

## ELIJAH THE BROKEN PROPHET

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Then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word burned like a torch (Sir 48:1 RSV).

It is hard to imagine a more dramatic OT character than the prophet Elijah. From his stunning appearance in the court of Ahab on Mount Samaria to his memorable association with our Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration he demonstrates himself to be truly significant in the OT record. His dramatic character and his enduring importance may hardly be questioned. The extensive section of the book of Kings describing the reign of Ahab likely depends not on the infamy of the king but on the greatness of Elijah, who was the prophet of Yahweh in Israel's darkest hour.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, for all of his importance, we are troubled by Elijah. There are at least three issues raised in the mind of the thoughtful reader in confronting the Elijah narrative: (1) the nature of his miracles, (2) the problem of his character, and (3) his place in prophetism.

All of us are impressed with the spectacular element in Elijah's miracles. But, we wonder, were these done only to startle, to impress, to terrify? Was this section of the Bible preserved only to entertain? Or is there not something more profound underlying these graphic miracles? Is there not a level at which they may be seen to be didactic and theological?

In addition to the problem provoked by Elijah's miracles there is the perplexity we feel concerning his character. On the one hand his very name evokes strong images in all who have even a cursory acquaintance with the OT historical narratives. He is a figure of bold action who has about himself an air of mystery. Yet he has his darker side too. Some might want to use an entirely different set of adjectives for this "other" Elijah: moody, depressed, paranoid—even afraid!

Finally, compounding the difficulties we have concerning his miracles and his character is our question concerning Elijah's role in prophetism and his place in *Heilsgeschichte*. Why was he selected to appear along with Moses when Jesus revealed his glory for a moment to his closest disciples?

Let us look at these three questions in somewhat more detail.

### I. THE PROBLEM OF HIS MIRACLES

Likely the nature of our difficulty in understanding the miracles of Elijah lies not in disbelieving that they *might* have happened so much as wondering why they ever *would* have been done. Some readers of Scripture are content, of course,

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<sup>1</sup>Here reference is made to the principle of proportion in literature. The amount of space given to Elijah in the book of Kings demonstrates his importance in OT history.

to chant: "The Bible says it, God did it, I believe it!" But there are others who are just as pious who have to add a footnote to that litany: "But I wonder why?"

And let us not minimize the difficulty. John Gray, for example, rationalizes away every miracle.<sup>2</sup> By his procedures the ravens who feed Elijah at the Wadi Cherith become benevolent Bedouin;<sup>3</sup> the pot and cruse of the widow of Zarephath never become empty because the neighbors of the widow, impressed by her gracious hospitality, establish for her, her son and her mendicant guest a Sidonian "hot-lunch" society;<sup>4</sup> Elijah's restoration of the widow's son is not a resurrection but an early example of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.<sup>5</sup>

Now why would Gray operate in this way? Is it not likely that the accounts of Elijah's deeds, if taken literally, seem to be too close to magic? Is it not simpler to assume that remarkable but nonmiraculous events were exaggerated and transformed in time by storytellers to a quasi-magical level?

Suggesting that the stories of Elijah are merely stories of magic is that, when analyzed, they appear to be merely silly. Recently my wife and I saw a fine performance of Mozart's "The Magic Flute." This charming opera is carried along by intriguing sets, lovely (if somewhat bizarre) costumes, a large chorus, several dancers and the dramatic clowning of Papageno. But principally, of course, the opera is carried along by the magnificent music of the incomparable Mozart sung by major artists with full orchestral accompaniment. If the story is analyzed apart from the music, however, how silly magic becomes—where an old hag is transformed into a luscious young lovely by the playing of a magic glockenspiel; where a corps of menacing monsters and the murderous rapist Monostatos become dancing dolls by the playing of a magic flute; and where "true love" from pure young hearts wins out over the crafty machinations of a beautiful but wicked witch as Tamino and Pamina survive the "rite of passage" through trials of fire and water, playing the magic flute to ward off all evil—sweet young lovers singing to the tune of the flute:

We wander by the flute's sweet might,  
Merrily into death and night.<sup>6</sup>

But Elijah is no simple lovelorn Tamino, his mantle is no magic instrument, we know too little of his servant<sup>7</sup> to call him a Papageno, Jezebel is far more evil

<sup>2</sup>J. Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963, 1970).

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 338. At note c he explains: "Reading 'arābīm for MT 'ore bīm ('ravens'), though there is no support in the versions. We adopt this reading solely because of its congruity with the sequel, where Elijah is fed by an alien Phoenician woman."

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 342. Gray speaks as well of the better hygiene of the airy upper chamber.

<sup>6</sup>The original words are: "Wir wandeln durch des Tones Macht, / Froh durch des Todes dust're Nacht." *Die Zauberflöte*, music by W. Mozart, words by E. Schikaneder from L. Giesecke (New York: Rullman, n. d.) 46-47.

<sup>7</sup>In contrast to Elisha's servant, Gehazi, Elijah's servant is mentioned only in passing (1 Kgs 18:43; 19:3). Some have guessed the identity of this servant to be the young Elisha (so. W. H. Stephens, *The Mantle* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1976] 193). Perhaps somewhat more likely is the Jewish tradition that has supposed him to have been the son of the widow of Zarephath, whom Elijah restored to life (see I. W. Slotki, *Kings* [London: Soncino, 1950] 137).

than the wicked witch, and Yahweh is neither Isis nor Osiris dispensing magic charms. To enjoy "The Magic Flute" one has to exercise a considerable "willing suspension of disbelief" and allow the beauty of the music to carry one through the silliness of the plot. How is one to enjoy the stories of Elijah? By the same mechanics used in appreciating fantasy? Or, conversely, by the escape of rationalism and humanism as is done by Gray? Neither approach satisfies the pious. The stories of Elijah call for faith—faith with substance, robust faith in the living Yahweh.

The pious truly believe that God *can* do anything. But the truly pious are not gullible, believing that God *will* do everything. In the context of the incarnation, "the grand miracle,"<sup>8</sup> what is the feeding of Elijah by divinely commissioned birds? If the Creator became incarnate, what is the replenishing of flour and oil within pot and cruse? If the God-Man died but now lives, what, in fact, is even the bringing back to life of the boy once dead? If God can become a man, certainly he can do all of these!<sup>9</sup> But the question is "Why?" For what purpose would God, who can, actually do? Here is where the work of Leah Bronner<sup>10</sup> has provided the Church an inestimably valuable service by demonstrating that every miracle done by Elijah is prompted by polemics, a frontal attack on the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. Bronner uses the poetic materials from Ras Shamra to display the nature of each belief under attack by Elijah.<sup>11</sup> None of the miracles of Elijah is a silly feat; not one is a magic trick. In fact, to rationalize the miracles as was done by Gray is to lose the basic theology of the pericope. Elijah, whose name means "My God is Yahweh,"<sup>12</sup> demonstrates by every miraculous act that Baal is a fake. Yahweh, he is God, Yahweh alone.<sup>13</sup>

Hence the first of our problems in a reading of the story of Elijah—that of the nature of his miracles—is to be resolved by cultural and archaeological insight provided by contemporary ancient Near Eastern research.

## II. THE CONUNDRUM OF HIS CHARACTER

"And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life" (1 Kgs 19:3a *NASB*).

What kind of a man is it who alone can face the 450 prophets of Baal without

<sup>8</sup>This is the designation of C. S. Lewis in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 112-136. He states: "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation" (p. 112).

<sup>9</sup>See R. B. Allen, "The Theology of the Balaam Oracles: A Pagan Diviner and the Word of God," unpublished doctoral dissertation (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973) 441-454, for a fuller presentation of this concept in relation to the "talking donkey" of the Balaam pericope.

<sup>10</sup>L. Bronner, *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha: As Polemics Against Baal Worship* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. Bronner develops many motifs in which Elijah and Elisha are functioning polemically against Baal worship. These include motifs of fire, rain, oil and corn, child-giving, healing, resurrection, ascent, river and others.

<sup>12</sup>In my article, "What Is in a Name?" (*God: What Is He Like?*, ed. W. F. Kerr [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977] 107-127), attention is given to the significance of names of Biblical protagonists to set the stage for the meaning of the name "Yahweh."

<sup>13</sup>Reference is to the credo of Israel in Deut 6:4.

flinching, but who then runs in cowardly fear because of the rantings of one woman? Expositors and preachers have had a field day exulting at the contrast of the Elijah of Mount Carmel, bold and dashing in victory, versus the Elijah of the wilderness, bowed in quaking fear under a desert shrub. If ever there was a portrait painted "warts and all," this is surely it.<sup>14</sup> Elijah is the "Peter of the OT," a favorite object of expository contempt and stern moralizing. Perhaps a few examples should be given to demonstrate the intensity of the attack upon him. First, the words of Merrill F. Unger:

What a contrast! Elijah the hero of faith on Carmel victorious over Baalism! Elijah the coward of unbelief at Horeb, self-occupied, utterly discouraged, wishing to die (cf. Rom 11:2-4), praying against rather than for God's people.<sup>15</sup>

British expositor A. W. Pink comments on Elijah's loss of faith in this way: "Hitherto Elijah had been sustained by faith's vision of the living God, but now he lost sight of the Lord and saw only a furious woman."<sup>16</sup> Pink then makes the proverbial comparison: "As Peter's courage failed him in the presence of the maid, so Elijah's strength wilted before the threatenings of Jezebel."<sup>17</sup>

Some have argued that Elijah's flight was not only an act of cowardice and faithlessness but also the rash action that destroyed the possibility for continuing his revival. F. B. Meyer speaks of him as being "utterly demoralized and panic-stricken."<sup>18</sup> But then he wistfully notes:

What might have been! If only Elijah had held his ground—dwelling in the secret place of the Most High, and hiding under the shadow of the Almighty—he might have saved his country; and there would have been no necessity for the captivity and dispersion of his people.<sup>19</sup>

Leon Wood follows the same approach:

The evidence is all too clear that Elijah indeed was wrong, and tragically so. He had conducted himself so well until this point, providing a shining example of strength and faith as we have seen; but here he failed. When he ran that night, he did nothing less than take all chance for revival with him.<sup>20</sup>

Howard G. Hendricks seems almost to relish the flaw of fear he finds in Elijah: "Singlehandedly he took on 850 prophets, but one woman said, 'I'll get you,' and he ran."<sup>21</sup> Hendricks also goes so far as to criticize the prayer of Elijah in the desert, terming it "hypocritical":

<sup>14</sup>Often this negative picture of the great prophet is adduced as support for the veracity of the Scriptures. See, e. g., F. B. Meyer, *Elijah and the Secret of His Power* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1909) 101-102.

<sup>15</sup>M. F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 223 (italics mine). J. V. McGee speaks of his "cowardly retreat" in *Notes for Through the Bible* (radio series; Los Angeles: author [n. d.]) 88.

<sup>16</sup>A. W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (rev. ed.; London: Banner of Truth, 1963) 197.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Meyer, *Elijah*, 99.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>20</sup>L. J. Wood, *Elijah the Prophet of God* (Des Plaines, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press, 1968) 109.

<sup>21</sup>H. G. Hendricks, *Elijah: Confrontation, Conflict, and Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 57.

The longer I examine this, the more I think there is a touch of the hypocritical in Elijah's prayer. Whenever you have distorted perspective, you always become dishonest, even in your praying. I don't think Elijah wanted to die. If he had wanted to die, he did not have to travel 120 miles south. All he had to do was to make himself available to Jezebel. She'd be delighted to accommodate him.<sup>22</sup>

Taken together we have a most curious picture of the prophet of Yahweh. On the one hand we read (with strong assent) the finely worded commendation of Elijah by the late H. H. Rowley:

The prophet Elijah is one of the great figures of the Old Testament. In Jewish expectation it was believed that he would return to herald the messianic age, and we know that in New Testament times there were some who asked whether Jesus was Elias *redivivus*. In the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord, Moses and Elijah appeared on the mountain with Jesus. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and was the mediator of the Sinai Covenant. Elijah was the prophet who saved the Israelite faith in the greatest peril it had to face between the days of Moses and the Exile.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand we are told by some writers that in Elijah's flight from Jezebel this great figure of OT prophetism was cowardly, unfaithful to God, guilty of self-pity,<sup>24</sup> responsible for the failure of the revival, and even hypocritical in his prayer.

These are serious charges. While it is certainly true that even the greatest Biblical heroes are often described in their moments of defeat, sin and despair, and while it is also possible that Elijah's fear before Jezebel may be described as psychologically understandable, when one takes into account the tremendous inner strain he must have suffered during the conflict on Carmel<sup>25</sup>—is it really credible that a man of such bold daring would really become afraid of Jezebel? Does saying, "Ah! But you never saw Jezebel!" really answer this basic question? It is the contention of this paper that the most common approach to 1 Kgs 19:3a is decidedly in error. Elijah was broken, but he was not afraid! The rhetorical question of Bähr asked more than a century ago needs to be restated:

Moreover, how should the man who had just been standing all alone over against the whole people, the king, and 450 priests of Baal (chap. xviii.22), who especially appears as an unequalled prophetic hero in the history of Israel, have become all at once afraid of a bad woman?<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. G. von Rad seems to minimize Jezebel's threat to a diplomatic proposal (*Biblical Interpretations in Preaching* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1977] 54).

<sup>23</sup>H. H. Rowley, "Elijah on Mount Carmel," in *Men of God: Studies in Old Testament History and Prophecy* (London: Nelson, 1963) 37. On the same page, n. 5, Rowley cites J. Skinner, *Kings* (Century Bible) 222: "He is to be ranked as the greatest religious personality that had been raised up in Israel since Moses."

<sup>24</sup>Noted by D. Alexander and P. Alexander, eds., *Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 266.

<sup>25</sup>Rowley, "Elijah," 63-64. He states: "Despite his confidence in God, Elijah must have been aware of the magnitude of the issues that hung on the crisis, and it is in no way surprising that a mood of depression should follow the exaltation of triumph."

<sup>26</sup>K. C. W. F. Bähr, *The Book of Kings, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (ed. J. P. Lange; reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), Part One, 218.

Is it really possible, in the words of William S. LaSor, to conclude that "the obvious meaning is that Elijah was just plain afraid"?<sup>27</sup> I think not.

It is the position of this paper that the conundrum concerning the character of Elijah is to be solved not by some sort of historical psychoanalysis, citing "certifiable manic depressives I have known," but that the issue has been confused because of a faulty turn taken in textual criticism.

The pivotal term in our text is the Hebrew word *wayyar*, the first word in verse three. This common verbal form<sup>28</sup> should be translated "then he saw" (from *rā'ā*). But it is rendered in this way (or similarly) only in older translations such as *KJV*, *ASV*, *La Sainte Bible* (L. Segond) and *JPSV* (1917 edition). Virtually all of the more recent translations of the Bible have opted for another reading, the Hebrew *wayyirā*, "and he was afraid" (from *yārē*). A survey of translations so reading includes *RSV*, *King James II* (ed. J. Green), *Das Alte Testament* (revised from Martin Luther), *Berkeley Version* (ed. G. Verkuyl), *La Sainte Bible* ("de Jérusalem"; French and English editions), *NEB* and *NASB*.<sup>29</sup>

Here is a classic instance in which a text-critical issue concerning one word determines an entire exegetical approach. In my judgment many have taken the wrong choice. The reading "and he was afraid" has the support of LXX, Vg, Syro-Hexapla, Syriac, one MS of the Targum, and some Hebrew MSS. Against this largely versional evidence stand most Hebrew MSS and the Targum, which read "and he saw."<sup>30</sup>

Against the prevailing tendency, which seems to count textual witnesses as one might tabulate votes,<sup>31</sup> the better procedure in textual criticism of the OT is to accept that reading which best explains the others.<sup>32</sup> Following this one simple canon of text criticism, one may explain how Hebrew scribes might change "and he saw" to "and he was afraid"; the reverse procedure is most unlikely. The following words in the verse, "and ran for his life," seem to go far more easily with "and he was afraid" than with "and he saw." The versional evidence may similarly be explained as part of a standard procedure to take an easier reading, regularly demonstrated in LXX, Syriac and Vg.

<sup>27</sup>W. S. LaSor, "1 and 2 Kings," in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 345.

<sup>28</sup>This form is found 132 times in the OT according to S. Mandelkern, *Verteris Testamenti Concordantiae* (Graz: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, n. d.) 1057-1058. He lists this form in our text, of course.

<sup>29</sup>Some modern translations give marginal notes to the effect that the Hebrew text does read "and he saw"; such is found in the French and English editions of the *Jerusalem Bible* and (grudgingly?) in *NASB*. *RSV*, *King James II*, *Alte Testament*, *Berkeley* and *NEB* do not even have a note to explain this variant reading. The *Living Bible* evades the controversy by reading merely: "So Elijah fled for his life."

<sup>30</sup>Text-critical data are found in J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951) 317.

<sup>31</sup>This is coupled by a renewed trend to grant too ready assent to the superiority of LXX readings; see R. W. Klein, *Textual Criticism of the Old Testament: From the Septuagint to Qumran* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974).

<sup>32</sup>Cf. B. K. Waltke, "The Textual Criticism of the Old Testament," in F. E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 1. 226.

If we accept the reading "and he saw," then we must see if these words fit in our text. It seems that they fit admirably well. "And he saw" is the harder reading, but on close inspection it is proved to be the better reading.

We must recall Rowley's words cited above: "Elijah was the prophet who saved the Israelite faith in the greatest peril it had to face between the days of Moses and the Exile."<sup>33</sup> The extreme gravity of the situation has not always been appreciated. By his marriage to Jezebel, King Ahab had not only continued the syncretistic apostasy of the northern kingdom begun with Jeroboam ben Nebat.<sup>34</sup> He had also, in subsequent actions, actually produced the nadir of Israel's spiritual decline. His wife was the Sidonian-born princess and priestess of Baal. She was established as queen with a large retinue of prophets and priests of her pagan religion in her own personal employment (cf. 1 Kgs 18:19: "who eat at Jezebel's table"). Ahab, at the side of his wicked wife,<sup>35</sup> led in the royal worship of Baal, having built altar and temple for Baal as well as erecting the Asherah (cf. 16:31-33a). For these reasons the prophetic writer of Kings concludes: "Thus Ahab did more to provoke Yahweh, God of Israel, than all the kings who were before him" (v 33b).

There are indications in the Elijah narrative that he hoped to eradicate Baal worship and reestablish a united monarchy under the pure Yahwism of Moses. The celebrated contest on Carmel (1 Kgs 18) actually began three-and-one-half years earlier in the palace of Ahab, when Elijah said there would be no more rain (17:1). Baal, the fertility god of Canaan, was principally pictured as the deity responsible for rain. Bronner states, "The Ugaritic text ascribed to him [Baal] the power of fructifying the land by giving the blessing of rain."<sup>36</sup> It was Elijah's intention "to uproot these fallacious ideas by demonstrating that God above fulfilled these functions."<sup>37</sup>

As we have already noted, each miracle of Elijah was a consciously designed attack on the theology of Baal. Elijah's desired response from the people was achieved when a bolt of lightning, the precursor of rain, struck his waterlogged sacrifice and altar on Carmel. Rain was coming, but it was being sent by Yahweh, not from Baal!<sup>38</sup> The people shouted their renewed *Shema*: "Yahweh, he is (the) God; Yahweh, he is (the) God!" (18:39).

In his preparations Elijah consciously evoked images of the united monarchy. He "took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of Yahweh had come, saying, 'Israel shall be your name,' " and

<sup>33</sup>Rowley, "Elijah," 37.

<sup>34</sup>The prophet-author of Kings chides: "As though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat" (1 Kgs 16:31).

<sup>35</sup>R. G. Lee, a venerable Southern Baptist preacher, in his most famous sermon, "Pay Day—Someday," describes Ahab as "the vile human toad who squatted on the throne of the nation." Jezebel was "the beautiful adder; coiled beside the toad." "Great Sermon Series" (Waco: Word Records, n. d.).

<sup>36</sup>Bronner, *Stories*, 67. See her texts and comparative data on the following pages.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>38</sup>Elijah's ribald scorning of Baal (18:27) is only given literally in the *Living Bible*. Cf. Montgomery-Gehman, *Kings*, 302: "Elijah's satire in a nut-shell is the raciest comment ever made on Pagan mythology."

he built of them his symbolic altar (18:31). He had four pitchers filled with water three times (vv 33-34)—again the number twelve is prominent. His prayer is Mosaic in tone, evoking Yahweh as God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Israel (v 36).

Surely by all these actions an utter defeat of Baalism had been anticipated. The extermination of the prophets of Baal in mock and grisly sacrifice at the Wadi Kishon (v 40) seemed to be the final stroke. The sevenfold demonstration of the lack of rain in the three-and-one-half years of drought is matched by the sevenfold quest for rain clouds by the servant, and all the while Elijah is in great and fervent prayer (vv 42-44; cf. Jas 5:17-18).

But when Ahab witnessed it and returned to his palace at Jezreel, did he depose his wicked queen? No! He told her of Elijah's victory and did not prevent her from ordering Elijah's execution in reprisal. Then Elijah saw! He explains what he saw: "I am not better than my fathers" (1 Kgs 19:4). He wanted to die, for he was broken. He did not wish to die at Jezebel's hand, for that would be judged her victory—hence his flight. But south of the proverbial southernmost city of the southern kingdom, in the wilderness of Judah, where none would give Jezebel credit for his death—there he begged Yahweh to take his life.<sup>39</sup> He was not going to bring about a great revival that would stop Israel's plunge to destruction. Rather, like all the prophets before him, he was just one more figure stepping on the brakes of the national plunge to destruction for a moment. The ultimate destruction was sure.

To repeat, it is the contention of this paper that we do not confront in Elijah a prophet who is afraid but a prophet who was broken. He does not quiver with fear beneath that desert shrub, but he moans in disappointment. It was not for lack of courage (like a hapless fainthearted lion on the way to Oz) that he goes to Sinai, but for a new experience with Yahweh that would redirect his ministry. It is in his disappointment, not in his terror, that we see Elijah as "a man with a nature like ours" (Jas 5:17a).

It was not new boldness that Yahweh gave Elijah at Horeb, but a new insight into Yahweh's way ("the voice of a gentle stillness," 1 Kgs 19:12). Further, God gave Elijah a new encouragement for ministry in teaching him that he was not entirely alone. There was a small but important cadre of faithful men, untarnished by the prostitutions of Baal worship in Israel (v 18).

In short, Jezebel did not scare Elijah by her ghastly cackle. She broke him by her unrepentant spirit and her unhindered power to strike back at him in her continuing control of the nation. Her terrible oath was adjured in the name of her gods,<sup>40</sup> whom Elijah had demonstrated already to be powerless.

Hence, as Keil wrote long ago,

*Wayyar'* is not to be altered into *wayyîrâ'*, *et timuit*, after the LXX. and Vulg., notwithstanding the fact that some Codd. have this reading, which only rests upon an erroneous conjecture. For it is obvious that Elijah did not flee from any fear of the vain threat of Jezebel, from the fact that he did not merely withdraw into the Kingdom of Judah, where he would have been safe under Jehoshaphat from all the

<sup>39</sup>It would be an error to suppose that Elijah had in mind here his chariot "exit."

<sup>40</sup>Jezebel's oath is to be rendered as follows: "Thus may the *gods* do to me and add thereto . . .," as the plural verbs demand.



persecutions of Jezebel, but went to Beersheba, and thence onwards into the desert, there to pour out before the Lord God his weariness of life (ver 4).<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the conundrum of Elijah's character is resolved along text-critical lines. Elijah was broken, but he was not afraid.

### III. HIS ROLE IN *HEILSGESCHICHTE*

Our third line of inquiry is theological. It concerns the place of Elijah in the "forward directedness" of divine revelation.<sup>42</sup> Again, reference should be made to the splendid assessment of Elijah given by H. H. Rowley. In his statement Rowley connects Elijah to Moses and Jesus. This is the line of continuity I wish to stress. From Moses to Jesus the prophetic hinge was Elijah. In his actions he was a Moses *redivivus*; in his actions he also portends Messiah.

The dissolution of Yahwism in the reign of Ahab called for a new Moses. This new Moses was Elijah. In his deep personal crisis attending his brokenness he came to Mount Horeb/Sinai for a new experience with Yahweh that has "Moses" written all over it. Elijah's forty days of fasting in the wilderness of Sinai (19:8) recall Moses' forty days of fasting on the Mount (see Exod 34:28; 24:18; Deut 9:9; 10:10; some connection may also be seen with Israel's forty years in the wilderness). R. A. Carlson remarks on the highly accentuated Mosaic influence in this regard.<sup>43</sup> Further, the English text of 1 Kgs 19:9 is not as direct as it might be. "Then he came there to a cave" would be rendered more literally as "Then he came there to *the* cave." The Hebrew is definite, and a study of the word "cave" in Hebrew literature suggests that this word with the article is regularly specific rather than generic. We agree with Gray that the article here "seems rather to point to the tradition of a definite cave on the holy mountain, possibly that from which Moses saw the back of Yahweh (Ex 33:21 ff.)."<sup>44</sup> In both cases Yahweh passed by—an extraordinary demonstration of his stooping grace. The "Moses-connection" of Elijah is best developed by Bähr:

When now Elijah is favored with the same revelation, such as fell to the lot of Moses only and of no other servant of God beside Moses under the old dispensation, he is thereby placed over against Moses; in fact, to a certain degree, on the same line with him; and this is owing to the position which he holds in sacred history as the restorer of the broken covenant, the other, the second Moses.<sup>45</sup>

In the Biblical narrative there are three periods characterized by extensive miraculous actions by God: the time of Moses, the time of Elijah and Elisha, and

<sup>41</sup>C. F. Keil, *The Book of Kings* (reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n. d.) 253. I find less convincing Keil's explanation of the words "he went for his life" as "he went to care for his soul" or "for conscience' sake." On this last see Bähr's correction of Keil (*Kings*, Part One, 218).

<sup>42</sup>For this definition see my paper, "Is There *Heil* for *Heilsgeschichte*?", presented at the 27th annual meeting of ETS (December 30, 1975) 17.

<sup>43</sup>R. A. Carlson, "Elie à l'Horeb," *VT* 19 (1969) 432.

<sup>44</sup>Gray, *Kings*, 364. The definite article is also emphasized as specific by Carlson: "dans la grotte" ("Elie," 432).

<sup>45</sup>Bähr, *Kings*, Part One, 224-225. It is of interest to this discussion that in the original these notes were under the German heading, *Heilsgeschichtliche und ethische Grundgedanken* (see p. vi in P. Schaff's "Preface").

the time of Jesus. The initiating of God's actions with Israel, the period of deepest crisis to that relationship, and the time of fulfillment in Messiah—these are the periods of God's exuberant wonder-works.

But it is not just in miraculous displays that Elijah points forward to Jesus. It is pre-eminently in the fact that "Elijah the second Moses" is still not the Prophet greater than Moses (cf. Deut 18:15-18; 34:10-12);<sup>46</sup> he is rather the hinge-figure that keeps that hope alive. Just as Moses with manna, and Jesus with the multitudes hungry on the shore of Galilee, so Elijah is connected with miraculous provisions of food (1 Kgs 17:2-7, 8-16). Further, he portends the resurrection miracles of our Lord when he is used of Yahweh to bring back to life the dead son of his benefactress (17:17-24), whereas she, in turn, is the Syrophenician believer of the OT (cf. Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Elijah's role in the rain controversy is also recalled in the many instances of Jesus' control over weather phenomena: Baal is still a fake!

Finally, may we not see in Elijah's despair in the wilderness something similar to Jesus' ordeal in Gethsemane? In both cases there was a time of tumultuous decision-making in determining to drink the cup of the Father's will (see Matt 26:36-46).<sup>47</sup>

Though a broken prophet, Elijah does not remain broken. His ministry continued in the record of the book of Kings. His name became a messianic designation (Mal 4:5; Matt 11:14; 17:10 ff.; Mark 6:15; 9:11 ff.; Luke 9:8; John 1:21; see also Matt 16:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19). And he—with Moses—talked with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8 and parallels). Yet he—and Moses—fades before him, so that the three disciples on looking again "saw no one except Jesus himself alone" (v 8).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Three questions have been addressed in this paper. The nature of Elijah's miracles was judged to be polemical against the specific assertions of Canaanite faith in Baal which pervaded Israel during the infamous rule of Ahab and Jezebel. The conundrum of Elijah's character was resolved by a text-critical procedure in which it was determined that Elijah was not terrified by Jezebel but broken by her unrepentant paganism and her continuing power over the nation and its destiny. Finally, Elijah was seen in a *heilsgeschichtliche* continuity to be the prophetic hinge between Moses and Jesus. He is a second Moses who still ranks lower than the great prophet Messiah.

<sup>46</sup>R. P. Carroll in an article on Deut 18:15-18 in relation to Elijah asserts two factors: "The idea of continuous action on the part of Yahweh in raising up prophets to meet situations, and the Mosaic nature of such prophets" ("The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel," *VT* 19 [1969] 401).

<sup>47</sup>My colleague James DeYoung reminds me that Heb 5:7-8 may well fit in here. Von Rad quotes extensively from Luther on assaults upon the spirit (*Anfechtungen*) which are "integrating forces in our Christian existence" (*Biblical Interpretations*, 55-56).