

The Many Roles of Elijah and Elisha:
אֵישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים--The Charismatic Religious
Leader in Perspective

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DIGEST

Elijah the Prophet is one of the most enduring characters in Jewish history. Legends about Elijah and his successor, Elisha, abound in Jewish liturgy and folklore. Elijah "appears" at our Seder table, during Havdalah, and at every traditional Brit Milah. We find the prophet in the songs and stories told by the Jewish people in every age. Rabbinic literature and later commentaries are filled with legends about his character.

This profusion of traditions about Elijah is grounded in the biblical text, where we find accounts of the power and magical abilities of Elijah and his immediate successor, Elisha. Yet the Elijah who appears in the biblical account is perplexing to the modern reader.

What is the purpose of these narratives in the Bible? What can we glean from the biblical stories about these two Northern Prophets which lead to such timeless lore? What, about the characters Elijah and Elisha, commands our attention even in a modern context?

Both Elijah and Elisha function within their community as politicians, counselors, and as traditional religious leaders. Together, these varied roles which appear throughout the Elijah and Elisha cycle define an archetypal personality for the "Charismatic Religious Leader". This archetype, I intend to suggest, can even be applied to the modern American Rabbi.

The first chapter of this thesis is a literary analysis of the narratives of First and Second Kings that comprise the

Elijah/Elisha cycle. This chapter also includes an overview of the social roles of the ancient Israelite prophets as enacted by Elijah and Elisha. The second chapter is a selective commentary on some of the stories, focusing on the archetypal roles of the prophets as religious leaders. In the third chapter, I examine the "Elijah-archetype" in relation to the different roles of the prophet. Finally, I present an application of the archetype to several historical personages, and ultimately to the modern American Reform rabbi. It is my hope that this structure will enable the reader to understand the biblical basis for the development of Elijah and Elisha into models for modern charismatic religious leadership.

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For Meg

My inspiration to search for truth and honesty

Introduction

Elijah the Prophet is one of the most enduring characters in Jewish history. Legends about Elijah and his successor, Elisha, abound in Jewish liturgy and folklore. Elijah "appears" at our Seder table, during Havdalah, and at every traditional Brit Milah. We find the prophet in the songs and stories told by the Jewish people in every age. Rabbinic literature and later commentaries are filled with legends about his character.

This profusion of traditions about Elijah is grounded in the biblical text, where we find accounts of the power and magical abilities of Elijah and his immediate successor, Elisha. Yet the Elijah who appears in the biblical account is perplexing to the modern reader. As Frieda Hyman comments, "Certainly, scripture portrays no engaging personality. Indeed, of all the characters of the Tanakh, he is hardly the gentlest or the kindest. On the contrary, he is a stern, demanding, even autocratic figure. For years he was relentless, not only to his fellow man, but to God Himself..."¹

What is the purpose of these narratives in the Bible? What can we glean from the biblical stories about these two Northern Prophets which lead to such timeless lore? What, about the characters Elijah and Elisha, commands our attention even in a modern context?

¹Frieda Clark Hyman, "Elijah: Accuser and Defender," Judaism 39 (Summer 1990): 283.

Biblical exegesis and literary analysis may help to explain the many roles that Elijah and Elisha play in our tradition. According to some, "...acts of power, whatever else they may mean in the text, give us a glimpse of the process by which these early Israelite prophets were authorized."² In other words, the magical accounts of the Elijah and Elisha cycle point to a unique relationship between these religious functionaries and their communities.

For other scholars, such as Alexander Rofé, the stories of the early prophets reflect moral and ethical beliefs of their time. "In such cases, principle would dominate plot, the miracle would become secondary and the homily primary..."³ For Rofé, the stories of the Elijah and Elisha cycle represent ethical *legendae*⁴ which may expound upon the character of the religious leader.

Another commentator, Robert Cohn, views these stories as an artistic composition. He argues that this literary perspective can help us to "begin to understand the purposes of the final author, himself a creative artist, and the ways in which the work has functioned for countless generations of hearers."⁵

Still others see the cycle of Elijah stories as indicative of the Prophet's role in the social, political, and religious realms. Robert

²Thomas W. Overholt, Channels of Prophecy--The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 109.

³Alexander Rofé, The Prophetical Stories: The Narratives About the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible--Their Literary Types and History (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), 126.

⁴Rofé defines *legenda* as the fanciful creation of a band of believers who had gathered around a holy man in order to express their admiration. These stories help to establish a relationship with this religious leader and to teach morality to the future generations. It can be compared, Rofé contends, to the Hassidic wonder tales associated with the *Baal Shem Tov*.

⁵Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," Journal of Biblical Literature 101, no. 3 (1982): 333.

Wilson states, "The narrative not only illustrates Elijah's peripheral social functions but also describes some of his characteristic prophetic behavior and...his prophetic opposition, the Baal prophets of Israel's central cult."⁶ Thus, we may view Elijah as a model of the varied roles of the charismatic religious functionary known as the "prophet".

Many aspects of the activities of Elijah and Elisha appear to be prototypical for the behavior of religious leaders generally. As early examples of the "Charismatic Religious Leader", Elijah and Elisha manifest a particular personality type emulated in many subsequent generations. "Elijah became the prototype of the hero-archetype for the Jewish people. Their spiritual leaders, in confrontation with him, emphasized sometimes one, sometimes another trait of his personage, corresponding to the situation of the collective as well as to their own religious attitude...always aiming to strengthen and deepen the relationship between men, the world, and the divine towards unification."⁷

Both Elijah and Elisha function within their community as politicians, counselors, and as traditional religious leaders. Together, these varied roles which appear throughout the Elijah and Elisha cycle define an archetypal personality for the "Charismatic Religious Leader". This archetype, I intend to suggest, can even be applied to the modern American Rabbi.

⁶Robert S. Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 195.

⁷Wiener, Aharon, The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism--A Depth-Psychological Study (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 197.

The first chapter of this thesis is a literary analysis of the narratives of First and Second Kings that comprise the Elijah/Elisha cycle. This chapter also includes an overview of the social roles of the ancient Israelite prophets as enacted by Elijah and Elisha. The second chapter is a selective commentary on some of the stories, focusing on the archetypal roles of the prophets as religious leaders. In the third chapter, I examine the "Elijah-archetype" in relation to the different roles of the prophet. Finally, I present an application of the archetype to several historical personages, and ultimately to the modern American Reform rabbi. It is my hope that this structure will enable the reader to understand the biblical basis for the development of Elijah and Elisha into models for modern charismatic religious leadership.

Literary Styles of the Elijah/Elisha Cycle

The modern reader of the Elijah and Elisha stories needs to address the literary function of these texts. As an integral part of the Book of Kings, these texts serve as historical accounts of the political and social life of the Northern Kingdom. The text includes stories about kings and their encounters with the regional oracle givers, against the backdrop of the general social and political conditions of the period. According to Robert Wilson, "The narrative not only illustrates Elijah's peripheral social functions but also describes some of his characteristic prophetic behavior and...his prophetic opposition, the Baal prophets of Israel's central cult."¹ Many biblical scholars have studied these texts in terms of the socio-political structure of this time in order to gain insight into the society about which the stories are written. However, this approach to the material slights the literary value of this material for the modern reader. Thus we can view the text for its literary value in addition to its historical information. From this viewpoint, several literary styles are apparent within the text.

The Legenda

One such literary style points to the moral and ethical values of the biblical author. We can look to the Elijah and Elisha narratives for symbolic meaning which is useful in any society. Alexander Rofé classifies such stories about pious persons as **legendae**. According to Rofé, "The term legenda denotes the type

¹Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel, 195.

of stories which grew up in pious Christian circles around figures of the saints of the Catholic church, relating their virtuous life, miracles, or martyrdom....Judaism developed a very similar class of narratives concerned with the activity of its pious men. The best known of them are the Hassidic stories, termed *shevachim*, to be translated 'eulogies'.² These *shevachim* include the accounts of the activities of the Baal Shem Tov and other Hassidic masters, as well as stories about such individuals as Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed.

Legendae presumably originate in oral form and are later written down by followers of the teachings of these men. "The prophetic legenda, like the Hassidic wonder tale, is the creation of a band of believers who had gathered around a Holy Man, and to express their admiration for him, recounted his miraculous acts."³ The stories that we have today (i.e., the miracle stories of Elijah and Elisha) are probably condensations of earlier and longer folk stories which had been passed down from generation to generation. The original stories must have been shortened in order to be written down in their present canonical form. According to many biblical scholars, the cycle of stories which we read today in the Books of Kings is such a collection of shortened wonder tales about the Man of God.

The legenda itself is a simple form using characters only to foster the literary movement of the parable. Even the main character in many of the stories, Elisha, is portrayed as no more

²Alexander Rofé, "The Classification of the Prophetical Stories," Journal of Biblical Literature 89 (December 1970): 429.

³Rofé, The Prophetical Stories, 20.

than a "Man of God" without a given name. The role of the Man of God in these stories is to perform the wonders or miracles for his constituents or followers, helping ordinary people in their daily lives. The Man of God is used primarily in the development and resolution of local rather than national problems. Thus these stories serve to illustrate the simple lifestyle characteristic of ordinary people in the Northern Kingdom. The Man of God is instrumental in the resolution of problems inherent to this society.

Several short *legendae* are found among the stories of Elisha, whose "miracles are minor deliverances, small acts of salvation, in both scope and effect. They attest merely to the supernatural power of the Man of God who performs them..."⁴ As in most *legendae*, the power of the miracle worker and his personal power are at stake in all of the miraculous tales. The prophet "...acts not through the power of prayer, nor through the power of God's word which he hears and transmits, but through the use of powers residing within himself, or through his knowledge and rule over the hidden forces of nature."⁵ In a number of stories that I will discuss, the Man of God miraculously heals people, resurrects the dead, and brings good fortune. The Man of God is in possession of remarkable power. Even after his death, the contagious nature of this power can be transmitted by contact to those who believe in it.

⁴Ibid., 14.

⁵Ibid., 17.

Examples of Short Legendae in the Books of Kings

I will mention six distinct stories in the Elisha cycle in an attempt to characterize the prophetic wonder tale or legenda. According to Rofé's analysis, the stories share four common plot features to some extent:

- 1) Miraculous acts in a simple plot
- 2) A crisis which demands supernatural intervention
- 3) A plea for the prophet's help
- 4) Deliverance by the Man of God

"In each case, the power of God through the prophet Elisha breaks into this hopelessness and shatters it with a word of life."⁶ The stories which conform to this classification are:

- 1) The sweetening of the Jericho spring [2 Kings 2:19-22]
- 2) The she-bears and the death of the children [2 Kings 2:23-24]
- 3) The never-ending oil [2 Kings 4:1-7]
- 4) The curing of the poisonous stew [2 Kings 4:38-41]
- 5) The multiplication of the loaves of bread [2 Kings 4:42-44]
- 6) The floating ax head [2 Kings 6:1-7]

None of these six legendae seems to convey any significant moral teaching, aside from a devotion to Yahweh, yet we learn a great deal about the prophet and his followers in this ancient society. The man of God is to be treated with respect and veneration. His followers learn through their experiences with the Holy Man that they are to behave towards him just as they behave towards God.

⁶Richard D. Nelson, First and Second Kings, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 175.

The story of the sweetened waters of Jericho will serve as an example of the *legenda type*:⁷

19The men of the town said to Elisha, "Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement." 20He responded, "Bring me a new dish and put salt in it." They brought it to him; 21he went to the spring and threw salt into it. And he said, "Thus said the LORD: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!" 22The water has remained wholesome to this day, in accordance with the word spoken by Elisha.

In this example, verse 19 presents a crisis which can be solved only by supernatural intervention. The people of the town beg Elisha, the Man of God, to help them effect a change in the situation. The next three verses of this simple plot show Elisha drawing from his "bag of tricks" to find the perfect solution to the problem. The reader might imagine Elisha opening a book of spells to find that he has the power to use salt to purify the waters of this town. Brichto points out that this sort of healing could only be effected by supernatural means:

And was the healing of the waters accomplished by human agency, by the wielding of natural means? No....But salt from a new dish, symbolizing a new dispensation from Providence, discloses once again that the Power that can mysteriously turn life-giving waters into a death potion can use death-symbolizing salt to restore the spring's life-giving wholesomeness.⁸

⁷Throughout this thesis, I will be using the New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Tanakh. In instances where I prefer an alternative, I will present and note my own version.

⁸Chanan Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1992), 196.

Thus, the prophet's connection to the divine is upheld and his power confirmed. And finally, in verse 22, we read that the wondrous deliverance by the Man of God still benefits the inhabitants of that city until this very day. This episode is a perfect example of the short legenda; its purpose seems to be to establish the Man of God's supernatural power and connection with the deity.

Another example of the short legenda is the story of the floating ax head:

6:1 The disciples of the prophets said to Elisha, "See, the place where we live under your direction is too cramped for us. 2 Let us go to the Jordan, and let us each get a log there and build quarters there for ourselves to live in." "Do so," he replied. 3 Then one of them said, "Will you please come along with your servants?" "Yes, I will come," he said; 4 and he accompanied them. So they went to the Jordan and cut timber. 5 As one of them was felling a trunk, the iron ax head fell into the water. And he cried aloud, "Alas, master, it was a borrowed one!" 6 "Where did it fall?" asked the man of God. He showed him the spot; and he cut off a stick and threw it in, and he made the ax head float. 7 "Pick it up," he said; so he reached out and took it.

This story is more complicated since the immediate crisis (the ax-head) is subordinated to the larger problem of proper living space. Yet again in this example, the four criteria appear clearly. Not only is there a plea for help and a miraculous act on the part of Elisha, but the story begins with a twofold plea for the prophet's help. The disciples of the prophets ask Elisha to join them in their new settlement and also seek his help in the ax-head incident.

Once again, the story serves the purpose of legitimizing the power of the prophet. "The entire story seems designed to create a setting for the miraculous retrieval of the ax head...Unlike the prodigies effected by Moses and Aaron, Elijah, and Elisha himself to part the Jordan's waters, the act here is performed without orders from, or invocation of, the Deity."⁹

The other four stories that I cited above do not conform so completely to the form of the legenda as defined by Rofé. For example, in the she-bear story, it is questionable whether or not there is any plea for the intervention of the prophet. Similarly, in the story of the widow and the oil it is actually the prophet who asks if he can be of help. Nevertheless, even these stories seem to be related to the legenda type.

Political Legenda

Another common role of the prophet in the books of Kings is that of political advisor. Two accounts (2 Kings 6:8-23 and 6:24-7:20) move the action of the simple legenda into the political realm. This **Political Legenda** retains much of the form of the simple legenda, but because it contains more detail, it is considerably longer. Even in this expanded format, the characters often remain amorphous and without detail. Although these passages can be read as historical accounts, the inclusion of a miraculous act sets them apart from other historical narratives.

One example of a political legenda is the story of the war against the Aramean armies in chapter six of 2 Kings:

⁹Ibid., 199.

6:8 While the king of Aram was waging war against Israel, he took counsel with his officers and said, "I will encamp in such and such a place." 9But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass through that place, for the Arameans are encamped there." 10So the king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God had told him. Time and again he alerted such a place and took precautions there. 11Greatly agitated about the matter, the king of Aram summoned his officers and said to them, "Tell me! Who of us is on the side of the king of Israel?" 12"No one, my lord king," said one of the officers. "Elisha, that prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom." 13"Go find out where he is," he said, "so that I can have him seized." It was reported to him that [Elisha] was in Dothan; 14so he sent horses and chariots there and a strong force. They arrived at night and encircled the town.

15When the attendant of the man of God rose early and went outside, he saw a force, with horses and chariots, surrounding the town. "Alas, master, what shall we do?" his servant asked him. 16"Have no fear," he replied. "There are more on our side than on theirs." 17Then Elisha prayed: "Lord, open his eyes and let him see." And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw the hills all around Elisha covered with horses and chariots of fire. 18[The Arameans] came down against him, and Elisha prayed to the Lord: "Please strike this people with a blinding light." And He struck them with a blinding light, as Elisha had asked.

19Elisha said to them, "This is not the road, and that is not the town; follow me, and I will lead you to the man you want." And he led them to Samaria. 20When they entered Samaria, Elisha said, "O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see." The Lord opened their eyes and they saw that they were inside Samaria. 21When the king of Israel saw them, he said to Elisha, "Father, shall I strike them down?" 22"No, do not," he replied. "Did you take them captive with your sword and bow that you would strike them down? Rather, set food and drink before them, and let them eat and drink and return to their master." 23So

he prepared a lavish feast for them and, after they had eaten and drunk, he let them go, and they returned to their master. And the Aramean bands stopped invading the land of Israel.

In this story Elisha is not engaged in the problems of the common people; rather, he is instrumental in the pursuit of national security, a political concern. His intervention in the political realm helps to secure the status of the Northern Kingdom under the king of Israel.

In these stories, the man of God must overcome skepticism in order to make the miracle take place. Often, the prophet is pitted against a powerful king who believes in the method of forceful attack. "We must therefore infer that such legendae were the product of periods of social disintegration, and evolved among circles of disciples who nurtured ideas and traditions differing from, and even hostile to, the current ideas predominant in the royal court."¹⁰ Thus, these political legendae provide insight into one of the most important roles of the prophet, namely to challenge the belief that Yahweh's will can be overcome by force.

Ethical Legendae

Other stories included in the Elijah-Elisha cycles are different from the short legendae in that they include a fuller development of the characters involved, including the prophet and his following. These longer and more detailed legends are also identifiable by their emphasis on the moral implications of the events for the characters. The consequences of the prophet's

¹⁰Rofé, Prophetic Stories, 59.

actions are recounted in order to focus the reader on the moral and ethical nature of the prophet's relationship with his community.

These **Ethical Legendae** are intended to add a deeper level of meaning to the simple plot of the short legenda, namely the introduction of a clear religious element. "The legenda, furthermore, could serve as a vehicle for the expression of other cherished beliefs and ideas...where principle dominates plot..."¹¹ The ethical legenda is further identifiable by the introduction of tension with regard to the prophet's ability to perform the miracle. In other short legendae, the prophet's power is not questioned by the onlookers. It seems to be taken for granted that the "Man of God" could perform most miracles. The longer ethical legenda, however, is marked by the possibility that the prophet will not be able to perform the miracle. The ultimate success of the prophet often unites the characters with the prophet and his religious belief.

Two examples will illustrate the genre of Ethical Legendae: The Shunammite Woman [2 Kings 4:8-37]¹² and Naaman's Leprosy [2 Kings 5:1-27]. Each adds information and development to the original content of a short legenda in order to supply moral content. In the first sections of the story of the Shunammite woman, it appears to be a short legenda. The

¹¹Ibid., 125-6.

¹²This text must be compared to the parallel Elijah text in I Kings 17:8-24 which may be an elaboration of the same Elisha story later projected onto the more famous character, Elijah. Many of the details which appear in the Elisha story are copied into the Elijah cycle and become illogical in their new context. For example, the inclusion of an upper chamber where the prophet stayed (I Kings 17:19) is probably not original to the Elijah story. It is unlikely, in my opinion, that a woman as poor and destitute as the woman of Zarephath could afford an upper chamber at all. The use of the phrase "man of God" also points to the borrowing of language and ideas from the Elisha text.

woman, who is in need (she wants a child) is granted a glimpse of the power of the "Holy Man". Elisha promises that she will soon bear a child. It is not until later in the course of events that this simple legenda is transformed, with the introduction of dramatic tension, into an ethical legenda.

The text actually includes two distinct miracles, but is not to be broken down into two legenda. Instead, the author uses the same characters to tie the stories together. Elisha assumes moral responsibility for the death of the son because he had, in some way, been responsible for the child's birth. This matter of moral responsibility defines this literary style. At first, Elisha uses his servant to deal with the problem which has arisen, "He said to Gehazi, 'Tie up your skirts, take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him; and if anyone greets you, do not answer him. And place my staff on the boy's face.'" This indirect response to the problem does not satisfy the woman. She demands that Elisha take personal responsibility for what has happened. Elisha is then forced to perform a second miracle, reviving the child and restoring faith in the power of God and the "man of God".

The second example of the ethical legenda is the story of the healing of Naaman's leprosy. Two distinct sections make up the body of this text: 1) 2 Kings 5:1-19 and 2) 2 Kings 5:20-27. Both are merged into one tale through the author's intent to show that the prophet's only goal is to spread the belief in God throughout the nations. In the story, Naaman's healing is brought about

through contact with the God of Israel, Yahweh. This ethical message distinguishes this text from other short *legendae*.

The outcome of the Naaman episode suggests that the intent of the author of the Book of Kings is to demonstrate God's superiority over the other gods of the time. It is only through the agency of one of Yahweh's prophets that the healing can take place. "The tale of Naaman contains an underlying idea that is not encountered in *legendae*: the miracles performed by the Holy Man are not intended to benefit any particular person or persons, but to increase and spread the belief in God, even among other nations."¹³ The goal of the story is achieved when Naaman, the representative of the other nations, says in verse 15, "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel!". Thus in this ethical *legenda*, and in the story of the Shunammite woman, the author develops a simple *legenda* into a tale replete with ethical and religious significance. This is the role of the ethical *legenda*.

Vita and Epic Story

In addition to the various forms of *legenda* which partly comprise the Elijah and Elisha cycles, two related literary forms can be found. The **Vita** is an origin story for a prophet who has been granted supernatural powers by a divine source. In some instances, there is a conscious effort on the part of the author of these stories to immortalize the Man of God as a legendary figure.

According to Rofé, the opening story of the Elisha cycle,

¹³Rofé, Prophetic Stories, 127.

which includes the ascension of Elijah, serves as a *vita* for Elisha and his power as a prophet of God. Without this origin story, the reader has no reason to accept Elisha as a prophet with supernatural power. In the context of this account, Elisha first requests power and knowledge from his teacher and mentor, Elijah. From this point forward in the narrative, Elisha is joined by a band of prophets who seem to be his followers.

The majority of the stories which follow act as proof of Elisha's power. His miracles are rarely miracles of salvation, but rather prove that Elisha is a potent prophet or Man of God. "The finished product is a biography of the Man of God consisting entirely of a consecutive recitation of miracles: a biography of *legendae*."¹⁴

The genre of **Vita** is common in the Jewish literary tradition. Another example of this literary style can be found in the *Shivchei HaBesht*. This collection of miracle stories serves as the *Vita* or origin story for the power of the Baal Shem Tov.

Elijah "is presented as unlike any other prophets of the Monarchy period, and especially Elisha. No admiring 'Sons of the Prophets' accompany Elijah. He is not portrayed as a 'wonder worker' who engages in the performance of minor miracles to benefit the common man...there is no reason to doubt the historical background of his career."¹⁵ The Elijah story is an **Epic Story**. The author has yoked the *legendae* to a larger concern, namely to present a character who expends all of his energy in the defense of

¹⁴Ibid., 42.

¹⁵Ibid., 191.

Yahweh against Baalism and other pagan worship. This overarching theme transforms the individual Elijah stories into an epic saga of significant depth. Rofé suggests that, "...the story of God, Elijah, and Baal is an epic, a broad, sweeping and rich canvas of images, places and people interacting over a long period of time, which recounts the mighty battle that determined for all times the fate of the entire nation."¹⁶

Other commentators have reached this understanding of the Elijah story without assigning any particular genre label to it. For example, Elma E. Levinger suggests a similar classification in her popular biography of Elijah. She writes, "He (Elijah) has won his place in the history of religion as the Columbus of the Spirit--a pioneer explorer in the search for God."¹⁷ In a more scholarly tone, Robert L. Cohn presents the common understanding that the Elijah story is in fact a composite body of literature which must be examined as an epic saga. He suggests that, "As a whole, a text may convey meaning only half perceived in its component parts. An excellent example of a carefully woven literary tissue is the group of tales about Elijah...its central theme the battle for the establishment of the exclusive worship of Yahweh in Israel against the forces of Baal."¹⁸

The epic story of Elijah's struggle against Baal is detailed in three distinct sections. Together, these three "acts" of a finely crafted drama help the modern reader to see the monotheistic

¹⁶Ibid., 196.

¹⁷Elma E. Levinger, Elijah: Prophet of the One God, (New York: Association Press, 1956), 119.

¹⁸Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," 333-4.

intent of the author of the text. The first act of the drama (1 Kings 17:2-16) follows a brief introduction which sets the scene and determines a theme for the remainder of the story, namely the worship of Baal and the drought which follows as a consequence. In this first act, we are presented with Elijah as he struggles to survive and sustain himself during the famine and drought. It is important to note that Elijah's survival comes only at the hand of Yahweh.

The second act of the epic (1 Kings 18) finds Elijah leaving his hiding place to face the public on Mt. Carmel in the famous stand-off between the prophets of Baal and the Prophet of Yahweh. His success in this challenge proves that Yahweh and not Baal is God. It is in this segment of the epic that Elijah faces his most difficult task. Elijah is forced to perform miracles in public which will prove Yahweh's superiority over all other pagan deities. Although this scene seems to be the crux of the conflict between Yahweh and Baal, it is merely the continuation of the theme presented in the first act. None of the miraculous acts of Elijah's life can occur without divine intervention.

Throughout this second act, the author of the text seeks to distance himself from historical fact, relying on the symbolism of Elijah's act. "Elijah embodies the prophetic role to the exclusion of traits that distinguish one human individual from another. He is more role than person."¹⁹ By presenting the character of Elijah in this way, the author is able to present a coherent idea associated

¹⁹Brichto, 131.

with the role of the prophet which continues throughout the epic. The epic story is held together by this thematic purpose.

In the third and final act of the epic saga (ending with 2 Kings 1), Elijah is left alone to defend that which he has taught through his actions and words. "The third act...turns the tables on the hopeful situation. The people disperse, and Elijah is left alone, a classic example of the popular leader who succeeds in momentarily capturing the crowd, only to be left without support and forced to face the authorities alone."²⁰ He continues his mission in defense of God's superiority until the moment he ascends into heaven. In dramatic fashion, befitting the tone of the epic saga, Elijah passes on his mission to Elisha, his successor.

There is no doubt that the life of Elijah is underlined by a conscious attempt to support Yahweh. Rofé argues that throughout this epic story,

Elijah appears in a multi-faceted role: as forceful servant of God, as a saintly individual enjoying His favor and supported by Him, as a refugee...bringing blessings to the faithful, as a master of the King's officers and of the King himself, as a ruthless warrior slaying the prophets of Baal, as a miracle worker who halts the rains and predicts their return, as an enthusiast running before the King's chariot, as a fugitive pursued by the royal powers, abandoned by all, and finally as the messenger of God returning in despair from his mission.²¹

In all of these roles, however, the message is clear: Yahweh is the Lord!

²⁰Rofé, Prophetic Stories, 185.

²¹Ibid., 194.

The stories present a hard-line monotheistic view. It is only through the sovereign will of God that any of Elijah's miracles occur. They are granted solely for the purpose of proving God's divine power. Although some scholars have suggested that the stories represent a monolatrous religion which had not yet reached the stage of absolute monotheism, Rofé rejects that view. He argues that the author definitely assumes that only one God exists, and that God is Yahweh. Only that assumption can account for Elijah's constant struggle to prove Yahweh's power.

The Social and Political Setting of the Elijah/Elisha Cycle

Having defined some of the various literary genres that were shaped into the cycles of stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, we must now move to the social and political motives behind the authorship and redaction of these cycles. The literary genres that shape the biblical narrative are enhanced by the social structure of the prophets' community. The *legendae* which appear in this section of the Hebrew Bible are part of a conscious editorial effort. The political tensions of the time are highlighted in the stories that advance the claims of Elijah and Elisha to be the legitimate prophets of Yahweh. "What otherwise appear to be upper echelon rivalries between kings and prophets become expressions of a fundamental social antagonism between the ruling elite, who control the military establishment and tend to favor Canaanite agricultural deities, and the more or less subservient peasants, whose interests are supported by Yahwistic religion."¹

1 Kings 17-19

"Bible scholars agree that Elijah was a historical person who lived about 920-850 BCE and that the biblical account of him, the Book of Kings generally, was composed or edited about 100-150 years later."² This view places Elijah in the midst of the divided monarchy during the reigns of several of the Kings of Israel,

¹Robert LaBarbera, "The Man of War and the Man of God: Social Satire in 2 Kings 6:8-7:20," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (October 1984): 637.

²Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism*, 1.

including at least Ahab and Ahaziah. However, Elijah is not a prophet like any who had come before him. He was separate from the royal and cultic institutions of his time. "Elijah is neither a 'prophet of the cult', connected with a sanctuary, nor, like many of his predecessors, subject to the royal court and at its disposal, nor has he a constant home where people can seek him out."³ We learn nothing about his family or his origins. He is introduced during his adulthood, presumably having already established himself as a Man of God.

Elijah was a prophet at a crucial period of the history of the Israelite people. The stories of his life and his prophetic activity mark his involvement in the social and political issues of his time. He speaks to the masses who are disheartened with the current political situation, bringing a religious message as the solution to the political crisis. That message is that monotheistic belief in Yahweh would offer the most for the present and future of Israel.

Prophets speak to specific situations in their society. Elijah spoke the word of Yahweh in a society confused by conflicting religious claims...The stories demonstrated the physical refuge and sustenance for bands of people who had been forced out of the old protective tribal structures by the monarchy and social stratification. They are also an ideological base for the advocating of Yahwistic social and ethical concepts.⁴

In other words, like many to follow throughout history, Elijah slips religious doctrine into the mouths of people who are hungry because of political turmoil and distress.

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Judith A. Todd, "The Pre-Deuteronomistic Elijah Cycle" in Coote, Robert B., Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 1.

The initial stories about Elijah in Chapters 17-19 set up the relationship between the prophet and the political establishment of the time. In his commentary on I Kings, Burke Long points out that most scholars agree that, "This material is clearly a composite editorial unity welded of diverse, some originally independent, elements."⁵ It is more than a mere biography in that it parallels the conflict between Elijah and the King with the conflict between Yahweh and Baal. Long continues, "Looking back on the history of the northern Kingdom as religious miscarriage...this editor set the struggles between Ahab (Jezebel) and Elijah, writ large as between Baal and Yahweh, as the opening piece in the largest block of material telling the canonical 'story' of the northern Kingdom."⁶ Similarly, Simon DeVries suggests that this text is actually a historical demonstration narrative which is intended to support both the prophet and the royal system of government of the time.⁷

The editor of this text has developed the prophetic legends that set up the inevitable conflict between Baal and Yahweh. The first of these legends (17:1-16) serves as the setting in which the narrative will continue. "The legend offers a first glimpse of events in the reign of a king already roundly condemned and under the shadow of curse and drought...(as) part of the exilic author-editor's presentation of King Ahab's reign, and Elijah as

⁵Burke O. Long, I Kings, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature Series, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene Tucker, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 177.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Simon DeVries, Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Kings (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 207.

the king's great 'troubler'".⁸ The conflict between Yahweh and Baal is set up through the actions and words of Elijah in this scene; the final outcome is foreshadowed by Elijah's successful multiplication of oil, which shows his obvious connection with God.

In the first verse of the chapter, Elijah proclaims himself a powerful prophet of Yahweh against the royal court. "Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding.'" This single verse sets the stage for the confrontation which will follow for several chapters.

Elijah's special connection with Yahweh is further defined in the conclusion of this chapter (17:17-24). Through his miraculous reviving of the dead boy, the prophet is able to turn the woman towards belief in Yahweh. At first this text seems out of place amidst the larger political theme of the story. It is probable, however, that the editor used the legenda to legitimate Elijah's power. In addition, as Burke Long suggests, this story exemplifies the way Elijah went about gathering support for his impending battle against Baal and Ahab. "Taken with vv. 2-16, two legends set up the approaching conflict with Ahab by gathering the forces on Elijah's side: he is provided for, given special care and knowledge, and then actively mediates Yahweh's benevolent power. In a word, he comes to 'prophetic maturity'".⁹ Thus, the editor has prepared the way for his account of the conflict between Yahweh and Baal on the top of Mt. Carmel.

⁸Long, *I Kings*, 182-3.

⁹Ibid., 187.

In 1 Kings 18, the political challenge comes to a climax pitting Elijah against the royal prophets. As the biblical author presents the situation, pagan beliefs and practices were all too common in the pre-monarchic period. "The more paganism [the Israelites] adopted, the weaker the covenant bond between them became and the more each tribe tended to live by and for itself."¹⁰ With the establishment of the monarchy and Solomon's rule, the factions of the Israelite community were united and the intrusion of foreign worship became more and more difficult. After the division of the kingdom, however, the Northern Kingdom took on a syncretistic state religion. According to Leah Bronner, the Northern Kingdom adopted a mixture of worship of Yahweh and many Baalistic and pagan elements. This set the scene for Elijah to enter as the prophetic advocate of the worship of Yahweh alone.

The symbol of rain, which was introduced in the first line of the Elijah narrative, serves as a constant symbol of this political battle throughout this part of the text. Not only is the drought the source of social tension because of the devastation it has produced, but it also serves as the focal point of the political struggle between Elijah and Ahab. According to D.R. Ap-Thomas, rain symbolizes the ultimate challenge of the trial at Mt. Carmel: the ability of either Yahweh or Baal to bring rain is a decisive test of power.¹¹ All the way back to the second millennium, Baal was regarded as

¹⁰Leah Bronner, The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship (n.p.: Pretoria Publication, 1968), 2.

¹¹D.R. Ap-Thomas, "Elijah on Mount Carmel," Palestine Exploration Quarterly 92 (July-December 1960): 151-2.

lord of the storm, bringer of rain, and concomitantly, fertility.

John Day suggests that,

[T]here was one great Canaanite storm-and-fertility deity Baal-Hadad of cosmic stature....The fact that Israelites were settled among the Canaanites, for whom the worship of Baal was so important, and that Palestine is a land utterly dependent for its fertility upon the rain, which was held to be Baal's special realm of influence, accounts for the tempting nature of this cult as well as the strength of the OT polemic against it.¹²

The author of the Elijah story is familiar with the motifs and beliefs about Baal and Yahweh and uses rain in order to show the dominance of one over the other.

The motif of power over life-giving water persists in the story of Elisha sweetening the springs at Jericho. "The manner in which the narratives of Elijah and Elisha describe these prophets performing miracles with rain and water aimed to teach the people that God is the creator, who controls these forces and bestows these blessings on man and beast."¹³ The motif of miraculous alleviation of the drought, then, serves as proof of Yahweh's manifest superiority to Baal, and not merely to attest to the power of the Man of God.

Thus, with the certainty of divine support, Elijah sets out to confront Ahab on Mt. Carmel. The result of the encounter is Yahweh's absolute vindication, when the people chant, "The Lord alone is God!". Long suggests that throughout this portion of the narrative, "Ahab and, to a certain extent, Jezebel are less real as

¹²John Day, "Baal," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) Volume 1, 547.

¹³Bronner, 77.

antagonists than they are as symbols. The events of Mount Carmel make the king into a paradigm of Baalistic devotion, or at least benign support, without his ever taking an essential or forceful part in the drama."¹⁴

Other scholars, as well, view this story in terms of dramatic and literary symbolism. Chanan Brichto suggests that, "In the portrayal of the characters, in the actions ascribed to them, in the diction employed to describe those actions, his use of hyperbole and metaphor are designed to convey a concern for symbolism....And in this he sets the tone for the entire corpus of Elijah stories."¹⁵ Elijah succeeds in his defense of Yahweh and moves on the next stage of his personal saga.

The transition from the Mt. Carmel story, at the beginning of 1 Kings 19, appears to connect two distinct literary pieces. Elijah is forced to flee because of his actions against the Baal prophets. The subsequent theophany at Mt. Horeb, however, is only vaguely connected with any of the action that precedes it. In the preceding stories, the prophet is a mighty Man of God; here, we meet a prophet in weakness and resignation. According to Brichto, "The normally intrepid prophet, for his part, takes fright and flight...and makes his way to the kingdom of Judah's southernmost town, at the edge of the Negev wastelands."¹⁶ From Mount Carmel, where Elijah enjoyed his great victory, he goes to Mount Horeb to await word from Yahweh.

¹⁴Long, *I Kings*, 196.

¹⁵Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics*, 131.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 141.

The fearful Elijah now becomes the focus of the narrative (1 Kings 19:3-4). "There can be little doubt but that the Elijah of our narrative is so weak and filled with despair because he has suddenly cut himself off from the fountain of his strength, the God of Israel, who is also the God of heaven and earth."¹⁷ Yahweh provides for Elijah during his long journey to Horeb (19:5-8).

Elijah is confronted by Yahweh one final time atop Mt. Horeb. God's question, "Why are you here?", highlights the intention of the imminent theophany. Elijah is forced to realize through the still, small voice or murmuring sound, that Yahweh is the reason behind all of his actions: "He answered, 'I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and have put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.'" (1 Kings 19:14) Elijah clearly articulates the nature of his political/religious struggle, and learns that it will be continued by Elisha his successor (19:16-18).

The political battle between Elijah and the royal powers continues in the name of God. 1 Kings 21, the story of Naboth, marks the first interaction between Elijah and the political system following the theophany at Horeb. "Ahab is not just an Israelite King, he is the king who opposed Elijah and Yahweh...As on Mt. Carmel, Ahab is a symbol..."¹⁸ As usual, Elijah and the forces of Yahweh prevail and Ahab is doomed because of his actions.

¹⁷DeVries, 1 Kings, 236.

¹⁸Long, 1 Kings, 230.

Perhaps, after the theophany on Horeb, Elijah is even more resolute as the mouthpiece of God and monotheistic belief.

2 Kings 1:1-18 and 2:1-18

The only stories about Elijah in 2 Kings appear in the first two chapters. Themes of the previous stories, such as political/religious conflict and theophany in fire, however, can be found in these two chapters. At first (1:1-8), Elijah is seen as a Yahweh's prophet who foretells of the death of a king of Israel. In the continuation (1:9-18), the theme of political confrontation is revisited. "It is not accidental, then, that the situation narrated here recalls Elijah's meeting with Ahab..."¹⁹ Elijah again uses fiery force to prove his power over other prophets, as well as the superiority of Yahweh over other gods, within the symbolic context of the political realm.

Chapter two of 2 Kings presents a final look at Elijah as he anoints his own successor and ascends into heaven. The narrative serves as the transition from one era of prophecy to the next. "This pausal moment thus captures a momentous change in religious leadership. Just as Elijah represented...an authentic voice for Yahwism in the apostasy-prone Omride northern kingdom, so Elisha will be a similarly presented prophetic power in the waning years of that same dynasty."²⁰

¹⁹Burke O. Long, *II Kings*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature Series, ed. Rolf Knierim and Gene Tucker, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 17-18.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 22.

The most challenging verse in this narrative is 2 Kings 2:11, where Elijah leaves in a fiery chariot symbolic of the fire of Yahweh which has sustained him throughout his prophetic career. The sons of the prophets serve as witness to the transfer of power to Elisha, who becomes the new prophet of Yahweh. A new era of prophecy begins.

2 Kings 2:19-9:3

Elisha is a character very different from his teacher, Elijah. "Elijah loved the ascetic life, the quiet mountains, and he kept away from the cities and remained untouched by Canaanite influences. Elisha liked city life, enjoyed the company of men, and took a more active part in politics."²¹ Unlike the solitary Elijah, Elisha finds himself among the sons of the prophets; he works within a community. Both men sought to promote devotion to Yahweh alone. "[T]he main object of Elisha's life as that of Elijah's was to promote loyalty to God. Elisha likewise took an active part in political affairs and inspired the revolution against Jehu."²² The newly ordained Elisha, then, continues the work of Elijah, his predecessor.

The stories in this section of the narrative (2 Kings 5 and 6:8-9:3) depict Elisha's relationships with God and with royalty. We can assume that Elisha is granted legitimacy by the sons of the prophets, yet he seems to struggle for recognition throughout

²¹Bronner, 29.

²²Ibid.

his career. In all of these efforts, however, Elisha also works for the belief in Yahweh. Burke Long writes that,

[W]e know from other traditions that Elisha is more than a miracle worker. He sees visions (2 Kings 11-12) and is clairvoyant (4:16, 5:25-6, 6:9). He sends his 'heart', his vital essence, without the body, and lets it take part in events afar (5:26). He gives oracles on request (3:15), apparently in states of altered consciousness. He specializes in ritual healing, diagnosing illness and prescribing cures (5:10-11) or bringing the dead to life, calling at will upon the power of the deity.²³

As an intermediary between the power of Yahweh and the common people of the Northern Kingdom, Elisha is the perfect successor to Elijah. "In short, Elisha stands between ordinary men and the world of sacred power, and taps that power for the managing of social affairs."²⁴ Elisha is a social advocate throughout his career and uses this social role to persuade many of his followers to believe in Yahweh's power.

The many stories about Elisha, presented in the form of short *legendae*, are all aimed at legitimizing both the power of the prophet and of Yahweh. The first two stories (2:19-22 and 2:23-24) attempt the former while the third (3:4-19) promotes the latter. In the first encounter between Elisha and his followers, he is asked to cure a poisonous water source in Jericho. A simple act (the addition of salt) which would normally have made the water source worse miraculously cleanses the poison. Thus Elisha begins his pursuit of popular acceptance as a legitimate prophet.

²³Burke O. Long, "The Social Setting for Prophetic Miracle Stories," *Semeia* 3 (1975): 48.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 49.

Similarly, in the second encounter, Elijah is laughed at by a band of children who expect to see the well known prophet, Elijah.

"They jeer at him, focusing on an inconsequential physical difference between Elijah and Elisha: the former was hairy and the latter was bald. Elisha does not react well to the youths."²⁵

His reaction is a violent curse in the name of Yahweh, but its effect emphasizes Elisha's power and his strong connection with God.

In 3:4-19, Elisha presumably has made a name for himself in the Northern Kingdom because of the three kings' willingness to approach him for oracular counsel. Although this narrative seems to break the flow of stories about Elisha, it evokes memories of Elijah's confrontations with Ahab and Jezebel. By way of this brief historic interlude, Elisha is presented as winning over the royal court to the support of Yahweh, at least to some extent. The story also introduces the longest narrative about the prophet and his miraculous deeds. In this subsequent narrative, Elisha leaves the political arena and continues his work as social advocate and promoter of Yahweh's message.

²⁵David E. Fass, "Elisha's Locks and the She-Bears," Journal of Reform Judaism 34 (Summer 1987): 25.

The Roles of the Biblical Prophet

What is a Prophet?

The biblical prophet stands out as the most intriguing of all the characters of the bible. For the modern reader, the prophet's almost magical connection with God can be a frightening encounter. Abraham J. Heschel describes the prophet in the introduction to The Prophets, "This book is about some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived: the men whose inspiration brought the Bible into being--the men whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our faith..."¹ This, however, is only one view of the prophetic experience. For many, the prophet is far more than the creator and sustainer of a religious idea. Heschel continues

The prophet's task is to convey a divine view...He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response--not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the word, the subjective side of the message.²

More directly, the biblical prophet is a role model for all who hear his message and see his actions. In every age--from the biblical period in which the prophet acted to the world of modern biblical scholarship--we learn a way of life from the words and actions of the prophet.

¹Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets: Part I (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), ix.

²*Ibid.*, x.

According to Heschel, the prophet is a sensitive and compassionate person, horrified by the destructive actions of the people of his day. This attitude is reflected in the prophet's harsh words and reactive personality. It seems as though the prophet will always "speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God."³ Perhaps these communal actions did affect the prophet in ways incomprehensible to the modern reader. Yet, in their day, the prophet was looked to in times of duress by both royalty and the common people. While the Bible is mainly concerned with the centrality of the priestly function, it portrays the prophet as a significant part of the religious center of the society.

The Prophet Speaks

Among the prophet's experiences are several distinctive types of communication both with his followers and with God. The most common of these communications is divine revelation or some other sort of divine contact. In most cases, the revelation is communicated in the form of a proclamation to the prophet who is willing to listen. The prophet then speaks to an audience who will give their response to the revelation. The audience must react in some way to the prophet's message. This feedback is a significant part of the relationship of the prophet to his constituency.

"Prophets seek to move their audiences to action, and audiences may be said to attribute authority to prophets insofar as they

³Ibid., 4.

acknowledge and are prepared to act upon the truth of their message."⁴

Most often, however, the response is not initially positive. The prophet must be a good listener, able to hear the audience's negative reply and to communicate this back to God.



It is this constant circle of communication which is the basis of the prophet's career.

Only one theme underlies this cycle of prophecy as it is communicated to the public audience. The prophet struggles against all adversaries in the ultimate defense of God.

The prophets who appear in the Bible are included there because a tradition has established them as bearers of God's truth. Such claims to truth are not easily made, however, especially when the prophet's message challenges commonly held truths or regimes in power. A prophet as a canonical figure unifies, balances, and holds in constructive tension various institutions and factions within the tradition. An important part of the

⁴Overholt, Channels of Prophecy, 23.

biblical account is thus shaped by the prophet's followers and opponents.⁵

The prophet approaches every situation with the knowledge of his community's norm and seeks to use the conflict created by his message to serve as the catalyst for change. As a master communicator, the prophet must be well versed in the sociology of his community to be successful. Once he is established, his disciples, additional revelations, and supernatural confirmations serve to legitimize the prophet's message.⁶

For the prophet himself, the mission begins prior to his acceptance within the community as a messenger of God. Sheldon Blank characterizes four distinct features which mark the prophet in his career: "First...the prophet becomes aware of a mission...God tells him to go. Second...before he can go he must overcome a natural sense of inadequacy or unwillingness. Third,...he understands his business to be communication... Fourth, ...he is fully aware of the magnitude of his task."⁷ Each of Blank's prophetic features occur even before the prophet meets the public with God's message. This part of the prophet's life is often lonely and secluded, marking his departure from the general community in an attempt to resolve the internal struggle which is engendered by the revelation from God. Sustained and convinced by God of his readiness, the prophet emerges from seclusion to begin a career of public service. Once a prophet is prepared to communicate with his community, he is confident and ready to reach out to his

⁵Scott D. Hill, "The Local Hero in Palestine in Comparative Perspective", in Robert B. Coote, Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 37.

⁶Overholt, Channels of Prophecy, 24-5.

⁷Sheldon Blank, Understanding the Prophets (New York: UAHC Press, 1969), 35-6.

audience. Then the messenger of God shares the divine message with the community.

The prophets of the Bible carried out their respective missions in various ways. While a particular prophet may behave in an original way, in general, the prophets share a common purpose. "Some biblical prophets were ecstatic and others were not; some biblical prophets were political and others were not; some were attached to the shrine and others were not; but in all things they all claimed to be devout adherents of the one and only God, Yahweh."⁸ The prophet is continuously challenged by those who oppose Yahweh actively or passively by worshipping other gods.

The Prophet Acts

Although much attention has been given to the prophetic role as a communicator, the actions of the prophet are equally important. Thomas Overholt describes this problem within the field of biblical scholarship: "We generally think of the Old Testament prophets as speakers rather than actors, and as a consequence much more scholarly attention has been directed to the forms of their speech than to the patterns of their actions. And yet we realize that the prophets are sometimes pictured as acting in ways significant to the exercise of their office."⁹ Thus through his words and his actions, the prophet finds himself in the difficult

⁸DeVries, *1 Kings*, xxix.

⁹Thomas W. Overholt, "Seeing is Believing: The Social Setting of Prophetic Acts of Power," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1982): 3.

position of defending what he knows to be the "correct" choice: the belief in Yahweh.

This problem is solved by the prophet's use of the power granted to him by the deity. According to Burke Long, the stories "seek in some way to glorify the man of God, or perhaps better, the power of God which is operative in him."¹⁰ As the prophet draws attention to himself and his message through the acts he performs, a bridge between God and the people is formed. A logical dependence is fostered between the audience, which hopes for divine intervention during crisis, and the prophet himself. This dependence often motivates the prophet to alter the belief system of his audience. "The belief in the power of the word to bring into being that which it proclaims stands behind the employment of announcements to precipitate crises at crucial junctures in the narrative."¹¹ The prophet's words, which promise acts of power, then become crucial to this dependence, enabling the people to better understand God's message and power.

The narratives about the prophets vacillate between divine messages and acts of power. Miracles occur throughout the Elijah and Elisha cycles. On the one hand, those miracles establish the prophets' credentials. On the other hand, the prophet serves as the mediator of divine action that might just as well occur without him. Robert Cohn writes, "Though Elijah functions as Yahweh's

¹⁰Burke O. Long, "2 Kings III and Genres of Prophetic Narrative," Vetus Testamentum 23 (1973): 337.

¹¹Cohn, "Literary Logic," 344.

human agent in the first two miracles, the third miracle shows that the battle will continue even without Elijah."¹²

These "acts of power" are defined by Thomas Overholt as "reported actions of prophetic figures which in their narrative context appear somehow unusual, extraordinary, or miraculous."¹³ These acts, together with the communication of a divine message, are the basis of the prophet's activity. The prophet who approaches his audience only with a message from God may be ignored or even chastised, as is the case with Elisha on his way to Bethel near the beginning of his career (2 Kings 2:23-24). In contrast, it would seem that the prophet who claims no connection to Yahweh but performs miracles is merely a magician or pagan miracle worker. Overholt points out that within the Elijah and Elisha narratives, these two parts of the prophet's character are joined to give credibility and authority to his career. "Elijah's and Elisha's acts of power, whatever else they may mean in the tradition and in the present form of the text, give us a glimpse of the process by which these early Israelite prophets were authorized."¹⁴

In addition to requiring authorization, the prophet succeeds only if he is able to convert his audience to his side. As Robert Cohn writes, "The final element in each act is the transformation of those for whom the miracle is performed."¹⁵ For Elijah, a miraculous act of power is often followed by a verbal acceptance of

¹²Ibid., 347.

¹³Overholt, "Seeing is Believing," 3.

¹⁴Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy*, 109.

¹⁵Cohn, 348.

Yahweh as Lord. Perhaps the most significant example is the reaction of the people after Elijah is successful in summoning Yahweh's power on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:39) "When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: 'The Lord alone is God, The Lord alone is God!'" This confession enables Elijah to vanquish the Baal prophets (18:40)

Again, such a conversion takes place with regard to Elisha's power in the first scene after his succession (2 Kings 2:13-15). In this short narrative, Elisha verifies his power by parting the waters of the Jordan river. Having seen this miraculous action, the onlookers respond, "The spirit of Elijah has settled on Elisha!" (2:15) With this exclamation the conversion is complete, formalizing Elisha's new status.

"Man of God" or Prophet

Throughout the narratives of 1 Kings and 2 Kings, the prophet is referred to as "*ish ha'elohim*" or "Man of God". This distinctive title occurs over seventy times in the Hebrew Bible, mostly within the Elijah/Elisha cycle. Robert Wilson suggests that the title "*ish ha'elohim*" is synonymous with that of "Prophet". He states that, "The phrase 'man of God' should probably be understood to mean 'servant of God,' and there is some indication that the designation was an honorific title applied to certain members of prophetic groups. However...the man of God is synonymous with the prophet."¹⁶

¹⁶Wilson, Prophecy and Society, 140.

Other scholars have suggested that *ish ha'elohim* is not a prophetic title, but is used simply to describe men of worth or significance. David Petersen points out that there are three distinct usages of the term. He suggests that in addition to the descriptions of Elijah and Elisha which refer to these prophets as *ish ha'elohim*, the title is used both in the deuteronomical literature (plus Jeremiah) and in Chronicles.¹⁷ In both cases, the prophet referred to is unnamed and relatively unimportant to the plot of the story.

Another view the term *ish ha'elohim* is different, suggesting that it denotes a person who is a peripheral member of the community. I. Lewis explains that both *ish ha'elohim* and *bene hanevi'im* are fringe groups at the edge of the Israelite community. He suggests that social and economic pressures during the time of Elijah, Elisha, and the *bene hanevi'im* forced these prophetic characters outside the mainstream. Working together in small bands or prophetic groups, these men advocated exclusive devotion to Yahweh, which was a peripheral idea at this point in Israel's history.¹⁸ Both Elijah and Elisha seem to be this type of peripheral prophet taking a stand against the political and social establishments of their time.

I prefer to follow Alexander Rofé, and use the term *ish ha'elohim* to refer to a specific kind of prophet. In Rofé's words,

¹⁷In David Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, no. 17 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1981), 41, it is suggested that these three usages are similar in their intent, namely to promote the character as a good and worthy man. This argument seems to fall short of its goal as each of the instances obviously refers to a prophetic character.

¹⁸Petersen, *Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 43.

The man of God is a different essence: he is holy. Belonging to another sphere, he requires a different attitude, that of the awe and care due to divinity or to divine objects. The categories which dominate the legenda are those of 'holy' and 'profane'. The holy man performs miracles for the benefit of the profane; they, in return, are expected to respond with respect and veneration.¹⁹

Both Elijah and Elisha are referred to as *ish ha'elohim* because of their innate holiness, which they communicate to their audience. Because of their ability to use the power of holiness afforded to them by Yahweh, both Elijah and Elisha become religious leaders in their community. They perform miracles for their community, in return for which they earn the loyalty of those whose lives they touch. "The leader (prophet) enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the group. They verified his credentials as charismatic leader. Further, such sympathizers, whether rich or poor, provided for his basic welfare."²⁰ The prophet who is afforded this title thus becomes a sort of local hero, and is able to influence those who become his adherents.

Within the Elijah and Elisha narratives, the term *ish ha'elohim* is used in several ways. In some cases, the term is used after the prophet has performed an extraordinary act of power. Elisha is referred to as an *ish ha'elohim* in 2 Kings 4:7 after he has miraculously multiplied the oil supply during a time of famine and drought. "She came and told the man of God, and he said, 'Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest'." Similarly, in the next story, the Shunammite woman

¹⁹Rofé, "The Classification of the Prophetic Stories," 432.

²⁰Petersen, *Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 49.

says, "I am sure that it is a holy man of God who comes this way regularly" (4:9), and later, "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant." (4:16) In both instances, Elisha is considered to be *ish ha'elohim* because of his power to affect the natural course of events. Each time that Elisha performs a miracle or somehow impresses his followers with a divine act, he is called *ish ha'elohim*.

Elijah, too, is called a holy man only in conjunction with extraordinary powers. In 1 Kings 17, the widow addresses Elijah as *ish ha'elohim* only after he performs the miracle of the flour and oil. In the ensuing narrative she pleads with Elijah, "What harm have I done you, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son." (17:18) Again, the woman refers to Elijah as *ish ha'elohim* immediately after the miracle of her son's resuscitation. In verse 24 she declares, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is truly in your mouth."

On the other hand, when these prophets perform acts of ethical significance, they are not referred to as "Man of God". For example, in 1 Kings 21, following his intervention in the story of Naboth's vineyard, Elijah is not called *ish ha'elohim*. Again in 2 Kings 6-7, the title is missing from the story of Elisha's prediction of the end of a famine. Since he does not make a miracle occur himself, he is not referred to as *ish ha'elohim*. Petersen agrees with Rofé that, "...in the narratives about Elijah and Elisha, the title *ish ha'elohim* is used significantly. It denotes the activities of

a holy man, one filled with supernatural power."²¹ The author/editor of the Elijah and Elisha cycles uses the title in a marked way. Only when the prophet mediates divine intervention is he called *ish ha'elohim*.

The prophets Elijah and Elisha are distinct because of their description as *ish ha'elohim*. As such, they are regarded as holy men--leaders of their community. Through the vehicle of legendae, the author offers a fresh look at the prophetic office of the Northern Kingdom. Their unique status as *ish ha'elohim* places these particular prophets as the cornerstones of the social structure of their community.

Elijah and Elisha: Role Models of Ancient Israel

The stories about Elijah and Elisha are an exciting interlude amid the monotonous political history that dominates the Books of Kings. The author has taken a compilation of oral legends and tied it to the social and political history of his time. It is not important in this endeavor to discover the original source of these texts, nor is it my task to decipher their historicity in the context of other material in these books. It is crucial to understand, however, that the characters Elijah and Elisha represent well known social "types" within the ancient Israelite community. Both Elijah and Elisha serve important functions as a part of the social structure of the community. According to the text, they are sought by people in all walks of life for a variety of reasons. This, then, is reason to

²¹Ibid., p. 42.

believe that they were well respected within the community and stood for values cherished by the people of that day.

The author of the Elijah and Elisha cycle uses metaphor to describe the real problems of the time. In a sense, these narratives can be read as parables which may lead us to understand ourselves better by means of the problems addressed by the prophets. As I have discussed earlier, the political struggle between Elijah and Ahab is not merely an account of a bitter dispute between the royal estate and a wandering prophet. In fact, this narrative is more significant if it is taken in metaphoric terms. The ongoing battle between Ahab and Elijah is symbolic of the broadening problem of apostasy on the part of the people and their leaders.

As role models for the Northern Kingdom, Elijah and Elisha can be seen in many different functions. Here, I will discuss some of these roles.

Advocate of Yahweh, the One God

The first and most obvious role that Elijah plays is that of supporter and defender of the religious ideal represented by Yahweh. At a time when worship of foreign gods was at its peak, Elijah engages in struggle against apostasy from God. The author uses literary devices to point out God's superiority over competing deities. Elijah assumes the role of advocate of God and communicates this message to his followers. Elijah advocates exclusive devotion to one God, who is the provider of all sustenance. "Throughout the narrative, polemical parallelism is

evident. The author, by telling these tales, aimed to make it clear to his contemporaries that everything the pagans might expect from Baal is in reality a gift from the God of Israel. They are a protest against paganism as represented by the Baal cult."²² The characters of Elijah and Elisha are thus created by this innovative author to carry out this protest in literary form.

Within the text, Elijah and Elisha never actually speak about the worship of idols. There is no mention of material representations of Baal, yet it is clear that their community boasts this type of idolatry. All of the stories in the Elijah/Elisha cycle reflect a challenge to these ideals. As Leah Bronner suggests, "...the wonder tales connected with the name of Elisha as the giver of children, healer of the ailing, reviver of the dead, controller of the sources of rain and water, are all aimed to act as a foil against the claim made by pagan mythology that Baal lorded over all these elements in the universe."²³

The author of the Elijah/Elisha narrative seems to be well acquainted with the mythology of Baal and makes significant attempts to prove that both Elijah and Elisha side with the superior Yahweh. In response to their actions and words, Yahweh will grant the natural world its sustenance with rain, oil, corn; in the human sphere, Yahweh grants the prophet the power to heal the sick and raise the dead. In the present literary context, the exercise of this power is intended to undermine the belief that Baal was the source of blessing.

²²Bronner, 139.

²³Ibid., 140.

What, then, do these prophets, Elijah and Elisha, offer their constituency as an alternative to Baal? The struggle on Mt. Carmel can be seen as the focal point of this discussion. Obviously, the use of the motifs of fire and rain here functions to disparage the power of Baal, who is known to be a god of fire and rain. However, far more is at stake during this dramatic scene than the coming of the rains marking the end of a severe drought. This scene may be the opening act in a drama which will last for thousands of years. At the center of the story is the non-response of Baal. Elijah instructs his counterparts to do as they are accustomed, knowing that Baal can never legitimize their actions. Alternatively, when Elijah invokes Yahweh's power, he is successful. This conflict between Baal and Yahweh can be viewed as the initial seed planted to promote monotheistic belief throughout the region. "If we take the term monotheism in its narrower sense--more accurately described as monolatry...a good case can be made out for regarding the trial on Mt. Carmel as the starting point on a national scale for the assertion in Palestine of the exclusive right of Yahweh to be regarded as the national God of Israel."²⁴ Elijah takes on the role of advocate of this religious belief by his involvement in this dramatic encounter. Thus, he sets out to win over the hearts and minds of the entire region to belief in the One God, Yahweh. Morton Smith argues that this generation sparks a new "Yahweh Alone" movement because, "Evidently, from this period on there was a newly important element in the situation: the demand that all Israel worship

²⁴Ap-Thomas, 149.

Yahweh and Yahweh alone."²⁵ Elijah and Elisha are both prophets who led this "Yahweh Alone" movement.

Like Moses, to whom he is often paralleled, Elijah knows of other gods, but he clearly disdains them and their alleged powers. "When the prophet felt defeated he journeyed to Mt. Horeb where he got new strength for his God..."²⁶ As Elijah ventures to Horeb, he is viewed as a loyal prophet who seeks out the source of his power. Elijah turns to the only God about whose powers he is convinced and soon continues on his journey to convert the common people to his belief.

The theophany which Elijah receives in 1 Kings 19 complements the advocacy that began on Mt. Carmel. "To counter the impression that Yahweh's presence was to be identified through the same kind of manifestations as Baal, the theophany clarifies that Yahweh speaks through word and not through physical element; through human beings, not in spite of them."²⁷ The author of this text sets out to bolster Elijah's credentials as Prophet of God and is thus setting the stage for the continued struggle for a monotheistic belief.

Establishing a paradigm for the religious leaders of other monotheistic communities, Elijah devotes his career to the pursuit of this belief. Elijah's course of action is echoed, for example, in the solitude chosen by the Roman Catholic priest in his vow of poverty and celibacy. "Elijah, without family or friends,

²⁵Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 23.

²⁶Bronner, 26.

²⁷Todd, 23.

consciously lives only for the God of his fathers, who claims his chosen people as a whole and also individually. Seized by the dynamic of the ruach, the whirlwind of God, he is inspired; he confidently appears at the right moment and intervenes significantly in the course of events."²⁸ He follows this course throughout his career, affecting people's lives in significant fashion. The monotheistic belief he presents is clearly alive as Elijah teaches his disciple Elisha to carry on his important work.

The Personal Mediator of God's Word

A significant part of the prophet's advocacy of monotheism is his ability to mediate the word of God to the people in a comprehensible way. In many situations, Elijah is able to help people in time of crisis by bringing them the word of God in a miraculous way. The prophet "pronounces the word, and then is caught by the power of the word and must mediate the word in order to provide for the people."²⁹ Elijah's talent in both hearing and mediating the word of God adds to his reputation as a powerful prophet in the Northern Kingdom. Unlike his teacher Elijah, Elisha does not mediate God's word to his audience. Elisha, having been granted a double portion of Elijah's power, is able to act in miraculous ways without the direct command of God.

The stories about Elijah's interactions with his Israelite audience may be categorized generically and reapplied to other situations. Although these prophets mediate the word of God for

²⁸Weiner, 21.

²⁹Todd, 13.

their time, similar situations appear throughout history. Elijah therefore may serve as a model to many throughout history who follow his lead. Two narratives that exemplify such categories are 1 Kings 17: 1-24 (Elijah's introduction), and 1 Kings 21:17-24 (Elijah's prediction for Ahab).

The opening lines of the Elijah cycle show the prophet acting as a personal mediator of God's word. In 1 Kings 17:1, Elijah draws attention to his role as mediator* by saying, "As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding." Obviously, this prophet retains a special connection with God which enables him to mediate God's word for the people of the Northern Kingdom.

As the story continues, the plot seems to authenticate Elijah's authority as a personal mediator for the people. Elijah tells the woman that the God of Israel has ordained the multiplication of the oil and flour. In the second half of the story Elijah mediates God's word by reviving the child from near death. Finally, in verse 24 Elijah is accepted by his audience as the legitimate authority to mediate God's word and God's power. The woman praises Elijah saying, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is truly in your mouth." With this comment, she acknowledges that Elijah is indeed a true mediator for God.

This striking acceptance paves the way for Elijah's continued career as God's mediator. Throughout this chapter, a "command-response"³⁰ relationship is built between God and the prophet. In

³⁰Ibid., 12-13. This concept is further developed by Todd throughout this article.

every stage of the narrative, a command is given by God through Elijah which is then followed by one of the characters acting in accordance with God's word. Thus the role of mediator is further developed by the prophet and his interaction with his audience.

Again in chapter 21, Elijah acts in his role as mediator of God's word for human beings. In this case, however, the prophet mediates not for a member of the poor, lower class, but for the King himself. In verse 17, Elijah hears about Ahab's intentions to overtake Naboth's vineyard. Following God's command to approach the King with the bad news of his demise, Elijah proves himself to be a powerful mediator. In the verses which follow, Elijah demonstrates his ability not only to repeat God's word directly, but also shows his power to interpret and restate the divine speech. With full force, Elijah repeats the essence of God's command in his own voice and language. This mediation marks Elijah's remarkable relationship with God and again proves his power and authority.

The Social Advocate

Elijah and Elisha lived and worked in a tumultuous world ravaged by drought, famine and political unrest. Unlike the neighboring peoples who lived in a feudal system of land ownership by the aristocracy and peasant workers, Israel supported a different agricultural system. "Israel's land tenure system was based on the understanding that God was the owner of the land, and that families inherited the right to take control of that land. This is in stark contrast to the land systems of the

enemies of Israel, who had urban land owners that controlled the land through their peasants."³¹

Even prior to the problems and pressures associated with the drought, there was a struggle between the kings and the families who controlled land. In Elijah's time, the drought of 1 Kings 17-19 lasts for nearly three years. Josephus gives evidence that this famine actually took place and caused concern for everyone in society including the royal household. As in any society driven by the pains of famine and drought, the people lived in constant fear for their lives and for the lives of their families. Like many examples from the modern world, including modern Ethiopia and Somalia, the people living in the Northern Kingdom endured wars which took the lives of the men and boys, leaving only women to struggle against the drought and to pay increasing taxes to the royal establishment.

In addition, political problems associated with land control affected everyone within the Northern Kingdom. Judith Todd explains the difficult social setting of the period in her essay about Elijah. "The years covered by the Elijah-Elisha stories were a time of peasant dislocation by pressures from the prevailing royal-urban complex exacerbated by drought and famine...the 'sons of the prophets' sought both sustenance and refuge, and the Elisha miracle stories focus on the practical concerns of a marginal community for food, shelter, tools, and healing."³² In the context of this social setting, Elijah and Elisha appear to fill the void in the

³¹Ibid., 5.

³²Ibid., 7.

lives of those affected by the famine. At different times, they both act as social advocates for one part of the society or another:—

Several distinct social settings in which Elijah and Elisha interact with other people can be identified. Thomas Overholt identifies the following settings:³³

- with individuals and small groups
- with a King
- with large groups and gatherings
- with foreign functionaries
- with his own servant or the bene ha'neviim

Throughout the cycle of stories about Elijah and Elisha, these prophets find themselves involved with each group advocating its particular concerns. Most common, however, is the prophet's concern for the individual person, indicated by Overholt's first category. Both Elijah and Elisha seek to help the "typical" citizens succeed in their struggle against the natural and social pressures of the time.

The medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides (Yad Mattenot Aniyim 10:7), wrote that the highest form of tzedakah or charity is the task of teaching others to help themselves. At times, Elijah and Elisha represent a proto-model of this form of tzedakah in their work with individuals within the community. Both prophets seek to give strength to the people by helping them to survive by their own merit during the difficult famine. Several stories in the narrative illustrate this point: 1 Kings 17:8-24 (Elijah's Oil Story), 2 Kings 4:1-7 (Elisha's Oil Story), 2 Kings

³³Overholt, Channels of Prophecy, 92.

4:38-41 (Poison Stew), 2 Kings 4:42-44 (Multiplication of Bread), and 2 Kings 6:1-7 (Floating Ax Head).

In the first of these narratives, prototypical for later *legendae*, Elijah approaches a woman who has few resources and asks her to help him by giving him food. In response, the woman explains to Elijah that she is near the end of her endurance in the battle against the famine. She replies in verse 12, "I am just gathering a couple of sticks, so that I can go home and prepare it for me and my son; we shall eat it and then we shall die." Elijah then gently responds to the frail woman helping her to support herself by means of miracle which she creates. T.H. Renteria supports the theory that the prophet in this scene acts as a social advocate. She suggests that "tension is resolved between the two characters when the woman surrenders her negative attitude and goes to carry out Elijah's instructions. The denouement and purpose of this section of the story are designed to convince the woman to believe that this prophet has the power to help her provide for herself. The key here is that he does not do the miracle for her, but enables her to do it for herself."³⁴ As in the model, Elijah is the source of strength for the people whom he affects, enabling them to grow and prosper in a difficult political and economic time.

Elijah's task here is not only to help this poor woman find a way to help herself out of her miserable state. The significance of Elijah's work is greater because he must first help the woman to

³⁴Tamis Hoover Renteria, "The Elijah/Elisha Stories: A Socio-cultural Analysis of Prophets and People in Ninth-Century B.C.E. Israel" in Coote, Robert B., *Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 102.

trust him. Like others in positions of prophetic power, Elijah is faced with the problem of defining himself as a real prophet, not a fake. This may have been a familiar problem for the Israelites living during this period, who were often taken advantage of by fake prophets and other powerful people. This story, then, is intended to show the substantial role that Elijah plays in helping people overcome their problems during hard times. The lessons which are apparent in the narrative are useful in any age.

Elisha, too, follows the model set by Elijah as a social advocate for individuals within his society. In 2 Kings 4:1-7, Elisha helps another woman to become self-sufficient. The woman complains to Elisha of her impending problem with a tax collector. In verse one she cries, "Your servant my husband is dead...and now a creditor is coming to seize my children as slaves." Instead of performing a miracle for the woman, Elisha follows the example of his mentor, and gives her the ability to make a miracle happen herself. Fulfilling Maimonides' highest level of tzedakah, Elisha, too, establishes himself as a social advocate.

Other examples serve to illustrate the prophet's important function in this segment of society. In 2 Kings 4:38-41, "The magical 'instrumental action' of throwing the meal into the pot takes a subordinate role to the narrative's key structural organization....The story shows that Elisha not only feeds his followers, but also enables them to overcome the daily hazards of trying to eat during a famine...people can become empowered in the midst of overwhelming circumstances like the famine."³⁵ As in

³⁵Ibid., 110-111.

the other miracle stories, Elisha helps to solve a difficult crisis for the people who turn to him for help. Here, however, the prophet teaches the men of Gilgal to fend for themselves despite the obstacles which stand in their way. Similarly, in the next story, the actual supernatural feat of the multiplication of loaves of bread is missing from our text. All we know is that Elisha says to the man, "Give it (the bread) to the people and let them eat." We can conclude from this that the action of the miracle is not as important as is the empowerment of the man who acts as Elisha's attendant.

Finally, in 2 Kings 6:1-7, we again see the prophet teach the lessons of social advocacy to the *bene hanevi'im*. In this story about the floating ax head, it is not until the man who asks for help reaches down and grasps the ax head for himself that the story's tension eases. The miracle performed by the prophet is not nearly as important as the lesson of empowerment taught to the petitioner. "As in the other stories, the prophet always involves the petitioners in the miracle, enabling them to have power in their lives."³⁶

Throughout all of their interactions with the people of the Northern Kingdom, both Elijah and Elisha aim to help the people who suffer from the famine and drought to become self-sufficient. Their efforts seem to add a sense of dignity to a people who are forced into the lowest part of society by the natural and unnatural forces of the world. As social advocates, Elijah and Elisha attempt to elevate the standard of living for the lower classes to a level

³⁶Ibid.

which represents equality. Perhaps the population knew of these prophets' powers and saw them as a ray of hope in a time filled with despair. This is true even if these stories are fictional stories; they would still serve as sources of hope and empowerment for the reader in any case. It was inevitable in such circumstances that these prophets would have become such popular social figures.

The Prophet as Political Influence

Similar to their role as social advocate, both Elijah and Elisha help to minimize the disparity between the royal class and the lower classes by offering a political alternative to the national government. This is not to say that these prophets intend to undermine the political system of the Northern Kingdom; rather, the author of these stories seeks to present Elijah and Elisha as symbolic catalysts to political change.

Elijah is continually persecuted by Ahab and Jezebel. This persecution places Elijah at the edge of the political system as a potential threat to the security of royal power. Robert Wilson suggests that this motif is intentional on the part of the author of this material. He claims that, "In addition to providing background for some of the stories, this motif also portrays Elijah as a peripheral prophet who operated on the fringes of the Israelite royal court."³⁷

From this outsider's vantage point, Elijah is able to influence the community on several levels. Other scholars suggest that "the fact that the prophets do not appear as speakers legitimized by

³⁷Wilson, 195.

groups, lies in the very nature of 'primitive democracy', in which actual influence and prestige count for more than election and delegation...."³⁸ As we have seen, Elijah is granted prestige by the community even in his peripheral position with regard to the political system. Thus he is seen by the common people as an alternative to the political system of the Northern Kingdom.

The prophet's political struggle is centered around the promotion of Yahwism. These stories depict Elijah and Elisha as alternatives to the national government. Symbolically, this enables the prophet to bring the belief in Yahweh to the people because of a growing sentiment against the national government. Bernhard Lang suggests that the prophets of the Northern Kingdom have ultimate control over political issues because of their religious strength. "It remains uncertain whether the dynasty of Ahab is overturned by prophetic policy or -- rather more likely -- by the skilled use of alleged prophetic oracles..., but one thing is certain: the decisive religious influence...is in Israel in the hands of the prophets."³⁹ In other words, the author of the Book of Kings views the prophet as an integral part of the Northern Kingdom's political structure. Lang offers a slightly different picture of the political structure in place at this time.

More specifically, Elijah uses his influence in the political system to his advantage by coming to the aid of the desperate lower class. In a political move paralleled by hundreds of examples from history, the common people are enticed by "new"

³⁸Bernhard Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, The Social World of Biblical Antiquity Series, no. 1 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 89.

³⁹Lang, 63.

ideas at the time when they are most likely to be looking for an alternative to the status quo. The battle on Mt. Carmel may be the culmination of such a political conversion, whereby the prophet puts his political reputation on the line in order to stand up for his religious beliefs. Tamis Renteria suggests that this sort of political "usury" was not uncommon during this period of the Northern Kingdom. She claims that "miracle stories about prophets played an integral part in interclan struggles for power...Each group promoted its own prophet as the true representative of Yahweh, and thus advanced their own clan or faction as the one legitimized to monopolize power."⁴⁰ Although this political action develops in the realm of religious thought, Elijah places himself in the political arena by his actions.

John Hayes suggests that a significant political role is not unique to any one particular prophet. In his discussion of prophecy of disaster, he writes that in many cases a prophet approaches an audience and asks for support in a political matter. Hayes discusses the form of this type of prophecy. According to Hayes, the prophecy of disaster often begins with an appeal for attention or a commissioning of the prophet followed by an indication of the current situation. Having identified the problem, the prophet will offer a prediction of future political disaster.⁴¹

In 1 Kings 19:17ff, God positions Elijah in the center of the political movement of the period. Elijah is prepared, having received the commission of Yahweh himself, to offer an evaluation

⁴⁰Renteria, 76.

⁴¹John H. Hayes, Old Testament Form Criticism, (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 159.

of the situation and a prediction of the future course of events for the King. "Elijah stands in Yahweh's presence and receives the word of revolution--the commission to overthrow the existing power structures and to anoint a new ruler, Jehu."⁴² This prophecy of disaster corresponds to Hayes' formal model of this form of prophetic activity.

Throughout the Elijah cycle, the prophet strengthens his political role. By the end of Elisha's career, the prophet has fulfilled Yahweh's political charge to him. Each has served as a catalyst for change and presented an alternative to the system in power.

The Pastoral Counselor

I have already presented Elijah and Elisha as powerful and important figures for the community in terms of both political and social issues. Now, I intend to develop the role these prophets play on an interpersonal level with members of the community. On several occasions Elijah and Elisha act as comforters to members of the community during the difficult times of the famine. In each instance, the relationship between the prophet and his constituency is more important than the actual act of power which is performed. Renteria suggests that these interactions served to secure the reputation of a prophet within a particular segment of the community. She writes, "What is most important in these stories is not the empirical nature of the prophetic powers, but the interaction between the prophet, who offers his mediating skills,

⁴²Todd, 26.

and the people in need of a better connection with the powers that provide health, food, and reproduction."⁴³ By his actions, the prophet enables the members of the community who are suffering from hunger and despair to regain hope for the future. In many cases, the prophet is instrumental in the creation of a vision of the future which prods these people to sustain themselves through the famine.

Many different examples of pastoral counseling appear in the Elijah/Elisha cycle: 1 Kings 17:17-24 (Elijah and the poor woman), 2 Kings 4:8-37 (The Shunammite woman), and 2 Kings 3:4-19 (A Royal Encounter). The first example (1 Kings 17:17-24) has served to illustrate several other roles of the prophet, yet it is also crucial to demonstrate Elijah's proficiency as a pastoral counselor. Prior to this part of the story, in verse 13, Elijah comforts the woman with one simple phrase, "Don't be afraid...". With these words of compassion, Elijah sheds a ray of hope on the life of a desperate woman. She has just confessed that she is convinced this will be the last day of her life, but this sadness is reversed with Elijah's words. Indeed, this brief moment of pastoral counseling begins an interpersonal relationship between the woman and Elijah, enabling her to turn to the prophet with the problem of her son's death.

A similar example of this sort of pastoral counseling is found in the story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman. In the beginning of this story, the woman develops a personal relationship with Elisha as she offers him a place to stay each time

⁴³Renteria, 97.

he passes through their village. In return for her hospitality, Elisha offers to help her in any way that he can. In verse 13, he says to her, "You have gone to all this trouble for us. What can we do for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or to the army commander?" This personal interaction sets up an opportunity for Elisha to act as pastoral counselor in the next part of the text. As soon as the woman discovers her child's illness, she demands to be seen by the prophet himself, knowing that her relationship with Elisha entitles her to this meeting.

Renteria suggests that Elisha is known for his pastoral abilities:

The story may be using the husband as a device to illustrate the conventional view that holy men are to be used only for religious functions. In contrast, the woman demands an immediate, personal service, a miracle, from this man with whom she has formed a transactional relationship. The story's point here is that this prophet is different from a simple religious functionary, and that women understand this better than men.⁴⁴

The personal nature of their relationship suggests that the Shunammite woman knows that Elisha will be helpful to her in her time of need. Elisha's response to her arrival points to his compassionate nature. In verse 27 he says, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me." His immediate response to her distress is impressive, but not surprising given other examples of similar action in 6:1-7.

⁴⁴Ibid., 107.

Elisha does not limit his pastoral counseling to the lower classes who are deeply affected by the famine and drought. In 2 Kings 3:4-19 Elisha engages in a different genre of pastoral counseling which Burke Long identifies as the "Prophetic Inquiry Schema".⁴⁵ According to Long, three distinct sections appear within this schema: 1) setting and preparation for the inquiry; 2) the audience with the prophet; and 3) the fulfillment of the oracle.

The narrative of 2 Kings 3 matches this schema perfectly. Verses 4-10 set up the problematic situation as three kings venture together into battle and are confronted by a shortage of water for their soldiers. Verses 11-12 act as transition from the introduction to the actual audience with the prophet, Elisha. Like earlier examples of Elijah's and Elisha's pastoral counseling, this story, too, depicts Elisha responding to the desperate plea of his constituency and granting them an oracle. While this relationship is not as personal and intimate as the one developed between the prophets and the lower classes, it is easy to see how Elisha was respected and turned to in time of need.

Members from every segment of the Northern Kingdom's society seem to turn to Elisha and Elijah for personal counseling. In each case, as we have seen, these prophets react on an interpersonal level with their "clients" by addressing their needs with great compassion and dignity.

⁴⁵Burke O. Long, "2 Kings III and Genres of Prophetic Narrative," Vetus Testamentum 23 (1973): 343.

Medical Functionary

Perhaps less important than the other roles discussed here is the quasi-medical action of the prophet. Two scenarios may help the modern reader to understand Elijah and Elisha as the medical functionaries of their time. First, it is possible that the "miraculous" actions of the ancient Israelite prophet were regarded as medical practice. In other words, the fact that people in this ancient society looked to the prophet's ability to change the course of sickness and health assumes that these people believed in the power of these actions. Second, it is possible that the prophets actually did have some knowledge of medical techniques which aided them in their day-to-day interactions with people. In the case of Elijah and Elisha, both theories make sense, and they are not mutually exclusive.

In 1 Kings 17:17-24, Elijah instinctively acts as doctor to the sick boy. In verse 19, he quickly reacts to the woman's concern for her son's life. "Give me the boy," he said to her; and taking him from her arms, he carried him to the upper chamber where he was staying, and laid him down on his own bed." Immediately, Elijah takes responsibility for the health and safety of this child. According to Leah Bronner, Elijah is regarded by the community as the medical authority only because of his relationship to God. She writes, "The act of resurrection convinced the woman that Elijah was a man of God. In other words the man of God can perform Godly acts--to resurrect humans. He is God's instrument for giving or taking life."⁴⁶ This suggests that Elijah does not

⁴⁶Bronner, 120.

actually know a great deal about medical technique, but is regarded as being in control of life and death through his relationship with God. Bronner suggests further that both Elijah and Elisha are concerned primarily with demonstrating that the power of God controlled life, death, and healing. This argument is supported by Simon DeVries, who suggests that "it is not magic, but a typical symbolic act familiar to the prophetic movement in Israel. It is an 'acted out' way of saying, 'Let his lifeless body be as my lively body,' and the prayer that accompanies it fortifies this symbol...."⁴⁷

Is it not possible, though, that the actions described in verse 21 of the story point to some knowledge of medical procedure and techniques of resuscitation? This possibility is not discussed by the scholars whom I have read, but perhaps it is worth considering. The narrative tells us, "Then he stretched out over the child three times, and cried out to the Lord...", indicating that along with his prayer Elijah performed a medical technique similar to modern Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation. This action by Elijah should not be overlooked in an attempt to place the prophet into the role of medical functionary.

Again, in 2 Kings 4:8-37 the prophet's medical abilities are brought to the attention of the reader. Like his predecessor, Elijah, Elisha is regarded as having life-giving powers. In this case, the Shunammite woman rushes to the prophet in order to ask for his help in reviving her son, who has fallen ill. The woman's haste suggests that she believed in the prophet's ability

⁴⁷DeVries, 222.

to treat the boy. Here, however, the prophet's action is described in fuller detail. Verses 34-35 explain, "Then he mounted [the bed] and placed himself over the child. He put his mouth on its mouth, his eyes on its eyes, and his hands on its hands, as he bent over it. And the body of the child became warm. He stepped down, walked once up and down the room, then mounted and bent over him." Perhaps this detailed description is further proof that these prophets were acquainted with a primitive form of medicine.

Despite the difficult task of identifying the truth about the role of the prophet as a medical functionary in the ancient Israelite society, it is certain that the community turned to Elijah and Elisha for help in medical matters. Burke Long suggests that the actions of both prophets may be likened to those of the Shamans or Magic Men of other cultures.⁴⁸ In every age, human nature presses us to find new ways of dealing with the problem of sickness and death within the community. Renteria argues that "the doctor appears to inherit the role of the Holy Man."⁴⁹ Thus, Elijah and Elisha serve as role models for the medical functionary in their own time and in subsequent generations.

On Becoming a Local Hero

As I have shown, Elijah and Elisha can be placed into several important roles in the ancient Israelite community. The roles which they model are significant both individually as descriptions of the prophet, and collectively for the creation of a

⁴⁸Long, "The Social Setting for Prophetic Miracle Stories," 49.

⁴⁹Renteria, 21.

personality archetype. Both prophets serve a variety of functions: advocate of the monotheistic belief in Yahweh; personal mediator of God's word; social advocate of the lower class; alternative to the political system of the time; pastoral counselor; and medical functionary. As a result, they are regarded by the community as "local heroes". Scott Hill understands this designation in terms of social perceptions within the community. He writes, "The local hero is a man or woman who has been recognized as being holy....I define holy as having privileged access to power (generally meaning God) beyond the reach of other people. Such privileged power often comes in the guise of claims of truth, but it may also be manifested as wonder-working or the ability to overturn a power group."⁵⁰ In addition, the local hero must attract the attention of the community through his acts of power and his relationship with God.

This designation as "local hero" assumes that both Elijah and Elisha were well respected within their communities. To achieve this status, both prophets used their powerful connection with God to prove their influence. Pointing this out, Hill further develops the definition of the local hero. "The hero may influence the conception, birth, and health of children; the success of crops, business ventures, marriages, and partnerships; safety in travel and work; natural phenomena such as rainfall, plagues, and wild animals."⁵¹ Thus, the local hero finds himself consciously and

⁵⁰Hill, Scott D, "The Local Hero in Palestine in Comparative Perspective" in Coote, Robert B., Elijah and Elisha in Socioliterary Perspective (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 39.

⁵¹Ibid., 42.

unconsciously at a point of tension between the central power base of the political system and the peripheral power base of his individual sphere of influence. Elijah and Elisha use this tension to create, for themselves, a group of dedicated followers.

More specifically, Elijah can be labeled a "prophet" because of his deft use of political influence to guide a community to belief in Yahweh. Aharon Weiner suggests that it is initially a personal struggle which places Elijah as a central hero of the Northern Kingdom. "As with the heroes of all the more highly developed religions who are in search of God and are God's fighters, the inner development of Elijah and his spiritual striving for a personal experience of God find direct expression most frequently in biographical data and spiritual adventures."⁵² The author of the stories about Elijah uses the prophet's individual struggle with God to illustrate the struggle of an entire people. The person of Elijah the hero, whether fictional or real, represents the ideal to which all members of his community aspired. "The historical personage of the prophet Elijah as described in the biblical books of Kings shows clearly the traits of the heroic figure as it exists in innumerable variations in the imagination of all peoples, finding expression in their oral and written traditions, in legends, myths and religions."⁵³ Moreover, the hero portrayed by Elijah continues to influence our community and its leaders even today.

⁵²Weiner, 174.

⁵³Ibid.

Application of the "Elijah-type"

The author of the cycle of stories about Elijah and Elisha, by compiling the many oral accounts of these prophets, has preserved for us an important cross-sectional view of the ancient Israelite community of the Northern Kingdom. As we have seen, both prophets served in a variety of functions within the social and political structures of their community. Concerned with the social problems of the people of the Northern Kingdom during a severe famine, these prophets advocated social reform in a way that strengthened their position within the community. Both Elijah and Elisha interacted with individuals, advocating their needs and helping people to become self-sufficient. As well, they worked with the structure of the community in general, forcing social changes that affected the religious and cultural lifestyle of many people. Concerned with issues in the political arena, they battled a system in which kings and queens turned to other gods for help and refuge. In every case, the prophet was an essential part of the community as it developed and grew.

Because of the popularity of the oral accounts about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, I suggest that the author(s) of this material may have used it to create a personality archetype for communal leaders. Many traditions include written and oral accounts of prophets who behaved much like the ancient Israelite prophets, but Elijah and Elisha, in particular, seem to have served as models for many successors. Aharon Weiner suggests that this Elijah-archetype has appeared in similar form on many occasions,

"mainly in situations of crisis in which, in accordance with the peculiarity of the Jewish people, the spiritual and the national aspects are always mingled."¹ In other words, in certain situations where spiritual and national concerns are joined, the Elijah-archetype can and does function as a means of relieving crisis.

Thomas Overholt devotes an entire volume to the discussion of prophecy across cultural boundaries. He suggests many similarities between the biblical prophets and the shamans and miracle workers of other cultures, both ancient and modern. Overholt identifies terminology as one of the initial difficulties to the study of prophecy in cross cultural terms. "A problem encountered when one undertakes to study 'prophecy' cross-culturally is the identification of those roles within traditional societies which offer the most promise for comparison with biblical prophets."² Expectations of a particular nomenclature must be avoided in an attempt to find the Elijah-archetype in other cultures and societies. With this difficulty in mind, we may undertake a discussion of those who have modeled the Elijah-archetype.

Jesus of Nazareth

Outside of the Jewish tradition, the most obvious parallel to the Elijah-archetype is the work of Jesus in the New Testament. Just as Elijah and Elisha advocate belief in the power of Yahweh, Jesus is depicted throughout the Gospels as advocating the "power

¹Weiner, 176.

²Thomas Overholt, Prophecy in Cross-Cultural Perspective (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 7.

of God's Kingdom". According to the Gospels, Jesus comes to the people of Palestine at a difficult time, during Roman rule over this land. Thus, we see Jesus battling a political system that is unfair to the people who live under its rule and which is devoted to a different religious ideal.

The news about Jesus was good news for the economically disadvantaged....The earliest church loved to retell its memories of Jesus feeding vast hungry crowds...the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced gives special hope to the world's poor and hungry. It is a hope based not on the fickle good will of political leaders or economic theorists but on the power of the Creator God reflected in these stories.³

Similar to his predecessors Elijah and Elisha, Jesus and his disciples offer a political alternative which may be more appealing to the poor people who are suffering under Roman rule. Likewise, Jesus' disdain for the Jewish authorities in Palestine resembles the political relationships between the prophets and the leadership of the Northern Kingdom.

Similar to Elijah, Jesus acts as a "man of God" (or literally, the "Son of God"), performing miracles to make a legitimate claim of authority among those who doubt his power. Often, these miraculous acts place Jesus amid the intimate family life of those who follow him. Richard Nelson identifies this similarity in his commentary on First and Second Kings. "In the New Testament it is Jesus who becomes the focus of the ambiguity of God's power for both death and life. In his ministry he offered life in the midst of death by providing food, healing the sick, and raising the dead."⁴

³Nelson, 176.

⁴Ibid., 114.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus heals those who are in need of healing and gives life to those whose lives have been taken over by demons. In every case, however, he resembles Elijah and Elisha as they are depicted in the stories about their divinely bestowed life-giving abilities. The audience which is helped in the New Testament offers its praise of Jesus, recognizing that he has a connection with God. Thus Jesus, like Elijah, gives his followers self-confidence to believe in God and to help themselves.

Many other similarities between Jesus and Elijah have been discussed by scholars. It is, however, not my intention to attempt to understand the complex implications of these similarities. Rather, I will suggest that the stories about Jesus, which develop out of a colorful oral tradition, are written by the Gospel writers with a conscious knowledge of the Elijah and Elisha cycle. The basic similarities which exist point to a consistent attempt to create a character who fits into the mold of the Elijah-archetype. This is summed up well by T.R. Hobbs in the Word Biblical Commentary on 2 Kings: "The actions of Elisha (and Elijah) find echo in the ministry of Jesus. Like Elisha, Jesus responded to the needs of unfortunate women; like Elisha, Jesus raised the dead; and like Elisha, Jesus fed the hungry."⁵ Obviously, Jesus is portrayed as the "Man of God" in his time.

The Modern Evangelist

Another example of the Elijah-archetype which lies outside the Jewish tradition is the modern evangelical preacher. These

⁵T.R. Hobbs, Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Kings (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 55.

Christian religious leaders are often known as faith healers who use the teachings of Jesus to promote a belief in Christian ideals. Consistent with the archetype, these preachers often appeal to the lower class in an attempt to give them a sense of self-worth and dignity. Like Elijah and Elisha (and like Jesus), these faith healers use the "power of God" to create "miracles" of healing for crowds of people who watch them work. Often following one of these healing experiences, members of the community will "testify" to the power which is obvious in this leader. These claims serve to legitimize the power of the evangelist's "prophetic" personality.

While this ministry of faith healing is not often seen as a political alternative, Christian evangelists have captured the hearts, minds, and wallets of the American lower and middle classes who are dismayed with the current political system. Pat Robertson and others continue to charge the American political scene with religious energy. Recent election campaigns have proven that the debate over "Family Values" is now one of the most significant issues in mainstream politics. The evangelists' religious alternative is seen to provide relief from the political and economic hardship which face poor people each day. They turn to the faith healer not only for recovery from physical ailment, but also for a restoration of the soul which is provided by a belief in Jesus as the savior. Thus, the Elijah-archetype is fulfilled through healing (both spiritual and physical), faith, and new opportunity provided by the modern evangelist.

The Baal Shem Tov

Within the Jewish tradition, too, the Elijah-archetype has appeared in the personalities of several important leaders. One of the most significant comparisons can be made with the founder of the Hassidic Movement, Rabbi Israel b. Eliezer (Baal Shem Tov). Like Elijah and Elisha, the Baal Shem Tov is regarded by his community as a holy man, in constant contact with God. In a rare example of the Baal Shem Tov's actual writings, he discusses one of his experiences with the divine. "I engaged in an ascent of the soul, as you know I do, and I saw wondrous things in that vision that I had never before seen."⁶ In his explanation of this experience, the Baal Shem Tov assumes that his brother-in-law is familiar with his supernatural visions, which may have been a commonplace experience. Like Elijah in the cave on Mt. Horeb, the Baal Shem Tov uses these divine experiences to regenerate his spiritual and professional focus. "When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer--and what he had set out to perform was done."⁷ Having heard the word of God, the Baal Shem Tov was better equipped to approach his audience with a new outlook on life. At these moments, Rabbi Israel b. Eliezer seems to model himself on his predecessor Elijah, the prophet.

Most of the information we have about the Baal Shem Tov, however, comes from stories written about him by his followers

⁶Israel B. Eliezer to his brother-in-law Abraham Gershon of Kutow, *The Jewish Mystics*, ed. Louis Jacobs (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1990), 150.

⁷Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 349.

and later generations. Much like the Elijah/Elisha cycle, these stories are compilations of the vast numbers of oral traditions which exist about this holy man and his work. As Alexander Rofé points out, these stories (called *shevachim*) are similar to the *legendae* which make up the majority of the Elijah and Elisha narratives. "The prophetic legenda, like the Hassidic wonder tale, is the creation of a band of believers who had gathered around a Holy Man, and to express their admiration for him, recounted his miraculous acts."⁸

Aside from his influence on the development of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov is best known for his social advocacy within his community of followers. Gershom Scholem suggests that one of the Baal Shem Tov's central concerns was his interaction with the individual members of a community. "The fact is that from the beginning the Baal Shem...and his followers were anxious to remain in touch with the life of the community; and to this contact they assigned an especial value."⁹ In the next paragraph he continues, "Hasidism in fact solved the problem...of establishing so close a relation between the pneumatic, that is to say the man who feels himself inspired in every act by a transcendental power...and the religious community, that the inevitable tension between them helps to enrich the religious life of the community instead of destroying it."¹⁰ This social tension reflects the same tension created by Elijah as he defends his belief in God against the prophets of the Baal cult. Like the prophet, the Baal Shem

⁸Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, 20.

⁹Scholem, *Major Trends*, 346.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 347.

Tov is entrenched in the life of the community as he promotes a "new" religious idea to those who listen to him.

Some of the clearest examples of his social advocacy are evident in his miraculous medical practice among his followers. According to Scholem, the Baal Shem Tov is understood by his followers to be "a combination of practical kabbalist, who performed his cures by means of prayers, amulets, and incantations, and a popular healer familiar with *segullot* ('remedies') concocted from animal, vegetable, and mineral matter."¹¹ Like Elijah and Elisha, the Baal Shem Tov uses his miracle-like abilities to establish himself as a true "prophet" for his people. The story of the healing waters of a particular spring echo the story of the healing of Naaman's leprosy. In the story, the Baal Shem Tov bathes in a stream to heal his own wounds until the stream itself takes on some of his miraculous healing power.¹² In another story, the Baal Shem Tov is instrumental in the healing of a sick girl in his community. In many instances, his involvement with the powers of life and death resemble the actions of the archetypal figures Elijah and Elisha.

The Baal Shem Tov is but one example of a Jewish spiritual leader who may have modeled his behavior after the Biblical prophets. In this case, though, the resemblance between the career of the Baal Shem Tov and the prophets Elijah and Elisha are especially striking. The Elijah-archetype was almost certainly in the minds of those who immortalized the Baal Shem Tov in

¹¹Gerahom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1974), 310-11.

¹²Yisroel Yaakov Klapholtz, *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1970), 203.

stories and legends, since the archetype has become a part of the Jewish cultural heritage, as reflected in the Elijah tales that abound in Jewish folklore. It even helps to shape the personality of Jewish leaders and leadership in this generation.

The Modern American Reform Rabbi

In conclusion, it is my suggestion that we begin to link the Elijah-archetype to the spiritual leader of the modern American Reform Jewish community. Within the Reform community in America, the rabbi has adapted to fill the role of spiritual leader. This role, however, is not confined to the religious realm alone. On the contrary, the modern American Reform rabbi is expected to lead the community in issues of political, religious, economic and personal concern. Much like our predecessors, Elijah and Elisha, the rabbi is viewed as a "holy man", involved in every aspect of our lives. The modern American Reform rabbi is, at different times, a religious leader, a political leader, and a personal counselor for the entire community.

One function of the Reform rabbi is to serve as a spiritual and religious link between the Reform community and God. As a religious functionary, the rabbi is involved with the celebration of holidays and life cycle events as well as the regular worship experience of the congregation. It is the role of the modern Reform rabbi to be a source of knowledge about Judaism and its belief in God, and to teach this knowledge both from the pulpit and from the classroom. Just as Elijah supported and taught the monotheistic belief in Yahweh, the modern Reform rabbi must

teach this same Jewish belief to a modern constituency. The task is equally difficult. Rather than a prevailing belief in other deities such as Baal and Asherah, the modern American Reform rabbi struggles against assimilation and similar modern alternative "deities". In today's society, the rabbi must fight against those who are less interested in Judaism than they are in the deification of greed and money. The battle against this sort of idolatry parallels the struggle of Elijah's day.

In addition to this religious role, the modern American Reform rabbi is expected to be involved with the political life of his or her community. In many cases, the Rabbi may use the pulpit as a forum for presenting the Jewish understanding of current political issues. In this modern forum, the issues are different from the class struggles of the Northern Kingdom, yet the rabbi, like Elijah, tries to integrate religious ideals and the political life of the community. Often, a rabbi's sermon can focus on a current political struggle, offering a Jewish outlook on the problem. In many cases, the ideas presented by the Reform rabbi are viewed by congregants as the only Jewish position, creating a base of religious understanding for many Reform Jews.

As a political figure, the modern Reform rabbi can also catalyze the Jewish community into action. Beyond the pulpit, the rabbi is centered in the community as a politically active personality. In the mold of the Elijah-archetype, these rabbis find themselves advocating the welfare of members of society, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Like Elijah and Elisha who labored to help the poor and needy, the modern rabbi fights a constant battle

against social and political injustice. Today, the concerns are similar to those of Elijah's time. Hunger, illiteracy, homelessness, and poverty that we see today echo the same problems which haunted the prophets of the Northern Kingdom.

Finally, the modern American Reform rabbi must interact with individual members of their community in a pastoral role. One of the most important aspects of the modern rabbi's role is the ability to counsel members of the community in matters of personal concern. In the Elijah-archetype, the charismatic religious leader uses miraculous acts of power to help the audience see the potency of their own actions. In the modern society, where supernatural acts are not as readily discerned, the rabbi must rely on other means of supporting individuals within the community. Many rabbis counsel congregants about personal issues such as grief management, depression, and spiritual matters, in addition to hospital visitation and other on-site pastoral opportunities. In each case, the role of the rabbi is to enable congregants to cope with their problems and function better within the community. Like Elijah and Elisha, the modern American Reform rabbi helps to raise people out of the depths of their depression by teaching them to believe in God's power, which is within them. As a mediator of God's power, the rabbi is able to teach this lesson to many congregants.

In all of these roles, the modern American Reform rabbi can model him or herself on the Elijah-archetype in important ways. Not only is the Reform rabbi active in the political and spiritual life of the Reform Jewish community, but he or she may struggle

against many of the same problems which faced Elijah and Elisha themselves. The battles against a decaying social structure and against other gods vying for the attention of the community are still facing us, and show no signs of abating.

Epilogue

At the beginning of this thesis, my intention was to examine the wealth of material which has been written about the biblical accounts of Elijah and Elisha. The literary structure of this cycle of stories suggests that these legends are derived from a rich oral tradition about the local heroes of several ancient communities. I sought to discover the moral implications in the actions of these prophets which transcend their immediate historical context. More than a historical account of the political and religious struggles of the Northern Kingdom, these stories serve to enlighten us about the constant struggle of the charismatic religious leader in any age.

With this understanding, the prophets Elijah and Elisha may be seen as functioning in several specific social roles within their ancient society. Using their miraculous powers to legitimize themselves in a skeptical society, these prophets established themselves as powerful figures in the religious and political realm. The center of their existence, however, was the promotion of one God, Yahweh. It is this belief which drove all of their actions and endeavors. Thus an archetype was born--the Elijah-archetype, which has guided charismatic leaders throughout history.

I suggest that this archetype ties these ancient prophets to our modern society in the person of the modern American Reform rabbi. Perhaps we should, as the American Reform Jewish community, look to the rabbi in much the same manner that our ancient counterparts of the Northern Kingdom looked to their religious leaders, Elijah and Elisha.

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