

The Spirit in Elisha's Life: A Preview of Jesus Christ and the New Covenant

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Abstract: In the book of Kings, Elisha is the Spirit-empowered man of God who walks with God, represents God, and shows the way to covenant faithfulness through word and deed. Elisha therefore serves as a preview of knowing God in the new covenant through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We will see this as we examine the Spirit's role in Elisha's life from Kings, particularly in the narrative of Elisha succeeding Elijah (2 Kings 2:1–18), and how Elisha's Spirit-empowered ministry points forward to the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus Christ, the inauguration of the new covenant, and what it means for Jesus's followers to live in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The primary theological truth the book of Kings communicates is that Israel's God is the one and only God, the only true God.¹ Because Israel's God is the only true God, the people of Israel, led by their king, must exclusively worship God and keep God's law as written in the Mosaic Covenant if they expect to experience his blessing. Lisa Wray-Beal states this about the message of Kings: "As king and people walk in the torah, they prove their identity as covenant people. But when they walk outside the deuteronomistic norms of the covenant, they face discipline and ultimately exile from the land."² Unfortunately, as the book of Kings records, the kings of Israel, beginning with Solomon, do not worship God exclusively or keep his law, and instead of experiencing the blessings of the covenant the nation experiences its curses. Solomon commits idolatry near the end of his life and the kingdom is divided (1 Kgs 11:1–13). The subsequent kings of the divided northern and southern kingdoms follow

¹ Iain W. Provan, "Kings," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 183. While 1 and 2 Kings are two separate books in our modern Bibles, they are two volumes of one book, and will be treated as one book, the book of Kings, throughout the paper.

² Lissa M. Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, ApOTC 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 47.

Solomon's example and, with few exceptions, continue to lead the people away from the one, true God.³ Both the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17) and the southern kingdom (2 Kgs 25) ultimately experience exile for their sins. The repetitiveness of each king's sinful reign, leading the people further and further away from God, establishes that the exile of each kingdom, the present reality of the original audience of the book, is well-deserved.⁴

In the midst of this history of king after king leading the people away from God we find two prophets who demonstrate God's grace and covenant faithfulness despite the people's sin. The narrative space and the narrative placement of these two prophets highlight their importance to the narrative as a whole. The account of these two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, in 1 Kings 17—2 Kings 13, is the center of the book of Kings, comprising roughly 40% of the narrative.⁵ Elijah arrives on the scene at a decisive juncture in Israel's history, as Ahab and Jezebel are leading the people away from God and toward the false god Baal (1 Kgs 16:29–17:1), and Elisha's ministry effectively ends when Ahab's dynasty does (2 Kgs 9:1–3). The two prophets' miracles, ministry, and presence serve to call the people back to the one, true God and his covenant. Elijah and Elisha remind the people who God really is, especially when compared to the false gods the people are choosing to worship, and what it means to live before this God.⁶

One of the primary ways that the two prophets remind the people who God is and what it means to live before him is through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The Holy Spirit's presence and power is particularly noted in the narrative of Elisha succeeding Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1–18), where Elisha receives a "double portion" of Elijah's spirit (2 Kgs 2:9–10). While the Spirit's ministry and presence is implicit throughout Elijah's ministry (though explicitly mentioned in conjunction with Elijah's ministry in 1 Kgs 18:12), it is in and through Elisha, as Elijah's successor, that the Holy Spirit's presence and power is particularly emphasized. This emphasis on the Holy Spirit in the life and ministry of Elisha helps us to understand his purpose in Kings and the whole of the biblical canon, and gives us more insight into the things concerning Jesus in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27).⁷ In the context of Kings,

³ The only exceptions to this are Hezekiah and Josiah. Yet Hezekiah does not receive full approval from God because of his sin of welcoming Babylon and showing them his wealth (2 Kgs 20:16–18). Josiah receives full approval from God, but even his righteousness is not enough to overcome Manasseh's sin (2 Kgs 23:26).

⁴ Due to the narrative ending with Judah's exile and the apologetic arguments throughout the book emphasizing the necessity and reality of exile, it is most likely that an exilic author/editor formulated the present text of Kings for an exilic audience. See Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 34–36.

⁵ A chiastic structure for the book, with 1 Kings 16:23—2 Kings 12 at the center, is noted by George Savran, "1 and 2 Kings," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 148; and Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Wu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 693, 704. This chiastic structure assumes the unity of the book. However, critical scholars tend not to approach the book as a single literary unit. E.g., Suzanne Otto, "The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History," *JSOT* 27 (2003): 487–508; and William Schniedewind, "The Problem with Kings: Recent Study of the Deuteronomistic History," *RelSRev* 22 (1996): 22–27.

⁶ K. R. R. Gros Louis, "Elijah and Elisha," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, edited by K. R. R. Gros Louis, J. S. Ackerman, and T. S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 179–84.

⁷ Many critical scholars continue to ask why the Elisha narrative (2 Kgs 2–8), and sometimes even Elijah's narrative (beginning in 1 Kgs 17), is in Kings, failing to see any purpose or unity in Elisha's life and ministry. Suzanne Otto is representative when she states that no "convincing model for the process of the integration of the Elijah-Elisha stories has been achieved so far," and that almost none of the Elisha stories have any "particular purpose within the Deuteronomist's history and theology." Otto, "The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories," 489,

as so many in Israel have rejected God and his covenant, Elisha serves not only as a prophet calling the people to covenant faithfulness, but as the Spirit-empowered man of God who walks with God, represents God, and demonstrates the way to covenant faithfulness. As the Spirit-empowered man of God leading the people to covenant faithfulness, however, Elisha serves as more than an example of living before God under the old covenant; he also serves as a preview of what it will mean to walk with God in the new covenant in Jesus Christ, which is ultimately how God's people will know him and what it means to live for him.

This article demonstrates this truth by establishing the evidence and importance of the Holy Spirit's ministry in Elisha's life and then explaining how Elisha's Spirit-empowered ministry points forward to the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant. I compare and contrast Elisha's experience of the Holy Spirit with Elijah's experience of the Holy Spirit, and then compare and contrast Elisha's experience with Jesus's experience, demonstrating how the Gospels explicitly draw an analogy between Elisha's ministry and Jesus's ministry. Elisha's life and ministry in the Holy Spirit ultimately preview what life with God could one day look like under the new covenant. Jesus then makes the preview a reality for all who come to him. To all facing exile from God and the kingdom for their sins, Elisha is an example of how, when we trust the one, true God, all of us can know and walk with him through the Holy Spirit because of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done.

1. *The Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Elisha*

The center of the Elijah and Elisha narrative is 2 Kings 2, and the center of that chapter is verses 9–13, which narrates Elijah's ascension into heaven and Elisha's succession into the prophetic office vacated by Elijah.⁸ Once Elijah and Elisha have crossed over the dry ground of the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he is taken from him (2:9a). Elisha requests a "double portion" of Elijah's Spirit (2:9b). Jewish tradition interpreted this request as Elisha asking for a "doubling" of Elijah's Spirit, or twice as much of the Spirit as Elijah possessed.⁹ Elisha's request for a double portion, however, most likely refers to the customs of inheritance for the firstborn son (Deut 21:17). As Paul Watson notes, "Elisha is simply asking to be designated by Elijah as his true and legitimate successor. The *bene hannebi'im* present at the scene might be construed as other 'sons' of Elijah. Elisha wishes to be recognized as the firstborn of these 'sons,' with all the rights and privileges of the firstborn duly accorded to him."¹⁰ Elijah responds to Elisha by telling him that his request is difficult (2 Kgs 2:10a), most likely because it is impossible for him to fulfill; only God can grant that request.¹¹ Elijah then tells Elisha

494. For a survey of the functional problem of Elisha among critical scholars, see W. Brian Aucker, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Royal and Divine Characterization as Governing Images in the Portrayal of Elisha," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Baltimore, 20 November 2013), 1–5.

⁸ T. Raymond Hobbs, "2 Kings 1 and 2: Their Unity and Purpose," *SR* 13 (1984): 331, and Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 301–2.

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," *Perspective* 12 (1971): 87–88; and Nachman Levine, "Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel, and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha," *JSOT* 85 (1999): 25.

¹⁰ Paul L. Watson, "A Note on the 'Double Portion' of Deuteronomy 21:17 and 2 Kings 2:9," *ResQ* 8 (1965): 74–75.

¹¹ Richard D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, "1 and 2 Kings," in *1 Samuel–2 Kings*, EBC 3, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 813.

that he would know if he was Elijah's Spirit-empowered successor if he saw him ascend into heaven (2:10b). As the two prophets walk and talk, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separate them, and Elijah is taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2:11). Elisha witnesses the entire event, indicating that God granted his request for the double portion of Elijah's Spirit (that this is indeed the case is confirmed by the sons of the prophets in 2:15), tears his clothes into two pieces as an act of mourning, and picks up Elijah's cloak (2:12–13). The transfer of Elijah's cloak to Elisha, the same cloak that Elijah threw upon Elisha when he first commissioned him (1 Kgs 19:19) and with which Elijah divided the waters of the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:8), also symbolizes that God has transferred Elijah's prophetic power to Elijah.¹²

As the bearer of the firstborn's portion of the prophetic Spirit of the Lord, Elisha succeeds Elijah and does similar, Spirit-empowered acts in his ministry, just as God promised Elijah he would (1 Kgs 19:16). For example, both prophets speak the word of the Lord (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:1; 2 Kgs 3:16–20), and both prophets call the people back to proper worship and conduct before the Lord (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:17–40; 2 Kgs 6:20–23).¹³ The most prominent parallel Kings makes between the two prophets and their ministries, however, is in their miracles of healing, giving life, provision, controlling nature, and judgment. While Kings does not always explicitly mention the Holy Spirit's work in Elijah's and Elisha's' miracles, the central importance of 2 Kings 2 in the narrative gives us ample reason to understand their miracles as works of the Spirit, and the New Testament's description of the Holy Spirit's work reinforces this understanding.¹⁴

Through the Holy Spirit, Elijah does the following:

1. causes a drought and famine to come to Israel while ravens feed him (1 Kgs 17:1–7);
2. feeds a widow and her son for many days on one jar of flour and one flask of oil (1 Kgs 17:8–16);
3. raises the widow's son from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24);
4. calls down fire from heaven to burn his sacrifice to the Lord (1 Kgs 18:36–38);
5. brings rain to end the drought and famine (1 Kgs 18:41–45);
6. runs ahead of King Ahab to Jezreel (1 Kgs 18:46);
7. calls down fire from heaven to destroy two groups of men sent by King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:9–12); and
8. divides the waters of the Jordan with his cloak (2 Kgs 2:8).

Through the Holy Spirit, Elisha performs these mighty works:

1. divides the waters of the Jordan with Elijah's cloak (2 Kgs 2:13–14);
2. heals the waters of Jericho by throwing salt into the spring (2 Kgs 2:19–22);
3. curses his harassers in Bethel, which results in two female bears mauling forty-two of them (2 Kgs 2:23–25);
4. provides water for the soldiers and animals of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat (2 Kgs 3:9–20);

¹² Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 305; Gros Louis, "Elijah and Elisha," 183.

¹³ On the importance of the ministry of the word for both Elijah and Elisha and the prophets' emphasis on authentic conduct and worship, see T. L. Brodie, *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 70–75.

¹⁴ For example, the Holy Spirit empowers (Acts 1:8; 4:8, 31; 1 Cor 12:7–11), heals (Matt 12:28; Mark 5:30; Luke 4:18–19), imparts new life (Luke 1:35; John 3:6–7; John 6:63), and executes judgment (John 16:8–11; Acts 5:1–11; Heb 10:29).

5. multiplies the widow's oil (2 Kgs 4:1–7);
6. promises a son to a barren woman, whom she bears the next year (2 Kgs 4:13–17);
7. raises the woman's son from the dead (2 Kgs 4:18–37);
8. heals the deadly stew (2 Kgs 4:38–41);
9. feeds many from twenty loaves of bread and some grain (2 Kgs 4:42–44);
10. heals Naaman from his leprosy (2 Kgs 5:1–14);
11. curses Gehazi for his greed, resulting in leprosy for him (2 Kgs 5:26–27);
12. causes an iron ax-head to float (2 Kgs 6:1–7);
13. causes the servant to see horses and chariots of fire, causes the Syrians to be blind and then causes them to see (2 Kgs 6:18–20); and
14. ends a famine in Israel (2 Kgs 7:1–20).

Elijah and Elisha both end famines, resurrect a widow's son from the dead, feed people, bring judgment upon the Lord's enemies, and divide the waters of the Jordan. Gros Louis elaborates on this similarity:

Although some of the miracles differ in nature, they are basically the same in their execution and in the means employed.... We are aware that it is not Elijah who is the powerful one, since Elisha can do the same things—either Elijah and Elisha are equal in power and magic, or their skill comes from another source. And, of course, everything in Kings points to that other source being the Lord God of Israel.¹⁵

The same God who was at work in Elijah is now at work in his successor, Elisha. As later biblical revelation explains, the presence and power of the Lord God of Israel in human beings is the Holy Spirit of God.

But Elisha not only succeeds Elijah as the Spirit-empowered prophet, he exceeds him. In Kings, this sets apart Elisha in particular, even when compared to Elijah, as the example of the Spirit-empowered man. Kings indicates at least five ways that Elisha surpasses Elijah as the Spirit-empowered prophet.

First, Elisha performs almost twice as many miracles as Elijah, and several of these miracles are intensifications of Elijah's miracles. For example, Elijah feeds a widow and her son for many days on one jar of flour and one flask of oil (1 Kgs 17:8–16), whereas Elisha provides water for the soldiers and animals of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat (2 Kgs 3:9–20), multiplies the widow's oil (2 Kgs 4:1–7), heals deadly stew (2 Kgs 4:38–41), and feeds many from twenty loaves of bread and some grain (2 Kgs 4:42–44). Elijah raises the widow's son from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24), whereas Elisha promises a son to a barren woman, who then bears the son the next year (2 Kgs 4:13–17), and then later raises the widow's son from the dead (2 Kgs 4:18–37).¹⁶

Second, the presence of the “sons of the prophets” (2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1) in Elisha's ministry stands in contrast to Elijah's solitary ministry. While the sons of the prophets existed during Elijah's ministry, and Elisha would eventually accompany Elijah as his replacement, their presence is particularly emphasized in the Elisha narrative. The sons of the prophets accompanied Elisha from the

¹⁵ Gros Louis, “Elijah and Elisha,” 182–83.

¹⁶ As Raymond Brown notes, later works like Sirach (48:12–14) and Josephus also drew attention to how Elisha's miracles went beyond those of Elijah, indicating that Elisha was more closely associated with the miraculous than Elijah. Comparing the two prophets' miracles, Brown states, “Elisha emerges more clearly as a wonder worker: his miracles, narrated in profusion, run through his whole career and are the actions that constitute his relations to other men.” Brown, “Jesus and Elisha,” 89–90.

beginning, self-identifying as Elisha's servants (2 Kgs 2:15; 4:1), living with him in community (2 Kgs 6:1–6), and sharing and supporting his ministry (2 Kgs 9:6–10).¹⁷ Drawing together disciples, creating community, and fostering unity are all works of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2; 1 Cor 12–14).

Third, Elisha completes the ministry of Elijah by anointing Hazael as King of Aram (2 Kgs 8:7–15) and Jehu as King of Israel (2 Kgs 9:1–13), in fulfillment of the Lord's word in 1 Kings 19:15–16. Elisha does not just demonstrate the power and certainty of the Lord's prophetic word, however, he also takes part in the Lord's work of purification and judgment against sin among his people, which are works of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Cor 3:18).¹⁸

Fourth, even Elisha's death is presented as life-giving, further evidence of the Spirit's power upon him.¹⁹ Some time after Elisha dies and is buried, a burial procession is taking place when an invading group of Moabite raiders appears. The dead man is quickly thrown into Elisha's grave, and when the dead man touches Elisha's bones he comes back to life (2 Kgs 2:20–21). As Wray-Beal notes, "Elisha's ministry has brought life to many through healed water (2:19–22), provision of food (4:1–7, 38–41, 42–44) and resurrection (4:32–35). Even though he is dead, Elisha's power remains."²⁰

The fifth and most decisive way that Kings presents Elisha as exceeding Elijah is the succession narrative itself (2 Kgs 2:1–18). This succession is unique; it is the only example of a prophet succeeding another prophet in the Old Testament. As Brian Acker states, the narrative treats Elisha much differently than a normal prophet, giving him "the royal treatment" normally reserved for a national leader and placing his succession between the death of King Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:17–18) and the accession of King Jehoram (2 Kgs 3:1–3).²¹ In a number of ways, the narrative deliberately echoes the transfer of leadership from Moses to Joshua.²² Elijah and his ministry are analogous to Moses and his ministry

¹⁷ Although it should be noted that Elisha did sometimes follow the example of his mentor and work alone or with one assistant (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:8–37; 5:1–27).

¹⁸ "The commissions [of Hazael and Jehu] are given in the context of Baal worship and point to its overthrow (1 Kgs 16:31–33; 19:18). Such worship was introduced by Ahab, and for these sins his dynasty is judged (1 Kgs 21:17–29). Judgment comes at the hand of Jehu, and in the context of war with Hazael (2 Kgs 9:1–10). Thus in the unfolding history the commission given to Elijah (1 Kgs 19:15–18) is tied to the prophetic judgment against Ahab—the one facilitates the other." Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 364.

¹⁹ This is in contrast to Elijah's passing. Unlike Elisha, Elijah doesn't die but instead ascends directly to heaven, bypassing death (2 Kgs 2:1–18). This is a miraculous work of God, attesting to Elijah's righteousness and uniqueness. As it pertains to the presence of the Spirit, however, Elijah's ascension and subsequent absence means that the Spirit is now preeminently upon Elisha. Elisha has no successor, and the Spirit continues to be upon him in death even as it was in life. As House states, "Elijah has gone to heaven without dying; Elisha has kept giving Israel life after he has died." Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 308.

²⁰ Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 411.

²¹ Acker, "Where is the LORD," 16. The use of the word פְּנַיְתָךְ for Elijah's cloak, which Elisha takes up after Elijah's ascension (2 Kgs 2:13), also points in this direction. HALOT (17) glosses it as "robe of state" in Jonah 3:6 and "fur coat" in Genesis 25:25, which suggests a royal garment, or at least an unusually impressive and expensive one.

²² Many scholars have noted the analogical connections between Elisha's succession of Elijah and Joshua's succession of Moses. E.g., Acker, "Where Is the LORD," 16–18; Gregory K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 413; R. P. Carroll, "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel," *VT* 19 (1969): 400–15; Iain Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, NIBCOT (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 172–80; Philip E. Satterthwaite, "The Elisha Narratives and the Coherence of 2 Kings 2–8," *TynBul* 49 (1998): 1–28; and Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 306–8.

throughout 1 Kings 17–19, and this analogy continues in the succession narrative of 2 Kings 2:1–18.²³ Like Moses, Elijah disappears east of the Jordan and appoints a Spirit-empowered successor to carry on his ministry after his death (Deut 34:9), and like Moses his disciples find no trace of him once he's gone (Deut 34:6).²⁴ Like Joshua, Elisha leaves his master and crosses the Jordan, evoking Joshua 3 when Joshua led the Israelites over the Jordan and into Canaan to conquer the land.²⁵ Even their names identify Joshua and Elisha with each other, as Joshua means “The Lord saves,” and Elisha means “God saves.”²⁶ These parallels, coupled with the royal nature of the succession narrative, raise an important question: will Elisha, as the second Joshua, do what Israel's kings have refused to do and lead the people in a second conquest of the land, a conquest in which the people turn back to the Lord, thereby completing the ministry that Elijah began?²⁷ Elisha's mission explains the need for the Holy Spirit in his life, and the emphasis that the narrative places on his endowment with the Holy Spirit. As we see confirmed in Jesus Christ, only through the Holy Spirit's presence and power in Elisha's life is such a conquest even a possibility.

Elisha's role as a second Joshua and his need for the Holy Spirit to lead the people back to the one, true God are both confirmed in the subsequent narratives of 2 Kings 2:19–25. After Elijah's ascension into heaven we find Elisha in Jericho, and the men of the city come to Elisha with a problem: their water is bad and their land is a land of death, not of life.²⁸ Elisha then throws salt into the water and heals it, making the land life-giving instead of death-producing. Joshua's first act of conquest in Canaan is to subjugate and curse Jericho (Josh 6:26; cf. 1 Kgs 16:34), and Elisha's first act of conquest as the Lord's Spirit-empowered prophet is to bring blessing to a land that was cursed.²⁹ This blessing comes upon the people because they show faith in God, accepting his prophet Elisha, and therefore experience the blessing of the Spirit. Immediately following this miracle of blessing in Jericho, however, Elisha goes up to Bethel—a center of false worship in Israel (1 Kgs 12:25–13:34)—and experiences the opposite reception from the people there. Young men come out of the city and mock Elisha, rejecting him as a God's Spirit-empowered prophet.³⁰ As a result, Elisha curses them in the name of the Lord, and two female bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the young men. Whereas the people of Jericho respond to Elisha in faith and receive God's blessing, the people of Bethel respond in unbelief, rejecting Elisha and God's Spirit upon him, and receive God's judgment. These two episodes serve as a

²³ For a detailed explanation and defense of these analogies see Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 227–58.

²⁴ Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 306.

²⁵ Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives,” 8.

²⁶ Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 173.

²⁷ Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives,” 8–9.

²⁸ The Hebrew participle מִשְׁבַּלְתָּה in vv. 19 and 21 is causative, and is glossed in both *HALOT* (1492) and *BDB* (1013) as “to cause an abortion.” The land is causing death instead of producing life as a blessed land should.

²⁹ Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, 174–75.

³⁰ We have two descriptions of the group that mocks Elisha, נָעָרִים קָטָנִים (2 Kgs 2:23), and יִלְדִּים (v. 24). English versions of the Bible normally translate these terms as referring to small children, but Wray-Beal notes “While both terms can refer to small boys, young men of unmarriageable age can also be indicated,” and cites 1 Kings 3:7; 11:17; 12:8; Ruth 1:5; and Daniel 1:4 in support. She also notes that the darker intent of the insult suggests that the mockers are not merely children. Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 305–6.

paradigm for the rest of Elisha's ministry: those who receive him receive the blessings of God, and those who reject him receive the judgment of God.³¹

These two episodes also demonstrate at the beginning of Elisha's ministry how Elisha not only lives and ministers in the Spirit, but actually represents the presence of the Lord, which is why to accept Elisha is to accept the Lord and be blessed (2 Kgs 2:19–22), and to reject Elisha is to reject the Lord and be cursed (2:23–25). After Elijah ascends to heaven and Elisha tears his clothes in mourning, 2 Kings 2:13–14 states, “He also took up the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and returned and stood by the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and struck the waters and said, ‘Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?’ And when he also had struck the waters, they were divided here and there; and Elisha crossed over.” These verses are not describing two separate incidents of Elisha picking up Elijah's cloak or two separate incidents of Elisha striking the Jordan; rather, the repetition brings the focus upon Elisha's crisis moment, when he asks, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?”³² The answer given by 2 Kings 2:19–25 is that the Lord is present with and through Elisha. Elisha now represents the presence of God. As Brian Aucker notes,

At its core, the answer to Elisha's question, “Where is the LORD?” is Elisha. If the actions of Elisha are being equated with the actions of YHWH then we should not be surprised if his own actions bring about life and death.... Verses like 2 Kgs 2:19–25 are programmatic, acting as a summation for the kinds of activities associated with Elisha in the ensuing tales and an answer to his question, “Where is YHWH?” which preceded.

The LORD is present in this prophet in a dramatic fashion.³³

Elisha has the Holy Spirit, exceeding even his predecessor Elijah, so that as a second Joshua he can walk with God, represent God, and call the people back to covenant faithfulness.

Unfortunately, Elisha doesn't affect a new conquest in which the people turn back to God. Elisha's actions are successful: his Spirit-empowered miracles help people, he leads a faithful remnant in the sons of the prophets, he brings blessing and judgment according to God's ways, and he represents God to a nation that has forgotten who God is. During Elisha's life and ministry Aram is defeated (2 Kgs 13:23–25), Baal worship is eradicated (2 Kgs 10:28), and the Omride dynasty is overthrown (2 Kgs 10:30). Yet the people do not turn back to the one, true God and his covenant with them. The sins of Jeroboam are not set aside (2 Kgs 10:29), the cult of Asherah remains (2 Kgs 13:6), and eventually Baal

³¹ Satterthwaite emphasizes the contrast between faith and unbelief in these two episodes and its importance for the whole of Elisha's ministry: “The two incidents which immediately follow Elisha's (second) crossing of the Jordan suggest the form this ‘conquest’ will take: those who accept him as YHWH's prophet (that is implied by the respectful request to him in v. 19) will experience YHWH's blessing, in the form of life and material prosperity of the land (here symbolized by wholesome water, vv. 21–22); those who reject him will suffer death (v. 24). The parallel between Elisha and Joshua in 2 Ki. 2–8 is thus a striking way of raising the possibility that in Elisha's day the people will, in Deuteronomic terms, ‘choose life’ (Dt. 30:15–20, esp. v. 19), sweeping away Baal worship in a reversal as complete as the conquest under Joshua.” Satterthwaite, “The Elisha Narratives,” 10 n. 25.

³² Aucker, “Where is the LORD,” 21.

³³ Aucker, “Where is the LORD,” 23–24. In addition to 2 Kings 2, Aucker provides two other lines of evidence for this conclusion (pp. 15–17). First, while the Lord's name is present throughout 2 Kings 2–8, the Lord does not directly speak or command anyone in these chapters. “The word of the Lord” comes to Elijah several times (1 Kgs 18:1; 19:9; 21:7, 28) but never to Elisha. We always read of his delivery of the Lord's Word as “thus says the Lord” (2 Kgs 2:21; 3:16, 17; 4:43; 7:1). Second, the sons of the prophets show a level of respect only given to royalty, gods, or the Lord, by bowing before him (2 Kgs 2:15; 4:37).

worship returns (Hos 2:8).³⁴ Despite Elisha's life and ministry in and through the Holy Spirit, both the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17) and the southern kingdom (2 Kgs 25) experience exile for their sins. Even Elisha, like each imperfect king, points forward to someone who can actually lead the people back to God. In pointing forward, Elisha serves as a preview of a better covenant, one that is entered through the Holy Spirit (Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27), the one that comes about through Jesus Christ.

2. Elisha, Jesus Christ, and the New Covenant

Just as Kings draws an analogy between Joshua and Elisha, so to do the Gospels draw an analogy between Elisha and Jesus Christ. This analogy is most prominent in the similarities of their respective anointings of the Holy Spirit. Elisha's ministry begins after he received a double portion of Elijah's Spirit on the other side of the Jordan River, and Jesus's public ministry begins when John baptizes him in the Jordan River. After Jesus is baptized, the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus while he hears a voice from heaven identifying him as God's beloved Son (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:28–34). Both Elisha and Jesus receive the Holy Spirit in the same Jordan area.³⁵ Both also receive the Holy Spirit through the ministry of their predecessor, Elijah for Elisha and John the Baptist for Jesus. Making this analogy even more explicit is the connection Jesus draws between Elijah and John the Baptist, describing him as the "Elijah who was to come" (Matt 11:14; cf. Matt 17:12), the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy that claimed Elijah would come again before the Day of the Lord (Mal 4:5–6). The angel Gabriel also tells John's father Zechariah that John would minister "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), thereby fulfilling Malachi's prophecy.³⁶ Just as Elisha succeeds and exceeds Elijah as a Spirit-empowered prophet, so too does Jesus succeed and exceed John the Baptist as the Spirit-empowered Son of God.

The Holy Spirit plays a similar role in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and Elisha, empowering both to accomplish their respective divine missions. Jesus's baptism and subsequent anointing with the Holy Spirit was his commissioning as the Messiah of God, the point in his life when he was equipped with authority and power to carry out his God-ordained work.³⁷ Jesus makes this clear when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth after his baptism, his Spirit-led temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1), and Spirit-empowered ministry in Galilee (4:15). He stands up in the synagogue, reads Isaiah 61:1–2a ("The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."), and then states that this Scripture was

³⁴ Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 308.

³⁵ Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," 88.

³⁶ In addition to being involved in the anointing of their successors with the Holy Spirit, other parallels between Elijah and John the Baptist include their unusual dress (2 Kgs 1:7–8; Matt 3:4), their ministries of announcing judgment and calling Israel to repentance (1 Kgs 18:36–46; Matt 3:1–3), the unbelieving kings they confront (Ahab and Herod), and the hostile queens who seek their lives (Jezebel and Herodias). Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel According to Elijah and Elisha* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 9–11; and Bruce K. Waltke, "Meditating on Scripture," *Tabletalk Magazine* (September 2009), <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/meditating-scripture/>.

³⁷ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus*, reprint ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 132. Hawthorne also notes the parallel between the anointings of Jesus and Elisha.

fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16–21). The point of Jesus's sermon is that he is the Spirit-empowered prophet who will save his people and bring them back to God. We know this because when the people who had known Jesus from his childhood reject him and his message (Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:22), Jesus compares his ministry to Elijah and Elisha, explicitly calling only Elisha a prophet after he has referred to himself as a prophet (Luke 4:24–27).³⁸ Jesus's ministry will be like Elijah's in some ways, but Elisha is the Spirit-empowered prophet whose ministry most particularly points toward Jesus. This point is strengthened when one realizes not only that Luke 4:27 is the only reference to Elisha in the entire New Testament, but also the lengths Jesus goes to make it clear to his disciples that, despite the crowds' opinions, he is not Elijah (Mark 6:15; 8:28; Matt 16:14; Luke 9:8, 19).³⁹

Jesus's ministry after his sermon in Nazareth confirms that he is the Spirit-empowered prophet to whom Elisha's life and ministry pointed. Like Elisha, Jesus gathers faithful followers (Matt 10:2–4; Mark 3:14–19; Luke 6:12–16; cf. 2 Kgs 2:15), feeding them miraculously (Mark 6:35–44; 8:1–10; cf. 2 Kgs 4:38–44). Like Elisha, Jesus is an itinerant miracle worker bringing life, blessing, and judgment through the power of the Holy Spirit to a people who had forgotten God.⁴⁰ As Bruce Waltke summarizes,

Both ... cleanse lepers (2 Kings 5; Mark 1:40–45); heal the sick (2 Kings 4:34–35; Mark 8:22–25; defy gravity (2 Kings 6:6; Matt 14:22–33); reverse death by raising sons and restoring them to their mothers (2 Kings 4:1–7; Luke 7:11–17); help widows in desperate circumstances; are kinsman redeemers to save from slavery (2 Kings 4:1–7; Luke 4:19); feed the hungry (2 Kings 4:1–7; Mark 8:1–12); minister to the Gentiles (2 Kings 5:1–16); prepare (2 Kings 6:20–23) and sit at table with sinners (Luke 5:29); lead captives (2 Kings 6:18–20; Eph 4:7–8); have a covetous disciple (Gehazi and Judas); end their lives in a life-giving-tomb from which people flee (2 Kings 13:20–21; Mark 16:1–8).⁴¹

Elisha's miracles testify to the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in his life in a way that is unique in Scripture until the coming of Jesus Christ, when God testifies to the ministry of his only-begotten Son through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit upon him, seen especially in Jesus's miracles (Heb 2:3–4).⁴² Jesus is the Second Elisha just as Elisha was the Second Joshua, the one who finally lives up to the name "God saves" (Matt 1:21).⁴³ Whereas Joshua and Elisha's missions were never completed, Jesus succeeds in his conquest.

Elisha is the Old Testament prophet who most fully demonstrates the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, even representing the presence of the Lord, but when he passes away his ministry is over, and the people of Israel continue their march toward exile. Yet Elisha represents hope to the

³⁸ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 164.

³⁹ Brodie, *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 80–81.

⁴⁰ "Performing miracles constitutes a substantial part of the career of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels, and it is in respect to miracles that we find the closest similarities between Jesus and Elisha," according to Brown, "Jesus and Elisha," 89. Brown goes on to argue that Elisha's miracles influence the very formation of the Gospel narratives (see pp. 89–104). Brodie also demonstrates the dependence of Luke-Acts and Mark upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Brodie, *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 79–97. See also Wolfgang M. W. Roth, "The Secret of the Kingdom," *ChrCent* 110 (1983): 179–82.

⁴¹ Waltke, "Meditating on Scripture."

⁴² Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy*, 11–12.

⁴³ Wray-Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 308.

original exilic audience reading Kings, that life with God through his Spirit was possible. Prophets such as Jeremiah (Jer 31:31–34) and Ezekiel (Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27) had prophesied about a new covenant God would make with his people, a covenant unlike the old covenant that had been broken by Israel's sin.⁴⁴ Under this new covenant God would write his law upon each person's heart so that they would know him intimately, something that would be possible because God would put his Holy Spirit within each person under this covenant.⁴⁵ Elisha calls Israel back to covenant faithfulness, but the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in his life also point forward to a time when this kind of relationship with God would be a reality for everyone who follows him. Old covenant believers were regenerated by the Holy Spirit but did not experience the Holy Spirit in the same way that new covenant believers do, which is why the emphasis on the Holy Spirit's power and presence in Elisha's life is so extraordinary, particularly in light of the new covenant prophecies.⁴⁶ Jesus as the second Elisha is the fulfillment of this hope, the hope of the fullness of the Spirit and new covenant. Jesus is the last and greatest of the prophets, the prophet *par excellence*.⁴⁷ He not only ministers in the power of the Holy Spirit, but he pours out the Holy Spirit upon others (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 2:4). He not only represents the presence of God, but he *is* the presence of God in the flesh (John 1:14, 18). He is the “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15), the one with the ultimate “double portion” of the Spirit, who by bestowing the Spirit upon his followers makes them children of God, “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17).

Like Elisha, Jesus's death brings life; unlike Elisha, Jesus's death brings eternal life because it inaugurates the long-awaited new covenant. Jesus clarifies this at the institution of the Lord's Supper, which is a perpetual reminder for the church that life in the new covenant is only possible because of

⁴⁴ Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel were likely written before Kings, making these prophecies available to the exiles. Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 425–27, 440–43.

⁴⁵ “Jeremiah promises a new medium on which the law will be written; Ezekiel promises a rebuilt temple and a return of God's Spirit. These passages present the indwelling or ‘pouring out’ of the Holy Spirit as an eschatological blessing for each believer.” James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 26.

⁴⁶ Cole explains, “With the OT language of ‘circumcised hearts,’ ‘hearts of flesh,’ replacing ‘hearts of stone,’ and ‘a new spirit,’ we are moving in the same conceptual field as the NT ideas of regeneration and new birth. However, our Lord does make it plain that the indwelling of the Spirit was contingent upon his own return to the Father (John 16:7). This is a permanent blessing for all God's new covenant people, not a temporary filling or a temporary coming of the Spirit upon a few as in the case of OT believers. According to this view, OT saints were regenerated but not indwelt by the Spirit. So there are elements of continuity between the Testaments (regeneration) and elements of discontinuity (indwelling). Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 145. See also Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence*, 1–204, who defends this view at length; and Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 121.

⁴⁷ Klink demonstrates how this is the point of John 2:1–11. He concludes, “Since the fourth evangelist has already made implicit the connection between Elisha and Jesus, and has already shown that Jesus' mission is a prophetic mission similar to the prophets of old, the chief steward's comment [2:10] is to differentiate between the work of previous prophets and Jesus' prophetic mission. The new wine that is better than the old is Jesus himself who is the last of a long line of ‘prophets’ and the greatest of them all.” Edward W. Klink, III, “What Concern Is That to You and Me? John 2:1–11 and the Elisha Narratives,” *Neot* 39 (2005): 282.

Christ's broken body and shed blood (Matt 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20)⁴⁸ As Leon Morris states,

When Jesus spoke of his blood as blood "of the covenant" he was surely claiming that, at the cost of his death, he was about to inaugurate the new covenant of which the prophet [Jeremiah] had spoken. This was a big claim. Jesus was saying that his death would be central to the relationship between God and the people of God. It would be the means of cleansing from past sins and consecrating to a new life of service to God. It would be the establishing of the covenant that was based not on people's keeping it (Exod 24:3, 7), but on God's forgiveness (Jer 31:34).⁴⁹

Not only does Jesus make it clear that his death on the cross inaugurates the new covenant, he also indicates that life under the new covenant is an entirely new kind of life with God, life lived in and through the Holy Spirit. After explaining the connection between his death and the new covenant, Jesus states that he will not drink the fruit of the vine until he drinks it new with his disciples in his Father's Kingdom (Matt 26:29). Jesus is soon to go to the cross, which means that he will no longer physically be with his disciples until the kingdom, but they will still live in God's presence, because before Jesus goes he will send the Holy Spirit, who will be another *paraclete* who will be with them forever (John 14:6). Jesus states that he must go in order for the Holy Spirit to come (16:7), and that it is to the disciples' advantage that he goes and the Spirit comes, because the Spirit will abide with them and be in them eternally (14:16–17; 16:7; cf. 7:37–39). Jesus's death inaugurates the new covenant because he doesn't stay dead but rises from the grave in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 1:3–4; 8:11), and then pours out the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4).

Jesus not only has the Spirit but also gives the Spirit to all who believe in him, allowing all believers in Christ to experience the blessings of the new covenant.⁵⁰ Peter in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:16–21) indicates that the Spirit of prophecy has come for all people, as Joel 2:28–32 foretold.⁵¹ As Graham Cole states, "If God is going to live with his people, then they will need new life, intimacy with him restored, and what was the privilege of only some in Israel needs to be extended to all. The Spirit's outpouring is a necessary condition for any of this to take place."⁵² Elisha's life and ministry in the Holy Spirit served as a preview of what life with God could look like under the new covenant, and Jesus makes the preview a reality for all who turn from their sin and turn toward God.

⁴⁸ While the new covenant is only mentioned explicitly on this occasion in the Gospels, the entire New Testament presents Jesus as the one who inaugurates the Old Testament's covenant promises. This theology is most fully developed in Hebrews, which emphasizes the superiority of the new covenant over the old and underlines the role of the Spirit in the new covenant (Heb 7:22; 8:6–10:31; 12:18–24; 13:20). See P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 427–29.

⁴⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 660.

⁵⁰ This is the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), which each New Testament believer experiences at the moment of faith (1 Cor 12:13), making it clear that life in the church is life in the Spirit. See John Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

⁵¹ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 43–45.

⁵² Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 140.

3. Conclusion

During his ministry Elisha works to help Israel turn from their false gods and return to the one, true God and the blessings of his covenant. God empowered Elisha with his Holy Spirit so that Elisha could accomplish this mission. More so than any previous prophet, even his predecessor Elijah, Elisha demonstrated the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life and ministry, bringing life, blessing, and judgment through his miracles and his presence. Elisha's experience of the Holy Spirit also brought hope to a people soon to experience exile for their sin, that life with God was possible, and that God would make it possible through a new covenant. Elisha's ministry deliberately recalled Joshua's, and although he didn't lead his people to blessing in the Promised Land, he helped to pave the way for the one who would. Exile is not God's final word. Jesus Christ came as the Second Elisha, the ultimate Spirit-empowered prophet, and he succeeded in his conquest, making it possible for anyone who believed to experience new life through the Holy Spirit under the new covenant. Elisha's life anticipated the life of Christ, and in doing so it also anticipates the Spirit-filled life all Christ-followers are able to have. Elisha helps us understand that through the Holy Spirit we can know God, bring life and healing in a culture of death, represent the presence of God, and do even greater works than our Master (John 14:12).