

Chapter 23 1 Kings 12-19

Elijah

“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” 1 Kings 18:36-37

The prophets were God’s way of keeping his people in the Story. Without their Spirit-inspired intervention the covenant people might have disappeared altogether and blended into the pagan landscape. For all their power and wealth Israel’s kings proved sinfully inept in honoring Yahweh. The end of Solomon’s forty year reign gave the people hope for a new beginning. The legacy of his reign could be seen in the splendor of the Temple and the grandeur of his palace, but many looked past the buildings and felt the oppressive burden of his rule. The people of Israel longed for relief from the forced labor and heavy taxation demanded by Solomon’s expensive building projects, but there is no evidence that they called for spiritual renewal. Solomon’s many foreign wives introduced Israel to the fertility cults and pagan practices of the surrounding cultures. There was Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites, and Chemosh the detestable god of Moab.

In what must have been promoted as a magnanimous spirit of religious tolerance and cultural diversity, David’s heir proudly built shrines and high places to the gods of his foreign wives. He allowed the spirit of the times to dictate spirituality and blatantly defied the expressed Word of God. The consequences of Solomon’s actions were predictable. “So the Lord said to Solomon, ‘Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen’” (1 Kings 11:11-13).

Fateful Decisions

Rehoboam, Solomon’s son and successor, inherited God’s judgment against his father’s sin. But the whole story, past and present, should be told in order to see God’s justice, because Rehoboam not only was destined to have the kingdom torn from him, he deserved to have it taken from him. He wilfully brought the judgment down upon himself. The “whole assembly of Israel” appealed to Rehoboam, saying, “Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you” (1 Kings 12:4). What might have been a joyous coronation turned into a three day consultation with a disheartening conclusion. Rehoboam made a deliberate show of interviewing his father’s senior advisors, who counseled him to remember his calling. “If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants” (12:7). His power-hungry cohorts gave the opposite advice and wrote the speech that Rehoboam chose to deliver to

the people in a harsh, don't mess-with-me tone. "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions" (12:14). It only took three generations for everything that the Lord had warned about the oppressive nature of royal rule to run its course (1 Sam 8:10-20). It must have been a sad day for Israel when the people realized that King Rehoboam would not listen to them. They answered the king, "What share do we have in David, what part in Jesse's son?"

To your tents, O Israel!

Look after your own house, O David!"

What else could they say? As far as they were concerned the decision to part company was made for them. Their hopes for an easy yoke and a peaceable kingdom were dashed. Rehoboam was not looking for a people to serve, but for subjects to use and abuse under his iron-fisted rule. Under the leadership of Jeroboam, the northern tribes split from Judah and Benjamin. Rehoboam was warned not to fight against them, but to let them go. Shemaiah, "the man of God," delivered the divine order,

"This is what the Lord says: Do not go up to fight against your brothers, the Israelites.

Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing" (12:24).

From that point on the kingdom was divided and would never be reunited. As the Lord had done at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), he did here. God dissipated the power of evil by breaking up the nation. The people of Israel had become a poor excuse for the called out, set apart people of God. They no longer represented the will of God among the nations. David's psalm could no longer be sung over Israel: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes." Under Rehoboam, such joy had become a spiritual anachronism in Israel. The aesthetically pleasing imagery of the "dew of Hermon" falling on Mount Zion," belonged to a bygone era. The Lord was no longer bestowing his blessing, "even life forevermore" (Ps 133). Israel's landscape was now polluted with "high places" dedicated to fertility cults, male and female prostitution, and child sacrifice.

In the fateful dialogue between the people and Rehoboam, the repeated reference to a "heavy yoke" (1 Kings 12:4, 10,14) recalls the words of Jesus, the true Son of David, given some 950 years after David's grandson's fateful decision. Instead of issuing a harsh warning, Jesus gave a comforting invitation,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30).

Instead of driving the people away, as Rehoboam did, Jesus drew the people to himself.

The millennium between Rehoboam, Solomon's successor, and Jesus, the one greater than Solomon, is best described as the prophetic era. It stretches from Elijah to John the Baptist. The message and passion of the biblical text that covers this period belongs to the prophets rather than the kings. The narrative in Kings and Chronicles lists the kings in sea-saw fashion, going back and forth between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, making it difficult to keep all the names straight. In 1 Kings, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa and

Jehoshaphat make up Judah's royal line-up. Israel's kings include Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, Ahab, and Ahaziah. The length of the narrative description is often unrelated to the tenure of the king's rule. What mattered most was whether the king "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" or "did evil in the eyes of the Lord." Of all these kings, both north and south, only Judah's kings, Asa and his son, Jehoshaphat, were commended for doing "what was right in the eyes of the Lord" (15:11; 22:43). And even though "Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life" (15:14), he could not remove the high places because evil was so deeply rooted in Judah.

If Rehoboam's fateful decision drove the northern tribes away from the house of David, Jeroboam's fateful decision kept them away. If Rehoboam was determined to bully the people into submission, Jeroboam was determined to seduce them into idolatry. Following the advice of others, Jeroboam made two golden calves. He set up one idol in Bethel and another in Dan, and then promoted his new religion for its convenience. "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem," he reasoned. "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (12:28). The Psalms of Ascent sung by Hebrew pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover were no longer needed because of Jeroboam's cleverly devised alternative and more convenient site. His innovations however did not stop there. He set up shrines on high places and appointed priests "from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites" (12:31). He also set up a rival religious festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, "a month of his own choosing," to compete with the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29).

Jeroboam's actions led to an exodus of priests and Levites from the northern region. They "abandoned their pasture lands and property, and came to Judah and Jerusalem because Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them as priests of the Lord" (2 Chron 11:14). Those who were trying to be faithful faced a tough dilemma. They were forced to choose between the idolater of the north and the tyrant of the south. They decided to face the threat of political oppression instead of living under spiritual apostasy. At great personal and financial cost, the priests and Levites left their land and took up residence in Judah. Their example inspired others. "Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their fathers" (2 Chron 11:16). The presence of these spiritual refugees may have been instrumental in helping to keep Judah tethered to the law of the Lord and the temple. For instead of rejecting the judgment of God, which came in the form of an Egyptian invasion, they were humbled by it and turned to the Lord. Nevertheless, the book of Kings gives a devastating report of the overall spiritual climate of Judah (1 Kings 14:22-24), while Chronicles focuses on a remnant in Judah who remained "salt and light." "Indeed, there was some good in Judah" (2 Chron 12:12).

The counterfeit spiritual leadership that existed in Jeroboam's Israel was so corrupt that even when so-called prophets accepted the word of the Lord as true, they tried to subvert it. One critical incident serves to illustrate this. "By the word of the Lord a man of God came from Judah to Bethel" to confront Jeroboam who "was standing by the altar to make an offering" (1 Kings 13:1). The man of God from Judah dramatically prophesied that the Lord would raise up a future king from the house of David, by the name of Josiah, who would destroy the priests of the high

place on that very altar, and that as a confirmation of his prophecy the altar would break apart spilling out its ashes. Pointing to the man of God, Jeroboam shouted, "Seize him!" In that moment two things happened, the king's outstretched hand became paralyzed and the altar split apart. Immediately he asked the man of God to intercede with the Lord God for the restoration of his hand, which the man of God did and his hand was restored. Jeroboam's next move seems to be more in keeping with his usual seductive style of trying to win people's favor through a bribe. He gave the man of God an invitation. "Come home with me and have something to eat, and I will give you a gift." But the man of God refused the king's bribe, saying, "Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water there. For I was commanded by the word of the Lord: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came'" (13:8-9). So far so good, but what the man of God from Judah had not counted on was the blatant deception of a self-professed old prophet, who tricked him into coming home with him by claiming that an angel had told him to bring him home and feed him. Not only does the man of God from Judah come off looking naive and gullible, but the old prophet simply repeated Jeroboam's strategy of seduction in spiritual terms ("an angel said to me..."). Where the king failed, the old prophet was successful.

No sooner had the man of God eaten than the word of the Lord came to the old prophet telling him to denounce the man of God for having defied the word of the Lord. The man of God from Judah paid dearly for yielding to the old prophet's seduction. On his way home he was attacked and killed by a lion, but instead of the lion devouring the body, it stood by the body, until the old prophet retrieved it. The climax of the episode comes at the end, after the old prophet had honored the man of God by burying his body in his own tomb, and after he had given instructions to his sons that when he died he should be buried right next to the man of God. He told his sons, "For the message he [the man of God] declared by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel and against all the shrines on the high places in the towns of Samaria will certainly come true" (13:32). Such was the pernicious nature of religion in Israel that even when the word of the Lord was judged to be true it was attacked with deception and seduction. Politics and religion had knowingly entered into a conspiracy against the truth.

Jeroboam must have had some idea of how seriously he had violated the will of God, because when his son, Abijah, was gravely ill, he sent his wife in disguise to the prophet Ahijah to inquire about their son's health. Ahijah was the same prophet the Lord had used to inform Jeroboam that he was to be given power over the ten tribes of Israel after Solomon died (11:29-31). Nearly two decades later, a frail and blind Ahijah, pronounced God's judgment against the house of Jeroboam. "You have done more evil than all who lived before you," declared the prophet. "You have made for yourself other gods, idols made of metal; you have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back" (14:9). Consequently, beginning with Jeroboam's son, every last male member of Jeroboam's family was to be cut off. One of Jeroboam's sons, Nadab, succeeded him and ruled for two years before Baasha came to power and "killed Jeroboam's whole family" (15:29). The rulers that followed, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, "walked in the ways of Jeroboam" (15:34; 16:19, 26) and "did evil in the eyes of the Lord." A narrative climax is reached in this line of evil succession, when Ahab, Omri's son becomes king over Israel. He was to rule in Samaria for twenty-two years (874-853) and be so totally evil as to trivialize the sins of

Jeroboam. Under Ahab, Israel was no different than any other pagan, idolatrous state. Ahab forged an alliance with Ethbaal king of the Sidonians by marrying his daughter Jezebel. He introduced Baal worship and “set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria” (16:32). He made an Asherah pole “and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him” (16:33). The northern kingdom had sunk about as low as it possibly could. Enter Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe, that is to say from nowhere important, with no other credentials than the Word of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord

Elijah is introduced without family background or political connections. He grew up in Transjordan, on the edge of the desert, far removed from Israel’s power center. In many ways his life was the prototype for the prophetic experience. He emerged from obscurity, proclaimed the word of the Lord, pronounced God’s judgment, lived much of his life in solitude, confronted the powers of evil, experienced intense loneliness and remained faithful through it all. He portrayed a rugged, earthy, God-dependent spirituality that was evident not only in situations that required unprecedented courage and trust, but in moments of utter dejection and despair. Elijah was larger than life, a symbol of a new era of divine revelation and a standard bearer for the living God, but he was also subject to the emotional, physical and spiritual exhaustion that came from serving the Lord in an incredibly stressful situation. Above all else, he was a person defined by the Word of the Lord and obedient to Yahweh’s purposes. His life lived up to the meaning of his name, “Yah is my God.”

We are given no background for Elijah’s initial encounter with Ahab. Only the message of God defines Elijah’s prophetic calling and access to the king. “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (17:1). Having delivered God’s one minute message, Elijah vanished from public life for three years. And in spite of Ahab’s extensive search, the prophet could not be found anywhere (18:10).

Much of the drama of Elijah’s life unfolds outside the political spotlight and serves to highlight God’s sustaining grace. The real story is the behind-the-scenes look at Elijah camped out in the ravine of Kerith, hiding out at the home of a Sidonian widow, sitting down under the broom tree at Beersheba, and climbing up Mount Horeb. The focus shifts from evil kings and political succession to God’s direction in the life of his prophet. Elijah’s spirituality meant far more to Israel than Ahab’s building projects and political alliances. His life embodied the faith and hope of God’s people. What was true for Elijah is true for the followers of the Lord Jesus. It is the hidden personal life of the believer that takes precedence over public action. It is how we cope with the long arid stretches of life that determine how God can use us in the public arena.

Elijah at the brook of Kerith is an example of how Israel ought to be God-dependent. Elijah obeyed the word of the Lord and crossed the Jordan. There was no confusion as to the Lord’s direction: “You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there” (17:2), and Elijah obeyed it completely. After the brook dried up “the word of the Lord came to him: ‘Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place

to supply you with food” (17:9). Elijah’s relationship with the widow of Sidon showed Israel how Yahweh sought to bless the surrounding nations through the testimony of his great faithfulness and resurrection power. The widow and her son were on the verge of starving to death when Elijah showed up requesting a meal. “Don’t be afraid,” Elijah said to her. “For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’” (17:13-14).

We are meant to pick up on the contrast between Ahab’s capitulation to his Baal worshiping, Sidonian wife Jezebel and Elijah’s faithful witness to the Sidonian widow. Elijah’s response to her reminds us of the first words of the gospel, used repeatedly by Jesus, “Do not be afraid.” Some time later when the widow’s son became ill and stopped breathing, the testimony of Yahweh was once again put to the test. The widow said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?” It is implied that in the presence of Yahweh’s prophet she had become convicted of her Baal worshiping ways. Elijah said, “Give me your son,” and then preceded to plead with God for his life. “O Lord my God, let this boy’s life return to him!” When the Lord answered Elijah’s prayer and restored the life of the boy, it is obvious that Elijah was thrilled to be able to say to the widow, “Look, your son is alive!” (17:23). The Sidonian widow came to see what king Ahab and others in Israel could not see. “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth” (17:24).

Showdown on Mount Carmel

In the middle of Elijah’s hidden life came the challenge of a lifetime. For three long years he had bided his time, waiting for the Lord’s direction and preparing for his showdown with Ahab and the prophets of Baal. After three years of drought and famine the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, “Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land,” Elijah obeyed and arranged an audience with the frustrated king through Obadiah, Ahab’s chief of staff. It is hard to tell whether Elijah was aware that Obadiah, the political insider, was “a devout believer in the Lord” and was responsible for protecting one hundred faithful prophets from Jezebel. Obadiah hoped Elijah had heard about him and his rescue operation, but Elijah doesn’t let on either way.

Judging from Ahab’s opening line to Elijah, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” the severe drought had not inclined Ahab’s heart to repentance. Elijah was not surprised by Ahab’s reception and countered with his own accusation, “I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals. Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (18:18-19). Ahab agreed to the showdown and summoned the prophets to Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people with a prophetic ultimatum and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (18:21). The people responded to Elijah’s call for an either/or decision with silence. The single line, “But the people said nothing,” speaks volumes about the spiritual apathy and moral

indifference of the people.

In spite of what Obadiah said to Elijah about saving one hundred prophets, Elijah labored under the notion that he was all alone. He surely felt like he was alone and said so, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets.” The challenge Elijah laid before the people was designed to produce a clear winner. Two sacrificial bulls on two altars and “the god who answers by fire—he is God” (18:24). The prophets of Baal went first. They shouted all morning, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no answer. “At noon Elijah began to taunt them. ‘Shout louder!’ he said. ‘Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.’ So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention” (18:27-29).

Finally it was Elijah’s turn and he gathered the people around an old altar of the Lord that was in disrepair. They watched as the prophet made an altar out of twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Jacob, “to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, ‘Your name shall be Israel.’” Then Elijah dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold three to four gallons of water. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. For hours the people had watched the frantic prophesying and self-mutilation of the prophets of Baal and now they watched a single man lift stones in place, dig a trench, cut up the bull and lay out the sacrifice. Instead of a religious spectacle, Elijah worked in quiet reverence. When he finished, he ordered four large jars filled with water to be poured over the offering and the wood. “‘Do it again,’ he said, and they did it again. ‘Do it a third time,’ he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.” The reader is conscious that the pace of the story has slowed down to take in every suspenseful detail. Elijah was determined to make this a turning point in the life of Israel. After he had laid it all on the line, he stepped forward and prayed:

“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

“Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench” (18:38). Immediately, the people fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord, he is God! The Lord—he is God!” (18:39).

Miracles are relatively infrequent in the biblical record; centuries can pass without a recorded miracle. They are by divine design exceptional signs of the presence and power of God, leading people to faith in God. Biblical miracles tend to cluster around strategic turning points in God’s salvation history, such as the time of Moses and the Exodus or the coming of Jesus and Pentecost. Elijah inaugurated such a breakthrough era of divine revelation, and the miracles of provision and healing that had authenticated his ministry led up to this dramatic testimony on Mount Carmel. The consuming fire of the Lord left no doubt that Yahweh was the Lord God of Israel and that Elijah was his servant. The immediate result was the destruction of the prophets of

Baal as ordered by Elijah and the resumption of rainfall as earnestly prayed for by Elijah. But the long term results were not nearly as conclusive. Ahab seemed indifferent to the whole event, going off to eat and drink while Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel to pray. Elijah even honored Ahab by warning him to return to Jezreel before the storm stopped him, but the first thing Ahab did when he returned was tell Jezebel that Elijah had killed all the prophets of Baal. Ahab acted as if nothing had changed, even though he had personally witnessed the power of Yahweh through Elijah. Unchecked by the king, Jezebel was allowed to give free reign to her outrage in a vowed death threat delivered by messenger to Elijah. Her idolatrous, pagan fertility cult had failed miserably, but she acted like the victor.

Elijah must have experienced a deep sense of loss. The anticipated outcome had not materialized. What more could he have done? What more could God have done? The hoped for renewal movement was squelched before it got started. The Lord God had given dramatic proof of his powerful presence, the prophets of Baal had been destroyed, but the king remained apathetic and hard-hearted, and Jezebel, the Baal worshiping queen, was firmly in control just as if nothing had happened. Elijah was afraid and ran for his life (19:3). It was not so much a cowardly fear that caused him to head for the desert, as much as a fear of having failed God. It was his failure to turn the hearts of Ahab and the people to the Lord that unnerved him. It had never been Elijah's purpose to fight Jezebel. His mission had always been to turn the heart of the people back to the Lord. Those who reason that Elijah failed because he did not stand and fight against Jezebel miss the goal of his mission. Elijah obeyed the word of the Lord and was careful to do everything in his power to heighten the testimony of God, but it wasn't enough. So he left his servant behind and went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree and sat down under its scant shade and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."

A New Perspective

It is the hidden life of Elijah with which we identify most. It is easier for us to picture ourselves under the broom tree bemoaning our spiritual weakness than on top of Mount Carmel declaring victory over the vain idols that possess our culture. We are haunted by the feeling that we are no different than those we know who have failed God miserably and who are we, to think that we are any different from those who have gone before? "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." It is reasonable to conclude that Elijah's broken heart over the hard-heartedness of Ahab and Israel truly identified with the heart of Yahweh.

God in his mercy did three things for Elijah: first, he strengthened his body; second, he restored his soul and third, he renewed his calling. Food and rest were all that his body needed, but his soul required a slow journey to Horeb (Mount Sinai). A trip that could have easily taken ten days turned into forty days and forty nights. It was a journey that recalls the Israelites forty year wilderness sojourn (Num 14:26f), and Moses' forty days on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:28) and looks forward to Jesus' forty days in the wilderness (Mt 4). The place itself and the time it took for Elijah to get there was essential preparation for a new perspective of God. In Jewish custom the period of mourning lasts for forty days, perhaps it took that long for Elijah to get over the fact

that spiritual renewal was not going to sweep Israel as he hoped and prayed.

Having reached Horeb, the word of the Lord came to the prophet, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Some conclude that the thrust of this question serves as a rebuke against Elijah for leaving his ministry in the north and fleeing south. It is as if God said, “Elijah, you have no business being here.” But if God was provoked with Elijah for traveling to Horeb why had he prepared him for the journey in the first place? It is more consistent to interpret the question as a reminder rather than a rebuke. The Lord God was restoring Elijah’s perspective, not berating him for his pilgrimage to Mount Sinai.

Elijah answered the question by reviewing his ministry. “I have been zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (19:10). Is Elijah suffering from a feeling of indispensability or is he identifying with the cause of God and lamenting the fact that it has, at least from his perspective, gone down in defeat? From what we know of the character and courage of Elijah it is wise to conclude that he was far more concerned about Israel’s rejection of the covenant than he was about his own personal safety or self-importance. At Horeb, Elijah trusted in the faithfulness of God, but it was the faithlessness of Israel that tried his soul.

The new perspective that Elijah needed in order to carry on his work was a fresh experience of God. The Lord said to him, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” What follows is well known. The Lord was not in the wind that tore the mountain apart, nor in the earthquake that shook the earth, nor in the fire that scorched the mountainside. The Lord chose to go beyond the demonstrative forces of judgment, which had often been a sign of his presence, and to speak to his prophet in a gentle whisper. The experience on the Mount was not one of condemnation, but communion. Elijah emerged from the cave where he had been hiding to hear the Lord ask a second time, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” The prophet repeated his answer word for word. He still felt the same zeal for the Lord and the utter loneliness and helplessness in reversing Israel’s apostasy. The experience of the presence of God had not changed his mind, but it had prepared him for action. The Lord’s re-commissioning of Elijah came in two parts: first he was to anoint God’s instruments of judgment, the new kings of Aram and Israel, and a new prophet, Elisha; secondly, he was made aware of the seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal “and all whose mouths have not kissed him” (19:18). In this way, Elijah was reminded that God was by no means powerless and the covenant cause was by no means lost. God’s salvation history story was far from over, and no matter how alone Elijah might have felt, he was not alone. There were seven thousand more like Obadiah who were devoted believers in the Lord.

Ahab’s Fateful Decisions

Ahab’s stubborn refusal to do what was right in the eyes of the Lord is portrayed in three separate events at the close of 1 Kings. In each instance his conscience clings faintly to a vague notion of the will of the Lord, but he continually chooses to circumvent, violate, and deny the

expressed will of God. Ahab remains in the spiritual orbit of the word of the Lord, but he lives according to the spirit of the times and capitulates to his own weakness, self-interests and ambition. In each event, Ahab is reminded of the word of the Lord. When Ben-Hadad II, (860-842) king of Aram (Syria), led a coalition of thirty-two kings against Israel (Samaria) an unnamed prophet of the Lord announced to Ahab, “Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the Lord” (20:13). The prophet’s word proved true and Ahab “advanced and overpowered the horses and chariots and inflicted heavy losses on the Arameans” (20:21). By the next spring Ben-Hadad had amassed another large army which again greatly outnumbered Israel’s army. As they positioned themselves for battle, the man of God told Ahab, “This is what the Lord says: ‘Because the Arameans think the Lord is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the Lord’” (20:28). Once again Ben-Hadad’s army was unexpectedly routed and the king, fearing for his life, approached Ahab pleading for mercy and offering lucrative treaty concessions. Calling Ben-Hadad his brother, Ahab signed a peace treaty with the king of Aram and gave him his freedom. It never seemed to occur to Ahab that sparing Israel’s public enemy number one and striking a treaty alliance with him was wrong and that it compromised Israel’s spiritual strength and national security.

Ahab’s inexcusable weakness in executing God’s will is in contrast to the personal pain suffered by an unnamed prophet in order to confront Ahab with the word of the Lord. The prophet forced another prophet to strike him so that he could appear before Ahab as a wounded soldier. When he met Ahab along the roadside he made up a story about inadvertently allowing a captive Syrian soldier to get away. As a plea for mercy, the disguised prophet repeated the harsh consequences for such an irresponsible action. His own life was on the line because his prisoner had gotten away. Given the fact that Ahab had just released the enemy king, one might have thought that he would have extended mercy to one of his own wounded soldiers, but instead, Ahab agreed that capital punishment was the correct sentence. Immediately the prophet removed his headband and the king recognized him as one of the prophets. He confronted Ahab, “This is what the Lord says: ‘You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people’” (20:42). Ahab made a fateful decision on the basis of how he wanted to be perceived and the financial gain he thought he could achieve. Instead of boldly obeying the word of the Lord, he compromised the spiritual strength and physical security of Israel. Ahab’s response to the prophet’s pronouncement of judgment was far from repentance. He returned to his palace in Samaria, “sullen and angry” (20:43).

In the second episode which deals with Naboth’s vineyard we see a similar pattern in Ahab’s life of passive exposure to the word of the Lord, internal rejection and deliberate disobedience. Ahab wanted Naboth’s property for a vegetable garden because it was good land and close to his palace. The king was willing to pay well, but Naboth rejected his offer, saying, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (21:3). Once again, Ahab was confronted with the word of the Lord. Naboth’s deeply rooted values were based on the long-standing tradition that God distributed under Joshua’s leadership to each tribe and family their rightful portion of the land. Out of fidelity to the law of God Naboth sought to honor the tradition of land distribution and apparently Ahab had enough of a conscience to know that he could not simply override Naboth’s objection and seize the land. This brought him no pleasure, but only

frustration. He went home “sullen and angry” and laid on his bed “sulking and refused to eat” (21:4). If Elijah had been discouraged for all the right reasons, Ahab was discouraged for all the wrong reasons. Through his own downcast emotional attitude he recruited the encouragement and evil ingenuity of Jezebel. “Is this how you act as king over Israel?” Jezebel asked. “Get up and eat! Cheer up. I’ll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite” (21:7). It is fitting that Jezebel should write her slanderous letters against Naboth in Ahab’s name, because he was the real perpetrator of the false accusations and barbaric stoning of Naboth. It is also tragically ironic that the same law Naboth lived to obey, Jezebel ingeniously twisted in order to bring about his stoning. Undoubtedly Ahab denied that he had any responsibility for Naboth’s death, rationalizing to himself that he had not taken any overt action against Naboth. However his covetousness, internal rejection of the word of the Lord, and his emotional reaction led directly to Jezebel’s involvement. Ahab may have thought that he had kept himself away from direct involvement, but in God’s eyes he was the prime agent for Naboth’s brutal death.

Once again Ahab was confronted by the word of the Lord and a message of judgment. He was met at Naboth’s vineyard by none other than Elijah! Ahab’s first words to Elijah suggest that he suspected that this was not going to be a positive encounter, “So you have found me, my enemy!” Elijah answered, “I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord” (21:20). Elijah proceeded to pronounce God’s judgment against Ahab and his family in the strongest terms. “Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country.” The editor of 1 Kings summarized Ahab’s character and reign in two contrasting ways. It could be said that Ahab reigned over a successful and wealthy nation. He fortified cities and he built a splendid palace which he ornamented with ivory (22:39). But the more important assessment summarized Ahab’s character: “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel” (21:25-26).

Elijah’s encounter with Ahab in Naboth’s vineyard reached a climax that signaled the end of Ahab’s life, and it would have, if Ahab had not responded with sincere repentance. “He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly” (21:27). Consequently, the Lord came to Elijah and asked, “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me?” No comment is made on Elijah’s reaction, but the Lord in his mercy chose to postpone Ahab’s judgment because he humbled himself.

The third and final episode of Ahab’s life follows the now familiar pattern of passive resistance to the Lord God, followed by a persistent reminder of God’s will, resulting in inexcusable disobedience. In the first episode Ahab gave in to foreign domination and compromised Israel’s strength in spite of the prophet’s reassurance that the victory was the Lord’s. In the second episode Ahab became frustrated over Naboth’s loyalty to the law of the Lord and agreed to Jezebel’s evil schemes. In the third episode, Ahab proposed an alliance with Jehoshaphat king of Judah to take back Ramoth Gilead from Aram.

In 2 Chronicles, Jehoshaphat is described as having “great wealth and honor” and an alliance

with Ahab through marriage (18:1). When Ahab asked for his support, Jehoshaphat expressed strong support, "I am as you are, and my people as your people; we will join you in the war." His only condition was that Ahab, "First seek the counsel of the Lord" (2 Chron 18:4). Ahab consulted with his four hundred prophets who enthusiastically supported the campaign. "Go," they answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." However, it must have been clear that these four hundred prophets were not prophets of the Lord, because Jehoshaphat asked, "Is there not a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?" (1 Ki 22:7).

Ahab's response to Jehoshaphat is consistent with his lifelong resistance to the will of God, "There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah" (1 Ki 22:8). "The king should not say that," replied Jehoshaphat and Ahab called for Micaiah to be brought at once (22:9). At this point the story slows down for every dramatic detail. The scene is set. The kings of Israel and Judah are sitting on their thrones in full regalia as Zedekiah son of Kenaanah used a pair of iron horns to symbolize victory over the Arameans. Speaking on behalf of all the prophets, Zedekiah declared, "This is what the Lord says: 'With these you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed'" (22:11). The messenger who was sent to bring Micaiah told the prophet, "Let your word agree with theirs, and speak favorably" (22:13). One can imagine all eyes riveted on Micaiah as Ahab asked, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?"

"Attack and be victorious," the prophet answered, "for the Lord will give it into the king's hand." There must have been something in Micaiah's tone or delivery that betrayed his insincerity, because Ahab immediately responded, "How many times must I make you swear to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?" (22:16). Ahab could have accepted Micaiah's feigned endorsement and moved on, but instead something in him made him want to challenge Micaiah for the truth. Throughout his life he wanted to feel that his way and the Lord's way were one. He lived in the realm of God's truth, as one who understood, but did not obey the word of the Lord. Ahab was a nominal believer, who wanted both the blessing of God and the freedom to do his own thing. For Ahab this freedom meant supporting idolatry, making alliances with pagan kings, getting his own way and following his own ambition. Ahab couldn't handle the truth, but Micaiah gave it to him any ways. Micaiah answered, "I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace'" (22:17). Ahab's aside comment to Jehoshaphat sums up the negative opinion the nominal believer has of the word of the Lord, "Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?"

But Micaiah had the floor and he didn't stop recounting his vision of how all the other prophets had been deceived until Zedekiah came up and slapped him in the face, saying, "Which way did the spirit from the Lord go when he went from me to speak to you?" This tragic episode recalls the experience of Jesus before the Sanhedrin when he was struck and slapped in the face and mockingly asked, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?" (Mt 26:67). In so many ways the prophets make us think of Jesus.

**Thomas Alan Harvey in Acquainted with Grief writes: “In his commentary ‘The Missing Voice’ Wang lifted up Micaiah, the true prophet of Israel who resisted the four hundred false prophets flattering wicked King Ahab even as they led Israel astray. From this Wang observed that the true prophet stands alone and is opposed by the many and the powerful. The true prophet speaks the word of God regardless of the circumstances, while false prophets measure their words to indulge the king with flattery and assurance of good fortune in order to gain favor. Authoritative and direct, the true prophet’s words sting with the admonishment of hard truth. Obsequious and diversionary, the words of the false prophets comfort the king even when disaster is imminent. Even though genuine prophets are few, they are those that speak the truth and because they do they are mistreated by those in power. As Wang explained:*

‘Such people are so rare in the world. Such people are even rarer in the Church. They are scarce among believers and scarcer still among Christian leaders. There were four hundred prophets who flattered Ahab but only one prophet who did not value his own welfare, who did not care that others slandered him, because he was determined simply to be faithful to God. The situation in the nation of Israel in those days is parallel to that in the Church of God today. The faithful prophets of God are hated and persecuted wherever they are. But there are two kinds of people who hate and persecute them the most. There are those who are being rebuked and warned but who refuse to repent. And there are those who are unfaithful in preaching God’s Word but who habitually flatter and praise men.’

Harvey goes on to say, “This figurative use of characters from the Bible was not just a strategic ploy. Wang used biblical characters and narratives to frame and discern the true import of events unfolding around him. From the stories of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel to the apostles and the religious leaders, Wang turned to the biblical narrative to make sense of his resistance to the religious status quo. Thus, the truth of Scripture was to be found not simply in ideas abstracted from the text, but in the stories themselves, which provided the interpretive lens by which to make sense of the surrounding events. Though the names might have changed, the fundamental conflict between faith and unbelief remained the same. This was hardly escapist. By turning to the biblical narrative, he offered a significantly different version of what was taking place. Accordingly, Wang renarrated the events that engulfed him in light of biblical stories, which unveiled their true significance. This was Wang at his prophetic best as he cast current events in their true biblical light. When events were seen in their true perspective, this allowed wise Christians to take on their proper role in the unfolding drama swirling around them. Only then could their faithfulness or unfaithfulness be fitly manifested, understood, and measured. Accordingly, Christian faith could never be reduced to mere personal opinion or private sentiment, consolation or comfort, or refuge from the harsh realities of life. No, Christian faith was something real and prophetic; it brought to light the true essence of the human drama not taking shaping before their eyes.” (Thomas Alan Harvey, Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao’s Stand for the Persecuted Church in China, Brazos Press, 2002, 73-75).

Elijah and Jesus

This phase of Israel’s history brings to mind the life of Jesus in more ways than we might realize. Rehoboam’s arrogant threat to impose on the people a heavy yoke recalls Jesus’ invitation to take up the easy yoke. Naboth’s trial before his false accusers and his subsequent stoning, reminds us of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. What Jezebel did to Naboth, the rulers of Israel did to Jesus. It is fitting to identify Naboth’s death with Jesus on the cross.

Micaiah’s declaration to Ahab, “I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, ‘These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace’” (1 Kings 22:17), makes us think of Jesus’ words when he saw the crowds and had compassion on them, “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). Unlike the ninth century B.C. prophet who advised the people to go home because they had no master, Jesus was ready to send the people out into the harvest. The Master was on the scene and

ready to put the people to work. “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few,” Jesus declared. “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Mt 9:38).

However, the greatest connection between Jesus and this era of salvation history is with Elijah. No other prophet is referred to in the New Testament as many times as Elijah. Many of the references center around John the Baptist, who went “before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17). John’s ministry is understood as the fulfillment of the Lord’s final promise in the Old Testament, “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4:5-6).

When John the Baptist was asked whether he was Elijah, he answered definitely, declaring, “I am not!” (Jn 1:21). His denial was true in a literal sense, but not in the sense intended by Malachi’s prophecy. Jesus claimed that John’s life and ministry were not only in the tradition of Elijah, but the fulfillment of the prophetic era. “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John,” Jesus explained. “And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come” (Mt 11:13-14). The teachers of the law were predicting the literal return of Elijah prior to the coming of the Messiah, but as Jesus explained to his disciples, Elijah had already come in the person of John the Baptist and the people had not recognized him. In other words, Elijah (the type) began a pattern of ministry that was fulfilled in John (the antitype). If the teachers of law had missed this connection between Elijah and John, they had also missed the connection between the coming of the Son of Man and suffering. This is why Jesus asked, “Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?” “Elijah has come,” Jesus declared and soberly added, “and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him” (Mk 9:13). In other words, what Ahab, Jezebel and Ahaziah had wanted to do to Elijah, and were unable to do, was carried out against John by Herod. Jesus saw a parallel between the vulnerability of John the Baptist, the prophet like Elijah, and the suffering and rejection he was to experience as the Son of Man (see Mt 17:11-13).

At the end of his earthly life Elijah’s God-given invincibility was demonstrated in two dramatic events. In the first incident, Ahab’s successor, King Ahaziah, proved powerless against the prophet. The king had fallen through “the lattice of his upper room in Samaria and injured himself” (2 Ki 1:2) and instead of turning to the Lord God for help, he consulted Baal-zebul (Baal the Prince), which the Hebrews mockingly dubbed Baal-Zebub (“the lord of flies”), to see if he would recover from his injury. Guided by the angel of the Lord, Elijah intercepted the messengers bound for the shrine of the god of Ekron. He told them to deliver the following message to the king: “This is what the Lord says: You will not leave the bed you are lying on. You will certainly die!” When Ahaziah heard Elijah’s death sentence he ordered one of his captains to go after Elijah with a detail of fifty men.

Elijah was found sitting on top of a hill. The captain gave the prophet the king’s command, “Man of God, the king says, ‘Come down!’” Elijah answered the captain, “If I am a man of God, may

fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Immediately fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men. When the king heard about it he sent another squad of fifty men and the second captain and his men were destroyed in the same way. Then the king sent a third captain, but instead of ordering Elijah the captain begged him, “Man of God please have respect for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!” (2 Ki 1:13-14). This time the angel of the Lord instructed Elijah to go with the captain and deliver the Lord’s message of judgment against the king in person, which he did. The story of Ahaziah ends with a footnote: “So he died, according to the word of the Lord that Elijah had spoken” (2 Ki 1:17).

The incident confirms that the real story of God’s presence and power is to be found among the faithful prophets rather than the faithless kings. The word of the Lord and the covenant promises were supernaturally sustained by the prophets, Elijah being a key example. But in the New Testament, God’s strategy changed from divine invincibility to divine vulnerability. This became evident first in the life of John the Baptist and then in Jesus.

In the Gospel of Luke there is an echo of Elijah’s fiery apologetic expressed in the reaction of the disciples. After Jesus encountered opposition in a Samaritan village, because he had “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51), James and John asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” (Lk 9:54). It must have seemed like an Elijah-like moment, “but Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village” (Lk 9:55). It eventually became clear to the disciples that although God had sustained his witness through the prophet Elijah in powerful and dramatic ways, God was going to fulfill his witness through the Son of Man’s suffering on the Cross.

In the second incident, death itself proved powerless against the prophet. Elijah did not die a natural death, but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. The account of Elijah’s departure focuses on the mantle of prophetic responsibility being passed to Elisha, but the supernatural character of the event causes us to think of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. The prophetic era begins with Elijah, a prophet whose earthly end is not only dramatically contrasted with the death of Israel’s king, but points forward to the day when death will be swallowed up in victory. This truth appears to be confirmed and emphasized in Elijah’s presence with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Elijah’s life creates an expectation of everlasting life that will be fulfilled in Christ. In the words of the apostle, “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:54,57).

Given all that Elijah stands for, it is remarkable that the last reference to him in the New Testament should be a reminder for us to learn from his example. James held up the life of Elijah as a powerful illustration of effective, fervent prayer, but he made a point of telling us that “Elijah was a man just like us” (Ja 5:17).