FAITH
IN THE FACE OF
APOSTASY

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

A series of studies on the lives of Old Testament characters, written for laypeople and pastors, and designed to encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching, and preaching of the Old Testament.

TREMPER LONGMAN III
J. ALAN GROVES

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FAITH IN THE FACE OF APOSTASY

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
ELIJAH & ELISHA

RAYMOND B. DILLARD

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This book is dedicated to

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Wilmington, Delaware

Brian Bankard
Baltimore, Maryland

—brothers who hear God's word
and put it into practice.
(Luke 8:21)

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FOREWORD

"The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed."
—Augustine

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

"In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his

> glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending for which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament Series is committed to this proposition that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God, and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. The individual books of the Old Testament exhibit diverse genres and styles and individual theologies, but tying them all together is the constant foreshadowing and pointing to Christ. Believing in the fundamentally Christocentric nature of the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament,

we offer this series of studies in the Old Testament with the following aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament,
- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament,
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament.

To this end, the volumes in this series are written for pastors and laypeople, not scholars.

While such a series could take a number of different shapes, we have decided, in most cases, to focus individual volumes on Old Testament figures—people—rather than whole books or themes. Some whole books, of course, will receive major attention in connection with their authors or main characters (e.g., Daniel or Isaiah). Themes will be emphasized in connection with particular figures.

It is our hope and prayer that this series will revive interest in and study of the Old Testament as readers recognize that the Old Testament points forward to Jesus Christ.

A WORD ABOUT THIS VOLUME

Ray Dillard was a beloved teacher, mentor, and colleague to both of the editors of this series. If not for his untimely death on October 1, 1993, he would certainly have been the editor himself. Indeed, his passion and example for grappling with the issues of reading the Old Testament as a Christian inspired us to pursue a series of this kind. It is therefore fitting that the initial volume comes from his own hand. This book exemplifies the kind of strategy we are trying to communicate for reading the Old Testament as Christians.

While Ray had finished a draft of the book in May of 1992, it was never published. We have made some minor additions and consolidations to bring the project to completion. The essence is his. We are grateful to our Savior for using his servant Ray Dillard in our lives and pray that others will profit as we have.

Tremper Longman III
J. Alan Groves

PREFACE

When I began reading the Bible earnestly in my early teenage years, I always struggled with the Old Testament. I was never sure I understood it. I liked the stories. They were full of characters with whom I could identify. I could see bits of myself in their lives: Their temptations and failures were like my own and warned me. Their courage and faithfulness set an example to follow. But I could find similar examples of failure and courage in the morning newspapers or in a good novel. Was this why these stories were there? Were they just to set an example for me?

My real love affair with the Old Testament began a decade later, when some of my teachers at Westminster Theological Seminary taught me how to read the stories of the Bible in better ways. These stories did portray principles of wisdom about life, but the purpose of the Bible was far more to reveal God to us—to show us what he is like and what he has done. When we read the biblical stories, our reading needs to take account of why God revealed himself in the Bible and what he is showing us about himself. The Bible is not me-centered, but God-centered.

But where have I come to know God best? As a Christian, I know God best as I have met him in Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3). It was through him that the world was made, and he was the sum of what the prophets had said (vv. 1–2). For me,

there was yet one more step to take: to understand how the God I met in the Old Testament was the same as the God I met in Jesus. I wanted to begin reading the Old Testament in a way that was Christ-centered. We do not meet a new and different God when we cross over that blank page between Malachi and Matthew. Jesus, who was there at the Creation, is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). Can we read the Old Testament in ways that direct us toward Jesus, in ways that highlight his goodness and grace and his coming again? Can we see how the ways in which God dealt with ancient Israel anticipated his revealing himself to us in Christ?

This desire to read the Old Testament in a Christocentric fashion provided the impetus for this volume on the narratives in 1 and 2 Kings about Elijah and Elisha. I did not want to write a book on hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) or a book on biblical theology (God's revealing of himself through history) or a commentary on these narratives. Rather, I wanted to write a book that would help others to learn, by example, some ways of reading the Old Testament that would directly nourish their faith and growth as Christians.

This book is intended to nourish faith and to provoke worship. It really has three audiences in mind—the individual, the Bible study leader or adult Sunday school teacher, and the pastor. It is divided into eleven chapters; after an introductory chapter, each one contains two or three sections, each section devoted to an event in the life of Elijah or Elisha. (Note that 1 Kings 20; 22; 2 Kings 3; 7:3–20; 8:7–13:9 are not discussed because these passages either do not mention Elijah or Elisha, or mention them only tangentially.) The book can be used in the following ways:

1. *As a guide to devotional reading.* Each chapter is kept fairly short, so that it can be read alongside the passages as part of personal worship.

2. *As a text for a small-group Bible study.* Each chapter ends with a few questions to prompt further reflection and discussion.
3. *As a help toward the preparation of sermons.* The Old Testament is unbelievably rich and exciting—shouldn't we hear more from this three-fourths of the Scriptures during the worship of the church? Trajectories for applications to our current day are interspersed throughout each section.

No book is written in a vacuum. There are a number of folks to whom I want to express my thanks.

For some years, I have been teaching a senior homiletics course at Westminster Seminary. In this course, the students are expected to prepare sermons from Old Testament narratives, and during the years I have taught the course, the Elijah and Elisha stories have been the assigned texts. This has meant that I have myself heard dozens and dozens of sermons on these passages and have had the benefit of talking with students about their sermons for many hours, both as they have developed their thoughts and in interviews after they have preached in class. Every teacher learns far more from his students than they realize. I owe a great debt to the men who have shared with me their encounter with the God of Elijah and Elisha.

After I finished a rough draft of this volume, Mrs. Karen Jobes, then a Ph.D. candidate and instructor in Greek at Westminster, was kind enough to read the chapters and to offer suggestions for the questions and prayers at the end of each chapter. Her suggestions were most helpful to me.

I experience God's goodness, wisdom, and grace most prominently on a daily basis through my wife, Ann, and our three sons, Joel, Jonathan, and Joshua. They are all part of this volume in so many ways beyond the abundant encouragement and patience they show.

The volume is dedicated to three men who have never met one another, but each of whom has been one of God's great gifts to me. How can one measure the value of friends? These men are like brothers to me, and I thank God for them.

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CHRISTIANS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Understanding the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments is perhaps the master key that opens the door to understanding the Bible. Yet Christians often feel disoriented while reading the Old Testament. Somehow it seems less relevant to their lives than the New Testament. After all, we are Christians, and it is the New Testament that speaks to us preeminently and clearly about Jesus Christ, our Savior. The Old Testament seems not only less relevant, but also culturally more distant than the social milieu we encounter in the New Testament. When Christians read the Old Testament, they encounter many genres of literature that are quite different from those of our daily experience. We do not often read law codes, oracles against foreign nations, or rhymeless poetry. In ways that are almost subliminal, the Old Testament seems to communicate to modern Christian readers, "This was not written for you. It was for a different world. This will be hard to read and hard to understand."

And when we do read the Old Testament, most of us feel more at home with its stories. We identify with the characters in their temptations and struggles, and with the interwoven tangle of sin and obedience, success and failure, that filled the days of those whose lives are reported there. But even when we read stories with which

we easily identify in terms of our own experience, there is still the nagging doubt, "Is that all there is? Is this what I am supposed to get from reading this passage?"

Sometimes even the stories are disconcerting. Take a few of the Elijah and Elisha narratives as examples. We instinctively feel that it almost trivializes the power of God when that power is used to make an axhead float in water (2 Kings 6:1–7) or to improve the taste of a pot of soup (4:38–41). Doesn't this make God look like a carnival magician? What does it tell us about God when he sends bears to maul children who have insulted a prophet (2:23–25)? And why does God sit idly by when his people are reduced to cannibalism (6:24–7:2)?

The net result is that Christians tend to be ill at ease and unfamiliar with the Old Testament. And that is regrettable. The Old Testament makes up about three-fourths of the Bible, and it is important to Christians for many reasons.

1. The Old Testament is part of the Christian canon. It is God's word—not just for Israel, but also for us. We want to know all we can about God and his purposes for history and our own lives; we cannot neglect the larger part of the Bible and hope to get very far.
2. The Old Testament had enormous influence on the New. The more we study the New Testament, the more we recognize this influence. Jesus' Bible was the Old Testament, and the New Testament was written by Jews who were thoroughly versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The apostles continually appealed to the Old Testament to verify and bolster their witness to Jesus Christ; they quoted it and alluded to its themes and motifs. Even if our goal were no more than to know the New Testament better, we could not get very far without devoting attention to the Old Testament.
3. The Old Testament reveals Jesus to us. As Christians, we tend to think that we learn most about

> our Savior from the New Testament, yet Jesus himself invited us to learn about him from the Old Testament (Luke 24:27, 44). Peter said that all the prophets from Samuel onward spoke of the days and events surrounding the life of Jesus (Acts 3:24). The Old Testament is every bit as much a Christian book as the New Testament.

The God who revealed himself to Israel is the God who was incarnate in Jesus. He is the same, "yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). His character and attributes, his mercy, grace, and holiness, are the same for the new Israel, which is the church, as they were for Israel of old. The character and attributes of God did not change between the Testaments.

It is our goal in this small volume to read the Old Testament in ways that appreciate the unity that exists between it and the New Testament. We want to learn from the Elijah and Elisha narratives, but also to see how those accounts direct us onward toward faith in Christ.

REPRESENTATIVE APPROACHES

It is possible, and even necessary, to read these stories from many different vantage points. There are at least three different historical and literary horizons that intersect in the Elijah and Elisha narratives.

1. The historical background of the incidents: when the stories took place.

THE DYNASTIES OF OMRI AND JEHU

I. Omri
   - A. Omri, 885–874 B.C.
   - B. Ahab, 874–853 B.C.
   - C. Ahaziah, 853–852 B.C.
   - D. Jehoram, 852–841 B.C.

II. Jehu
   A. Jehu, 841–814 B.C.
   B. Jehoahaz, 814–798 B.C.
   C. Jehoash, 798–782 B.C.
   D. Jeroboam II, 793–753 B.C.
   E. Zechariah, 753–752 B.C.

The Elijah and Elisha stories span a period from the second quarter of the ninth century to the first quarter of the eighth century B.C. These two prophets were active in the northern kingdom during the dynasties of Omri and Jehu.

We first hear of Elijah during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 17:1); Elisha died during the reign of Jehoash (2 Kings 13:20). Much of the action is set against the backdrop of the reign of Ahab and his notorious wife, Jezebel.

Prior to this period, Israel had always been in danger from the gradual assimilation of Canaanite religious influence into the worship of Yahweh.[1] Canaanite sanctuaries had proliferated in the land before the Israelite conquest, and the religious practices of the Canaanites continually threatened to infiltrate and adulterate the proper worship of God in spite of the strong warnings in the Law and from the Prophets. The northern kingdom was already set on this course from its inception. Shortly after the break-up of the united kingdom under David and Solomon, the first king in the north, Jeroboam, rehabilitated the Canaanite shrines and introduced the worship of Yahweh under the symbol of a bull (1 Kings 12:25–33). The God who called Israel into existence demanded the exclusive allegiance of the nation. His first commandment was that Israel was to have no other gods (Ex. 20:3). Israel was always in danger of losing this antithesis between her God and all the pretenders.

However, during the reign of Omri, there was a noticeable change in royal religious policy in the north. Omri had been seeking a commercial and political al-

liance with Tyre in order to gain a share of the lucrative trade that moved through that Mediterranean port and to secure an ally against threats from a traditional enemy to the north, the Arameans in Damascus. Such alliances were often sealed in the ancient Near East through a diplomatic marriage, in which a member of one royal household would wed a member of the other (compare 1 Kings 11:1–4). Omri concluded his alliance with Ethbaal of Tyre by arranging the marriage of his son Ahab to the Tyrian princess Jezebel. When Jezebel arrived in Israel, she was not content to worship her own deity in private (1 Kings 16:32). She sought to remove the worship of Yahweh from Israel and to substitute the worship of foreign deities. Jezebel included in her entourage 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, the queen mother of the gods (1 Kings 18:19). Under Ahab and his successors in the dynasty, largely due to the tutelage and influence of Jezebel, the religious life of the northern kingdom became a war between the ruling dynasty, which promoted the worship of Baal, and those who adhered to Israel's ancestral faith in Yahweh. Jezebel, in her relationship with Ahab, appears almost to have chosen for herself the role of Anat, the warlike and capricious goddess who was the consort of Baal.

Baal was worshiped under many names throughout the ancient Near East. The Baal that Jezebel introduced was probably Baal Melqart of Tyre. Archaeological discoveries have greatly enhanced our knowledge of Baalism. The mythological texts discovered in the ruins of ancient Ugarit have been especially helpful. Ugarit was a city north of Tyre on the Mediterranean coast that flourished between 1400 and 1200 B.C. In the texts discovered there, Baal was depicted as a nature deity whose primary function and powers in the pantheon encompassed weather and fertility. Baal was the storm deity; he was called the "Rider of the Clouds." He was often portrayed with a lightning bolt in one hand, and thunder was iden-

tified as his voice. Ancient Syro-Palestine was an agrarian society, and because Baal gave the rains, he was worshiped to insure the fertility of the land and the production of crops. Since all of life was tied to the fertility of the land, it is not hard to see why it was so tempting to Israel to worship Baal. Describing the impact of Baalism in Israel, Hosea likened Israel to an adulterous wife who said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink" (Hos. 2:5; cf. 2:2–13). Because the fruitfulness of the land was attributed to Baal, he was often associated with motifs of life, healing, and death.

Ugaritic mythology tied the life cycle of Baal to the annual crop cycle: Baal was defeated by the god Mot ("death"), and, as a result, the crops died and the land became unproductive. Then, after a battle in which his consort, Anat, played a prominent role, Baal returned victorious in the autumn, and the fall rains that signaled his return restored fertility to the earth.

Understanding a bit about the Baalism that was sweeping Israel in the ninth century helps to set the Elijah and Elisha stories in sharper focus. Time and again the theological tenets of Baal worship were challenged by these prophets. Yahweh would demonstrate through them that he was the giver of life, rain, and fertility, and that Baal was nothing. We will return to these themes as they are relevant in the chapters that follow.

2. The historical background of the author: when the stories were written. Although the Elijah and Elisha stories are largely set in the ninth century B.C., this was not the period in which the author of the book of Kings (which was later divided into two books, 1 Kings and 2 Kings) lived. The book of Kings is anonymous. We know that the author used many sources in writing his history, and the literary development of the book may be rather complex. The final editor/writer must have lived at a

point later than the last events he reports. The book ends by recording the release of Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon during the reign of Amel-Marduk (562–560 B.C.) (2 Kings 25:27). Since the writer does not report the return from captivity to Jerusalem, he probably lived during the later part of the Babylonian exile, sometime between 560 and 540 B.C.

It is valuable for readers today to ask about the Elijah and Elisha stories, not just in terms of the historical significance of the events that they relate, but also in terms of their literary function in the book of Kings. Why did the author choose to include this material in his report? How do these stories fit the overall purpose and interest of the book as a whole? How were they relevant to a writer during the period of the Babylonian exile?

The book of Kings is often called "Deuteronomic history." This is because the writer chose a set of laws unique to Deuteronomy to provide the perspective from which he evaluated Israel's history. Deuteronomy warns Israel about the seductive threat of the foreign religions and foreign gods that the nation would encounter as it entered the land; the book is much concerned that foreign religion not be found among the Israelites (Deut. 12:1–3, 29–32). During Israel's captivity in Babylon (586–539 B.C.), the nation was once again confronted with the seductive tenets of foreign religions and foreign gods. For the writer of Kings, these stories of Israel's encounter with a foreign religion in the past would provide important reminders that in spite of appearances, foreign gods were a delusion.

Have you ever noticed the disproportionate amount of attention given to the Elijah and Elisha stories in Kings? The largest part of 15 out of the 47 chapters in the book (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 9) covers the lives of these two prophets. Almost a third of the history is given to the roughly 80-year period during which they lived, even though the book itself covers over 400 years. Many other

prophets are mentioned in Kings, but only here do prophetic stories and miracles cluster with such frequency. The book of Kings, again taking its cue from Deuteronomy (18:9–22), is very much concerned with the power and fulfillment of the words of the prophets. The prophets who followed Moses would also perform signs and wonders (Deut. 34:10–12). Their words would come to pass (Deut. 18:21–22).

Deuteronomy also authorized Israel to have a king (Deut. 17), and the "Deuteronomic history" (Joshua-Kings) traces the history of that institution. The king was charged with maintaining the basic religious orientation of the nation (Deut. 17:18–20), and the well-being of the nation was tied to his faithful obedience to divine law. The entire section of the Elijah and Elisha narratives is introduced by the statement that Ahab exceeded all other kings in his wickedness (1 Kings 16:30–33), and the writer of Kings uses the Elijah and Elisha stories to illustrate this fact. Since the continuation of a dynasty was tied to its fidelity to God (Deut. 17:20), the writer of Kings makes a point of the wickedness of Ahab and his successors and demonstrates how their rule came to an end in the coup d'état staged by Jehu (2 Kings 9–10). The emphasis on Baalism leads naturally to the destruction of Baal's ministers and priests (2 Kings 10:18–31).

The writer of Kings is much concerned to demonstrate that God rules over kings and kingdoms, and that he raises them up and disposes of them as he sees fit. From his vantage point in the sixth century B.C., the writer of Kings is showing how God could also bring judgment and exile on both the northern kingdom (722 B.C.) and the southern kingdom (586 B.C.). In the same way, the God who had raised up the Babylonian armies that destroyed Jerusalem could also bring an end to the Babylonian kingdom.

The Elijah and Elisha stories have a somewhat different atmosphere than most of the rest of Kings, largely be-

cause they concentrate so much on the lives of the two prophets, whereas accounts of the prophets are more sporadic and less extended in the remainder of the book. We can only speculate about what sources of information about Elijah and Elisha may have been available to the compiler of the book of Kings. It is at least possible that a proponent of the reforms undertaken by Jehu pulled together the stories about Elijah and Elisha into a single narrative in order to show how bad conditions had become during the Omride dynasty and to explain and justify Jehu's coup and the attendant destruction of Baal worship (2 Kings 10:16–31).

3. Later biblical interpretation: for example, Matthew. The first person to read a text after it has been written begins the process of its interpretation. Subsequent biblical authors were quite familiar with the Elijah and Elisha stories, and they also used these accounts to instruct later generations. They drew a variety of inferences from them and found illustrations there that they could apply to the needs of their own audiences.

It is striking that the Old Testament itself ends by recalling Elijah and proclaiming that he would come again (Mal. 4:5–6). The gospel writers also made frequent reference to our two prophets. We shall have occasion to reflect on most of this material in the brief meditations that follow in this volume. However, before moving on to the individual narratives, we will pause to see how Matthew in particular made use of the Elijah and Elisha stories. Since Matthew was writing about the life of Jesus and made frequent use of these accounts from Kings, his example may provide a framework for Christians who want to relate the Old Testament to the New and to their own lives.

Matthew draws parallels between the lives of Elijah and Elisha and the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus. He presents John as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy

that Elijah would come again (Mal. 4:5), and he presents Jesus as the new Elisha.[2] The Jews of Jesus' day apparently expected that Elijah would appear literally and physically from the grave, and so when John the Baptist was asked if he was Elijah, he replied, "I am not" (John 1:21). At least early in his ministry, John the Baptist does not appear to have been aware that he was fulfilling the role of the expected Elijah. On the other hand, Jesus described John as "the Elijah who was to come" (Matt. 11:14; cf. 17:12), and Matthew goes out of his way to demonstrate how this was so:

a. Elijah was known for his distinctive style of dress. When Ahaziah sent messengers to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron, his messengers encountered a mysterious figure who sent them back to the king. When the king asked the messengers, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you?" the messengers answered, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kings 1:7–8). The king knew immediately from this rather minimal description that his messengers had encountered Elijah. Matthew introduces John the Baptist at the beginning of his preaching by saying, "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist" (Matt. 3:4). This unusual clothing was reminiscent of Elijah.
b. Both Elijah and John the Baptist faced a hostile political power throughout their lives. In particular, the main antagonist for both was a woman at the royal court who was seeking their lives. For Elijah, it was Jezebel (1 Kings 19:2, 10, 14); for John, it was Herodias (Matt. 14:3–12).
c. Both Elijah and John the Baptist anointed their successors at the Jordan River. (1) On both occasions, the heavens were opened and the partici-

pants saw a flying object descending from above. Elijah and Elisha saw an approaching chariot (2 Kings 2:11–12); John and Jesus saw a descending dove (Matt. 3:16). (2) In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is often the Spirit of prophecy; possession by the Spirit enabled one to fulfill his calling. While 50 other prophets waited nearby, Elisha asked for a "double portion" of the Spirit that was on Elijah (2 Kings 2:9). The double portion was the inheritance assigned to the firstborn son; Elisha's request would set him apart from the rest of the prophets. When John saw the Spirit descending as a dove on Jesus, he heard the words, "This is my Son" (Matt. 3:17), God's own firstborn, one set apart from the rest. Elijah was the forerunner of Elisha, just as John the Baptist was for Jesus. Luke notes this theme as well: when the birth of John the Baptist was foretold to his father Zechariah, the angel Gabriel said that John would "go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah," and that John would fulfill the mission assigned to Elijah by Malachi, "to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children" (Luke 1:17; cf. Mal. 4:6).

d. The test of whether Elisha would succeed Elijah was "if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not" (2 Kings 2:10). The question was whether or not Elisha would also be admitted to the heavenly council and enabled to peer into the glory cloud (cf. Jer. 23:18–19). Jesus, like Elisha, saw Elijah in heavenly glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2–3).

e. There is perhaps no section of the Old Testament that abounds in miracles as much as the Elisha narrative. Having given Elisha the double portion of the Spirit that he sought, God demonstrates his empowerment of the prophet and testifies to the message he proclaimed through the miracles that

> accompanied Elisha's ministry. Similarly, miracles abound when God himself testifies to the ministry of his own Son (Heb. 2:3–4).

The appearance of Elijah was supposed to inaugurate "that great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5), the day when God would judge evil while protecting and preserving his people. While John was in prison, he heard that Jesus was preaching and teaching in Galilee. So John sent messengers to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus told John's disciples to "go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matt. 11:2–5). This list is largely a list of the miracles of Elisha, who had restored sight to the blind (2 Kings 6:18–20), cured leprosy (chap. 5), restored the dead to life (4:32–37; 8:4–5; 13:21), and brought good news to the destitute (4:1–7; 7:1–2; 8:6). This list conflates the miracles of Elisha with those of the promised Servant of the Lord (Isa. 61:1–3). Jesus was in effect telling John, "Elijah's successor has come. I am the one you are looking for." John was the herald that Isaiah had said would prepare the way for the coming of the servant of the Lord (Isa. 40:3; Matt. 3:3); John was Elijah, the forerunner of an even greater prophet.

Matthew drew these parallels between Elijah and John, and between Elisha and Jesus. In doing this, Matthew provided one of a number of interpretive grids with which Christians can read this portion of the Old Testament. Other gospel writers used the narrative of Elijah and Elisha in equally creative and helpful ways, which we will comment upon as we review the individual stories. For example, Kings itself presents a number of parallels between Elijah and Moses; these are described in the chapter discussing 1 Kings 19:1–18. Later

biblical authors also paired Elijah and Moses in reference to the day of the Lord (Mal. 4:4–5), on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3–4; Mark 9:4–5; Luke 9:30–33), and in Revelation (Rev. 11:3–6). Moses represented the Law, and Elijah represented the Prophets; in the person of Jesus, one came who was greater than Moses and Elijah, and all the Law and the Prophets spoke of him (Luke 24:27).

2

THE LORD, OUR PROVIDER

The story of Elijah and Elisha begins with three narratives that are united by the theme of death, whether impending or actual. The first two accounts center on problems with water and food. Without them, we die, yet often, especially in affluent societies like our own, we take them for granted.

In Elijah's day, the Israelites, under the influence of the royal family, were swayed to the pagan view that Baal, the Canaanite god of weather and fertility, was the source of water and food. Unless Baal was worshiped, rain would not fall. Without rain, there would be no crops. And without crops, there would be no life. But God prepared two lessons to teach Israel that he controlled the weather and fertility.

The third episode flows from the second. The second story introduces the widow of Zarephath, whose household God used to provide Elijah with food during a famine. In the third story of the cycle, the woman's child dies, creating yet another situation in which the prophet can demonstrate God's sovereignty over life and death.

All three of these episodes illustrate that God, not Baal, provides life for his people.

A. OF PEDIGREES AND PROVISIONS
1 KINGS 17:1–6

> Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "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."
>
> Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: "Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. You will drink from the brook, and I have ordered the ravens to feed you there."
>
> So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

Elijah appears on the scene with surprising abruptness. He is introduced without any information about his prior life, without reference to his family or clan in Israel, and even his place of birth (Tishbe) is not known with confidence today. He is assigned no elaborate pedigree, whereby we could place him in the social register of ancient Israel, and no support group is mentioned for whom he could be considered the spokesman. He lived in Gilead, a peripheral area in ancient Israel, isolated across the Jordan. He had no fame or notoriety, no particular political clout, no credentials to command a hearing, no alphabet soup of academic degrees following his name. His seemingly humble beginnings remind us of another servant of the Lord, one who had "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him," a man who was "despised and rejected" (Isa. 53:2–3), a man whose pedigree was also questioned (John 6:42; 8:39–41). Like the nation of Israel itself, God chose as

his servants "not many . . . [who] were wise by human standards, not many . . . [who] were influential, not many [who] were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26–28).

Elijah's great qualification for serving God at his moment in history was the same as that other servant of the Lord: his food and drink were "to do the will of him who sent me" (John 4:34). All too often as Christians, we tend to think that the work of God in our day is done by the great and powerful, the famous preachers, celebrities, and the influential wealthy. God looks not for fame but for faith, not wealth but willingness, not renown but reliance. The only pedigree needed to serve God in our world is his call to obedience. It is to believe that "the LORD, the God of Israel, lives" (1 Kings 17:1), and to serve him instead of the Baals.

God had long ago set before Israel the ways of life and death, of blessing and cursing, of obedience and disobedience. Near the time of his death, Moses reminded Israel that God's laws were "not just idle words for you—they are your life" (Deut. 32:47). Prosperity—the full barns, bounteous crops, livestock, and ample food that the people desired—was tied to following his commands (28:1–6), but disobedience would bring hunger to the nation, the failure of both crops and rain. "The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The LORD will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder" (28:23–24).

God could not be God if he was not true to his own word. With the wickedness of Ahab exceeding that of all the kings who had preceded him (1 Kings 16:30–33), God

responded according to his sworn promise and sent Elijah to announce a drought.

In ancient Israel, the primary agricultural season was during the winter months. After the heat and dry season during the summer, the early rains came in the autumn to soften the parched and cracked ground. If these rains did not come, the ground was indeed like iron and could not be plowed. Springs and wells would not be refreshed. The latter rains fell in the spring, and these gave the crops the moisture needed to develop and flourish. If these rains did not come, the harvest was destroyed.

Much of the Elijah narrative is set in the region around the plain of Jezreel. Each morning from fall to spring in this valley, the coating of dew is so heavy that even if it did not rain, agriculture would still be possible. This is the area where Gideon had laid his fleece, alternately requesting that it be wet and dry (Judg. 6:36–40). This helps us to understand why Elijah announced that God would withhold not only the rain, but also the dew.

There could be no clearer way to throw down the gauntlet to the worship of Baal. In Canaanite mythology, Baal was the God of the storm. In one of the ancient texts from Ugarit, Baal's power over the waters is described:

> Seven years shall Baal fail, eight the Rider of the Clouds.
> There shall be no dew, no rain,
> no surging of the two depths,
> nor the goodness of Baal's voice.[1]

In the annual crop cycle, when Baal died and vegetation ceased to grow, the god Mot told Baal to descend into the netherworld and to "take your clouds, your wind, your storm, your rains."[2] In another text, a king of Ugarit named Keret has a vision and reports,

The heavens rain oil,
the wadies run with honey,
So I know that the mighty one, Baal, lives,
Lo, the Prince, the Lord of the Earth, exists.[3]

The third line of this Ugaritic poem is very similar to the Hebrew with which Elijah introduces the drought: "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives." The great contest between Yahweh and Baal is now set, and we will soon discover which God lives. Ahab, Jezebel, and their minions were serving Baal to insure the fertility of the land. Elijah would serve Yahweh, the God of Israel. In announcing God's power over the rains, the challenge was unmistakable.

The three episodes in 1 Kings 17 all show some of the effects of the drought, and each addresses human needs that were the particular province of Baal's power in Canaanite mythology. While the nation began to feel the effects of the drought, Elijah experienced the blessings of food and water that God had promised to an obedient nation. God had promised,

> If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land. (Lev. 26:3–5)

But,

> If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins seven times over. I will

> break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze. Your strength will be spent in vain, because your soil will not yield its crops, nor will the trees of the land yield their fruit. (Lev. 26:18–20)

Yahweh, the God of Israel, sent rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45); he could also withhold it.

Elijah now embodied what Israel was supposed to be, devoted to Yahweh and serving him alone. So God does not abandon his prophet, but provides for him those tokens of divine blessing that would have gone to an obedient nation. Just as God had provided Israel under Moses with food and drink in the wilderness (Ex. 17; Num. 11; 20), so he now provides for his faithful servant.

The Lord, who knows the fall of a single sparrow, also commands the ravens. When Israel was wandering in the wilderness, God was "like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions" (Deut. 32:11). Now the birds do the bidding of their Creator, for he has taken Elijah under his wings.

For us, too, in a dry and thirsty world, he has spread a table of food and drink (Matt. 26; 1 Cor. 11), with instructions that we also must flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14–17). God's grace was new for the prophet each morning (Lam. 3:22–24). Although the brook Cherith would eventually diminish and run dry, Jesus has opened for us a well that will never run dry (John 4:10, 13–14; 7:37–39).

Jesus, too, would embody what Israel was supposed to be—a nation/man living in obedience to God's command. But, unlike Elijah, he would not be spared in his identification with his people; rather, he would experience divine judgment, and Elijah would not come to save him (Matt. 27:47–49).

While Elijah was at the brook, the crops of Israel would fail, and the watercourses and wells of the land would run dry. Many would begin to suffer from the privation to follow, as subsequent episodes show. Yet even in this, the love of God is evident. Just as a father chastens the children he loves (Heb. 12:5–11), so God chastens Israel. How much better it is to know the rebuke and chastening of God than to be abandoned by him! Chastening is the price of our election.

Elijah's sudden appearance revealed God—but so did his disappearance. We do not know the location of the brook Cherith, or how long the prophet was there. It was at least long enough for the effects of the drought to become widespread and severe (1 Kings 17:7–12). God had commanded the prophet to hide (17:3; contrast 18:1). Now Israel would endure not simply a famine of food and water, but a famine of the word of God (Amos 8:11; Ps. 74:9).

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Water plays a significant role throughout the Elijah narrative. What is it about water that makes it so important to the story? What is its connection to Baal? To Yahweh?
2. Baal is no longer the overt opponent of the Lord God in our society. But what has taken his place? In your own life, what things oppose God's lordship? How does God show his power over these things today?
3. God wonderfully provided for Elijah's need during the drought. In what circumstances in your life, in your family, or in your church have you been aware of God's care?