

## The Deep Meaning of Elijah and Elisha

The Bible is a supernatural book. It's not just a book of great stories, history and biography with theology here and there, something to read for interest or for information about life. It's God speaking to us! And God is the Author of all language, so the Scriptures communicate deep and compelling truths that God wants us to know. These are truths that we mustn't be smug about, because we dare not be smug about God. He is dangerously holy.

When Israel arrived at Mount Sinai, having been delivered miraculously from Egypt, instead of ascending to meet their great God, in terror they asked Moses for a mediator. They only wanted to know the God who loved them indirectly. So Moses served that generation of Israelites as their mediator, and Moses then gave them Scripture to be the mediator for subsequent generations. After the Conquest, the Nation degenerated into a moral and spiritual abyss. Darkness was thick with only a flicker of light here and there (the story of Ruth, for example). The people needed a king, a Spirit-led representative of God to keep God's Covenant and to enforce if not merely lead the people into keeping the Covenant. The king and the people would be a corporate unity, with God as their ultimate Ruler. And prophets would be called or commissioned to speak God's will to the king.

Saul failed to obey the prophet. He didn't represent God. The Spirit therefore departed Saul leaving him tragically controlled by evil spirits. David, in contrast, was led by the Spirit to lead the people into Covenant faithfulness. And so the people, the Nation of Israel, flourished. But David grew old and died. Then came the succession, and it was messy. Solomon, David's son, began sort of well but ended badly. Then came more successions, and more, and more. And it was all downhill. The Book of Kings is the sordid story of Israel's Monarchy. The kings did not represent God. They did not listen to the prophets that God sent. They were not led by the Spirit. There was no Covenant faithfulness. But in the middle of the story of Kings, there's the narrative about Elijah and Elisha. What's that all about?

The Book of Kings is all about the Kings, so why are Elijah and Elisha in it? They're not kings, but they serve God *as if* they were. They serve God as the kings should have served. The two are royal prophets. Consider the following: They're right there at the center of the Book, they wear a royal robe (the "cloak" or "mantle"), they have a succession narrative as all the kings had, they minister in the power of the Spirit, and they represent God and call the people to Covenant faithfulness. Elijah and Elisha followed the Lord and gave the nation an alternative to the wicked kings, inviting the people also to walk faithfully with the Lord by following them instead of being subject to and following their ungodly king. The Elijah/Elisha narrative was, in other words, a polemic against the kings, embedded in the Book of Kings. It was possible, during the Monarchy, to walk with the Lord *apart from* being subject to wicked kings.

In many ways, Elijah reprised the figure of Moses. The parallels in the texts between these two establish that. Elijah's power encounter with Baal reprising Moses' with Pharaoh, and Elijah's encounter with the Lord atop Mt. Sinai paralleling that of Moses are two examples. And as Moses passed leadership on to Joshua, Elijah did the same to Elisha. So Elisha reprised the figure of Joshua, and a number of parallels support that claim. (For just one example, Elisha miraculously crossed the Jordan R. as Joshua did, and the first work by the Spirit after crossing was at Jericho.) The ministry of Elisha consisted of blessings and cursings. The men of Jericho who respected Elisha as God's representative were blessed, the youths who were

contemptuous of him (and therefore of God and His Covenant) were cursed. The miracles Elisha did, twice as many as Elijah did, were the work of the Holy Spirit. There was a band of godly people who acknowledged Elisha's role and followed him. Even Elisha's bones were able to give life to the dead.

But the people didn't respond to Elijah or Elisha. The ministry of those two, although spectacular, failed. Joshua's work had failed. The Judges failed. The Monarchy failed. The prophets failed, and the Nation failed. The entire O.T. is a compelling study in promise yet failure. And so it ends incomplete: Someone clearly needs to come in the future, Someone to whom the people will respond. Elisha prophetically anticipated Jesus, Israel's Messiah/King.

John the Baptist's ministry was like that of Elijah. And Jesus' ministry was like that of Elisha. John the Baptist represented, as Elijah did, the godly remnant within Israel which was faithful to God. As Elisha succeeded Elijah, Jesus succeeded John in calling people into the Kingdom and preparing them for it. Jesus worked miracles in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus represented God, expressing both the power and presence of God. His work included blessings and cursings. He called people to God. And there were those who acknowledged His Person and work and followed Him. And all who follow Him experience life in the Spirit. As Elisha's bones brought life to another person who was dead, so Jesus' death and resurrection is able to impart life to others.

Jesus' ministry too seemed to fail, as the Kingdom He came announcing was rejected (if not by the people, by their leadership). In Luke 4:26-27, we read that Jesus likened Himself to those two prophets. The Nation was rejecting Jesus just as the people of Israel back then rejected Elijah and Elisha. But the Return of Jesus is one event with His death/resurrection/ascension, so in reality Jesus' ministry doesn't fail—it didn't fail and won't fail.

Followers of Jesus are royal prophets, just like Elisha. (Priests also.) We are indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus so that we can be just like Jesus and do as Jesus did. We demonstrate the power and the presence of God, we represent God to the wicked world we live in. We continue the work of Jesus in the very same way that Elisha continued the work of Elijah, calling people to be faithful to God.

People don't have to submit to the idolatrous ways of the land they live in, nor be subject to the demands of their (invisible) wicked ruler, Satan. Then can instead follow Jesus and be eternally blessed. It's our role in life, our calling and commissioning, to share this good news with everyone.

The Scriptures are God Himself speaking to us. It is God who has called each of us and is sending us to others, to those who don't know Him. We must be faithful to the work assigned to us. That's the only appropriate response to God.