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## **SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ELIJAH-ELISHA NARRATIVE**

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### ABSTRACT

The present article aims at some considerations of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Taking the biblical text in its final, canonical shape, a brief delineation of the socio-political and religious conditions of Northern Israel is presented and the themes of covenant renewal, word of YHWH and the uniqueness of YHWH are identified as major aspects of the theological message of the Elijah-Elisha narrative.

### RESUMO

O presente artigo apresenta algumas considerações sobre o ciclo de Elias e Eliseu. Tomando-se o texto bíblico em sua forma canônica, apresenta-se uma breve resenha das condições socio-políticas e religiosas do reino do norte de Israel e os temas da renovação do concerto, palavra de YHWH e singularidade de YHWH são identificados como importantes aspectos da mensagem teológica da narrativa de Elias e Eliseu.

### RESUMEN

El presente artículo dirige a algunas consideraciones del ciclo de las historias de Elías-Eliseo. Tomando el texto bíblico en su forma canónica final, se presentará una breve delineación de las condiciones socio-políticas y religiosas del Israel del Norte y los temas de la renovación del concierto, palabra de YHWH y la unicidad de YHWH son identificadas como los más grandes aspectos del mensaje teológico de la narrativa de Elías-Eliseo.

### INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Elijah and Elisha occupies the central section of 1–2 Kings (1 Kgs. 17-2 Kgs. 13), “in which is described a time of special prophetic intervention in the life of Israel directed against

widespread apostasy to the god Baal and his consort Asherah.”<sup>1</sup> This narrative, sometimes labeled as Elijah-Elisha cycle, has been investigated from a variety of perspectives. Several studies have inquired on the literary integrity of this part of the Former Prophets and their place in the so-called Deuteronomistic History.<sup>2</sup> Others have attempted to interpret the text from the point of view of the socio-economic conditions of Northern Israel in the times of the Omride dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

Some studies have dealt with this text from the perspective of the history of religion, attempting to uncover the commonalities between the religion of Israel and its ANE environment.<sup>4</sup> The present article aims at some brief considerations of the Elijah-Elisha cycle of stories. Taking the biblical text in its final, canonical shape, a brief delineation of the socio-political and religious conditions of Northern Israel is presented in order to identify some aspects of the theological message of the Elijah-Elisha narrative.

#### SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Elijah and Elisha performed their prophetic ministry to the Northern Israel in the times of the Omride dynasty, when the Northern kingdom had reached an unprecedented level of economic and political prosperity. Omri found a dynasty that managed to hold on to the Israelite throne for a total of 33 years.<sup>5</sup>

The guiding principles of his governmental policy were two: treaties without and parity within. Omri introduced a foreign policy in which Israel sought to

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<sup>1</sup> T. Renz, “Elijah,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Libronix electronic ed.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Abbe, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, 12, Susanne. Otto, “The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History,” *JSOT* 27, no. 4 (2003): 487-508.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah.*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Peter R. Ackroyd, “Theology of the Chronicler,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 8 (1973): 23.

<sup>5</sup> That included not only Omri’s son Ahab, but also his grandsons Ahaziah and Joram. See, Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1983), 79ff.

win the support of certain neighboring states by means of treaties and diplomatic marriages. So, for example, the marriage of the crown prince Ahab to the Phoenician princess Jezebel, which served to guarantee the accord with the Phoenicians, was certainly proposed by Omri and was brought to fruition during his own lifetime. Likewise the termination of tensions with the neighboring state to the S[outh], Judah, is most probably to be ascribed to the time of Omri, even though the actual marriage between the Judean crown prince Joram and Omri's daughter Athaliah, a marriage which sealed the peaceful relations between the two states, only took place somewhat later. In order to reach agreement with Judah, Omri apparently accepted certain territorial losses; he abandoned efforts to regain portions of the tribal territory of Benjamin that had been annexed to Judah by Asa several decades earlier (1 Kgs 15:22).<sup>6</sup>

Worthy of note in this regard is the founding of a new capital, Samaria, which as crown property and rival to Jerusalem was well located for the development of the international policies of the Northern kingdom.<sup>7</sup> Ahab son of Omri followed the policies of his father, opening himself up to foreign influences thus reinforcing cultic, cultural and social changes, which had started since the secession of the kingdom. A glimpse of Ahab's economic and political achievement is provided by the remains of his royal palace in Samaria, where about 200 pieces of carved ivory were found.<sup>8</sup>

Ahab's wife, Jezebel, daughter of the King of Sidon, Ethbaal, who was a priest of Astarte, according to Josephus, played a major religious and political role during the reign of her husband.<sup>9</sup> Jezebel's role in the episode of Naboth's Vineyard (1 Kgs 21) and her intention to avenge the destruction of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18) provides a glimpse of the strong political and religious influence of this queen on the life of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As T. Renz, ably expressed,

The story of Naboth in 1 Kings 21 reveals the profound difference between Israelite covenant law (cf. Lev. 25:23; Deut. 27:17) and the principles of

<sup>6</sup> Winfried Thiel, "Omri," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:18.

<sup>7</sup> John Andrew Dearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 73.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000–586 B.C.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 503–5.

<sup>9</sup> *Against Apion*, 1.123.

Canaanite kingship. By appropriating Naboth's land as crown property, Ahab acts more like a Canaanite than an Israelite king, and even instigates the judicial murder of Naboth, who refuses to violate the covenant. This time Elijah is asked to confront Ahab, which he promptly does with a message that seems even harsher than the word of Yahweh itself (cf. 1 Kgs. 21:19 with 20–24; see 1 Kgs. 22:37–39 and 2 Kgs. 9:30–37 for the fulfilment of these prophecies).<sup>10</sup>

According to Judith A. Todd, the Omride dynasty adopted an “advanced agrarian model” consisting of a rural-based agricultural sector and an urban-based commercial and industrial sector.<sup>11</sup> Several factors, such as drought, famine, warfare, corvée, heavy taxes, interest-bearing loans in addition to pressure on marginal landowners to sell the properties to city entrepreneurs<sup>12</sup> facilitated a social stratification that was in frontal opposition to the egalitarian principles that Yahweh revealed to Moses.<sup>13</sup>

Naboth refused Ahab's business deal of a better vineyard for a better property or silver. The rationale for such a refusal to do business with the king was plain and simple: “YHWH forbid me that I should give you the inheritance (nahala) of my fathers” (1 Kgs 21:3). The issue is not price, but Naboth's loyalty to the traditional land tenure system as prescribed in the Torah (see Lev 25:23; Num 36:7). The episode of Naboth's vineyard reveals that followers of Yahweh held to “an egalitarian societal configuration where Yahweh owned the land and the people were in equal relationship to their god and to each other.”<sup>14</sup> It may be surmised, on the other hand, that the followers of Baal “fostered the traditional city-state configuration where the gods

<sup>10</sup> T. Renz, “Elijah,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Libronix Electronic ed.

<sup>11</sup> Judith A. Todd, “The Pre-Deuteronomic Elijah Cycle,” in *Elijah and Elisha in Socio Literary Perspective*, ed. Robert B. Coote (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> The institution of the Jubilee was certainly a major deterrent to the concentration of property in the hands of a few people in detriment to the population at large. Based on the theological notion that the land belongs to YHWH, the Jubilee would play a major role in maintaining an equitable distribution of land among the Israelites. See Lev 25:8-17.

<sup>14</sup> Todd, 3.

legitimated the hierarchical structure of king, ruling elite, and a highly developed social stratification.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the question was not merely what god to serve, but in what social configuration to live. As Francis Andersen noted, this episode reflects a clash of “Israelite and Canaanite ideas of kingship, of citizenship, and of property. Naboth refused to relinquish his property (vs 3); Jezebel thought that the king could do anything he pleased (vs. 7).”<sup>16</sup>

#### RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

The religious situation in the time of Elijah and Elisha was marked not only by the strong influence of the god Baal upon the court and people, but also by syncretistic practices in which, apparently, the worship of YHWH intermingled with that of other deities, i.e. Baal in its several manifestations. The Biblical text mentions not only the four hundred prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah (1 Kgs 18:19), but also four hundred false prophets of YHWH (1 Kgs 22:6), which are summoned by Ahab to legitimate his military venture against the Arameans. In this context, the strong figure of the self-proclaimed prophet of YHWH, Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah (1 Kgs 22:11), further indicates that, in spite of the apparent exclusivism of Jezebel, Baal and YHWH could coexist side by side.

The inscriptional record of that period sheds additional light on the religious situation prevalent during the Omride dynasty. The Samaria ostraca contain several names of individual bearing the DN Baal, which may be interpreted either as an indication of Baalistic influence upon the Israelites, assuming that this were names borne by Israelites; or an evidence of foreign elements among the Israelites if one assumes that these names were borne by foreigners, perhaps Phoenicians, in the service of the northern monarchy.<sup>17</sup> In either case, one perceives

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. better vineyard or silver for his property. The rationale for such a refusal of doing business with the king was plain and simple: “The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (1 Kings 21:3).

<sup>16</sup> Francis I. Andersen, “Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident,” *JBL* 85 (1966): 46.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, Harvard Semitic Studies 31 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986), 16.

the strong influence of foreign religion or foreign individuals on the Israelite life.

Inscriptions coming from the northern Sinai site of Kuntillet Ajrud may shed interesting light on the Northern Israelite religious situation. Dating to the ninth or early eighth century these inscriptions contain references to Baal, El, and YHWH. One of them, inscribed in a Jar Fragment reads: "I hereby bless you by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah (KAjr 18).<sup>18</sup> Although it may be difficult to establish with certainty the meaning of these expressions, especially the relationship between YHWH and his Asherah,<sup>19</sup> the mention of YHWH of Samaria relates more closely to this discussion. It may be surmised that YHWH was conceived as a local deity along the lines of other ANE

<sup>18</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp and others, eds., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2005), 237. See Dearman, 79, Klaas AD Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 159. Cf. KAjr 14, a fragmentary plaster inscription which reads "YHWH of Teman" (Dobbs-Allsopp and others, eds., 237).

<sup>19</sup> "There can be little doubt that the *he* at the end of the form is a suffix; the more difficult problem is the identification of the <sup>2</sup>*šrh*. There are three main ways to interpret the word: (a) the goddess Asherah (cf. Ugaritic <sup>2</sup>*atrt*), (b) a wooden cult symbol representing the goddess, and (c) a cella or chapel (with some evidence in Akkadian, Phoenician, and Old Aramaic). The last is the least likely because the word does not occur in Hebrew with the meaning 'cella, chapel.' One is tempted to take the word to refer to a wooden cult-symbol representing the deity. If so, one may assume the antecedent of the suffix to be the place (i.e., the sanctuary at Samaria—hence, 'its asherah'). According to 2 Kgs 13:6, Jehoahaz the son of Jehu did not depart from the syncretism of his predecessors and 'moreover, the asherah stood in Samaria' (cf. also the mention of the asherah in 1 Kgs 14:15; 16:33; 2 Kgs 21:3). Yet, in the Khirbet el-Qôm inscription (*Qom* 3.3), <sup>2</sup>*šrh* cannot be merely a cult object. There it seems clear that it is YHWH's 'Asherah'—perhaps the goddess as YHWH's hypostatic presence—who delivers one from one's enemies. Hence, we should translate 'his Asherah' (see Freedman 1987, 241-49). Such a translation is admittedly odd, for one does not expect a personal suffix with a proper noun. Here we assume, however, that Asherah has become so generalized that it is treated like a common noun. By analogy, one may note that in Akkadian, the proper name Ištar was treated as a common noun and even takes the personal suffix: <sup>4</sup>Ištarī (literally 'my Ištar'), <sup>4</sup>Ištaršû ('his Ištar'), <sup>4</sup>Ištaršina ('their Ištar'), and so forth. McCarter (1987) notes that there are examples of the personification of the temple and its cultic paraphernalia elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Here, in this inscription (as at Khirbet el-Qôm), the asherah is probably the cult object personified as a hypostatic presence of YHWH" (Dobbs-Allsopp and others, eds., 238).

deities. Or as Dearman has suggested, it could “reveal the powers of local cults to identify even a national deity by regional characteristics.”<sup>20</sup> Comparison with inscriptions found elsewhere in the ANE suggests that “YHWH of Samaria” is the YHWH who dwells in Samaria.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the theology presupposed by these inscriptions could not be further removed from the Biblical ideal that Jerusalem should be the place where YHWH would put his name.<sup>22</sup>

#### THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE

After the sociological and religious considerations presented above, attention is turned to the theology of the Biblical text. It is argued that three major theological concepts underlie these stories: covenant renewal, word of YHWH, and uniqueness of YHWH.

#### COVENANT RENEWAL

The underlying presupposition of the Elijah-Elisha narratives is that Israel has broken the covenant, and these prophets rise to call the people to a renewed experience of YHWH’s covenant. The prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha is modeled after that of Moses and his successor Joshua, respectively. Three incidents in Elijah’s ministry, as noted by R. P. Carroll, put him in the same line as Moses and hint at Elisha as a parallel to Joshua.<sup>23</sup>

Firstly, when the conflict between YHWH and Baal reached its climax in the contest on top of Mount Carmel, Elijah acts as a true

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<sup>20</sup> Dearman, 80.

<sup>21</sup> One “may compare *hdd skn* “Hadad of Sikan” in the Aramaic inscription from Tell Fekheriyeh (1.1), where the meaning of the epithet is clarified in the Akkadian version, which has *Adad āšib sikani* “Hadad who dwells in Sikan” (Dobbs-Allsopp and others, eds., 238).

<sup>22</sup> See Deut 16:11-15, cf. Zech 1:7; 2:12.

<sup>23</sup> R. P. Carroll, “Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel,” *Vetus Testamentum* 19, no. 4 (1969): 410. Cf. the following statement by Ellen White: Moses, wearied with forty years of wandering and unbelief, lost for a moment his hold on Infinite Power. He failed just on the borders of the Promised Land. So with Elijah (see Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* [Pacific Press, 1958], 174).

“Mosaic prophet proclaiming the word of Yahweh and mediating the covenant between Yahweh and his people.”<sup>24</sup>

Pointedly, he erects a twelve-stone altar (for the twelve tribes of Israel) and prays to the covenant God, ‘O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel’ (1 Kgs 18:36–37; cf. Jas 5:18), reminding the people of their true identity as the covenant people of Yahweh (cf. Exod 24:1–11). Elijah’s prayer is answered and he is vindicated against the Baal prophets who are slaughtered (the Hebrew word in 1 Kgs. 18:40 is used elsewhere to refer to the slaughter of sacrificial animals) as a punishment for their apostasy (cf. Deut 13:12–15).<sup>25</sup>

As DeVries observes: “Like Moses, Elijah saw himself in a great contest with the forces of apostasy. Like Moses, he did not refrain from leveling monumental challenges, confident that Yahweh would fulfill his expectations. The explanation for Elijah’s confidence lay in the fact that, like Moses, he was a man of prevailing, powerful prayer (1 Kgs 18:36–37, 42).”<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, fleeing from Jezebel, Elijah went to the wilderness and from there to Horeb, where centuries before Moses had met with YHWH. The theophanic experiences of Elijah on that occasion recall Moses’ experiences in the same place.<sup>27</sup>

Like Moses, Elijah flees from enemies into the wilderness, but this time in a ‘reversal’ of salvation history. He journeys for forty days and forty nights (far longer than necessary) from Beersheba, at the border of the Promised Land, to Horeb, i.e. Mt Sinai, symbolizing Israel’s forty years’ journey in the wilderness. Yet when he arrives at a cave (Moses was in the cleft of a rock<sup>28</sup> when he saw the glory of Yahweh passing by in Exod. 33:18–23), Yahweh asks him what he is doing there (1 Kgs. 19:9). Elijah claims to be the only faithful person left in Israel, and it seems that God will have to make the same offer to Elijah as he once did to Moses, namely to make a great nation of him (Exod. 32:10).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> T. Renz, “Elijah,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Libronix electronic ed.

<sup>26</sup> Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary. Vol 12. (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 210.

<sup>27</sup> Carroll: 410.

<sup>28</sup> As a matter of fact, the Hebrew text of 1 Kgs 19:9 reads “the rock” (*hammee’ara*) possibly suggesting a connection with the “cleft of the rock” (Exod 32:22) from whence Moses had a glimpse of the glory of Yahweh.

<sup>29</sup> T. Renz, “Elijah,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). Libronix electronic ed.



Thirdly, at the end of his prophetic career, “Elijah moves in stages to Bethel, to Jericho and to the Jordan, each time trying to leave Elisha behind (2 Kgs. 2:2, 4, 6). Finally, he crosses the Jordan into the same region where Moses died, having re-enacted one of the most symbolic moments in Israel’s history, the dividing of the Jordan.”<sup>30</sup>

Elisha inherits Elijah’s leadership in a scene partially reminiscent of Moses at the Sea of Reeds [Exod. 14:15–31] and of Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan and entering the land of Israel near Jericho [Josh. 3]. Like Elijah, Elisha brought life in the midst of death (1 Kgs. 17:17–24; 2 Kgs. 4) and mediated salvation even to foreigners (1 Kgs. 17:8–16; 2 Kgs. 5). Having asked of Elijah a double portion of his spirit, he went on to perform many more miracles than his predecessor did, especially for the benefit of the humble, who were generally more in touch with and open to what God was doing through his prophet than were the great.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, like Moses, mystery surrounded Elijah’s retirement from public ministry, except that Elijah was taken alive to heaven, while Moses had to experience death.<sup>32</sup>

Summing up this section, Elijah and Elisha emerge in the the narrative with the function of bringing the people back to the covenant, evoking what Moses and Joshua (respectively) had accomplished five centuries earlier.

#### WORD OF YHWH

It should be noted that the preceding section of the former prophets ends by noting the fulfilment of a long-range prediction of the prophetic oath made by Joshua that the one who would rebuild Jericho would do so at the expense of the lives of his firstborn and his youngest sons: “In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho; he laid its foundations with the loss of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua the son of Nun” (1 Kgs 16:34, NASB; cf. Josh 6:26). In the section that follows, the Elijah-Elisha narrative (1 Kgs 17-2Kgs 13), there occurs the highest concentration of short-range prophetic predictions and their respective fulfilment ever found

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Carroll: 410.

elsewhere in Hebrew Scriptures with nineteen pairs of short-range prophecy-fulfilments (see the table at next page),<sup>33</sup> attesting to the effectiveness of the Word of the Lord, proclaimed by the prophets.

The notion of “word of the Lord” runs throughout the narrative as a unifying thread binding together the several episodes that make up the Elijah-Elisha narratives. The precision of the prophetic predictions provide authenticity to the prophets of YHWH as the moral conscience of the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the pattern of prophecy and fulfilment, the authority and authenticity of the true prophets of YHWH were enhanced by a sequence of supernatural actions resulting in food, life, and healing. According to one count, the Elijah and Elisha narratives have twenty one recorded miracles: seven by Elijah and fourteen by Elisha.<sup>35</sup> Some commentators have suggested that Elisha’s having performed the double of Elijah’s miracles might be linked to Elisha’s request to receive a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kgs 2:9). Others, however, have linked Elisha’s request to Deut. 21:17, where the same expression denotes the double portion which the eldest son received of the father’s inheritance. In this case, Elisha was simply requesting “twice as much as any other heir, not double the amount Elijah had,”<sup>36</sup> so that he might thus be enabled to continue the work begun by Elijah.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Gerhard von Rad listed eleven pairs of prophecy-and-fulfilment passages found in the so-called Deuteronomistic History from 2 Samuel to 2 Kings. *Studies in Deuteronomy* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 78-81.

<sup>34</sup> Paul R. House, *I, 2 Kings*, The American Commentary 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 245.

<sup>35</sup> Elisha’s 14 miracles are: (1) parting the Jordan’s waters (2:14); (2) healing a spring (v. 21); (3) cursing scoffers (v. 24); (4) filling ditches with water (3:15–26); (5) multiplying a widow’s oil (4:1–7); (6) predicting a pregnancy (vv. 14–17); (7) raising a dead son (vv. 32–37); (8) neutralizing poison (vv. 38–41); (9) multiplying loaves (vv. 42–44); (10) healing Naaman’s leprosy (5:1–19); (11) cursing Gehazi with leprosy (vv. 20–27); (12) trapping an Aramean military force (6:8–23); (13) revealing an army of angels (vv. 15–16); and (14) predicting relief for besieged Samaria (6:24–7:20). Larry Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 244.

<sup>36</sup> T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 13 (Dallas: Word, 2002), 21.

<sup>37</sup> “Double portion,” [2 Kgs 2:9], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976-80), 2:851.

Prediction	Prophet	Event	Fulfilment
1 Kgs 17:1	Elijah	Drought	1 Kgs 18:1
1 Kgs 17:14	Elijah	Multiplication of Oil and Flour	1 Kgs 17:16
1 Kgs 20:17	Elijah	Judgm. by Hazael, Jehu, Elisha	2 Kgs 9:32-26
1 Kgs 20:13	A prophet	Victory over Ben Hadad	1Kgs 18:20
1 Kgs 20:22	A prophet	Return of Ben Hadad	1 Kgs 20:26
1 Kgs 20:28	A prophet	Victory over Aram	1 Kgs 20:29-30
1 Kgs 20:36a	A prophet	Son of a prophet killed by a lion	1 Kgs 20:36b
1 Kgs 20:42	A prophet	Death of [Ahab] king of Israel	1 Kgs 22:34-37
1 Kgs 21:19-22	Elijah	Death of Ahab (no descend. dogs)	1 Kgs 22:34-38; 2 Kgs 10:1-9, 17
1 Kgs 21:23	Elijah	Death of Jezebel (dogs)	2 Kgs 9:32-37
1 Kgs 22:17	Micaiah	Israel defeated by Aram	1 Kgs 22:35-37
2 Kgs 1:4, 16	Elijah	Death of Ahaziah	2 Kgs 1:17
2 Kgs 3:17-19	Elisha	Victory over Moab	2 Kgs 3:20-25
2 Kgs 4:16	Elisha	Birth of a son to the Shunammite	2 Kgs 4:17
2 Kgs 7:1	Elisha	Abundance of flour and barley	2 Kgs 7:16
2 Kgs 7:2	Elisha	Death of a skeptical royal officer	2 Kgs 7:17-20
2 Kgs 8:9-10	Elisha	Death of Ben-Hadad	2 Kgs 8:15
2 Kgs 8:12-13	Elisha	Hazael to become king over Aram	2 Kgs 8:15
2 Kgs 13:19	Elisha	Joash to defeat Aram three times	2 Kgs 8:25

Whatever the precise meaning of that request, what remains clear is that those were times of intense divine activity. So the supernatural actions by Elijah and Elisha certainly contributed to provide legitimacy to the prophetic word, in a time when the true prophets of YHWH were not only confronted by a host of Baal's prophets, but also by those self-proclaimed prophets of YHWH, who prophesied according to the king's interests.<sup>38</sup>

#### *UNIQUENESS OF YHWH*

A major motif in these stories is the uniqueness of YHWH and its consequent superiority over Baal. Fundamental questions answered by these stories are: "Who is God? Who rules the earth? Who speaks for God? What does it mean to be king over the Lord's people?"<sup>39</sup> Thus as the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that the actions of Elijah and Elisha refute significant aspects of the perception of Baal found in Ugaritic texts. Ugaritians perceived Baal as the master over rain, fire, agriculture, life, healing and death.<sup>40</sup> The various titles given to Baal in Ugaritic literature indicate that Baal was understood to have strong influence over nature and its forces: Prince, Lord of the Earth (*zbl b'l ars*) the Mighty One, Baal (*aliyn b'l*), Rider in the Clouds (*rkb'rpt*), and Hadad (*hd*), used to indicate Baal in his role as the the rain/storm god.<sup>41</sup>

By announcing that there would be "neither dew nor rain" those years, except by his (i.e. Elijah's) word (1Kgs 17:1), Elijah was dealing a severe blow on Baal's theology and reaffirming YHWH's sovereignty over nature. It becomes clear that "Yahweh, not Baal, is in charge of

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., 1 Kgs 22:6, where reference is made to four hundred prophets who, presumably, prophesied in the name of YHWH (cf. vs. 7).

<sup>39</sup> House, 245.

<sup>40</sup> James R. Battenfield, "Yhwh's Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. M. Smith concludes that "the Phoenician baal of Ahab and Jezebel was a storm-god. The extrabiblical evidence indicates that the baal of Carmel and Baal Shamem were also storm gods" (*The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990] 44. Quoted by House, 245.

crop-enriching rains.”<sup>42</sup> The Canaanite’s “equating of fertility with the presence of a live and vibrant Baal”<sup>43</sup> is demolished by YHWH’s actions as the absolute sovereign over the forces of nature, thus challenging “not only the power but even the existence of Baal in the hearts of the people of the Northern Kingdom [1 Kgs 18:21].”<sup>44</sup>

During the drought described in 1 Kgs 17:8-24, Elijah is miraculously fed by ravens at the brook of Kerith and, later, by a widow in Zarephath. It is interesting to note the verbal links between the two episodes. In vs. 4 YHWH said to Elijah: “I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there”; and in vs 9: “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” Other links are the terms “go,” *hlk* (3, 5, 9, 10); “stay,” *yshb* (vss. 5, 9); “bread,” *lehem* (vss. 6, 11); “rain,” *geshem* (vss. 7, 14). These connections are most probably not accidental, but indicate that the widow is taking the place of the ravens in sustaining Elijah.<sup>45</sup>

As the narrative unfolds, the widow’s flour and oil are multiplied, demonstrating that it is YHWH who provides “the two common staples in any ancient, as well as modern, Near Eastern household.” In Ugaritic texts, Baal is mentioned as Son of Dagan (*bn dgn*).<sup>46</sup> Dagan means corn or food stuffs, a fitting epithet for a vegetation god.<sup>47</sup> However, during that drought, when the Phoenician widow and her son were at the point of death, it was not Baal, but YHWH who presented Himself as provider.

Elijah’s interactions with the widow of Zarephath continued when her son “became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him” (1 Kgs 17:17). Voicing resentment, she said:

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<sup>42</sup> House, 245.

<sup>43</sup> A. J. Hauser and R. Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, JSOTS 85 Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 11. Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Battenfield, 20.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>47</sup> See T. C. Mitchell, “Dagon,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 1:849. For the view that the meaning of “Dagon” can not be determined with certainty, see Lowell K. Handy, “Dagon,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:2-3.

“What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!” (17:18).

In those circumstances, Elijah took the boy to the upper chamber and cried to YHWH, who returned life to the boy. The woman’s resentment toward Elijah is then replaced by a confession that “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth” (17: 24). “The whole point of the story,” as Battenfield asserted, “seems to be paramountly a demonstration that YHWH, not Baal, has the power of life over death.”<sup>48</sup> It is ironical that everything is done in the very heartland of Baal, Phoenicia, which was also Jezebel’s native land.<sup>49</sup>

Thus “what Baal can only do in mythology Yahweh can do in history”<sup>50</sup> and throughout these narratives the reader perceives that YHWH divested Baal of authority to the point that the Canaanite god became not only powerless, but non-existent.<sup>51</sup> For the narrator, Baal is not Baal Zebul (Baal the Prince), but Baal Zebub (Baal of the fly), as in the pejorative epithet used of Baal in the narrative of Ahaziah sending messengers to inquire the oracle at Ekron (2 Kgs 1:2).<sup>52</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

As noted above, Elijah and Elisha performed their prophetic ministry in times of social, political, and religious change. The Omride monarchs established close ties, by marriage alliances and trade, with the surrounding neighbors at the expense of Yahwistic faith. The religious innovations, though, consisted not in that Baal theologians wanted to deny YHWH’s existence or right to be worshiped, but that there should be no problem in worshiping both Baal and YHWH. In that situation, Elijah and Elisha became the voice of Yahweh summoning kings and people to a recommittment of their loyalty to the principles of the

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<sup>48</sup> Battenfield, 23.

<sup>49</sup> House, 245.

<sup>50</sup> *1, 2 Kings*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2001, c1995), 246.

<sup>51</sup> Battenfield, 23.

<sup>53</sup> John Day, “Baal (Deity),” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:547.

covenant. As covenant prosecutors, these prophets delivered an authoritative message of judgment to kings and people proclaiming the uniqueness of YHWH, a message authenticated by a pattern of prediction and fulfillment, in which the Word of YHWH accomplished its goals.