

The Age of Kings: 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles

The Age of Kings: What can history, even biblical history, possibly reveal to us about God? What was God up to in the reign of King David and his son Solomon? Why did God destroy ancient Jerusalem and send them into exile for seventy years? What relevance can the age of Old Testament kings possibly have in the life of a twenty-first century believer? Why did God speak prophetically to his people during this period? These questions and more will be considered in this class. We will explore together God's redemptive historical work revealed in the pages of scripture and see how the mission of the people of God both then and now has always been the same.

The objective of this class is: to gain an appreciation for the period of the northern & southern monarchies in the OT, and understand the relationship between the redemptive work of God and the events that unfolded during this specific time in history. Careful attention will be given to both the Davidic Covenant as well as the decline and exile of the people of God.

Introduction: This week, we will shift from looking at the kings of Israel to discussing the role of the prophet in Israel that arose alongside that of king. We have already mentioned in this class, the fact that the prophets in Israel played a pivotal role during dynastic transitions. The prophet served as the mouthpiece of the Lord, while the intended purpose of the king was to be a vassal for the Lord, a kingdom representative of His reign among His people. More often than not, the voice of the prophet was a voice calling both the kings of Israel and Judah as well as the people of God to repentance. This is extremely clear during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Today's class will explore in detail the ministries of Elijah and Elisha and will discuss the unique role their ministries played in the life of the people of God. Elijah plays a crucial role in redemptive history, something that will be mentioned by later post-exilic prophets in anticipation of the promised Son of David. For the sake of this study, we will divide the lesson into two sections: The Ministry of Elijah, and The Ministry of Elisha.

Section One: The Ministry of Elijah

Part One: A Voice in the Wilderness – The beginning of the ministry of Elijah is less than conspicuous, and leaves many questions unanswered. For example, we are not told how his ministry began, the names of his parents, or if he had proclaimed the word of the Lord in the royal court of the king in the past. We are given an indication into his character through his name (*Eli* – my God *jah* – is YHWEH). The seventeenth chapter of the book of 1 Kings simply introduces the prophet as being a Tishbite of Tishbe, a town located in Gilead, and plunges immediately into the prophecy delivered by Elijah regarding a three-year drought. The second word was intended for Elijah. He was instructed, “*Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there*” (1 Kings 17: 3-4). There are a couple of noteworthy statements that should be made regarding this command. First, God made provisions for the safety and preservation of his word through the prophet Elijah by sending him on the other side of the Jordan. The river Jordan was representative for the people of God. Even though there were two and one half tribes that were given their inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan, the river originally formed the eastern boundary of the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 13:12, Numbers 34:11-12, Joshua 1:1). Thus, the Jordan river represented the boundary of the land of promise for God's people. Secondly, the raven was an unclean bird (Lev. 11:15). Therefore, it could well be that God was preparing the prophet for what he was about to do next.

In 1 Kings 17:7 we read, “*And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.*” Consequently, God sends the prophet to Zarephath, a town in Sidon, a gentile nation, where he has

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prepared a widow woman to sustain the prophet, and by so doing herself for the endurance of the drought. It is here that we read of the first miracle in the life of the prophet: the widow supposedly only has enough flour and oil for one cake that she and her son will consume with the expectation that it will be their last meal. Elijah instructs her, *“Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth’”* (17:13-14). You will recall that the widow was not a member of the covenant community, and had no “right” to know the Lord God of Israel let alone expect his faithful provision. However, she came to know him through role the man of God would play in her life and her son’s life from that point forward.

Part Two: The Showdown at Carmel – After three years, Elijah receives this good news from the Lord, *“Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth”* (18:1). The time was right; God’s mercy was about to break forth. Elijah reveals himself to Ahab, and is accused of being the, “troubler of Israel”. However, Elijah informs Ahab that, *“I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals”* (18:18). Elijah then calls for all the prophets of Baal (450) and the prophets of Asherah (400), the wife of Baal, and for all the people of Israel to be assembled at Mount Carmel. From there God will make known to Israel who is God, and who is the true king.

When Israel gathers to the top of Mount Carmel, Elijah announces that an offering is to be placed on both the altar of Baal as well as the altar of YAHWEH and prayers are to be made by the prophets of each. The god who answers with fire, he is the only true God. His introductory remarks are both a challenge as well as a rebuke. He states, *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word”* (18:21). Whether the people were haunted by the faith of their fathers, or their hearts had become softened by the previous three years of drought during which time all their prayers to Baal (the agricultural rain god) proved futile, there was no expression of either remorse or certainty on the part of the people concerning to whom they should direct their worship. When Elijah announced the terms of the challenge, they answered, *“It is well spoken.”* Being severely outnumbered, Elijah agrees to let the prophets of Baal go first. Verse twenty-six declares, *“And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, ‘O Baal, answer us!’ But there was no voice and no one answered.”*

After spending all morning crying out to Baal, Elijah decides to have a little fun with them. He mocks them saying, *“‘Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’ And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them”* (18:27-28). It was common in the ancient near east among pagan worshippers for the suppliant petitioning of their gods to be accompanied by cutting one’s self and shedding blood. For this reason, Israel was explicitly instructed not to do so (Leviticus 19:28), *“You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord.”* This was one of the ways that Israel was to distinguish the worship of YAHWEH from the way deities of the surrounding nations were worshipped.

At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice (Exodus 29:39), Elijah responds to the fact that there was, *“... no voice. No one answered or paid attention.”* He compels all the people of Israel to come near

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to him and proceeds to repair the altar of the Lord that had been broken down. There is no record of an altar to YAHWEH having been built atop Mount Carmel, prior to this time, so it is unknown whether this had to do with the faithful among the northern kingdom who adhered to the worship of the one true God and could not pilgrimage to Jerusalem or if the repair of the altar is figurative (since the worship of YAHWEH had undoubtedly been neglected). What is telling is that the prophet makes no distinction between the two divided kingdoms in his repair of the altar; he constructs the altar using twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. After all, YAHWEH was not simply the God of the Kingdom of Judah, he was the covenant making, covenant keeping God of all Israel.

After the repair of the altar, Elijah instructs that a trench be dug around the base of the altar and water to be poured over the altar three times. Then he, *"...put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "Oh Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, Oh Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, Oh Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (18:36-37). After the conclusion of this simple prayer, "... the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord he is God, the Lord he is God'" (18:38-39). After this public confession that YAHWEH is God, Elijah led the people in a mass extermination of the prophets of Baal and Asherah. Israel's confession was followed by much needed rain; the curse of God's judgment had been removed from the land.*

Two points should be made about the above scriptural account. First, according to Exodus 29:36, the offering of the bull at the time of the evening oblation was consistent with the offering of a sin offering. Thus, the atonement for sins committed was a prerequisite for national revival. Secondly, true repentance occurred (at least in part) among the covenant community. Elijah references at the end of his mediatorial prayer, that God had turned the hearts of his people back. This turning back is indicative of true biblical repentance. Bear in mind that this occurred during the reign of the Israelite king who reportedly committed more evil than all who came before him. A word of pastoral application: there is no period so dark that God's mercy does not continuously seek to draw his people to repentance. Repentance is not something that is one and done, but must be repeated with each day, month, year and each generation. It is an on-going lifestyle in which we (God's people) cast ourselves upon God's mercy and claim the pardon for sin that has been purchased by the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

Part Three: A Divine Commission: One might expect this period of national repentance to be restorative for Elijah's confidence. However, the events of the next day reveal that the prophet fled from the Queen (Jezebel) who threatened retaliation in the form of decapitation of the prophet. He flees not simply to the south of Judah, he continues southward until he reaches Mount Horeb, the mountain from which the Mosaic covenant was initiated and from which God revealed himself in a unique way to his covenant people. It was there that the jealous, despondent prophet sought God. God passed by and three geological effects ensued: 1) a great and strong wind that tore the mountain; 2) an earthquake, and 3) a fire. However, God was not in any of these manifestations. Then, a *"... sound of a low whisper"* made the prophet hide his face. God met with him there and gave him three instructions: 1) Anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, 2) anoint Jehu, the son of Nimshi to be king over Israel, and 3) and Elisha the son of Shaphat to be prophet in Elijah's place. These three commands (all but one of which were carried out by someone other than Elijah) deal with three aspects of God's kingship: 1) God's sovereign rule over all

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nations (anointing foreign kings to a position of power, even kings whom he will use to discipline his people). 2) God's sovereign rule among his covenant community, and 3) God's ministry of the word proclaimed.

Part Four: *Elijah Never Dies* – Before we continue in our exploration of the life of Elijah, suffice it to say that this was not a normative period in the life of the people of God. By this, I mean, God is doing something in the life of his people during the Age of Kings that he will not do again until the true King (Jesus Christ) walks onto the world stage. After Elijah anoints his successor, there is a change of scenes. More unrighteousness on the part of Ahab unfolds (his coveting of Naboth's vineyard and pursuant murder of Naboth) as his latter reign and impending death occupy center stage. Finally, Ahab is killed in battle with the Syrians and the dogs of the city lick up his blood while the men are washing his chariot, just as Elijah the prophet foretold. His son, Ahaziah, succeeds him, and continues to live wickedly in the sight of God.

Chapter two of 1 Kings begins, *"Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind..."* Elisha accompanies Elijah on a circuit, apparently aware of what God was about to do. They journey from Gilgal to Bethel, and then to Jericho. All three cities are significant in redemptive history. It was at Gilgal that the covenant was renewed prior to occupying the land of promise. At Bethel, Jacob had his dream of the ladder between heaven and earth (an OT type of Christ – see John 1:51). Jericho was the cursed city that was never to be rebuilt, but had been recently rebuilt during Ahab's reign. In each of these locations, there were schools of prophets (OT seminaries) where sons of prophets were trained. After Jericho, Elijah crossed the Jordan (recall the symbolism of crossing the Jordan mentioned above), and was greeted by a flaming chariot of fire that separated Elijah from Elisha. Elijah was then carried into heaven by a whirlwind (2:11).

Section Two: The Ministry of Elisha

Part One: *Elisha's Double Portion* – Before Elijah was carried into heaven by a whirlwind, he asked Elisha what he wanted done for him before he was taken away. Elisha's answer, *"Please let there be a double portion of your spirit on me"* (2:9b). In other words, Elisha was simply asking for the birthright of the firstborn son. There is a symbolic association between this birthright and the cloak of Elijah. Elijah lets his cloak fall to the ground when he is being carried into heaven, Elisha retrieves it and it soon becomes clear to local observers that his request is granted.

A quick word about the relationship between Elisha and Elijah. The relationship between the two prophets is never repeated in the same way again in scripture. There seems to be some significance between the prophets called of God and the "sons of the prophets" mentioned in the scripture. Elisha functioned as a son of Elijah in this regard in that he was asking to inherit a birthright that would have been set aside for a firstborn son. That the birthright is spiritual and not physical (though symbolized by the cloak) is not immaterial. One might draw a parallel as later, post-exilic prophets will do between the relationship between Elijah and Elisha and that of John the Baptist and Christ. What can be stated with certainty is that the kingdom of God is revealed in the ministry of Elisha in a manner not paralleled until the time of the NT.

Part Two: *Elisha & The Finger of God* – When Christ is asked in Luke 11:19-20 by what authority he drives out demons he states, *"If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."* In other words, the miracles that accompanied the ministry of Christ testified to the

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presence of the Kingdom. The Kingdom was present, because the King had come. In a similar way, the presentation of miracles in the life and ministry of Elisha is a reminder to Israel of God's kingdom rule. Such a reminder would be given as the clock was winding down and the judgement of God evidenced through the Assyrian captivity of God's people was imminent. The significance of this cannot be overlooked in the life of God's people nor can its absence among Israel's neighbor, the southern kingdom of Judah. Why God should reveal himself to Israel through signs and miracles in the life and ministry of Elisha, but not do so to Judah might possibly be understood by the fact that Judah, unlike most of Israel, would be brought back from exile, and God would preserve a light in Jerusalem until the time of the coming of Christ for the sake of his covenant with David.

God's miraculous involvement was not limited to the covenant community in the north (as is evidenced by the healing of Naaman the Syrian, and the raising from the dead of the son of the Sidonian woman), but no accounts of miracles among the covenant community residing in the kingdom of Judah are mentioned. Therefore, it seems possible that the activity of God within the northern kingdom through the ministries of Elijah and Elisha can be contributed to his mercy shown before destruction, and a harbinger in the pages of the OT, that God's kingdom designs have not changed. He still seeks to redeem all of creation, as far as the curse is found, and will ultimately do so through the King who is to come.

Far more miracles occurred in the ministry of Elisha, than the ministry of Elijah. Below is a list of some of the miracles, with similar occurrences in the life and ministry of Moses and Christ.

Parting of the River Jordan (2 Kings 2:13-14)

Healing of the waters at Jericho (2 Kings 2:19-22)

The miracle of the multiplied oil (2 Kings 4:1-7)

The raising of the Shunamite's son (2 Kings 4:18-37)

Feeding the multitude (2 Kings 4:42-44)

Naaman healed of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14)

Parting of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21-22)

Turning water into wine (John 2:1-12)

A coin in a fish's mouth (Matt. 17:27)

The raising of Lazarus (John 11:38-53).

Feeding the Multitude (Matt. 14:13-21)

The healing of the Syrophenician's daughter (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:25-30)

One final thought about the comparison of miracles mentioned above. We are to read backwards instead of forwards. In other words, we should interpret the meaning of Christ's advent in light of what had taken place in redemptive history, and not the other way around. It is noteworthy that during three occasions in redemptive history (the exodus, the period immediately preceding the destruction of the northern kingdom, and the life and ministry of Christ), miracles, signs and wonders accompanied the message of the prophetic voice.

Part Three: Unfinished Business – In 2 Kings 8:7-15 and 9:1-13, we witness two of the three commands given to Elijah while on Mount Horeb implemented by his successor, Elisha. In 8:7-15 we witness the anointing of Hazael to be king over Syria along with the prophecy that he will do great harm to the people of God. Then, in 9:1-13 we see that Elisha himself delegates one of the sons of the prophets to anoint Jehu as king over Israel, in the place of Joram. God's justice is executed against the house of Ahab and Jezebel, the daughter of the Sidonian king and perpetrator of Baalism throughout Israel, is slain.

There is one final note regarding Elisha that deserves our attention. After his death (recorded in 2 Kings 13:14-20) God continued to work miracles through the prophet. 2 Kings 13:21 reveals that while they were burying a man, the Moabites launched a raid against Israel, so they placed the man's corpse in the grave of Elisha, and "... as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his

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feet.” Such a statement may seem farfetched to today’s reader, but remember that God was doing a unique work in the life of Israel, and can do as he pleases in the life of his church. He is omnipotent, and omnipresent. Therefore, if we struggle with these truths of scripture, then perhaps our understanding of God is too small.

Section Three: Elijah in Redemptive History

The role of the prophet Elijah in redemptive history does not end with his miraculous escape from death by being called into heaven on a whirlwind. Later, prophets and sages quickly perceived the dilemma presented by the purported account of a man who never died. To this day, during special occasions in Judaism, Elijah is believed to be mystically present. For instance, during the observance of the Passover meal, a seat is left open, designated for Elijah. There is a cup in the Seder (the traditional liturgy of the Passover) known as the *Cos Eliyahu* or Cup of Elijah. However, when we part from tradition and look at the sacred writings of scripture, we see that Elijah does indeed play an important role in the life and ministry of Christ.

Malachi 4:5 sates, *“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord Comes.”* When Christ was later questioned by the Jewish elders why the scriptures teach Elijah would come before the coming of the Messiah, he replies, *“... if you are willing to accept it, he (John the Baptist) is Elijah who is to come”* (Matthew 11:14). One of the great NT moments when Christ is revealed in his glory prior to his passion involves an appearance of Elijah as well as Moses. Matthew 17:1-3 states, *“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.”* Luke indicates in his gospel, that a prophecy was proclaimed to Zechariah, John’s father, concerning John that, *“...he (John) will go before him (Jesus) in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord, a people prepared”* (Luke 1:17).

So, whether John the Baptist is the final apparition of Elijah or if he will come (as some believe) prior to the second advent of Christ or Parousia, the truth remains that a parallel is drawn between the ministry of the prophet Elijah, and that of John the Baptist. Both herald an imminent redemptive act in history: national revival preceding destruction for the former and repentance and renewal prior to grace and mercy for the latter.