's desire for the people of Israel to live under covenant faithfulness before Him. In doing so, he stands as the intermediary between God and Israel. "Prophets intercede for people by virtue of their position. Their summons locates them between Yhwh and people, identified with both."¹ Elisha emerges from the powerful ministry of his predecessor, boldly asking for twice the spirit Elijah possessed during his ministry. According to the Midraash, Elisha's illustrious career records sixteen miracles,² spanning from multiplying food to raising the dead. Elisha interacts with a wide variety of people. Elisha's intentional ministry toward the marginalized, outcast members of society reveals Yahweh's love for the abandoned, providing both material and spiritual deliverance.³ Yet, Elisha interacts with powerful figures as well—several kings and wealthy individuals. In addition, Elisha's ministers to the Arameans, Israel's primary enemy at the time, revealing Yahweh's control of all political, economic, and social affairs, as well as His desire to make Himself known to all peoples. God always seeks to bring salvation towards those who will respond, regardless of their status in society or their nationality, which is evident throughout the Elisha narratives.

The thesis will discuss this aspect of Elisha's ministry in detail. First, a brief overview of the context of Kings, of Elisha scholarship, and of Elisha's ministry will be discussed. A chapter will discuss Israel's apostasy. Because of the nation's unfaithfulness, the disobedience of both

¹John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life* (Downers Grove, IL, IVP Academic, 2009), 271.

²*Mishnat R. Eliezer b. R. Yosi Ha Gelilil Midrash Lamed-Bet Midot in Yal., Gen. VaYera 92*, cited in *Introduction to Sefer Melachim Im Pirush Daat Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1989). Quoted in Nachman Levine, "Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel, and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 85 (1999): 46.

³Marsha White, "Elisha," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 398.

the Israelite kings and the people as a whole, Elisha's ministry is not pointed to the nation or the kings, but to other atypical characters. Israel is unable to experience the blessings with which God desires to bless them because they refuse to submit to Him. Therefore, the unlikely individuals become the recipients of Yahweh's mercy and blessings; they are the true faithful followers of Yahweh. The widow in debt, the Shunammite women, and Naaman all experience rich blessing and miraculous restoration. These individuals display genuine faith and obedience to Elisha's commands, and thus, to God. The thesis will focus on these three specific stories in the Elisha narrative.

These three stories have not been selected at random, but have been chosen due to their prominence in the overall narrative. With the exception of the military accounts during Elisha's ministry, these three stories are the longest stories in terms of the number of lines from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The sheer length of the stories reflects the importance of each account in the overall Elisha narrative. The author of Kings is focusing on these three accounts to demonstrate Elisha's intentional ministry toward the atypical character.

The widow's oil, found in 2 Kings 4:1-7, consists of eleven lines, the shortest of the three stories that will be analyzed. In this narrative, Elisha provides an abundant supply of oil for a destitute widow. The stories of the Shunammite woman and her son consist of forty-two lines. The Shunammite woman, a powerful figure in her community, acts decisively and Elisha responds. Furthermore, a separate account of the woman is found in 2 Kings 8:1-6. The last story, the healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-27, consists of forty-nine lines.⁴ Here, a general in the army of Israel's enemy travels to Israel and receives healing from Elisha. The actions and faith of these three people, a destitute widow, a powerful and wealthy woman, and a non-Jewish

⁴Jerome T. Walsh, "The Organization of 2 Kings 3-11," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2010): 242-243.

military official, strikingly contrast with the expected recipients of prophetic miracles and blessings. It is not Jewish males who benefit from Elisha's ministry, but women and a foreigner. These characters demonstrate that Elisha's ministry specifically focuses on atypical characters. God uses Elisha to intentionally target the unexpected individual, further emphasizing the Lord's heart for all people.

Understanding the distinct atypical character focus of the Elisha narrative is important, for it connects to God's overall plan to make all peoples know Him. Just as the foreign general, the destitute widow, and the powerful woman all recognize the power of Yahweh through the work of the prophet, so God desires all unlikely characters, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic standing, to recognize His greatness.

Therefore, the thesis will argue that the apostasy of Israel leads Elisha's ministry to focus on unlikely characters, women and a Syrian general, whose faith starkly contrasts with the unbelief of the Israelite kings and the chosen people as a whole. The unlikely characters display genuine faith, whereas those who should demonstrate their faithfulness reject the prophet Elisha and Yahweh.

The Books of Kings

1 and 2 Kings reveal the royal history of Israel in the Old Testament. Kings narrates the royal history of the kings after David has established the kingdom and his reign. From the death of David to the fall of Jerusalem, Kings traces the rise, division, and fall of the kings of Israel and Judah. Despite being a royal history, two non-royal figures dominate the narrative. Elijah and Elisha, as well as the other prophets in this section of the Hebrew Bible, overshadow the lives of the kings. They are the main characters; the kings are secondary. "The ministry of the prophets assume so prominent a position in the books of the Kings, whereas the history of the

kings appears sometimes to fall into the background in comparison.”⁵ The spiritual vitality and power of Elijah and Elisha stand as a foil against the declining faithfulness and growing apostasy of the kings of the chosen people, as well as the overall society. Both figures stands firm in a time of incredible and blatant disobedience, displaying the utter power of God to the people. In a time of crisis, Elijah’s character demonstrates integrity—an individual of “outstanding natural dignity and a commanding presence.”⁶ Elisha does the same.

The accounts in the books of Kings, originally a single manuscript, reveal Israel’s rampant disobedience through the actions of both the kings and the people. C. Marvin Pate states, “The Deuteronomistic view of the story of Israel asserts, first of all, that the nation has been ‘stiff-necked,’ rebellious and disobedient during its entire existence.”⁷ This trend throughout Israel’s history is exposed yet again in 1 and 2 Kings. Both books move from a positive tone to a negative one.⁸ 1 Kings begins with Solomon’s glorious reign and ends with Ahab’s evil reign; 2 Kings begins with Elisha’s powerful ministry and ends with the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and Judah to the Babylonians.

Clearly, Elisha, who introduces 2 Kings and is the main character of a third of the book, is the most prominent, if not most important, figure of 2 Kings, since “9 out of 25 chapters of the Book of Kings II are devoted to Elisha's career, while the remaining 16 chapters deal with no

⁵C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 5.

⁶Francis Cheesebrough Lightbourn, “The ‘Story’ in the Old Testament,” *Anglican Theological Review* 21 (1939): 99.

⁷C. Marvin Pate, J. Scott Duvall, J. Daniel Hays, E. Randolph Richards, W. Dennis Tucker Jr., and Preben Vang, *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 18.

⁸Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury*, Focus on the Bible Series (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2011), 12.

fewer than 13 kings of Israel and 17 kings of Judah.”⁹ The Israelite kings span approximately one hundred and thirty-two years until they fall to Assyria in 722 BC; the kings of Judah span two hundred and eighty-nine years until they fall to Babylon in 586 BC. It is obvious that more than any other figure, Elisha is the focus of 2 Kings. The author is intentionally focusing on Elisha amidst centuries of history.

Elijah and Elisha are non-writing prophets. It is believed that the Deuteronomistic Historian, or School, which flourished at the latest during the time of Josiah (640-609 BC) and continued after the fall of Jerusalem, utilized the oral tradition to write down the accounts. Despite heavy reliance on the oral tradition, in addition to the accounts written much later, the books of Kings are trustworthy, historical accounts. “While the accounts of these prophets may have been shaped by the Deuteronomic scribes, they may have utilized older traditions without significant distortions.”¹⁰ The rich, oral tradition is reliable.

Review of Elisha Scholarship

A brief review of the contemporary research of the prophet Elisha must be stated. Literary approaches toward biblical studies have abounded, particularly with Elisha scholarship. For example, Robert Cohn’s commentary in the Berit Olam series emphasizes the literary angles of 2 Kings. It is an excellent resource that connects the Elisha narrative together as a literary unit. Keith Bodner’s *Elisha’s Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* compares Elisha’s ministry with Elijah’s, emphasizing the parallelism and connectedness between the two prophets. Leah Bronner’s *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship* reveals the direct connection between the prophets’ miracles and their crusade to demonstrate that Yahweh,

⁹Shimon Bakon, “Elisha the Prophet,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29 no. 4 (2001): 242.

¹⁰P. L. Redditt, “Prophecy, History of”, in *IVP Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 592.

not Baal, was the true God. Marvin Sweeney's commentary in the Old Testament Library series possesses a strong exegetical study of 2 Kings that deftly connects both 1 and 2 Kings. Paul House's New American Commentary of 1 and 2 Kings interacts with the original language and with the literary thrusts of the narrative. John Olley's *The Message of Kings: God is Present* is particularly insightful. Rick Dale Moore's *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* explores the stylistic and literary features of biblical texts. Moore delves deeply in the Aramean texts and provides much helpful information. Wesley Bergen, in *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, views Elisha as a negative character. The shift in language from the Lord speaking to the prophetic word according to Elisha (2 Kings 2:19-22), Bergen argues, is a negative insinuation in regards to the prophet. Lastly, Phillip Satterhwaite's article "The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2-8" exposes the literary unity and coherence of the Elisha account.

With the increased number of literary approaches to the text, narrative criticism has increased as well. Narrative criticism, which connects the stories with its larger context, analyzes the literary themes, plot, motifs, characterization, style, figures or speech, symbols, and repetition of the story.¹¹ This thesis aims to view the Elisha narratives through narrative criticism and analyze several accounts in conjunction to their impact on the overall Elisha narrative. Doing such will develop the themes and overarching thrust of the Elisha narrative, revealing the atypical character thrust of the Elisha account as a whole. As literary approaches and narrative criticism support one another, both will be heavily utilized to analyze and interpret the Elisha account, determining that the emphases of Israel's disobedience and Elisha's ministry toward unlikely characters is clearly emphasized through the author's literary structure and narrative thrust of 2 Kings.

¹¹J. C. Robinson, "Narrative," in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 236-237.

Categorization of Biblical Narratives

The Elisha passages are narrative based. Alexander Rofe classifies biblical narratives in three different categories. Simple legenda are accounts that are brief and direct with little plot development; the Elisha food miracles, each consisting of only a few verses, are included in this category. Perhaps the oral account was longer with greater detail, but the writer of Kings has skillfully and purposefully edited them.¹² It is clear that “the Israelite storyteller was not a primitive who could not even master his language ... The conciseness of the present stories rather reveals the opposite: the man who reduced these narratives to writing took the pains, and had the skill, to condense them.”¹³ Although short in form, the food miracles reveal powerful miracles that have been intentionally condensed to emphasize the power of Elisha’s spirit.

The second classification of biblical narratives is literary elaborations. Literary elaborations are fuller accounts with a plot, development of circumstances, and characters that precede and proceed from the miraculous act. They are “much more than the bare account of a miracle; we have an entire plot, with a full development of circumstances which precede each miracle.”¹⁴ The miracles of the widow’s oil, Shunammite women, and Naaman are all literary elaborations. Each account has an extended description and progression of what occurs before, during, and after the miraculous event. These three literary elaborations will be analyzed in order to further expose Elisha’s intentional ministry toward the atypical character. The last classification is *vita*. *Vita* accounts are birth or transformative points. Elisha’s inauguration into his ministry is a *vita*, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

¹² Alexander Rofe, “The Classification of the Prophetic Stories,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89, no. 4 (1970): 432.

¹³*Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

Conclusion

The introductory chapter has stated the thesis, has given background information concerning the book of Kings, elaborated upon the history of Elisha scholarship, and discussed the various types of biblical narratives. Such information introduces the topic and provides a foundation for the development of the thesis statement. It will be demonstrated that the Elisha narrative exposes the apostasy of the nation and thus, unlikely characters become the recipients of Elisha's ministry and Yahweh's blessings.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the Elisha scholarship by calling attention to the distinct focus of Elisha's ministry towards the atypical character, which occurs as a result of Israel's vast disobedience. This disobedience, which is prevalent throughout all levels of society, sharply contrasts with the faithful obedience of the widow, Shunammite woman, and Naaman, all who represent different social strata and standing. Therefore, the nation and people of Israel experience curses and increased punishment while the faithful individuals experience God's deliverance and great blessing.

Chapter II: The Elisha Narrative

Elisha is a powerful man of God who performs miraculous actions through the empowering of the Spirit. As A.W. Pink observes, “Far more miracles were wrought by [Elisha] or were granted in answer to his prayers than any other of the Old Testament prophets.”¹ In a society that was moving further and further away from God, Elisha’s ministry stands as a reminder that God continues to beckon the nation to return to Him. His authority and power, which stems from his close relationship with Yahweh, is evident. His word is effective; God hears his prayers and responds accordingly. An understanding of the prophet’s illustrious career is essential to understanding the disobedience of the nation and the focus of the atypical character in Elisha’s ministry. This chapter will provide a short overview of the prophet Elisha’s life and ministry. Chapter II will summarize the Elisha narrative. His calling, succession of Elijah, a comparison between the two prophets, and his death will be discussed.

His Calling

Elisha’s calling is found in 1 Kings 19:19-21. This account, although only three verses in length, is a pivotal moment in the Kings account. The event bridges the two prominent figures of Kings and passes the ministry from one to the other. Elijah departs from Mount Horeb, where he first fled to escape Jezebel’s wrath. Walter Brueggemann explains, “He finds Elisha doing field work (with twelve yoke of oxen!), and he throws his mantle over him. The choice is decisive; the deed is done irreversibly, and Elisha knows it.”² Elisha understands that Elijah’s mantle is an invitation to become a man of God. The call is nonverbal, for it needs no verbal explanation.

¹Arthur Wilkington Pink, *Gleanings from Elisha: His Life and Miracles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 7.

² Walter Brueggemann, “The Stunning Outcome of a One-Person Search Committee,” *Journal for Preachers* 25, no. 1 (2001): 36.

“There is only a dramatic act that both parties understand.”³ This mantle, the same one Elijah used to protect himself from the theophany (1 Kings 19:9-18), is thrown upon Elisha as a call to become Elijah’s successor to symbolize what was Elijah’s ministry is now placed upon Elisha.⁴

The twelve pairs of oxen are significant for several reasons. They display the immense wealth Elisha’s family possesses. In a time of drought and famine, Elisha is not only plowing the field to prepare for the farming season, but is doing so with twenty-four oxen. Yet, this great wealth is not an obstacle for Elisha, for he recognizes that material wealth pales in comparison to the honor of becoming a man of God and following a great prophet. He must totally forego his current life and follow Elijah, but does so willingly and joyfully. “Elisha’s response does not indicate unwillingness but a clear recognition of what is demanded (‘I will come after you’) and an obvious desire to comply.”⁵ The twelve yoke of oxen also parallel the twelve stones Elijah uses at Mount Carmel, which were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. Keith Bodner states, “With Elisha’s twelve pairs the reader is not given the same explicit parameters, but rather invited to make a connection: just as Elijah’s twelve stones are used to (re)build the altar of Israel’s covenant relationship, so Elisha’s work with the twenty-four oxen will double these efforts for the nation.”⁶ The twelve yokes, like the twelve stones, transitions Elisha from a farmer to a man responsible for the twelve tribes of Israel, even in a time when the tribes are divided into two nations.

³Walter Brueggeman, *1 & 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 239.

⁴Kaltner, John, “What Did Elijah Do to his Mantle? The Hebrew Root *GLM*,” in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon*, eds. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 226.

⁵Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly* (Geanies House, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 274.

⁶Keith Bodner, *Elisha’s Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 34-35.

Elisha sacrifices a pair of oxen and feeds it to the people as his last deed before following Elijah. “By feeding the people with the twelfth yoke, Elisha indicates the end of his life as farmer and new beginning as nurturer of Israel.”⁷ This transitional act not only reveals Elisha’s acceptance and eagerness of his new position, but great kindness. It is an indicator of his character and thus, the tone of his future ministry. He desires to serve the local people in some manner before he leaves and decides to take a pair of his own oxen, sacrifices it, boils it, and provides a meal for the people. “At a time when poverty was widespread, this was an extraordinarily generous act.”⁸ Elisha’s desire to minister to those who are poor, on the margin, and often forgotten is evident from this first act as Elijah’s official successor.

His Succession

Elijah’s ascension and Elisha’s succession account is found in 2 Kings 2:1-15. The entire chapter focuses on this pivotal moment, as the mantle is officially passed from Elijah to Elisha. “Succession is a major focus in the Elijah-Elisha stories because it addresses not just the continuation of a prophetic ministry but also the very continuity of God’s people.”⁹ Elijah’s incredible ministry has an incredible ending. Elijah’s deathless entrance into heaven is a reward for his boldness and faithfulness to Yahweh during a time of rampant apostasy. John Olley states, “[Elijah] is often described as the person who saved Israel from complete abandonment of

⁷Robert L. Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 3 (1982): 349.

⁸David J. Zucker, “Elijah and Elisha. Part 2, Similarities and Differences,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41 (2013): 21.

⁹Jonathan Huddleston, “What Would Elijah and Elisha Do? Internarrativity in Luke’s Story of Jesus,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5, no. 2 (2011): 277.

YHWH, although a century later all is gone. His disappearance at the end, like Moses, marked him out as special.”¹⁰

Elijah, Elisha, and the sons of the prophets are all aware that Yahweh will take him to heaven soon. The sons of the prophets ask, “Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?” (2 Kgs. 2:3, 5) The close relationship between Elijah and Elisha is evident, for Elisha refuses to leave Elijah, clinging to his mentor for as long as possible. When Elijah and Elisha reach the Jordan, Elijah takes his mantle, strikes the water, and the river parts as they cross on dry ground. This mantle, which has been a tangible sign of Elijah’s ministry, demonstrates Elijah’s anointing once again.

Elisha has one last request—he asks for a double portion of the spirit that enabled Elijah’s ministry, which will be discussed in the following section. Suddenly, a chariot of fire and horses separate the two and Elijah is taken up to heaven by a whirlwind. When Elijah disappears, Elisha deeply, sincerely mourns. “When Elijah is taken from him, Elisha does not simply tear his clothes, a traditional expression of sorrow (e.g., 22:11), but tears them ‘in two pieces’ (v. 12), tangibly expressing the depth of his pain.”¹¹ After expressing his sadness, Elisha picks up the mantle, strikes the waters, and crosses over on dry land, following the footsteps of his predecessor. Brian Britt states, “[Elijah’s cloak] represents his prophetic office: it becomes a token of Elisha’s commission immediately afterward and in the miraculous ascent of Elijah in 2 Kings, where the mantle parts the waters.”¹² Elijah further cements his succession by traveling to

¹⁰ John Olley, “YHWH and His Zealous Prophet: The Presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 80 (1998): 49.

¹¹ Gene Rice, “Elijah’s Requirement for Prophetic Leadership (2 Kings 2:1-8),” *Journal of Religious Thought* 59-60, no. 1 (2006-2007): 7.

¹² Brian Britt, “Prophetic Concealment in a Biblical Type Scene,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2002): 46.

Mount Carmel and Samaria, two major sites of Elijah's ministry.¹³ Elisha has officially succeeded Elijah as the man of God.

A Double Portion of the Spirit

The parallels between Elijah and Elisha are unmistakable. "Time and again Elisha does or says things which recall the deeds and words of his predecessor Elijah."¹⁴ Elisha continues the ministry that Elijah initiates. Elijah prophesies the end of Ahab's line, but it is Elisha who sees the fulfillment of the word. Keith Bodner states, "Elijah speaks the prophetic utterance about the end of the Omrides and inaugurates the process, but it is brought to completion by his double agent and successor in a story thick with plot and character."¹⁵ Elisha witnesses what his predecessor began. However, the parallelism is further emphasized because of Elisha's last request to Elisha. Elisha has received the double portion of the spirit. Therefore it is natural that as a man with the double portion, he doubles and parallels his predecessor's miracles. "Elisha's miracles repeat and multiply elements of the miracles of his teacher Elijah, from whom he requested 'twice as much as your spirit'."¹⁶

Elisha's request for his double portion of Elijah's spirit is a request for the main share of Elijah's prophetic power. M.A. O'Brien states, "[Elisha] is after the lion's share of Elijah's prophetic power. The Deuteronomic text refers to the eldest son's right to a double share of his father's inheritance. Elisha is therefore claiming a unique prophetic status as his right."¹⁷ The "double portion" of the Spirit should be interpreted as parallel to the laws of primogeniture in the

¹³Zucker, "Elijah and Elisha: Part Two": 20.

¹⁴Paul J. Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 149.

¹⁵Bodner, 163.

¹⁶Levine. "Twice as Much of Your Spirit, 46.

¹⁷M. A. O'Brien, "The Portrayal of Prophets in 2 Kings 2," *Australian Biblical Review* 46 (1998), 10.

Old Testament. Elisha's double portion reflects a desire to inherit Elijah's power, just as the firstborn Israelite would receive a double portion of his father's possessions, as stated in the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 21:17). The firstborn's right was a double portion of all the father had. Since there were other prophets that would interact with Elijah, such as the sons of the prophets, Elisha's request solidifies himself as Elijah's main successor. Thus, Keith Bodner argues, "One can now better appreciate the roles of the other 'prophetic sons,' following them in this particular episode, as now Elisha is poised to inherit the mantle of firstborn son and heir of Elijah."¹⁸

It is obvious that "Elisha's miracles not only double Elijah's but seem to parallel and multiply them in their themes, elements, and language."¹⁹ Thus, common themes, motifs, and even wordplays are prevalent in both narratives, in order to compare and contrast their ministries and their relationship to one another and to Israel, of which they greatly impact. As the bearer of Elijah's double portion, Elisha multiplies oil for a widow (2 Kings 4:1-7), just as Elijah did (1 Kings 17:8-16). Elijah and Elisha resuscitate a boy from death (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:8-37). Both figures send oracles to morally ill kings, although the kings are of different nations (2 Kings 1:1-18; 2 Kings 8:7-15). These parallels seem to be an intentional—Elisha's miracles have a counterpart in the Elijah cycle.²⁰

Furthermore, Elisha's greater anointing is highlighted by the use of a messenger. Elisha utilizes an assistant who speaks Elisha's words to others. As Mark Roncace observes, "Typically, the use of a messenger indicates that the one who sends the message is more powerful than one

¹⁸Bodner, 54.

¹⁹Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 92.

²⁰Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (Anchor Bible 10; New York: Doubleday, 1988), 59.

who receives it.”²¹ Elisha speaks through a servant, rather than addressing the individual directly, revealing Elisha’s great authority.

Despite Elisha’s lofty position and influence, there are certain elements that might appear to undermine the effectiveness and strength of Elisha’s ministry. First, the author of Kings never calls Elisha a prophet, but only as a “man of God”. “Given the double spirit received by Elisha the biblical narrative does not show him great respect as a top rank prophet. First, the narrative never calls him a prophet per se. He is referred to in the third person only as a man of God.”²² Additionally, there are no recorded conversations between Elisha and Yahweh. Whereas Elijah argues and speaks with God, who in turn responds (1 Kings 17:9-10, 20-22; 18:37-38; 19:9-18), there is no reported instance of God speaking to Elisha. Rather, the single time Elisha refers to an interaction with God is when he says to the Shunammite woman that God has hidden the reason for why her son has perished from him. “Of course this by definition tells us that God speaks to Elisha but there is a strange silence in that we *never* find reported *direct speech* of God to Elisha.”²³ Despite these oddities, it is evident that Elisha does possess this God-given double portion. Perhaps the author is choosing to emphasize Elisha’s anointed double portion of the spirit rather than his reliance on Yahweh by removing divine conversations and calling Elisha a prophet, because it is obvious that it is only through God that Elisha can perform such miracles.

As the double-bearer of the spirit, Elisha’s ministry addresses the unfaithfulness of Israel, as Elijah did, but in a different manner. “The majority of [the miracles] performed by Elijah were associated with death and destruction, whereas by far the greater of those attributed to Elisha

²¹Mark Roncace, “Elisha and the Woman of Shunem: 2 Kings 4:8-37 and 8:1-6 Read in Conjunction,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no. 91 (2000): 112.

²²Elliot Gertel, “Moses, Elisha, and Transferred Spirit: The Height of Biblical Prophecy? Part II,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2002): 172.

²³Levine, 45.

were works of healing and restoration.”²⁴ Elijah’s miracles are directly against the apostasy and evil prevalent in the land, seeking to destroy them, but Elisha’s miracles seem to focus on healing and restoration, as an “almost continuous testimony to the readiness of God to relieve the distressed and respond to the call of need wherever that call came from a contrite and believing heart.”²⁵

His Death

Elisha’s death is recorded several chapters after the Elisha narrative has concluded. As almost a second conclusion to the Joash account, 2 Kings 13:14-21 recounts Elisha’s death and burial.²⁶ However, “even in death, the presence of Elisha makes a difference.”²⁷ Throughout his ministry, Elisha continuously demonstrates his ability to bring life and restore. Even after his death, Elisha accomplishes this once more, emphasizing his role as “a ‘life-bringer’ and a powerful force for life with a capacity to transform circumstances of death.”²⁸ When Elisha dies and his body is being buried, a man is cast into Elisha’s grave. When the man touches Elisha’s bones, he is revived and stands. Elisha is dead, but he remains the focus of the narrative; the man who falls into the grave remains nameless because he is unimportant in the story. Yael Shemesh argues, “The narrator is silent about the subsequent adventures of the living dead after his miraculous resurrection because he has absolutely no interest in his fate. The man’s sole narrative function is to serve as the object of a miracle that provides final evidence of the

²⁴Pink, 11.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶J. Maxwell Miller, “The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, no. 4 (1966): 451.

²⁷Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 450.

²⁸Walter Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 432.

holiness and greatness of the deceased prophet.”²⁹ Elisha performs one last miracle; even in death, he provides life.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of Elisha’s ministry. Beginning with his calling and ending with his death, the chapter has demonstrated the vastness of Elisha’s ministry. Elisha does not hesitate when Elijah calls him, but excitedly and joyfully follows the prophet, leaving behind his family and a life of wealth and security. Elisha miraculously witnesses Elijah’s ascension and subsequently picks up Elijah’s mantle and assumes his role as prophet of Israel. The fulfillment of his request for the double portion of the spirit is clear, for Elisha’s power is evident. Even in death, Elisha miraculously brings life. Despite succeeding one of the most important prophets of Israel’s history, Elisha does not shy away from the task. Rather, he boldly and assertively ministers to the people.

The brief overview of Elisha’s ministry as a whole is necessary to understand the prominence of the Elisha account in Kings. Elisha is certainly no insignificant figure. Thus, the ministry he has with the atypical character is noteworthy. The disobedience of Israel greatly shapes Elisha’s ministry to individuals.

²⁹Yael Shemesh, “The Elisha Stories as Saints’ Legends.” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (2008): 35.

Chapter III: Israel's Apostasy

Israel's growing apostasy is well established by the time of Elisha. This chapter will analyze the religious climate of the nation. A discussion of both the spiritual condition of the kings of Israel and of the people will reveal that the nation was clearly unfaithful to God and possessed a complete misunderstanding of who Yahweh is. The kings and the people's unfaithfulness and lack of knowledge of God are highlighted in the military accounts throughout the Elisha narrative. It will be concluded that Israel was in a perpetual state of apostasy, which then leads Elisha to turn away from the nation as a whole and specifically minister to unlikely characters.

The miracles of both Elijah and Elisha are tailored to combat the apostasy within Israel. Elijah and Elisha are the only other prophets except Moses to perform miracles. Miracles were necessary for both prophets' ministries to demonstrate their legitimacy as men of God and establish the reality of Yahweh's anger to a spiritually bankrupt society. "By means of drastic impositions, by awe-inspiring displays of His power, by supernatural manifestations of His justice and mercy alike, God forced even the skeptical to recognize His existence and subscribe to His supremacy."¹ These miracles are pointed demonstrations against Israel's kings. Victor H. Matthews states, "The miracles performed by these prophets were not so much authorizations of their power but rather indictments of the monarchs' abuse of their power and authority."² The miracles of Elijah and Elisha are not simple shows of power, but are theological demonstrations to display the righteousness of God and His desire for the people to return to Him and follow the Law He has provided.

¹ Pink, 7.

²Victor H. Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 31.

The History and Saturation of Apostasy in Israelite Society

The kings of Judah were anointed as God's adopted son. The Davidic Covenant promised that the Davidic line would continue—a house, kingdom, and seed would last (2 Samuel 7). This unconditional promise, however, had conditional elements as well. Each king was responsible to keep the Mosaic Covenant. If he did, the nation would be blessed and would prosper. Walter C. Kaiser observes, “The ‘breaking’ or conditionality can only refer to *personal* and *individual* invalidation of the benefits of the covenant, but it cannot affect the transmission of the promise to the lineal descendants.”³ Thus, with a disobedient king, the generation would suffer the consequences to sin. However, God remained faithful to the covenant he established with David. “That is why God would staunchly affirm His fidelity and the perpetuity of the covenant to David in spirit of succeeding rascals who would appear in his lineage.”⁴

Although the kings of the Northern Kingdom Israel were not of the Davidic line, their actions still affected the religious climate of the nation. The kings, just like all the other Israelites, were responsible to obey the Mosaic Law. Yet, each of the Northern Kingdom's rulers was unfaithful. The kings did evil in the eyes of the Lord and were therefore punished accordingly, Israelite king unashamedly disregarded Yahweh and His law by introducing gods and pagan worship to the people.

The first king of Israel initiated improper worship characterizes the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam institutionalized false worship at Dan and Bethel, erecting sanctuaries throughout Israel to prohibit the people from traveling to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:25-44). Consequently, syncretism and Baal worship became more and more prevalent. Thus, the location of the

³Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 157.

⁴Kaiser, 157.

succession account of Elijah and Elisha is significant. The pair, along with the sons of the prophets, travel to Bethel from Gilgal. The statement of “going down” to Bethel, a location where apostasy was institutionally practiced, is an intentional polemic against the syncretistic worship Jeroboam erected.⁵ Whereas, other passages mention the direction is “up” (cf. Gen 35:1; Judg 20:18, 23; 1 Sam 10:3; Hos 4:15), the opposite direction is utilized here. The writer of Kings is deliberately stating that Elijah and Elisha are travelling downward not in terms of physical or geographical direction, but to designate “the symbolic meaning at work in this passage and its broader literary context.”⁶ Elijah and Elisha are going downward spiritually toward a location of unfaithfulness. Yet, in such a place, God chooses to miraculously receive Elijah into heaven.

The pinnacle of disobedience occurs during the reign of King Ahab, who commits great evil before the Lord. Jerome T. Walsh explains the severity of Ahab’s misdeeds, “The phrase ‘committed great abomination is a technical term for heinous religious or ethical wrongdoing’; and the word used for idols is the same as in 15:12 and is a further echo of the scatological language of the dynastic condemnation.”⁷ Therefore, the demise of the Omride Dynasty Elijah prophesies and the effects of their sin are realized during Elisha’s ministry. The two prophets’ ministries are further connected by the fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy. “The themes of the destruction of Ahab’s line and war against [Baal] form a crucial part of the background to chs. 2-8, and that many episodes in these chapters must be understood in relation to them.”⁸

⁵Joel S. Burnett, “‘Going Down’ to Bethel: Elijah and Elisha in the Theological Geography of the Deuteronomistic History,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 283.

⁶Burnett, 286.

⁷Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 334.

⁸Phillip E. Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2-8,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (1998): 3-4.

Baal worship is not only accepted but also prevalent in Israel's society. This is most evident in the Mount Carmel account of 1 Kings 18. Baal prophets would often mimic what they desired Baal to do in heaven.⁹ Thus, at Mount Carmel, the prophets danced to mimic fire flames, cut themselves so the blood would pour down, just as they desired Baal to pour forth fire from heaven. Elijah firmly stands against Baal worship in defiance of the king. In Elijah's mind, Mount Carmel is a sure victory, for he does not doubt the power of Yahweh or the futility of the false prophets' actions. As Herbert Parzen states, "His stern opposition to Baal worship was not simply due to the fact that the Baal was a foreign deity, the god of Tyre. It was rather due to the conviction that the Baal was no god at all... YHWH is God, Baal is nothing, is Elijah's view."¹⁰

The author of Kings is aware of the myths concerning Baal and therefore uses both the Elijah and Elisha miracles as pointed polemics against the futility of the people and the kings' misplaced trust in other gods or political alliances. The author desires "to liberate the people from these beliefs by showing through the agency of concrete examples and incidents that all the power ascribed by Ugaritic mythology to Baal, are really the attributes only of the God, the Lord of Israel."¹¹ Therefore, the miracles of Elisha purposefully demonstrate that it is Yahweh, not Baal, who is in control. Elisha's ability to manipulate the weather, food, child-bearing, resurrection, and restoration are powers Baal possessed. F. Charles Fensham notes, "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."¹²

⁹J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 406.

¹⁰Herbert Parzen, "The Prophet and the Omri Dynasty," *Harvard Theological Review* 33, no. 2 (1940): 74.

¹¹Bronner, 54.

¹²F. Charles Fensham, "A Few Observations on the Polarisation between Yahweh and Baal in 1 Kings 17-19," *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92, no. 2 (1980): 223.

The Disobedience of the Kings

The unfaithfulness of the kings is seen most clearly through the military accounts in the Elisha narrative. “The historian is using accounts of Israel’s military campaigns against Syria and Moab (both of them failures for Israel) to illustrate and underline his major point that the word of the Lord as spoken to Israel by the prophets does not always support the political aims of the kings of Israel.”¹³ The military accounts, which are quite lengthy, are some of the longest accounts in the Elisha narrative. Whereas the military accounts reveal the spiritually waywardness of the kings, the leaders of the nation of the chosen people of God, the individual accounts of Elisha ministering to the widow, the Shunammite woman, and Naaman reveal spiritually rich, faithful people. The author of Kings intentionally contrasts the two groups to highlight Israel’s apostasy. The individual accounts will be discussed later. The kings do not believe or trust in Yahweh, but unlikely, marginalized, foreigner individuals do.

King Jehoram reveals not only unfaithfulness, but also disinterest in Yahweh and His prophets. Although not quite as evil as his father Ahab, Jehoram continues to commit the sins of Jeroboam and does not remove Baal worship (2 Kings 3:1-3). It is evident that Jehoram does not regard the prophet or God as an authoritative spiritual leader. When the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom battle against Moab, they seek direction from Elisha, but only after Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, suggests doing so. Elisha’s apparent disgust for Jehoram is blatant, but since the king of Judah, who has a much higher regard for Yahweh and for the prophet, is present, Elisha consents (2 Kgs 3:14). Elisha commands the kings to dig trenches in the valley, for God will miraculously fill the trenches with water. Then God will give the Moabites to the coalition; then

¹³John R. Barlett, “The ‘United’ Campaign against Moab in 2 Kgs 3.4-27” in *Midian, Moab and Edom: The History and Archaeology of Late Bronze and Iron Age Jordan and North West Arabia*, eds. J.F.A. Sawyer and D.J.A. Clines (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1983), 137.

they are to strike every fortified city, fell the trees, stop the springs of water, and mar the land with stones.

God faithfully provides the water, which the Moabites see as red as blood. They conclude that there was infighting, and rush the valley to obtain the spoil. When they arrive, the Israelites arise and strike the Moabites—God has delivered them into the alliance’s hands. They chase after them, slaughtering them, destroying the cities, and stopping the springs, just as Elisha prophesied. However, the alliance is defeated; the Moabites are victorious, for when the Moabite king sees that they may lose the battle, he sacrifices his oldest son, the heir to the throne, on the wall. As a result, “there came a great wrath against Israel, and they departed from him and returned to their own land (2 Kgs 3:27b).”¹⁴

Because of Jehoram’s lack of commitment to Yahweh, the prophecy “failed”. This does not diminish the reliability of Yahweh’s character or promise, because, like most prophecies, “the fulfillment of Elisha’s oracle of victory was inherently contingent upon Israel’s willingness to bring it to completion.”¹⁵ This account does not reveal some type of failure by Yahweh, but failure by Israel when faced with military opposition. Jehoram’s partial success mirrors his partial commitment to Yahweh. He removed the pillars of Baal, but continued in the practices of Jeroboam. “As such, the report of Israel’s retreat at the end of the chapter combines with the introductory report to form a thematic inclusio for the chapter: Those whose commitment to Yahweh is half-hearted invariably fail to experience the fullness of his blessing.”¹⁶

¹⁴Raymond Westbrook, “Elisha’s True Prophecy in 2 Kings 3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 3 (2005): 531.

¹⁵Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Israel’s Retreat and the Failure of Prophecy in 2 Kings 3,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 92, no. 1 (2011): 71.

¹⁶Chisholm, 71.

Therefore, Elisha's prophecy is fulfilled. Each step of the prophecy comes to fruition, yet because of the people's ignorance and the kings' inability to trust in God for victory, they are unable to successfully defeat the Moabites. Elisha does not offer a deliberate false prophecy, but due to the unfaithful, misguidedness of Jehoram, he is unable to experience victory. The goodness of God is prevalent. Despite the unfaithfulness of the king, God still responds with a miraculous filling of the valley. Yet, because of the disobedience of the people, they are unable to experience military victory.

2 Kings 6:24-7:20 also displays the ignorance and the unwillingness of the king to believe that deliverance is possible. The Syrians have attacked the city and Samaria is under siege; the city is in great distress. Frustrated by this situation, the king swears to kill Elisha that very day. The very individual the king should seek for advice and wisdom, the very individual who may be able to bring about deliverance, becomes the individual of whom the king is targeting to kill. However, one must understand that the king was not necessarily acting irrationally. "This blame makes sense only in light of the previous episode in which Elisha urged the king against his own inclination, to send the Aramean troops home well-fed. Now those troops have returned to bring Israel the misery illustrated by the case of the cannibal mothers."¹⁷ It is evident that the king clearly does not possess faith in Elisha's ability to restore this situation; the king does not realize that just as Elisha was able to blind the Aramean troops in the previous passage, Elisha possesses the ability to deliver the city from a horrible siege.

Despite the king's unbelief, Elisha still offers a prophecy. He declares that within twenty-four hours, the siege will be over and food will be in plenty. Even when reports that the Aramean camp has been deserted are relayed, the king remains skeptical. He says to his servants, "I will now tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know we are hungry; therefore they have

¹⁷Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings*, (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 50.

gone from the camp to hide themselves in the field saying, ‘When they come out of the city, we shall capture them alive and get into the city’ (2 Kings 7:12).” It is only after the servants imploringly ask him to allow some men to travel to the deserted camp and determine whether the Syrians have truly left or not that the king sends an army to the camp. Again, God demonstrates grace to a people who are undeserving and unbelieving. Although the kings possess little faith nor have any interest in fully following Yahweh, God, in his covenantal love, delivers the people and shows mercy upon them.

It is not surprising that the kings reflect an unbelieving heart towards Yahweh’s ability to assist and deliver them, for they possessed a misunderstanding of religion altogether. The kings are hostile toward Elisha, the man of God—they have taken Elisha to be an enemy precisely because he has unloosed transformative energy and authority in his realm.¹⁸ The kings are naturally hostile to Elisha because they are hostile to God. Yet, God continues to show mercy to the kings.

The Unfaithfulness of the People

Although much of the religious climate is determined by the actions of the kings, the people of Israel also display unfaithfulness and disobedience to God. Like the kings, the people are unfamiliar with who God is and what He desires. Israel does not seek God as the one, true source of their strength and protection, but place their trust in other sources. Rather than solely relying upon God, who has given them a Law to know exactly how to live their lives, the people of Israel choose instead to be influenced by the pagan cultures around them and follow their religious practices. For the pagans, gods are merely glorified beings who possess certain powers that behave just as humans do. Leah Bronner states, “The study of Near Eastern mythology

¹⁸Walter Brueggemann, “Elisha as the Original Pentecost Guy: Ten Theses,” *Journal for Preachers* 32, no. 4 (2009): 43.

shows that the gods were regarded as beings subject to all human functions as sleeping, eating, drinking, procreating etc.... The Biblical concept of God is remarkably different. The God of Israel is not subject to nature, He is above it and controls it.”¹⁹ They seem to possess a hybrid, syncretistic view of Yahweh, impacted by the pagan religions surrounding them. Their misunderstanding of who God is and how He operates is blatant through their actions.

Israel, as the people of God, is bound to the Mosaic Covenant. “Israel had to be holy, for her God, Yahweh, was holy (Lev. 20:26; 22:31-33). As such, they could not be consecrated to any further to any thing or person (27:26) or enter into any rival relationships (18:2-5).”²⁰ These guidelines for living were bound by abundant blessings when obedient, but also curses if the people chose to forsake God. The demise of the Israelite society is evident throughout the Elisha accounts. The promised covenant curses consistently come to fruition as the society becomes further corrupt and unrighteous.

One of the first actions Elisha performs as Elijah’s successor reveals the depths of perversion and blatant hostility against Yahweh. Found in 2 Kings 2:23-25, this short account reveals the tone of Israel’s corrupt society. Several young men come from their city of Bethel to mock Elisha. Saying, “Go up, you baldhead; go up, you baldhead!”, these boys disrespect Elijah’s chosen successor. Consequently, Elisha curses them; two female bears come and maul forty-two of their number. “The death of 42 of the boys seems to contradict Elisha as lifegiver, but his lifesaving acts are all directed toward those who recognize his holiness.”²¹

¹⁹Leah Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship*, Pretoria Oriental Series 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 135.

²⁰Kaiser, 111.

²¹Freedman, 398.

These young boys are not children, but young men, who are taunting not because they are immature juveniles, but because they are maliciously mocking Elisha and his ministry. The Hebrew phrase “young boys” (וַיִּנְעָרִים קְטַנִּים) refers to young men ranging from anywhere between twelve to thirty years old (cf. 1 Samuel 16:11-12; 2 Samuel 14:21; 18:5), meaning, these individuals were old enough to know that they should show respect toward God’s prophet, particularly the chosen successor of Elijah. Mocking Elisha to ascend just as Elijah did, this large group of men who are no less than forty-two in number, face the punishment for their crime. “The taunting of the young men should be not viewed as immature juvenile activity... The mauling of the youthful mob is not vindictive anger on behalf of Elisha but divine judgment for culpable denial of the divine purpose.”²² Wild animals devour some of their group, just as it says in Deuteronomy 28:26 that the society will experience as a curse for their disobedience to the covenant.

Furthermore, this miracle is a polemic against the idolatry pervasive throughout Israel. The young men are a reflection of the city in which they live. Bethel, one of the main locations of idolatry and syncretistic worship established by Jeroboam, was most likely hostile to welcome a man of God, who would certainly disrupt their daily lifestyle and routine. Roger Ellsworth argues, “We should give due weight to the fact that these young toughs were from Bethel, a center of idolatrous worship since Jeroboam had established the northern kingdom of Israel. If there was any place in Israel where a prophet of the Lord would not be welcome, it was Bethel.”²³ However, it is not only because these young men are from Bethel that this account is significant. Rather, these young men reveal the spiritual state of Israel during the ministry of Elisha. “The youths were typical of a nation that ‘mocked God’s messengers, despised his words

²²August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 382.

²³Roger Ellsworth, *Apostasy, Destruction and Hope* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2002), 41.

and scoffed at his prophets' (2 Chr 36:16)."²⁴ The blatant hostility toward Yahweh has permeated through the society and is evident in the younger generation of Israel.

The Syrian siege of Samaria in 2 Kings 6:24-7:20, which exposed the unbelief of the king, also displays the people's unbelief for Yahweh's ability to deliver them, as well as a clear disregard for the Law. The siege has devastated the city; there is no food to be eaten. The people have been reduced to cannibalism—there is nothing remaining in the city and the people believe that defeat is imminent. Yet, it appears that none are aware that this disaster has occurred as a direct result of their sin. Phillip Satterthwaite states, "The idea of famine as an attack on the claims of Baal's followers and a judgment on Israel for worshipping Baal [is] in line with a general tendency in Kings to link both military reverses and famine with YHWH's judgment on Israel's unfaithfulness."²⁵ Furthermore, siege and cannibalism is explicitly stated as a covenant curse in Deuteronomy 28: 49-57. It is undeniable that God is sending curses to Israel to demonstrate their spiritual unfaithfulness to Him.

Two women come before the king. They have eaten one of their sons, but the second woman refuses to allow them to eat her own son. The famine and siege has become dire—the woman resort to cannibalism as their solution. Yet, even in this dilemma, the woman accusing the other seems to possess no shame. As Stuart Lasine observes, "In 2 Kgs 6.24-33 a breakdown of social relations is not only implied by the nature of the complainant's crime but by her exaggerated obliviousness to the horrible nature of her actions. Her inattentiveness to the way others might view her deed shows that she lacks the public emotion of shame, which makes

²⁴Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*. The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995). 261.

²⁵Satterthwaite, 3-4.

possible orderly social relations.”²⁶ The Israelite society is experiencing the covenant curses, yet does not seem to be aware that they are; furthermore, they do not seem to possess any remorse for their crimes. This is the extent to which the people have separated themselves from the Mosaic Law and from following the one, true God they were commanded to follow. The apostasy of Israel is undeniable.

In the same Samarian siege account, a sarcastic officer refuses to believe Elisha’s prophecy and scoffs that deliverance is even possible. Even with a direct prophecy from the mouth of the prophet that the siege will be lifted within a day, the officer refuses to believe that deliverance will occur. Perhaps this appears to be an impossible task in his eyes, but the officer should have been aware of Israel’s rich history in which Yahweh miraculously and powerfully delivered His people time and time again. Moreover, he has undoubtedly heard of the many miraculous deeds Elisha himself, the very man who is standing in his presence, has performed. Yet, because of the officer’s intentional unbelief, Elisha adds to his prophecy—the man will witness the restoration, but will not be able to partake of the deliverance. When the siege lifts the following day, the people, in their eagerness, trample the man to death while he is at the gate of the city. The phrase “the people trampled on him at the gate, and he died” is repeated twice (2 Kgs 7:17, 20) for moral emphasis.²⁷ The word of the prophet stands above the faithless scoffing of a royal officer.

Even when the people experience military deliverance and victory, Israel cannot fully experience the covenantal blessings because of the pervasive infidelity and disobedience they practice instead of following Yahweh. “The Lord cannot fully bless his people because Israel is

²⁶Stuart Lasine, “Jehoram and the Cannibal Mothers (2 Kings 6:24-33): Solomon’s Judgment in an Inverted World,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991): 33.

²⁷James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951), 388.

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."²⁸ Even when Israel is blatantly disobedient, God continues to demonstrate mercy towards them. Despite the rampant unfaithfulness and the onset of covenant curses within the Israelite society, God's mercy is evident. "In every case where the prophet encounters the king of Israel, [Elisha] aids the king by performing specific tasks. While he may perform the task grudgingly or only under threat, he works at all times to aid the king when the king needs him."²⁹ Yahweh's *hesed* love will not allow Israel to remain under the curses; He will do whatever it takes to restore His unfaithful wife.

Conclusion

This chapter has firmly established the apostasy in Israel. From the beginning of the history of the Divided Kingdom, Israel initiated syncretistic worship. Although each king had a choice to return to Yahweh, they did not, but instead chose to remain in idolatry and false worship. Both the kings and the people display unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Allan Effa observes, "While Israel's worship of Yahweh fizzles, the covenant requirements are ignored and its apostate kings introduce all kinds of foreign deities and practices, fresh outbreaks of faith emerge in some of the most unexpected places."³⁰ As a result, the kings reflect a disinterest and disregard for God and therefore His prophet as well. They do not seek or expect God to intervene in their military struggles; they do not even think to ask Yahweh for deliverance. Likewise, the people display a similar attitude. They disrespect the prophet, mocking him and scoffing at his

²⁸Gary E. Yates, "The Motif of Life and Death in the Elijah-Elisha Narratives and Its Theological Significance in 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 13," *Liberty University Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2008), 22.

²⁹Wesley J. Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism* (Library Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies; Salem, WI: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 45.

³⁰Allan Effa, "Prophets, Kings, Servants, and Lepers: A Missiology Reading of an Ancient Drama," *Missiology* 35, no. 3 (2007): 306.

prophesies, for they do not realize who Elisha serves. The apostasy has permeated through every level of society—kings, officers, youths, and women. Although the people should be well aware of Yahweh's deed throughout their own history, as well as the miraculous deeds God did through Elijah, the kings and the people continue to ignore God and worship Baal and other gods.

Thus, one must turn and analyze the individual displays of faithfulness to God. In these cases, the Lord displays immense grace and kindness, especially in a time in which the nation completely disregards Yahweh as the one, holy, true God of Israel.

Chapter IV: Elisha and His Interaction with Women

Israel's blatant apostasy leads Elisha to search for the few faithful individuals remaining in the nation. Both the kings and the people reflect faithlessness in God and the words of the prophet Elisha, who seeks to display Yahweh's power through his actions. Therefore, Elisha focuses his ministry on unlikely persons who display great faith and obedience. "These faithful Israelites are set over against the unfaithful Northern Kingdom, the larger Israel of which they are a part... By juxtaposing the miracle accounts with narratives relating to the larger Israel, the narrator invites us to draw conclusions about the impact of Elisha's followers on Israel at large."¹ Therefore, Elisha's interaction with specific women must be analyzed. This chapter will establish the intentional prominence of women in the Elisha narrative. This prominence will demonstrate that Elisha's ministry focuses on women as the atypical recipients of God's blessings. Although not all women are faithful to God (such as the cannibalistic women of the Samarian siege), the two women to whom Elisha specifically ministers display obedience and faithfulness to the prophet.

It was against the cultural norms to deal directly and so frequently with women, yet in Elisha's ministry the majority of the individuals with whom Elisha interacts and are recorded in the Kings account are in fact women. God's heart for all people, including those who are upon the fringes of society, is apparent. God desires those who are faithful to Him, regardless of social standing or sex. Gary Yates states, "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."² The first woman, a widow, represents one of the lowest groups of Israelite society. On the other hand, the Shunammite woman clearly possesses wealth and power. She seems to run her

¹Satterthwaite, 8.

²Yates, 20.

household rather than her husband. These two women are greatly different from one another, but both display faithfulness and courage.

Interestingly, both accounts of the women are back-to-back in 2 Kings 4. The author of Kings is intentionally emphasizing Elisha's interaction with women by placing these two accounts adjacent to one another in the Elisha narrative. By doing so, the author emphasizes the prominence of Elisha's ministry toward women, regardless of their social standing. These two women are on opposite ends of the socioeconomic scale but are not grounded in their material wealth or possession, but a faith in God and the work of His prophet—this what the author desires to emphasize. One implores Elisha for assistance because she is absolutely desperate; she has lost her husband, is in crushing debt, and her sons are about to be taken as slaves. The other displays great hospitality to Elisha out of her abundant material wealth. As a result, Elisha desires to repay her and prophesies that a son will be born to her. These two women, who are greatly different from one another, display that if one is faithful, God will respond. Their faith and response to Elisha's words are completely opposite to how the nation as a whole responds to him.

Elisha's interactions with both women reveal that prophets are “not only preachers of sin and repentance; they also are agents of God's healing mercy and kind compassion.”³ Because of the women's receptiveness of the prophet and his work, they experience blessing far more than they initially expect. They are able to experience the fullness of God's blessings—something that Israel is unable to do.

³House, 268.

The Widow and Her Oil

Because widows were destitute after the death of their husbands, they occupied one of the lowest rungs of power in Israelite society.⁴ Yet, God commanded for the nation to assist widows; they were not to be ignored, but to be actively aided. God stated that He would provide food and clothing for the orphan, widow, and alien (Deuteronomy 10:18). He would accomplish this through His people. The Mosaic Law clearly commanded that the society was to care for the widows, so that they would not be impoverished. The people were to leave crops and fruit behind so the widows could gather food (Deuteronomy 24:19, 20, 21), give their tithe every third year to feed those who were not able to grow their own food (Levites, widows, and orphans) (Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:12), and be included in the feasts and festivals (Deuteronomy 16:11, 14). Furthermore, the Mosaic Law also explicitly stated that God would judge those who cursed or afflicted widows (Deuteronomy 27:19). Doing such angered God, and therefore, God would kill the man who afflicted widows (and orphans) as a punishment, making his wife and children widows and fatherless children (Exodus 22:22). Despite explicit laws regarding widows, Israel disobeyed. A result of their apostasy, Israel not only ignored the laws to care for the widows, but exploited their destitution for their own gain. Because of Israel's unfaithfulness to these laws, the widow of 2 Kings 4 turns to Elisha.

In 2 Kings 4:1-7, a widow, whose deceased husband was one of the sons of the prophets, cries out to Elisha. She appeals to him for help; she is in debt and her two children are about to be taken as slaves in order to repay the debt. This situation, which violates the Mosaic Law's commands on multiple counts, will leave the widow with nothing and thus, lead to her death. As the widow implores Elisha, he asks her what she has remaining in her house. The only item left in her possession is a single jar of oil. Elisha commands her to borrow vessels from her

⁴Cohn, "Literary Logic," 346.

neighbors, as many as she can, close the door of her house and pour out the oil from the original jar into the other empty containers. The widow does exactly what Elisha commands. The single jar of oil continuously flows as she pours it into the vessels. When the vessels are full, the oil stops. She reports what has occurred to Elisha, who tells her to sell the excess oil to pay her debt and free her sons and use the excess to financially support herself and her two sons.

This miraculous event reveals the faithfulness of the widow. In a time of desperation and utter despair, she turns to the prophet. She understands that there is no other earthly figure who will be able to rescue her from an impossible situation. She appeals to Elisha by reminding him of her family's past faithfulness. "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves (2 Kgs 4:1)." Here, the creditor and his lack of compassion, who is commanded by the Mosaic Law to take care of the widows (cf. Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:17, 20-21; 26:12-13), is obvious. He is blatantly disregarding Yahweh's commands and has come to take and enslave the widow's children so that their debt may be repaid. F. W. Krummacher observes, "Though the sons of the prophets had most probably interceded in her behalf, her creditor, who evidently hated the people of God, for he oppressed those who were quiet in the land, was only the more importunate."⁵ The disobedience and unfaithfulness of the creditor starkly contrasts with the faith of the widow.

Later Jewish tradition (Josephus and the Targums)⁶ identifies the widow's deceased husband as Obadiah. If her husband was indeed Obadiah, then the debt could have been accumulated from borrowing money to feed the hidden prophets during Ahab's reign (1 Kings 18:4). Regardless of the identity of the husband, the debt is substantial and the widow is desperate.

⁵F.W. Krummacher, *Elisha: A Prophet for Our Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 50.

⁶John Olley, *The Message of Kings: God is Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 228.

Although people throughout the Old Testament almost exclusively appeal to either the king or to the Lord, the widow of 2 Kings 4 appeals to the prophet. Yael Shamesh states, “When a person petitions the king for help, the context is almost always that of the king as the supreme judicial authority, and the petitioner is asking for justice. This is not the situation in the present narrative. The woman is not going to a court of law, but to the man of God.”⁷ The widow recognizes that it is not the king who will be able to remedy this seemingly impossible situation—it is the prophet. Rather, the king is not even mentioned in this account; the king is not even considered as a figure who can assist (or would even desire to assist) the destitute widow. As a wife of a member of the prophetic guild, she was no doubt familiar with the many miracles of which both Elijah and Elisha were capable. Therefore, there is no record of the widow seeking deliverance from anyone else. Her decision is obvious; she must appeal to the man of God.

The widow chooses to place her trust solely on the prophet—this element is emphasized in the narrative. James L. Mead states, “The narrative makes very clear the positive message that the prophet can be trusted in times of human need.”⁸ Elisha provides a clear command—use the last remaining item in your house, find empty jars, close your door, and fill the containers with the oil from your one jar. Although this is an odd request, the widow complies. Interestingly, Elisha does not provide the solution to her debt in his first command, but the widow still responds in obedience. It is only after she has gathered the empty vessels, closed her door, and poured out the oil, and has reported her obedience that Elisha provides the solution. Because of her faith, she is able to experience deliverance. The Hebrew indicates that the widow kept

⁷Yael Shamesh, “Elisha and the Miraculous Jug of Oil (2 Kgs 4:1-7),” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (2008): 8.

⁸James L. Mead, “‘Elisha Will Kill’? The Deuteronomistic Rhetoric of Life and Death in the Theology of the Elisha Narratives” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999), 169.

pouring, stressing the ongoing action of faith she possessed as she filled vessel after vessel.⁹ She is to sell the oil, pay off the debt, and live, *with* her two sons, on the excess money that remains. It is the widow's faith that triggers the solution. If she had not complied with Elisha's first command, a solution to her debt would not have been introduced. The widow must first demonstrate obedience and faith before Elisha reveals her solution. The widow's faith is strong and because of this, she receives a miracle.

Both Elijah and Elisha rescue their respective widows from certain death and give them life. Elisha's double portion allows him to provide not only for a widow and one son, but for a widow and two sons. Elisha's double portion also empowers him to give an excess amount, whereas Elijah provides daily portions. Elisha provides a continuous supply of oil that provides both financial deliverance and future security. In fact, "the quantity of oil was only limited by the woman's lack of faith in failing to ask for more empty jars."¹⁰ The oil is a means for a stable future that God provides as a reward for the widow's sure, obedient faith.

The Shunammite Woman

The Shunammite woman demonstrates Elisha's further ministry with women, for God seeks faithful individuals, regardless of their sex or economic standing, in a nation whose leaders and people as a whole have turned away from worshiping the one, true God who has revealed to them how they should live in obedience and faithfulness to him that they may receive His abundant blessings. The Shunammite woman dominates two separate passages in the Elisha account. In 2 Kings 4:8-37, the woman cares for Elisha and bears a son who dies and is resurrected by Elisha. In 2 Kings 8:1-6, many years have passed. Because of what Elisha has

⁹D. J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 203.

¹⁰Ibid, 202.

done previously in the woman's life, the king restores the land the woman and her household left the land during a famine.

The Shunammite woman's account is found in 2 Kings 4:8-37. Elisha, while in Shunem, is persuaded by a powerful woman to dine at her home; she also builds a separate room for him where he can stay whenever he is in the area. Because of her generosity, Elisha asks the woman what he can do for her. The woman lacks little, for she and her husband are wealthy and is not in want of anything. Gehazi, Elisha's servant and the individual through whom Elisha communicates to the woman, observes that she does not have a son. Olley observes, "As only sons can carry on the family name and property, wealth cannot substitute for children."¹¹ Therefore, Elisha declares that in a year, she will have a son. The woman responds, "No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant," but she conceives and has a son the next year, just as Elisha stated.

Time passes and the child has grown older. However, he suddenly falls ill and dies. The woman takes the boy and lays him on Elisha's bed in Elisha's chamber. She saddles a donkey and finds Elisha at Mount Carmel. This time, the woman directly addresses Elisha, grabs his feet and demands that he give a reason for providing then taking away her son. Elisha directs Gehazi to take Elisha's staff and lay it upon the child's face, but there is no response. Elisha then goes to the room himself, closes the door, and prays to God. He lays upon the child, placing his mouth, eyes, and hands on the child's while stretching himself over the body. The flesh of the child becomes warm. Elisha turns and walks in the house and stretches himself upon the boy again. The boy sneezes seven times and opens his eyes. He has been resuscitated, resurrected from death. The woman, falling to her feet, bows to the ground, and takes her son.

¹¹Olley, 230.

Like the widow, the Shunammite woman does not seek the king for assistance, but realizes the power of the prophet Elisha. “The Shunammite is used as a foil for the king of Israel as she opts for prophetic consultation in a time of crisis. Situated in the north, the great woman resists seeking other deities and so furthers the diminution of northern royalty seen in the past few episodes.”¹² The woman immediately seeks to find the man of God when tragedy arises. The kings and the woman both possess wealth and power, but the Shunammite’s faith sharply contrasts to the kings’ trust in God. The woman comes to Elisha in a time of distress, whereas the kings of Israel seek pagan gods and other solutions. In 2 Kings 1, King Ahaziah sends messengers to ask Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, if he will recover from his illness. Elisha confronts Ahaziah with a message, “Because you have sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron—is it because there is no God in Israel to inquire of His word?—therefore you shall not come down from the bed where you have gone up, but shall surely die (2 Kings 1:16).” The Shunammite woman serves as a contrast to these kings; the author seeks to reveal that wealth and possession are not stumbling block to obedience. Rather, because the woman uses her material blessings to bless others, including Elisha, she is blessed with more. This sharply contrasts with the actions of the kings.

This woman is a powerful figure in both her household and in her community. She is the active figure in her home and he is quite passive—it appears that the woman makes decisions and reports her decisions to her husband. Her husband is a secondary character. Mary E. Shields states, “The Shunammite woman stands out as the active partner, while her husband merely goes along with her wishes.”¹³ In the narrative, it is the Shunammite woman who invites Elisha to

¹²Bodner, 80.

¹³Mary E. Shields, “Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman: Role and Power Reversals in 2 Kings 4,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 58 (1993): 60.

dine with them, suggests building a room for the prophet, goes after the prophet when her son dies, and takes her son when he is resurrected. This active/passive nuance is not only evident in the woman's relationship with her husband, but is present in her relationship with Elisha as well. She is the active partner; Elisha is the responsive character. "Elisha's actions are always in response to the woman's initiative."¹⁴ She is the driving force of the narrative.

Despite her active nature, the woman is not a domineering figure, but a model of generosity and selflessness. She invites Elisha to her home and provides a room in which he can rest. The woman's lifestyle, as one who lives among her own people (2 Kgs 4:13), reveals her involvement in her community. The woman, despite her power and wealth, interacts with the community intimately. John Goldingay states, "The story of Elisha and a woman in Shunem opens a delightful window on an Israelite community at its best. When Elisha wonders whether he can mediate with the authorities in some way for this woman who has cared for him, she tells him that 'I live in the midst of my people' (2 Kings 4:13)."¹⁵ Even when prompted, she does not demand anything from the prophet. She does not request for a son, but rather it is Gehazi who observes that she does not have a son. Whereas the kings of Israel demonstrate selfish ambition (cf. 1 Kings 21), the woman desires to use her wealth to serve others.

The birth of the son should not be viewed as some type of miraculous event, but rather a simple announcement Elisha states as a response to the woman's faithful service to him. Unlike other miraculous birth accounts throughout the Bible, the son remains a minor character throughout the entire narrative. His name is not even mentioned, but his sole purpose is to highlight Elisha's power. "Many scholars have noted that stories of miraculous birth, or miracle deliverance, were designed to herald the appearance of a person who would play a significant

¹⁴Shields, 60.

¹⁵Goldingay, 424.

part in the nation's life and tradition.”¹⁶ Yet, the Shunammite’s son remains secondary, even after he has experienced resurrection from death. The main character of this miracle, therefore, is not the son, but Elisha. Elisha is called the “man of God” eight times and by name three times, whereas the child is anonymous. Yaireh Amit states, “Since the prophet's conduct and his development form the core of the combined story, interest is deflected from the child, who remains nameless, to the known prophet, Elisha, who brings about his birth and succeeds in reviving him.”¹⁷ The birth of the son seeks to highlight God’s responsive blessings to those who love and serve Him. Because the Shunammite woman has displayed love toward both her neighbors and to the prophet, God blesses her with the birth of her son.

The great faith of the Shunammite woman is abundantly evident. She deliberately seeks and serves the prophet, without expecting a return. However, when she does receive the gift of a child and loses it, she knows that the prophet will somehow remedy the situation. When her son dies, the woman wastes no time and searches for him. She demands he return and do something. By her placing the child on the prophet’s very bed, she demonstrates her belief that the prophet will somehow resolve this situation. When the child is revived, there is no account of what she says. Instead, it simply says she bows at Elisha’s feet and takes her son and leaves. Her faith and initiative was the trigger that caused this miracle to occur.

The second account of the Shunammite woman further reveals the depth of her faith. Elisha, knowing that a famine will occur, commands the woman to arise and leave the land for seven years. “So the woman arose and did according to the word of the man of God, and she went with her household and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years (2 Kgs 8:2).”

¹⁶Yaireh Amit, “A Prophet Tested: Elisha, the Great Woman of Shunem, and the Story’s Double Message,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11, no. 3-4 (2003): 283.

¹⁷Ibid, 283.

After seven years pass, the woman and her household return. She goes to King Jehoram to appeal for her house and field and arrives at the exact moment Gehazi is telling Jehoram of Elisha's deeds, including the resurrection of her son. As a result, the king restores all the land that belonged to her, as well as the produce that was farmed on the land since the day she left.

In this account, there is no mention of the husband. The absence of the husband could either mean he died during the famine, or simply reaffirm the assertiveness of the Shunammite. It was possible for woman to own property and engage in business in ancient Israel.¹⁸ One could obtain land by receiving a dowry, just as Achsah, Caleb's daughter did (cf. Joshua 15:16-20; Judges 1:13-15). The Proverbs 31 woman buys a field and is actively engaged in business. Regardless of the situation, it is clear in this account that the woman was the clear owner of the land and that restoration to a woman was a reward for the many years of faithfulness she displayed to Elisha.

It is clear once again that the Shunammite's woman's possessions are secondary to her faith in Yahweh and in His servant. The woman leaves all she possesses because of Elisha's prophesy. Although uncertain as to what will occur after she returns, she willingly leaves her land when the only indication that a famine would occur is that Elisha has stated that it will occur. Yet, the Shunammite's faithfulness is rewarded. All the land, and even the crops that grew on the land during the seven years of her absence, is fully restored to her. Land, a gift from God, was not to be taken away from a family (cf, Leviticus 25:23). "The principle embedded in the religious consciousness of Israel, that land owned by an Israelite family or clan was understood as a gift from Yahweh, and that failure to recognize this and respect the rights of the individual

¹⁸Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit & Israel: Their Social & Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 325.

and family within the covenant community would issue in judgment.”¹⁹ Unlike the Naboth account in 1 Kings 21, the land is respected and is restored to the woman. Perhaps Jehoram, upon hearing Gehazi’s tales of Elisha’s might deeds, is struck with a reverent fear and gladly gives the woman the land. Regardless of the reason, the king appoints an officer to fully return all that belonged to this powerful, obedient, faithful woman of Shunem.

The Shunammite was willing to leave her land, wealth, possession, and power because of the word of the man of God predicted a famine. Alfred Edersheim states, “Perhaps the sublimest act in the life of the Shunammite was when in simple faith she obeyed the prophet’s direction... To yield such absolute obedience in what involved such trial and renunciation of all her own, simply on the ground of the prophetic word, was no ordinary ‘victory over the world’.”²⁰ She moved her entire household from Shunem to Philistia for seven years, voluntarily, because for her, the word of Elisha was truth and was of greater value than her material possessions. This scene reflects Elisha’s own calling. At the prophetic action of Elijah, Elisha left his wealth and comfort to be obedient to Elijah. The woman does the same. She reflects sincere faith in the trustworthiness of God’s word. She is willing to be obedient, for she knows that doing so is true. The author is subtly connecting the woman to Elisha, revealing the depth of the woman’s devotion to Yahweh, even when it requires her to give up everything she owns. In the end, her faithfulness is fully recognized and rewarded.

Conclusion

Because of Israel’s idolatry and disobedience, Elisha focuses on those who will respond to Yahweh; therefore, they receive His blessings. Elisha’s interaction with women reveals that

¹⁹B. L. Smith, “Elijah,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. J.D. Douglas, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, N. Hillyer, D. Guthrie, A.R. Millard, and D.J. Wiseman (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1982), 321.

²⁰Alfred Edersheim, *Practical Truths from Elisha* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982), 269.

God loves and seeks faithful followers, regardless of their sex. The widow, on the verge of destitution, receives deliverance through a miracle of an unending supply of oil. Her demonstration of faith precedes Elisha's miraculous involvement. The widow initiates contact and obeys Elisha's commands. It is after she obeys that Elisha provides the solution to her debt and her sons' impending slavery. Similarly, the Shunammite woman displays great faith. Her miracle is preceded by her willingness to generously and selflessly serve the prophet. Both women understand that it is not the king nor any other individual who can deliver them from their predicament, but it is only through the power of God which works through the prophet Elisha that they will experience relief. Therefore, when God responds and provides monetary security and revives a son, the woman responds in worship. Again, the woman's land is fully restored to her as a reward for her faithful, complete obedience to the prophetic word. The women's faith is rewarded, for God chooses to bless those who remain faithful to Him, particularly in a time when the rest of the nation possesses the exact opposite attitude toward Yahweh.

Chapter V: Elisha and Naaman

The Naaman account is one of the longest accounts in the Elisha narrative. It is an unusual account. Those who are geographically near the prophet, Gehazi and the Israelite king, are the ones who display the least amount of faith and obedience to Yahweh; those who are geographically distant to the prophet, the Israelite servant girl and Naaman, demonstrate faith and trust that God and His servant, will provide a remedy to their situation. The Naaman story reveals many ironies between what appears to be to be powerful and what truly is. Esther Menn observes, “This narrative presents a sustained and ironic contrast between what appears big and important and what appears small and insignificant that ultimately inverts their usual valuation.”¹ This chapter will discuss various aspects of the story, its literary elements, and the significance of the minor characters. The relationship of Syria and Israel will be first established to provide the context of the Naaman account. It will be concluded that Naaman has experienced a true conversion. A foreign pagan comes to experience salvation and the blessings of Yahweh, which further contrasts Israel’s attitude toward God. God does not limit His blessings to His chosen people, but His grace extends to the “unchosen”.

Syria/Israel Relations during Elisha’s Ministry

God raises up Syria to continuously beleaguer Israel because of their disobedience. The Aramean territory was strategically located in Syria. Gaining control over all the major communication routes in Syria, the Arameans were able to gain power and influence. The control over the routes from the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia, from Egypt and Palestine to Anatolia and Mesopotamia, from the Arabian Peninsula to Damascus, and the fluvial trades on the

¹Esther Menn, “A Little Child Shall Lead Them: The Role of the Little Israelite Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1-19),” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35, no. 5 (2008): 342.

Euphrates², presented the Arameans with great connection and influence. The Aramean disturbance of Israel is prevalent throughout Elisha's ministry.

Elisha has a mixed relationship with the Syrians. In certain accounts, he clearly seeks their demise, whereas in others, he aids. In 2 Kings 6:8-23, Elisha assumes a neutral position. An enraged king of Aram sends an army to the prophet; he is furious that Elisha is able to supernaturally know his political and military strategies. While Elisha's servant panics as he sees the approaching army, Elisha does not fear. He states, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them (2 Kings 6:16)," immediately before praying that the army becomes blinded. Yahweh is the leader of Israel, who, as the Divine Warrior, will bring victory.³ Elisha guides the blind army to Samaria and the king of Israel. Elisha commands the king to not kill the army, but instead feed the soldiers and send them away. Elisha's neutrality successfully deters certain military conflict between the two nations; he does not allow the Israelite king to kill the enemy, but instead provide food and release them. In this case, Elisha is a peacemaker between the two warring nations.

However, in the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings 6:24-33, which has been discussed at length, Elisha assumes a decidedly pro-Israel stance. He prophesies Samaria's deliverance from Aram within a day. During the night, God causes the Syrian army to hear the sound of chariots and horses, the sound of a great army. The Syrians, thinking that Israel has hired the Hittites and Egyptians to fight on their behalf, leave at once, leaving their tents, horses, and possessions, fleeing for their lives. Four lepers discover the deserted camp and report the end of the siege to the Israelite king.

²Helene Sader, "The Aramaeans of Syria," in *The Book of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, eds. Halpern, Baruch, Andre Lemaire, and Matthew J. Adams (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 284.

³Robert LeBarbera, "The Man of War and the Man of God: Social Satire in 2 Kings 6:8-7:20," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1984): 651.

In 2 Kings 8:7-15, Elisha, while in Damascus, directly interacts with Hazael, prophesying that he will be the future king of Syria. With the exception of Jonah in Nineveh, this event is the only instance of an Israelite prophet directly addressing a foreign official in his own land.⁴ The king of Aram is ill and thus sends for Elisha. It must be noted that whereas the kings of Israel shun Elisha and ignore him, a pagan king sends for Elisha. Hazael, his messenger, arrives with a gift to ask the prophet if the king will recover from his sickness. Elisha tells Hazael to tell the king that he will recover, but the Lord has shown Elisha that the king will die. Elisha, while weeping, informs Hazael that he knows the great evil Hazael will commit through his life (even towards Israel) as the next king of Aram. K. L. Noll observes, “Elisha’s prediction to Hazael becomes, apparently, the motivation for the action that fulfills the prophecy.”⁵ Hazael departs from Elisha and kills the king. Whereas the main character of the narrative was initially the ill king of Aram, the focus shifts to the messenger who moves to become the next king of Aram.⁶

It has been demonstrated that Elisha’s Aramean interaction varies. This variance is a result of Israel’s apostasy. Because of the rampant unfaithfulness, God utilizes Syria to punish Israel. Moreover, in certain accounts, it appears that other nations have a better understanding of who Elisha is and the power he possesses as the man of God. Elisha’s ministry is widespread that others have heard of his power and desire to interact with the man of God, as the Hazael account confirms. His influence is well-known. The irony is that pagan kings seem to be more receptive to Elisha more than the kings of Israel. Yet, God is still working within Israel. Thus, there are

⁴Norman K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth: Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 78.

⁵K.L. Noll, “Presumptuous Prophets in a Deuteronomic Debate,” in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Ancient Israelite Historiography*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Lisa M. Wray Beal (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 135.

⁶Robert L. Cohn, “The Convention and Creativity in the Book of Kings: The Case of the Dying Monarch.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1985): 610-611.

instances in which God is clearly protecting Israel from destruction and instead delivers them from trouble, as He does to end the siege of Samaria.

Explanation of the Naaman Story

This account must be analyzed to further highlight the willingness of God to seek faithful individuals wherever they are located. The Naaman account possesses several features that further support this claim. The length of the plot and the complexity of the characters must be examined. As T. R. Hobbs notes, “The Naaman story has the most highly developed plot and contains the largest number of characters.”⁷ Naaman’s introductory statement demonstrates that he has been empowered by God to achieve great military success. He is a greatly respected, powerful captain of the army of the king of Aram, “because the Lord had given victory to Aram (2 Kgs 5:1).” It may seem startling that the Lord has given Naaman victories, but both books of Kings repeatedly demonstrate God’s sovereignty over all nations and all peoples. The Lord directs the future of Syria and thus, “surely he can work on behalf of a Syrian, if only to discipline Israel for idolatry.”⁸

Despite Naaman’s military accomplishments, he is a leper. However, Naaman’s wife’s young Israelite servant girl informs her mistress that there is a man of God in her home nation who can cure Naaman of his leprosy. The king of Aram sends Naaman to Israel with a letter for the king of Israel. Naaman takes ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten changes of clothes to give to his healer. Naaman arrives in Israel and presents the letter and his appeal to the king, tears his clothes at such an impossible request.

⁷T. R. Hobbs, "Naaman," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4968.

⁸House, 271.

Elisha hears of Naaman and contacts the king to send the general to him “so that he shall know that there is prophet in Israel (2 Kgs 5:8).” Elisha, through a messenger, commands Naaman to wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman, furious at this command, resolves to leave. However, his servants speak to Naaman and coax him to wash in the Jordan. Naaman dips himself in the water. He is not only healed, but his skin becomes like one of a child’s. Naaman returns to Elisha and worships God. He presents his gifts, but Elisha refuses to accept them. Naaman requests to take some of the earth so he might build an altar and sacrifice to the Lord in his own land. He also asks for pardon when his master worships in the house of Rimmon and Naaman, who accompanies him, must also bow. Elisha responds, “Go in peace (2 Kgs 5:19).” Naaman departs, completely cleansed of his disease.

A postscript is attached to this narrative. Gehazi pursues Naaman, for he desires to obtain a portion of the gold and clothing Naaman. Gehazi lies to Naaman, stating that two young men, members of the sons of the prophets, each need a change of clothes and a talent of silver. Naturally, Naaman eagerly gives Gehazi what he requests. Gehazi hides the clothes and silver in his house before returning to Elisha. Elisha confronts Gehazi, who denies his sin. Elisha responds, “Did not my heart go with you, when the man turned from his chariot to meet you? ... The leprosy of Naaman shall cleave to you and to your descendants forever (2 Kgs 5:26).” Gehazi leaves Elisha’s presence a leper, white as snow.

Naaman

The development of Naaman’s character is evident throughout the account. Naaman’s name, which means “fair” or “gracious”⁹, contrasts with the condition of his skin. Naaman is desperate for a cure for the leprosy that plagues his skin. Therefore, when his young servant girl

⁹W. Alan Smith, “Naaman and Elisha: Healing, Wholeness, and the Task of Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 89, no. 2 (1994): 211-213.

informs his wife of a possible cure, Naaman travels to Israel in search for relief. Despite the one hundred and twenty mile journey into a nation in which he would usually be at war, Naaman reveals his deep desire to be healed, as well as respect for the prophet by traveling to Israel with a myriad of gifts¹⁰ It is evident that Naaman deeply wishes to be cured—he does not spare any expense traveling and brings lavish gifts with the hope that he can buy a cure. Naaman, with his wealth, power, and prestige in Syria, would have surely summoned many to cure his condition and travelled throughout the land in search for a cure.¹¹ Because none were successful, Naaman eagerly travels to Israel, in the hopes that Elisha might cure him of his terrible disease.

Naaman arrives at Elisha's residence, expecting to receive special attention. Naaman initially expects Elisha to be impressed and amazed that such an individual should come to Elisha's door; Elisha should consider it a privilege to serve such an individual.¹² However, when he arrives, he receives odd instructions that debase his pride and status as a prominent commander. He is to wash in the Jordan River. The directions are too simple and insulting to someone of such social status and wealth. Elisha's instructions, however, intentionally seek to humble Naaman. Gerhard von Rad observes, "Elisha wanted to disabuse [Naaman] completely of this search for a miracle, this lust for cloudy vapor and magical twilight."¹³

Naturally, Naaman's initial reaction is negative—there are much nicer bodies of water in Syria in which he can bathe. Furthermore, Naaman, a man of great prestige in his home country, has received humble instructions to bathe. Yet, these are not the directions Elisha has given him.

¹⁰Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, volume 2 (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1896), 465.

¹¹ Kevin, J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 164.

¹² Walter A. Maier, III, "The Healing of Naaman in Missiological Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (1997), 180.

¹³Gerhard von Rad, *God at Work in Israel*, trans. John H. Marks (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 50.

Naaman, although humble enough to travel to Israel, has yet to fully humble himself to completely obey Elisha's command. Insulted, Naaman decides to return to Syria, but is due to the coaxing of his servants that Naaman decides to bathe. He does it half-heartedly, for he is still unsure of the validity of Elisha's words. The Hebrew verb to wash (רחץ) differs from what Naaman actually does. Naaman dips himself (חבל), "as lightly as he is able."¹⁴ Despite Naaman's feigned obedience, God graciously and cleanses Naaman anyways. Naaman emerges out of the water with the skin of a young child. Naaman is now thoroughly convinced of Yahweh's power. His humble act of bathing precedes the cure.

Naaman's request to return to Syria with Israelite dirt is unusual. However, this would not have been odd to the contemporary reader, but recognized as a positive note because it reveals that Naaman realizes Yahweh is a true God. Von Rad states, "[The ancient Israelite] would have been moved by the way in which a new-found faith here expresses anxiety about remaining alive out in the heathen world and asks from the Palestinian soil as a temporary expedient, an insulating layer, so to speak, from on-rushing heathendom."¹⁵ The Ancient Near Eastern culture viewed deities as localized figures. Therefore, taking the dirt from Israel was a vital component for Naaman to properly worship Yahweh even after he returned home.

However, it should be clear to the reader that Yahweh is not a localized God nor does the dirt possess a magical power that will transform Naaman's worship. Therefore, understanding the request for dirt as a reaffirmation of his belief that the soil possessed magic is not the best interpretation, particularly since his cleansing was not the result of a mystical experience, but was an ordinary action that resulted in a supernatural cleansing. Rather than viewing Naaman's actions as viewing the dirt as sacred, perhaps he simply wanted to use the dirt to build an altar to

¹⁴Maier, 183.

¹⁵von Rad, 52.

sacrifice to Yahweh. Syrian soil would not be as meaningful as the soil from Israel. Naaman's commitment to build a shrine reveals his deep devotion and the dirt is a tangible reminder of Yahweh. D. J. Wiseman explains, "The loads of earth were to prepare the base for a 'sacred place' on which an altar could be erected, and not because the Lord God could only be worshipped on Israelite soil."¹⁶ The dirt served as the material from which he would build an altar, not a magical dirt that possessed power.

Therefore, Elisha does not reprimand the general, but simply allows Naaman to go in peace. Elisha leaves Naaman's fate with God, who will guide and care for Naaman after he departs from Elisha's presence. Even though Naaman is leaving and returning to a pagan country, Elisha trusts that God will guide and protect Naaman. Elisha, full of wisdom and prophetic insight, trusts that God will continue to guide Naaman.

Naaman's new faith is evident. He, a Syrian general of Israel's greatest enemy, recognizes the truth of Elisha's ministry and worships Yahweh. It is because of Naaman's humble act of obedience that he is healed from his leprosy. His humility is the catalyst to his deliverance. "Naaman is only healed as he humbles himself and no longer seeks special treatment because of status."¹⁷ He humbled himself to travel to Israel. He humbled himself to bathe in a river. His humility is what enables the miracle. "It is Naaman's docility, surrender and commitment that made his conversion possible."¹⁸ Like both accounts of the widow and the Shunammite woman, it is Naaman's initial demonstration of belief that precedes the miraculous

¹⁶Wiseman, 208.

¹⁷Olley, 239.

¹⁸Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, "The Story of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1-19): Implications for Mission Today," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 96, no. 1 (2008), 34.

account. Naaman had to first dip himself in the water for healing to occur. Yet, when he demonstrates obedience, his deepest desire, that his skin will be restored and renewed, is granted.

Israel's disobedience does not limit Yahweh's ability to extend salvation to other peoples. Although Israel is not serving as a witness of God's greatness to those around them, God uses the witness of the faithful few to demonstrate the power of God to foreigners as well. Therefore, the Naaman account is significant for it shows Yahweh's salvation extending to Aram, Israel's greatest enemy during the life and ministry of Elisha. In a time of great apostasy within the nation of Israel, the Lord seeks other candidates and extends salvation to them. Naaman is a particularly poignant example. "This time of Aramean domination is a time when Yahweh's salvation is nonetheless manifest, albeit in unconventional and unexpected ways... It is a time when an Aramean general must submit to Yahweh as the sole source of even Aramean salvation (5:1)."¹⁹ Rather, the characters in the Naaman account reveal that those who are farther away from Elisha are more faithful than the ones near. Naaman, his wife, the little servant girl, and even the king of Aram display greater faith in Elisha than the king of Israel and Gehazi do. The significance of these minor characters will be further discussed, for they deeply impact the message of the Naaman account.

The Significance of Minor Characters

The minor characters are numerous in the Naaman account. Uriel Simon observes, "[Minor characters] have a definite expressive role—the indirect characterization of the protagonist and the implied evaluation of his deeds."²⁰ Minor characters compare and contrast and set the unexpected against the expected, as well as heighten the ironic reversal of social

¹⁹ Rick Dale Moore, *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1990), 140.

²⁰Uriel Simon, "Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990), 18.

conventions in the Naaman story. Those who should obey and know God demonstrate ignorance and disobedience, while those who should not possess a knowledge of God believe that Naaman can be healed by the man of God in Israel. The young servant girl plays a pivotal role, as do the kings of Aram and Israel and Gehazi, for they all shape and influence the plot of the Naaman account. These numerous minor characters contrast those who should be faithful who are not versus those who are not likely to be faithful but are.²¹

The little servant girl has been captured by Aramean raiders and taken away from her homeland to serve in Naaman's household. Although young, her faith is evident. Despite enduring hardship, she is the one who is the catalyst to this entire narrative. "This unnamed captive maid has by her singular act implicitly spread Jewish faith and the message of God's saving power in Israel, thus fulfilling the purpose and mission for which God had chosen Israel *ab initio* to be the source for making His name known among all the nations (cf. 1 Chr 16:8; Ps 9:11; 96:3; 105:1; Isa 12:4; 66:19).²² The smallness of the servant is contrasted with the greatness of Naaman. "This grammatical contrast reflects an actual contrast between them: 'great man' vs. 'little girl', 'Aramean commander' vs. 'Israelite captive' and 'master' vs. 'servant'."²³ Although being a slave, the young girl's heart is compassionate and desires for her master, the commander of the enemy army of her people, to be healed from his disease, despite his role in defeating and enslaving her people.

The strength of this young girl's faith starkly contrasts with the disobedience of the nation as a whole. Because of Israel's disobedience, she is living in enslavement in a foreign

²¹Simon, "Minor Characters," 15.

²²Nwaoru, 29.

²³Jean Kyoung Kim, "Reading and Retelling Naaman's Story (2 Kings 5)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, no. 1 (2005): 52.

country. Yet, the servant girl remains faithful and serves as an example of the atypical, faithful character. She serves as a foil against both the Israelite king and Gehazi. Whereas Gehazi, the “young man” (5:20), is the prophet’s own assistant and witnesses the miracle, succumbs to greed, and exploits the general, the young servant girl, although geographically distant, desires to help Naaman.²⁴ This unnamed little girl, although in Syria, places her full trust in the power of Yahweh and His ability to heal. She is a member of the faithful remnant of Israel.

The kings of Israel and Syria, the most powerful political figures of each nation, are significant minor characters in the Naaman account, serving as foils against one another. Whereas the Syrian king is eager to send Naaman to Israel where he might be healed, the Israelite king reacts with despair and is flabbergasted at Naaman’s request. As Maier states, “The king of Israel’s response to the letter of Syria’s king is both humorous and sad: humorous because we can understand his frustration at the request to heal Naaman, and sad because he does not think of the prophet Elisha.”²⁵ The deep unfaithfulness and spiritual illiteracy of the king is evident.

Gehazi, Elisha’s assistant, is the most significant minor character in this narrative. There is quite a contrast between the prophet’s very assistant and a foreign general. The individual who has followed the prophet as his personal messenger and is a vital figure in his ministry fails when his greed surpasses obedience to the prophet. The lure of clothing and silver is too strong for Gehazi to resist. Although Elisha has clearly refused to accept Naaman’s gifts, Gehazi desires them for himself. Naaman proves to be more faithful and righteous than Gehazi. The narrative concludes with Gehazi’s failure, pointedly contrasting the obedience of a foreigner with the disobedience of a “faithful” Israelite. Yates states, “The attempt of Elisha’s own servant to

²⁴Cohn, *2 Kings*, 40.

²⁵Maier, 179.

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)."²⁶ Perhaps Gehazi justified his actions by only asking for a small portion of clothes and silver Naaman has brought from Syria. Yet, this sin has devastating consequences. Even when Elisha gives Gehazi an opportunity to repent, his greed causes him to lie, denying his sin, resulting in the leprosy of Naaman to be placed upon his own body. Gehazi represents the severe and thorough apostasy throughout Israel. Elisha's own assistant has little regard for the prophetic word and the holiness of Yahweh, whereas Naaman returns to Syria cleansed in his body and renewed in his spirit.

Yahweh's Heart for All Peoples

The Naaman account most clearly reveals God's desire to make Himself known to all peoples. Although blatant in the New Testament, this concept is prevalent throughout the Old Testament as well. Missions is not a concept that suddenly appears in the New Testament, but is a recurring theme in the entire canon. God has continually sought to renew and restore His creation. In this, the Old Testament is thus bridged to the New Testament. His people, whom He has chosen to enact His plan, should share this same purpose. "The church which lacks the Old Testament again becomes easy prey to paganism. It is the Old Testament which initially broke radically with pagan religion and which thus forms the basis on which the New rests."²⁷ Rather, this is the overall trajectory of the Bible, which will come to full fruition at the end of the age. "This eschatological framework of final purpose links the Old Testament story of God's

²⁶Yates, 22.

²⁷G. Ernest Wright, "The Old Testament: A Bulwark of the Church Against Paganism," *Occasional Bulletin from the Missions Research Library* 14, no. 4 (1963): 8, 9.

covenant people with the overarching story of the whole Bible.”²⁸ Yahweh’s desire to reach the nations is evident. Christopher Wright argues that developing a biblical theology on Christian mission is not incidental or sporadic, but is powerful and explicit statements about God’s overall plan for the world.²⁹

Therefore, this concept of a missiological focus comes is not unique in the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Because of the unfaithfulness of Israel, the Lord seeks other candidates for His blessing. Because of the unfaithfulness of Israel, the Lord seeks other candidates for His blessing. The Elisha account has a decidedly missiological emphasis—clearly the work and knowledge of Yahweh is not limited to only the people of Israel. John M. Creed argues that the Elijah-Elisha accounts contribute to the foundation for the preaching of the gospel message to Gentiles in the New Testament. “The incidents cited from the careers of Elijah and Elisha provide good precedents for a mission to Gentiles—and this no doubt was their real significance to the evangelist.”³⁰ The Naaman account is chief evidence for this focus.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the Naaman account and has demonstrated that Naaman experienced healing because of his faith and obedience to Elisha’s commands. In a time when Israel and Aram were hostile with one another, the story of a leper, a general of Israel’s enemy, reminds readers of Yahweh’s heart for all peoples. The story displays irony on several levels. Those who should be the strongest in their allegiance and faith in Yahweh show the opposite. The faith of a foreign general sharply contrasts with the Israelites in the story. The Israelite king

²⁸ Stuart J. Foster, “The Missiology of Old Testament Covenant,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (October 2010): 206-207.

²⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, “Mission and Old Testament Interpretation”, in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening to God’s Address*, eds. Craig G. Bartholomew & David J. H. Beldman (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 192.

³⁰ John M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1965), 66.

and Gehazi serve as foils against Naaman. Conversely, the young Israelite girl, and even the Syrian king, encourages Naaman to travel to Israel for a cure. These minor characters play significant roles in the Naaman account to highlight Israel's apostasy and emphasize the conversion of Naaman as an authentic experience. Although Naaman initially hesitates bathing in the Jordan River, when he, in faith, enters the water and bathes, God miraculously heals him of his leprosy. God's love is not only for Israel, but also for all people, regardless of their nationality. A general, who no doubt fought against Israel and inflicted harm upon the Israelites, experiences Yahweh's abundant blessings because of his faith, while Israel continues to persist in their apostasy.

VII. Conclusion

Elisha's ministry focuses on the faithful few. Although the nation is unfaithful as a whole, God finds those who will respond in faithfulness and obedience. Through Elisha's ministry, it is evident that although the people disregard God, Yahweh deeply desires for Israel to return and repent. The prevalence of the covenant curses was designed as warning signs of their disobedience. The unraveling of these curses is occurring and God desires for the people to recognize their sin. The lack of response by the people moves them further away from God, eventually leading them to exile, which occurs to Israel in 722 BC.

When the nation as a whole does not repent, God still accomplishes His purposes and makes Himself known to those who will respond. Elisha's ministry reveals this quite plainly. The women to whom Elisha ministers display great faith. They know that the prophet will resolve their issues, thus, they seek the prophet, not the king. Naaman, being a foreigner, seeks the king first, but realizes that the one who can address and heal him is the man of God. Despite his initial pride and doubt, Naaman fully believes in God by the end of the story. His post-miracle reaction is detailed—Naaman's enthusiasm is evident, for he has experienced the power of God. "Jesus' ministry was introduced by a predecessor. He ministered in Galilee and Samaria, a ministry that included a concern for the poor and outcast. Most of all, his miracles are similar to Elisha's."¹

Each of the characters first displays faith, which is then succeeded by a miracle. The widow must first collect empty vessels, close her door, and pour the oil. The Shunammite woman first seeks out the prophet and demands a solution. Later, she leaves her land at the command of Elisha. Naaman must humble himself and bathe seven times in the Jordan River.

¹M. J. Wilkins, "Disciples and Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 206.

Each of these faith-filled actions is met with a reward. Whereas Israel lives in disregard of the prophetic word and the Law and experience the unraveling of the covenant curses, these three atypical characters listen to Elisha's word and experience rich blessing.

Traces of Elisha's ministry foreshadow the ministry of Jesus. Jesus, the ultimate prophet, more fully and miraculously parallels Elisha's ministry. "The typological link already begins to suggest both likeness and unlikeness. Jesus, the antitype, fulfills the pattern found in the Elisha story, but does so in a way that surpasses the type and leads readers to ponder how to interpret this prophetic figure who seems to possess even greater authority than the greatest of Israel's miracle-working prophets."² Jesus shows concern for women, the rich and the poor, lepers, and foreigners. Jesus' ability to cure lepers hails back to the most famous Old Testament attestation of healing in Naaman.³ Elisha's multiplication of food in 2 Kings 4:42-44 shares words with Jesus feeding the five thousand. "One may dress up a story with the words of another that is like it and well known. Both the synoptic and Johannine accounts of the feeding of the five thousand share words with 2 Kings 4:42-44, the take of Elisha miraculously feeding a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley. That is not coincidence."⁴ Furthermore, Jesus raises people from the dead and is resurrected Himself. Rather, Jesus "is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)."

The faith of the widow, Shunammite woman, and Naaman must be adapted in today's church. Despite the counter-cultural nature of Christianity, one must boldly and obediently follow Christ, just as the examples in Elisha's ministry did during their time. Their faithfulness was rewarded and immortalized in the canon of Scripture. Christians too can eagerly anticipate the day in which they receive a reward for their faith and obedience to God. ""Run in such a way

²Richard B. Hays, "The Future of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (2011): 34.

³Raymond Edward Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," *Perspective* 12, no. 1-2 (1971): 90.

⁴Dale Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 20.

that you may win (2 Corinthians 9:24).” ““I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:7-8).” A lesson that can be learned from the Elisha account is that God is sovereign regardless of the society’s spiritual state. Even when apostasy abounds, God’s plans are executed. His mercy and grace is extended. “The comforting and assuring lesson in this for Christians today is, that even in a season of apostasy and universal wickedness, when His rod is laid heavily upon the nations, the Lord will neither forget nor forsake His own, but will appear unto them as ‘the God of all grace’.”⁵

⁵Pink, 12.

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