

CINCINNATI CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

UNDERSTANDING THE LITERARY PURPOSE OF THE MT. CARMEL EPIC

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOKS OF KINGS	2
Historical Perspectives in Samuel-Kings	3
Covenant History of Israel/Judah	4
The Divine Verdict	6
THE PROPHET OF A NATIONAL CRISIS	8
Elijah the Prophet	8
The Crisis of Phoenician Ba'alism	9
The Ahabite Parenthesis	10
THE LITERARY PURPOSE FOR THE MT. CARMEL EPIC	13
The Mt. Carmel Epic	13
Yahweh's Judgment	14
The People Dismiss Their God	15
CONCLUSION.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	18

UNDERSTANDING THE LITERARY PURPOSE OF THE MT. CARMEL EPIC

Approaching a historical passage of Scripture, and trying to understand its purpose and meaning, can be a difficult business. After first attempting to recognize the immediate and primary meaning of the passage, what the events meant to those of whom the historical events were written, we then must make an attempt to understand the literary purpose of such a passage - i.e., why did the author include the passage and why did he place the passage in the exact context of the book where we find it?

It cannot be stated with more vigor or enthusiasm that this “secondary” search must be included in our primary meaning, for all meaning is derived by a complete contextualization of the passage in exegeses. Without reviewing the whole of the book, epistle, prophecy, etc., we are at pains to fully understand the author’s purpose in writing. To be quite blunt, if we do not take the book as a whole then we might as well take a passage out of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky and create elaborate systems of theology from them, for accepting the Bible only in pieces, while still useful, is in the end no better than using extra-biblical documents for faith practices.

For the Mt. Carmel epic specifically, it seems that we often overlook its literary value for the close value it has in synchronic history – at the time of the characters who took part in the events. Surely, to these individuals, the great and mighty deeds of Yahweh proved the day victorious, and surely these same deeds revived the hearts of many of those present to witness such feats, but in the end, what really changed in the hearts of Israel? Time would tell that

although there was a religious change in the winds, these winds did not begin to blow in the direction of pure Yahwism but continued with the “sins of Jeroboam.”¹

Instead, I think if we look at the Mt. Carmel epic in light of the literary purpose of the books of Kings we will come to a more complete thought on the matter. In fact, I embark here to prove that the narrator of Kings uses the Mt. Carmel epic to vindicate Yahweh’s judgment of His people in a covenant history leading toward the divine verdict.

To move toward this goal, this argument will progress on a focusing path looking from broad to narrow as we try to understand the context of the passage. Therefore, we shall begin with the perspective of the books of Kings as a whole, move into a better understanding of the purpose of Elijah’s ministry within the history of the books of Kings, and then ultimately end with a narrow and focused look at Mt. Carmel in light of the broader context previously discussed.

Understanding the Purpose of the Books of Kings

When one comes to the books of Kings, one finds not individual books with individual themes but rather one set with one purpose. Ultimately, the books of Kings describes the covenant history of Israel/Judah leading toward a divine verdict.

Historical Perspectives in Samuel-Kings

Of course, before one can properly come to that conclusion, one must first comprehend the meaning of history itself - a term that has somewhat of a slippery consistency. John Oswalt defines history as: “... a narrative of a series of events revolving about human beings acting in

¹ The phrase “the sins of Jeroboam” will be defined below.

time and space. Existing for the purpose of human self-knowledge, it purports to be an accurate account of all significant elements in the series and includes an attempt to evaluate the relative importance of these elements for eventual outcome.”²

The books of Kings, then, do not represent a complete history in the sense of that word for they do not give a complete record of the events. In fact, material context in the Levant reveals significant additions (not changes) to the events recorded in the Bible. For example, the Kirkh Stele of Shalmeneser III bears record that Ahab, King of Israel, partook in what can probably be deemed as the most significant battle of his lifetime. Being fought at Qarqar, Ahab, along with eleven other kings, fought against the Assyrian onslaught and, many believe, was somewhat successful in holding them back.³

Why does the Bible not record such an event of history? The answer to that is in the fact that the Bible is not historically all-encompassing. Instead, the authors have chosen what events would meet their literary purposes. This is not to say that the authors redacted history in any way; instead, the authors simply chose what they believed were the most significant aspects of the history as evidence of a specific point. In the case of the biblical narratives, this point was in what can be called a theological history – not to be confused with a metaphysical history.⁴

Covenant History of Israel/Judah

² John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Zondervan, 2009), 113.

³ William W. Hallo, “From Qarqar to Carchemish: Assyria and Israel in the Light of New Discoveries,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 23, no. 2 (May 1, 1960): 34-61.

⁴ I am here making reference to the work of John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 156ff. Oswalt defends the Biblical narrative against the idea that the text contains a metaphysical, and therefore historically unreliable, history.

This theological history is revealed in the books of Kings in the form of Covenant History.⁵ The covenant is that covenant formed between Yahweh and the people of Israel on their “wedding” day at Sinai, when Yahweh took Israel as His bride and joined in a type of pact between them (cf. Ezek 16:8); this, a covenant between deity and man, in and of itself is something quite odd for the time and region.⁶

Exodus 24:7 suggests that the covenant to which the people bound themselves with Yahweh was partially what was, to them, just previously read aloud - namely the stipulations found within Exodus 20-23. Beginning with the Decalogue and ending with a warning not to commit spiritual adultery, the scroll/book of the covenant mentioned in Exodus 24:7 gives us an understanding of the type of agreement that was made between this specific husband (Yahweh) and his wife (Israel), and thus sets the stage for a better understanding of the books of Kings.

These “kings” of which the books were written were not simply main characters in the story. Instead, the kings of Israel and Judah acted as political guardians of the covenant.⁷ One must perceive that the covenant just previously mentioned was not between Yahweh and Israel’s kings, for the kingship was not yet in existence. Instead, the covenant was between the people and their God - ratified by the sprinkling of blood on Israel’s representatives standing before Moses (Ex 24:8).

The role of the kings of Israel and Judah was to enforce the requirements of the covenant and to lead the people of Israel, through trial and tribulation, into a deeper relationship with their

⁵ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (3rd ed.; Zondervan, 2009), 283.

⁶ Stuart J. Foster, “The missiology of Old Testament covenant,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (October 1, 2010): 205.

⁷ Helen Ann Kenik, “Code of Conduct for a King: Psalm 101,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 3 (1976): 399. The phrase “guardian of the covenant” is adapted from Kenik’s statement that the king was “charged with the task of guarding that faith by his prerogative as judge.”

God. David, theologically the greatest king, had a special relationship with Yahweh to the point that it was said of him that he had a “perfect heart” - a statement only said of three kings throughout the history of the whole of Israel (David, Asa, and Hezekiah; no northern kings made the list). What made his heart perfect was not his perfect obedience, as one can see that this did not exist, but rather his “wholehearted” devotion to Yahweh and no other god.⁸ In this, David successfully fulfilled his role as King of Israel, both enforcing the requirements and leading the people into a deeper relationship with God, so much so that the kings of Judah were compared to him, in either a positive or negative light, throughout the books of Kings.

The kings were not left alone, though, for Yahweh created a sort of checks and balances in the kingdom in the position of the prophets – those who held no political position in the kingdom except that they should serve as a mediator between God and the people.⁹ In this manner, the prophets throughout the history of Israel are known for confronting the kings, yes authoritatively, and demanding change, often political for the sake of the religious.¹⁰

One of the greatest examples of these prophets comes even from the greatest king, David. It seems that even with a wholehearted devotion to Yahweh, David succumbed to the temptations of man. As the king, being the highest authority in the land (under God), David had

⁸ Fourteen passages contain some combination of the phrase לֵב/לֵבָב שָׁלֵם (these passages are as follows: 1 Ki 8:61; 11:4; 15:3, 14; 2 Ki 20:3; 1 Chr 12:38; 28:9; 29:9, 19; 2 Chr 15:17; 16:9; 19:9; 25:2; Isa 38:3). By first establishing the non-theological meaning, other passages can be understood in the proper sense. An exemplary passage of theological significance comes from 1 Kings 11:4, where it is stated of David in contrast to Solomon, “When Solomon became old, his wives shifted his allegiance to other gods; he was not *wholeheartedly devoted* to the LORD his God, as his father David had been” (emphasis upon the pertinent Hebrew phrase).

⁹ For an example in the life of Elijah, see Kathryn L. Roberts, “God, Prophet, and King: Eating and Drinking on the Mountain in First Kings 18:41,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (October 1, 2000): 634-638.

¹⁰ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 3:4.

no one to hold him accountable for his actions – except the prophet. In 2 Samuel 12:7, we find Nathan, the prophet, boldly approaching the king (the one that had too much blood on his hands to build the temple!) and proclaiming both sin and judgment upon him. Any repercussion that could have entailed did not, but even if it might have, the prophet's position was one that it would not have mattered – he boldly spoke the message of the Lord to whom the Lord commanded no matter the danger.¹¹ Beyond just the personal sin and judgment David received, as the guardian of the covenant of the people, all of Israel fell victim to the falling gavel, for one such result of this particular crime would find itself in a political coup against David (ultimately affecting the whole of the nation).

As a record of the kings of Israel, we find, therefore, in Israel not a pure history or even a political history but a theological history in the form of a covenant history – the history of how well the people of Israel, with their guardians the kings, actually kept the covenant as judged through the prophets. We would not, then, expect to find every aspect of Israelite history mentioned within Scripture, but only that which pertained to the keeping or not keeping of the covenant made between God and the nation.

The Divine Verdict

Ultimately, as one can see in the history of Israel, a divine verdict was made. This was in proper turn with the blessings and curses found within the recapitulated book of the covenant – Deuteronomy (fully developed in 27:1–28:68). Here we find that with obedience comes blessings beyond the imagination of the people: they will be elevated above the nations, blessings will reach their offspring, the offspring of the fields, the offspring of their livestock,

¹¹ Leon J. Wood, *Prophets of Israel, The* (Baker Academic, 1998), 77.

etc. (Deut 28:1ff). Indeed, if Israel obeyed the commandments of the Lord, great physical benefit was sure to follow!

On the other hand, if Israel did not obey Yahweh or perverted Yahweh's commands, then curses would fall upon Israel because of this. Disease and drought, defeat and deportation – all of this awaited the disobedient nation. More completely, disobedience actually meant a reversal of the blessings that Yahweh might have already bestowed upon the people (Deut 28:15-19) as seen in the symmetry of the blessing/curse lists.¹²

It is important, once again, to note that the obedience or disobedience of Israel was not determined by the kingship but by the people, for as previously stated the kings were simply guardians of this covenant. The blessings and curses of Deuteronomy were given to the people and would affect the people, devoid of political or economic status.

It is therefore quite important to understand the picture of the people as one reads the books of Kings. More often than not, the king did represent an image of the people, but even after the times of the four “good kings” in Judah, when Judah began to once again prosper, one has to wonder how the people could so quickly change allegiance upon the fourth monarch's death! The answer lies, of course, in the comfort and prosperity that lead to proud and selfish religious neglect in the people.¹³ Again, this represents the need of good kings and good leaders in Israel's societies and the need for the guardians of the covenant.

What we find in the books of Kings is simply that Israel did not obey the Lord. In fact, as we look particularly at the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the people almost never obeyed the

¹² Michael D. Swartz, “The Aesthetics of Blessing and Cursing: Literary and Iconographic Dimensions of Hebrew and Aramaic Blessing and Curse Texts.,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 5, no. 1 (2005): 187-188.

¹³ Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Rev Sub.; Zondervan, 1986), 301.

commandments of the Lord. This breaking of the covenant by the people, as led by the kings who ignored the checks and balances of the prophets, meant that curses must fall upon the people – if Yahweh was to keep His word.

In the end (of both Israel and Judah), Yahweh did keep His word, and all that was promised occurred: Israel lost her status among the nations, her blessings were reversed, disease followed, both defeat and deportation came. All that the Lord had promised came good – even though it ended bad for the disobedient.

It is easy to see, then, that as one approaches the books of Kings, one must do so with this literary theme running through one's mind at all times. In the books of Kings, we see that Kings describes the covenant history of Israel and Judah that did lead toward a divine verdict; therefore, as the Bible student looks into the ministry of Elijah, he should ask himself, how does this narrative fall into the literary purpose of this book?

The Prophet of a National Crisis

The ministry of the prophet is that of checking and balancing the power of the king, as previously stated, but the king did not always listen to the prophet. As a matter of fact, more often than not the king did not heed the warnings of the biblical prophet – relying instead on his own personal plethora of “yes-men” prophets. Because of this, many of the more famous prophets are those who arose in times of peril and great need. For Elijah, his ministry centered on the crisis of Phoenician Ba'alism in the Northern Kingdom during the Ahabite parenthesis.

Elijah the Prophet

As a preclassical prophet, Elijah does not have actual oracles attached to his name. Instead, his mission seemed to be royally focused, to be bent on the issue of judgment and covenant violation, and even to look for the repentance of the kings. This is in contrast to the classical prophets, whose ministry was expressed through the oracle and in symbolic form.¹⁴

Through the Elijah cycle we learn of the great, though sometimes wavering, faith of the prophet. Surely, Elijah should hold his place as a hero of the faith mentioned in Hebrews 11, for he was one of “the prophets” who were “destitute, afflicted, ill-treated.”

In fact, during the Mt. Carmel epic, it appears that Elijah believed himself to be completely alone in Israel (1Kgs 18:22),¹⁵ But even in this loneliness and isolation, much should be said about the fact that Elijah still persisted in his public duties – though showing fear in times outside of the public eye.

The Crisis of Phoenician Ba'alism

But who wouldn't show fear? This was, in fact, the time of the great apostasy that we can call the crisis of Phoenician Ba'alism.

Ba'alism being the central religious and even socio-political ideal of both lower and upper Canaanite societies, the kingdoms of Israel faced “uphill” battles throughout their existence, a consequent result of their disobedience to completely take the land. At its core,

¹⁴ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 296.

¹⁵ Here, Elijah is not yet aware of the great multitude of Yahweh worshippers mentioned by Yahweh in 1 Kings 19, but he is keenly aware of the one hundred prophets hidden in two caves by Obadiah, Ahab's servant. The loneliness, then, stems from the fact that the hidden prophets were not active, but in hiding – something Elijah himself would do directly after the Mt. Carmel epic. J.K. Mead states that this intense emotional outburst points to “the general pattern of [Elijah's] ministry” (Jame K. Mead, “Elijah,” ed. H. G. M. Williamson and Bill Arnold, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (IVP Academic, November 11, 2005), 252.).

Ba'alism was "a fertility cult offering its devotees agricultural prosperity."¹⁶ Because of this socio-economic link to the land, Israel was doomed to synthesis since the people – too – wished to grow good crops in the new land.

Beyond the normal results of mingling with an abnormal, or amoral, lower Canaanite society, there was also a strong missionary effort on the part of the Phoenicians. A look at the religious impact of Carthage and other Phoenician established cities on the Mediterranean region shows a religious fervor that is almost to be envied.¹⁷

Whether a connection between Jezebel and Dido, founder of Carthage, have any validity,¹⁸ the evangelistic oriented Jezebel also spread Phoenician Religion, this time the purely Ba'alistic culture reached to the lower Canaanite regions.

In fact, the Scriptures have much to say about the "missionary efforts" of Jezebel, for she ensured the existence of Ba'alism by first killing the prophets of Yahweh. Indeed, once the followers of Yahweh were quieted, through Jezebel, wife of Ahab, we find the very first state-sponsored religion outside of Yahwism – note that the prophets of Ba'al ate at Jezebel's table.¹⁹

The Ahabite Parenthesis

We have, then, during the reign of Ahab (and his heir, Ahaziah, who followed closely with Ahab's politics) what can be termed the Ahabite Parenthesis. This was a short period of

¹⁶ Robert B Chisholm, "The Polemic against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature.," *Bibliotheca sacra* 151, no. 603 (July 1, 1994): 268.

¹⁷ Sabatino Moscati, *The Phoenicians* (I.B.Tauris, 2001), 128.

¹⁸ Arthur Samuel Peake and Alexander James Grieve, *A Commentary on the Bible* (T. Nelson & sons, 1920), 302.

¹⁹ Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., "Elijah," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (IVP Academic, November 11, 2005), 249.

time in the Northern Kingdom's history that was purely Ba'alistic on the socio-religious level (thanks to Jezebel) and almost so on the political level (Ahab seemed to still have a hint of loyalty to Yahweh).²⁰

This can be better understood when contrasted with the "sins of Jeroboam," that infamous phrase attached as a qualifier/yardstick to the northern kings – all of whom fell short.²¹ 1 Kings 16:31 describes Ahab's reign as not only following the sins of Jeroboam, but he also married Jezebel and served Ba'al. Indeed, Ahab "did more to anger the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1Kgs 16.33b, NET).

The reason for this "greater" sin on Ahab's part was that he went beyond the simple syncretism of the former kings and openly accepted Ba'alism, even to the point of building a temple and erecting an altar to Ba'al in Samaria and making an Asherah. According to the text, Ahab served and sponsored Ba'al.²² This acceptance is contrasted to the previous kings who in all actuality "served" (if we can use the term lightly) Yahweh but in Ba'alistic manners. This is, then, the meaning of the sins of Jeroboam – a syncretistic blur of the lower Canaanite socio-economic culture (Ba'alism) with the ideal (Yahwism) given in the Torah.

Throughout the history of the Northern Kingdom (and to a point the southern), we see a slow but steady move toward blurring Yahwism with the typical pre-invasion socio-economic

²⁰ Indeed, a deeper look at Ahab's life actually reveals a good deal of Yahwism. As Mead points out, "he works with prophets [...], gives his sons Yahwistic names [...], and repents after the Naboth incident [...]. Furthermore, K. L. Roberts argues that Ahab is encouraged by Elijah to share in a covenant renewal meal after the Carmel incident [...]" (Ibid., 252-253). These Yahwistic tendencies simply reinforce the point that Ahab, as the king, was still the guardian of the covenant, and that Yahweh had not given up on him – thus sending the prophet to bring Ahab back into a covenant relationship with God.

²¹ Eva Danelius, "The Sins of Jeroboam Ben-Nabat," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58, no. 2 (October 1, 1967): 95.

²² Joel F. Drinkard, "Omri Dynasty," ed. H. G. M. Williamson and Bill Arnold, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (IVP Academic, November 11, 2005), 760.

culture of Canaan.²³ Indeed, the original sin of Jeroboam most likely had little to do with a desire to pervert Yahwism and very much to do with centralizing power by subverting temple worship in Judah,²⁴ but since that time Israel seemed to have slipped deeper into the Canaanite culture, as evidenced time and again throughout the books of Kings.

By the time of Ahab, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) had become quite Ba'alistic, but this was not to be confused with Jezebel's efforts to spread her faith. No, under Ahab we find a kind of parenthetical pause in the syncretism of Israel's faith with Ba'alism. Instead of a Ba'alism where Yahweh is simply another name for Ba'al, we find a complete Ba'alism, even a pure Ba'alism, due in whole to Ahab's marriage (thus the greater sin of Ahab mentioned above).²⁵

Thus enters Elijah. He enters not because the people were Ba'alistic, but exactly on the scene of Ahab and leaves after the death of Ahab's loyal son, and therefore ministers with the intent to deliver Israel from this utterly non-Yahwistic cult.

This is not a deliverance as we have often seen with the judges; instead, Elijah serves as the office of prophet allows him to serve – as the “cricket” on Ahab's shoulder, i.e., in a non-political but persuasive manner.

²³ While the idea of syncretism in Israelite culture is commonly accepted (cf. Chisholm, “The Polemic against Baalism in Israel's Early History and Literature,” 151:.), Frederick E. Greenspahn (“Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible,” *Vetus testamentum* 54, no. 4 [January 1, 2004]: 480-494) argues that perhaps we should avoid such theologically loaded terminology since the Biblical text does not in fact state syncretism as the great failure of Israel, but he first states that neither does Idolatry in the biblical text not mean syncretism. Indeed, Greenspahn states that syncretism is rather a normal part of religion, even though it is not stated in the text. That is exactly my point here.

²⁴ Wesley I. Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel Under Jeroboam I* (Scholars Press, 1993), 100.

²⁵ Note that in 1 Kgs 18:21 Elijah demands that the people of Israel choose between Yahweh and Ba'al. When the people do not respond, Elijah continues with an even deeper separation between the two deities. In the end, the people twice pronounce their allegiance to the one deity over the other. While this could technically have been an issue of syncretism, the greater sin of Ahab does demand more than the simple syncretism of Jeroboam.

The historical intent of Yahweh is here clearly seen to be people and nationally oriented – a drought is sure to get the attention of not only the king but all of the people of whom have allowed the Phoenician crisis to enter the land.

As we look at this crisis during the Ahabite Parenthesis, and we find Elijah there, we have to again begin to ask ourselves, “Why is this being recorded?” Is the purpose of Elijah’s ministry simply historically focused on the crisis itself? If so, why tell the world about it? If the Elijah narrative is simply historically and not literarily focused, then in truth, there would be no real need to spread the message of change after the parenthesis is over and the changes have occurred. For that matter, why record anything in the books of Kings? The answer is much simpler, and takes us back to the purpose of history in general, which according to Oswalt includes human self-knowledge *and* evaluation for future outcomes. It can be clearly said that records of the ministry of Elijah were given not to those in Elijah’s day but for those after him, those in exile – the children of those who slew the prophets.

The Literary Purpose for the Mt. Carmel Epic

Having moved through the books of Kings from a broad analysis to the purpose of Elijah’s ministry, we move now to a deeper understanding of the literary purpose of the Mt. Carmel epic itself. What we understand is that the Mt. Carmel epic, in addition to the historical value it has, actually vindicates Yahweh’s later judgment of His people because of their disloyalty in the face of a loyal God.

The Mt. Carmel Epic

Having assumed that my audience has a previous understanding of the epic through personal or corporate study, let us simply move forward to point to the reality behind the epic battle, for there is a sort of metaphysical reality linked with the physical reality of the epic itself. Of course, by metaphysical I am not assuming any unreliability in the text; instead, I point to the hidden backdrop found within the broader understanding of the battle. This hidden backdrop is that of the “gods.”

If one could mentally place himself into the position of an early 9th century Israelite, what would one think of this “battle between the gods”? Surely, these thoroughly Ba’alistic Israelites did indeed expect to see a battle, but a visible battle between the gods was not the norm. As the Ba’al cycle describes, the battles between deities took place in the world of the deities,²⁶ though the believers understood these battles to have mutual effects in their world. Now, here, we have not a purely metaphysical battle that correlates to the physical world; instead, what the Mt. Carmel epic describes is a physical battle between metaphysical entities. This is, then, when myth became reality, and when Israel understood the absence of Ba’al.

As a reminder of the outcome, Elijah continues the defeat of Ba’alism by slaying the prophets of Ba’al. This victory on the part of Yahweh was more complete with the victory over the prophets for the victory over the prophets was a reactionary event of which the *people* of Israel partook in. Note, also, that the people siezed the prophets after twice redevoting themselves as Yahwists from Ba’alism. The people who waited for Ba’al to answer the roll-call found Yahweh waiting for them.

Yahweh’s Judgment

²⁶ For more information on metaphysical battles, see: Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (E. J. Brill, 1969).

The Bible student must remember that the Mt. Carmel epic took place at a time when the curses, of the Torah's blessings and curses, should have been in full force. Since the time of Solomon, Israel had been engaged in state-accepted polytheism.²⁷ Sure there had been times of remorse and repentance, but, especially in the Northern Kingdom, the people had grown to be almost completely pagan.

As noted earlier, the Northern Kingdom had always, since its conception, been Ba'alistic. Now, during the Ahabite Parenthesis, we no longer find Ba'alistic Yahwism but extreme Ba'alism. The extreme Ba'alism of Israel, inacted by the extreme failure of Ahab (the guardian of the covenant), should have completely complicated the matter of repentance – at least from a legal perspective. Israel did not follow Yahweh's covenant; through her actions, Israel both perverted and abandoned Yahweh's covenant.

There is one drawback, though – Yahweh is loyal to Israel. Because of this loyalty, Yahweh sent the prophet to confront the guardian of His covenant with the people in an attempt to bring the people back into loyalty themselves.

The People Dismiss Their God

The Mt. Carmel epic acted, synchronically, as a great reminder of the grace of God to His covenant people. He acted on their behalf, even though they did not deserve it, and He saved them from the curses that would surely have ensued.

Diachronically, on the other hand, we see a different story. While the salvation of the people was proven successful, the people of God soon forgot their covenant. Indeed, the Ahabite Parenthesis was simply a parenthesis because pure Yahwism was not what was installed after

²⁷ E. Theodore Mullen Jr., "Crime and Punishment: The Sins of the King and the Despoliation of the Treasuries," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (April 1992): 231.

Phoenician Ba'alism was defeated, but instead what was installed was the syncretized Ba'alism/Yahwism of Jeroboam.²⁸ The Mt. Carmel epic did not save Israel from its future destruction; it simply acted as, perhaps, the greatest testimony of Yahweh's goodness and graciousness to His own people who did not care enough to care.

Conclusion

Approaching the Mt. Carmel epic from the perspective of its literary value within the books of Kings gives the reader a different perspective than the one that is often cited in sermons and in text. Understanding the literary perspective of the books of Kings, a description of the covenant history of God's chosen people leading toward a divine judgment, helps us place the epic battle in a more complete way, the way the post-exilic readers would have understood it.

Indeed, limiting Elijah's ministry to a time of great crisis in the land, a time when Phoenician Ba'alism seemed to create a parenthesis in both the political and religious history of the kingdom, forces us, as readers, to see the encroaching doom that should have arrived at any hour for the Northern Kingdom. This doom would not only have been legally acceptable and morally correct, it would have been well within God's right to destroy them – a people that served no future role in the coming messiah anyway.

In the end, though, God did not destroy them. He allowed Israel to survive and testified to His loyalty in an act that crossed the boundaries of the physical realm. It should come as no surprise, then, that, from a literary perspective, the Mt. Carmel epic does not show itself as the great triumph of God (did he really need to triumph?) but as an explanation of the duty He

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "Stereotype and Nuance: The Dynasty of Jehu," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (January 2008): 19.

performed in ridding His land of its disloyal servants. God was loyal, even when faced with complete rebellion, but the people did not care.

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