



2 KINGS

DALE RALPH DAVIS







2 KINGS

THE POWER AND THE FURY

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DALE RALPH DAVIS

CHRISTIAN
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Abbreviations

ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> , 3 rd ed.
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> (ed. D. J. A. Clines)
ESV	Scripture quotations marked esv are from <i>The Holy Bible, English Standard Version</i> , copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
IDB	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
IDBS	<i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible/Supplementary Volume</i>
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JB	Scripture quotations marked jb are taken from <i>The Jerusalem Bible</i> . Copyright © 1966 by Darton, Longman, and Todd, Ltd., and Doubleday, A Division of Bantam, Doubleday, Bell Publishing Group.
K-B	Koehler & Baumgartner, <i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon</i>
LXX	The Septuagint
NASB	Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the <i>New American Standard Bible</i> ®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation Used by Permission. (www.lockman.org)
NBD	<i>New Bible Dictionary</i>
NBV	New Berkley Version
NEB	Scripture quotations marked (NEB) are from <i>The New English Bible</i> © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press 1961,1970.
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis</i>



- NIV Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.
- NJB New Jerusalem Bible
- NJPS Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (1985)
- NKJV Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the *New King James Version*. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
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- NRSV Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the *The New Revised Standard Version*: copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- REB Scripture quotations marked are taken from *The Revised English Bible*. Copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press 1989.
- RSV Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- TEV Scripture quotations marked GNT are taken from the *Good News Translation in Today's English Version – Second Edition* Copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society. Used by Permission.
- TWOT *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*





Preface

When I taught in seminary I was always glad when I had a class on November 10, Martin Luther's birthday. We would do a 'Luther' cheer to begin class that day. I would holler, 'Give me an "L"!' and they would shout it back, and so on through Brother Martin's surname until I could yell, 'What does it spell?' and they would thunder back 'Luther!' It was a rousing way to begin class and forty or so, mostly male, voices easily rose to the invitation for mounting bedlam. I've far fewer opportunities for rowdiness now that I'm serving a congregation again, but I was especially delighted over Luther's birthday this year because it was the very day I finished the rough draft of this 2 Kings commentary. Twenty years ago I began writing, hoping to produce expositional commentaries on the 'Former Prophets' (Joshua–2 Kings minus Ruth) and it is gratifying to finish that course.

I am especially thankful to the kind folks at Christian Focus, who picked up an 'orphaned' series halfway through. I have never forgotten Malcolm Maclean's visit one March day and his willingness to take a rejected 2 Samuel manuscript back to Scotland with him. And I owe a huge debt to the elders at Woodland Presbyterian where I now serve. Any number of times they have asked me if I was 'getting enough time to work on the commentary.' They even offered to relieve me of preaching the evening services for a while in order to free up





time to write. (Actually, there may have been more behind that offer than I'm willing to admit.) I get to serve with such generous and encouraging men.

This book goes out as a tribute to Derek and Rosemary Thomas and to David and Andrea Jussely, former and esteemed colleagues while at Reformed Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, and special friends always. David did me (and others) the immense favor of pastoring Woodland Presbyterian some years before I arrived here. Because he poured some ten years of his sweat and prayers into this congregation, my work is so much easier now. One of the privileges I now miss is having an office door fifteen feet from Derek's, where I could find sense, hilarity, and helpfulness, usually all at one time. Not that I didn't help him. I still remember the days he would arrive at the seminary very early but forget his keys and wait, woebegone-like, until I arrived to let him in. It is my delight to send off *Power and Fury* in honor of these dear brothers and elect ladies.

Advent 2004





Introduction

When I was serving in theological academia we would occasionally have a student who couldn't begin studies at the start of the term. He might arrive, say, three weeks into the semester. Such students drop into the middle of things and that is a hard place to begin; they have to play catch-up and get their academic sea legs quickly. Generally, we don't like to begin in the middle of things. We want to see the whole play or read the whole novel.

2 Kings, however, makes us begin in the middle of things. It opens with the paramedics inspecting mangled King Ahaziah after a brutal second-storey fall. Rather abrupt.

Actually, this undesirable situation was not always the case because 2 Kings has not always been 2 Kings! Originally our 1 and 2 Kings were simply the single book of Kings. However, Greek translations of the Old Testament (after ca. 200 BC) divided the book into two segments, probably because of its length. This division then appeared in printed editions of the Hebrew text (1500s) and continues in, among others, our English Bible tradition.

So we must go back, at least momentarily, to pull 1 Kings into the picture and to see 1–2 Kings as one overall document. In a previous volume,¹ I laid out the major divisions of 1–2 Kings like this:

¹ *The Wisdom and the Folly: An Exposition of the Book of First Kings* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 11.



- I. The Golden Age, 1 Kings 1–11
- II. The Torn Kingdom, 1 Kings 12–2 Kings 17
- III. The Last Days, 2 Kings 18–25

The first segment focuses on the splendor of Solomon's reign, the second on the 'divided' kingdom(s) (north and south, Israel and Judah) with far more attention to the northern kingdom and its apostasy, and the third on Judah (the southern kingdom) by itself as it slides, only slightly hindered, into divine judgment and Babylonian exile.

Now that is the big view of the 'book' of Kings. And yet, in spite of the artificial division of Kings, one can almost say that 1 Kings and 2 Kings each carries its own distinct emphasis; in fact, they follow a similar pattern, moving from generally positive to terribly negative. 1 Kings begins with the blessing and wisdom of Solomon's kingship (1 Kings 1–10) only to continue with the folly of both Solomon and of the northern kings—especially Jeroboam I in his slick syncretism and Ahab in his raw paganism (1 Kings 11–22). 2 Kings moves similarly, beginning with an interlude of grace under the ministry of Elisha, through whom Yahweh displays the power he would lavish on Israel (2 Kings 1–8); with grace despised, however, the process of judgment presses on until Yahweh consigns his people to the tender mercies of the Assyrians and Babylonians (2 Kings 9–25). Hence I dub this study of 2 Kings, *The Power and the Fury*.



The Torn Kingdom
(continued)

2 Kings 1–17







The Fire This Time (2 Kings 1)

Second Kings begins on a positive note: Ahab is dead. You may think that is a nasty sentiment, but you must remember that Ahab was a conduit that allowed pagan sewage to engulf Israel (1 Kings 16:29-34), one who tolerated injustice (1 Kings 21), and who hated God's word (e.g., 1 Kings 22). But the Ahabs always die—that is good news. The bad news is that Ahab, Jr., follows him. Ahaziah is a chip off the old, dead block. Welcome to Israel, 852 BC.

One could develop this exposition under various schemes but since Old Testament historical narrative is 'a declaration from God about God' (Alec Motyer) I far prefer highlighting how Yahweh reveals himself in this passage.

The God who detests our idols (vv. 1-8)

Who knows exactly how it happened? Ahaziah fell from the second floor when some screen-work gave way. Apparently a serious injury since his inquiry implies he was uncertain of recovery. We needn't debate whether Ekron's god was Baalzebub or Baalzebul. The Baal-prefix says it all: he walks in the religious rut of his father as goaded by Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29-34). The king in Samaria thinks his hope for years to come squats in a temple forty-five miles (seventy-two kilometers) away in Philistia.



'But the angel of Yahweh spoke to Elijah the Tishbite...' (v. 3a). God doesn't twiddle when apostasy is afoot. There were Ahaziah's messengers (v. 2) and now there is Yahweh's messenger sent to intercept them. Elijah's message is both question and judgment:

Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire from Baal-zebub god of Ekron? Now therefore, here's what Yahweh says: 'The bed to which you have gone up—you will not come down from it, but you will surely die' (vv. 3-4).

So Elijah went off per instructions (v. 4b).

The next thing we know, Ahaziah's lackeys are reporting back to him (v. 5). The writer assumes that we are intelligent readers, so he omits details of the actual encounter between Ahaziah's men and Elijah. Assuming it took place as directed, he focuses the king's surprise at their swift return (v. 5b). Ahaziah knows they've aborted their mission. Why? They tell the king of the man who met them, the orders he gave, the message he announced (v. 6). They obeyed his orders; the stranger's authority trumped the king's authority.¹ The king presses for a description of the culprit (v. 7). Hearing that he was a 'hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist' (v. 8, NJKV), he knew—probably with a mix of despair and rage—that it was Elijah.²

What do we meet in this section of the story? Above all, *an intolerant God*. The suave, self-appointed connoisseurs of religious taste in our time will be aghast if ever they happen on to this story. How can Yahweh in his wild, untamed holiness sentence a man to death simply for exercising his religious preferences in a critical hour of his life? Yahweh here is not the democratic sort of God people crave, according to the polls. Our times would prefer the mythology of the Ancient Near East, where gods and goddesses were permissive and casual and never insisted upon exclusive loyalty. None of these deities thought it a mortal sin should one of his/her devotees want to

¹ Ahaziah's messengers must have been impressed by Elijah's authority. They do not question him at all and willingly risk the royal wrath by returning with the king's orders unfulfilled. Cf. K. D. Fricke, *Das zweite Buch von den Königen*, Die Botschaft des alten Testaments (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1972), 19-20.

² NKJV is correct in v. 8: 'hairy' describes Elijah himself, not his clothing.

be ecumenical in his devotion. But in the Bible we meet Yahweh and keep bashing ourselves against his first commandment (Exod. 20:3).³ Nor is it any better in the New Testament. Jesus goes around insisting folks must smash idols if they would follow as disciples (Mark 10:21-22). He is as obnoxious as Yahweh. Who does he think he is?

We also meet a *trenchant idolatry* here. We must not think Ahaziah's resort to Baal-zebub was simply a sudden act of desperation in a moment of weakness. Flip back your Bible page to 1 Kings 22:52-53, where the writer summarizes the *policy* of Ahaziah's reign. 'He served Baal and bowed down to him' (v. 53). In verse 2 (of the present text) Ahaziah only displays the *consistency* of his 'faith'. His appeal to Baal was not a knee-jerk reaction in a sudden emergency. Baal has always been Ahaziah's deity of choice; he has had no place for Yahweh. His idolatry was due to preference, not to ignorance or weakness.

In one of his books Carl Henry discusses the view of Hoyle and Wickramasinghe that life arrived on earth from outer space. Hoyle and Wickramasinghe 'project a supraterrrestrial principle of intelligence, one somewhat more than human yet less than ultimate and absolute and hence not a personal God.' Looking beyond the earth to the whole universe for an explanation of life has, according to these theorists, distinct advantages. 'For one thing,' they say, 'it offers the possibility of high intelligence within the universe that is not God.'⁴ That is a most revealing statement. Whom are they trying to avoid? Looks like they have a vested interest in positing something, anything, so long as 'it' is not the personal, omnipotent God. Their idolatry seems light-years away from Ahaziah's but at root it is the same: a *commitment* has already been made that wants no truck with Yahweh. For the king the idol was Baal; for the scientists a nebulous, non-divine super-intelligence afoot somewhere in the universe.

³ I like the way the Scots Confession (1560) puts this matter front and center. The very first lines of the confession are: 'We confess and acknowledge one God alone, to whom alone we must cleave, whom alone we must serve, whom only we must worship, and in whom alone we put our trust.' It goes on to describe and identify the triune God, but this *demand* comes first.

⁴ Quotations from C. F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word, 1983), 6:178-79.



Yet Ahaziah's was also a *foolish idolatry*.⁵ For a believer in Yahweh there is such a sadness about it all. Here is the king, perhaps near life's end—at least his request (v. 2) suggests Ahaziah knew it could be his 'last illness'. And in this desperate moment we hear, 'Go, inquire of Baal-zebub.' The moment so crucial; the recourse so asinine. The spectre of death does not necessarily produce good sense.

In one of his novels Walker Percy has his lead character, Will Barrett, writing a letter in which he lampoons both Christians and unbelievers—particularly the latter. According to Barrett, an unbeliever is crazy partly because

he takes comfort and ease, plays along with the game, watches TV, drinks his drink, laughs, curses politicians, and now and again to relieve the boredom and the farce (of which he is dimly aware) goes off to war to shoot other people—for all the world as if his prostate were not growing cancerous, his arteries turning to chalk, his brain cells dying off by the millions, as if the worms were not going to have him in no time at all.⁶

Staring our end in the face, whether slowly or suddenly, ought to drive us to sobriety and truth. But it doesn't necessarily drive us to sobriety; that was Will Barrett's point. And sometimes it makes us sober (as, apparently, in Ahaziah's case) but not smart (seeking Baal, not Yahweh). Death is no time to be playing with dead-end religious options. We must have the One who has the words of eternal life (cf. John 6:68). But here is Ahaziah about to step off the edge of life with nothing but Baal, or, I should say, with nothing.

We also run into a *kind severity* in this passage. No doubt about the severity—Yahweh's wrath glows at white heat, his disdain oozes out of his question, 'Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub?' (v. 3). His judgment is unsparing: Ahaziah will be bed-ridden and death-stricken (v. 4).

⁵ I owe the bulk of this point to my friend and former colleague Derek Thomas. I simply had not thought of it until I heard him preach on this text at First Presbyterian, Jackson, Mississippi.

⁶ Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 189-90.



Yahweh's words are repeated three times (vv. 3, 6, 16)—clearly they highlight the central concern of the narrative. When Ahaziah sends to Philistia he implies Israel has no God; when he appeals to Baal-zebub he is implying that Yahweh is either non-existent or irrelevant and inadequate. (Is this not, in principle, the essence of all our idolatry? By taking first recourse to other helps and supports we subtly confess the inadequacy and insufficiency of Yahweh to handle our dilemmas.) So Yahweh's intrusion is anything but affable and courteous. He sends Elijah to cut off and stifle the king's godless expedition. The command Elijah hears is very similar to one he received in 1 Kings 21:17-18. There Ahab had allowed Jezebel to shove Naboth and his sons through her meat-grinder so that Ahab might obtain Naboth's vineyard. Then 'the word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Rise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria..."' And here in 2 Kings 1 we find the same idiom: 'But the angel of Yahweh spoke to Elijah the Tishbite, "Rise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria..."' (v. 3). Rise, go down to meet; rise, go up to meet. But the import is the same: nail him in his tracks.

If, however, Yahweh is severe, he is at the same moment merciful. His nasty interruption of Ahaziah's mission is, if the king could only see, a last opportunity. Yahweh did not allow Ahaziah's idolatry to proceed in peace but invaded his space and rubbed his face in the first commandment again. Again we see our uncomfortable God: Yahweh is furious, not tolerant; holy, not reassuring; loving, not nice. But there *is* love in his fury. He won't let you walk the path to idolatry easily; his mercy litters the way with roadblocks. That is a wonder considering he so detests our idols.

The God who defends his witness (vv. 9-12)

Some commentators are quite clear that this section is *not* one of their favorite Bible stories. John Gray, for example, writes:

There may well be a nucleus of historical fact in Elijah's protest against Ahaziah's appeal to the oracle of Baal of Ekron (vv. 2-8, 17), but in the annihilation of the king's innocent emissaries by fire (vv. 9-16) there is a moral pointlessness, which relegates the tradition to the same category as Elisha's baneful curse upon the rude boys of Bethel (2.23f.).⁷

Another writes of the 'preposterousness of the miraculous element' in the story and laments 'its inhumanity with the destruction of the innocent fifties'.⁸ Now some difficulties cannot be alleviated. Some scholars and readers will always find the miraculous preposterous, and no story of 102 troops turned to toast can meet the standards of middle-class refinement. But 'moral pointlessness'? Has anyone who holds that really read the story? So we must dive in.

Let's begin with *blame*. Why did Elijah do that? Answer: he didn't. The first two captains come strutting onto the scene each with his own brand of arrogance. The first emphasizes royal authority: '*The king* has ordered, "Come down"' (v. 9b); the second demands speed: 'O man of God, here's what the king says: "Come down—quick!"' (v. 11b). In each case Elijah replies, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men' (vv. 10a, 12a).⁹ When we are told that fire 'came down from heaven' (vv. 10b, 12b) we are to understand that God answered Elijah's call affirmatively. If Elijah's request was wrong-headed or reprehensible or perverse, God would not and should not have assented. The account shows that Yahweh approved Elijah's call for fire.¹⁰ So let's quit beating up on Elijah. Blame Yahweh—he did it.¹¹

⁷ John Gray, *I & II Kings*, Old Testament Library, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 459. The story is not morally pointless in my view, but, supposing it were, I fail to see how moral pointlessness in itself is a valid argument against historicity.

⁸ J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 348.

⁹ When Elijah picks up their term of address, he seems almost to be saying, "Man of God," hmm...do you really understand what that may mean? "God" isn't a mere three-letter word, you know. If I am a man of God, then where I am God is likely to be acting.' Indeed this last is what Elijah calls for, because when he says 'Let fire come down from heaven,' he means 'Let Yahweh send it.'

¹⁰ In his earlier work (*Elijah and Elisha* [1957], 77-78) R. S. Wallace holds that as God's servants we are 'often as mistaken, self-centred and stupid as Elijah was in his behaviour on that mountain'. He proposes an anti-Elijah, pro-God explanation: 'Elijah may have given a most unworthy representation of the true nature of God and yet God protected him and used him. In this conflict between the vicious and rebellious king and the foolish and unworthy prophet God took the side of the prophet. He did not withdraw His help from Elijah because Elijah made a callous and dramatic fool of himself. He did not wait until one side was prepared to behave in a perfectly holy manner before He chose which side He was to be on.' Granted, God may give his help to his servants even in their wrong-headedness—one may find that in other texts. But for 2 Kings 1 I think Wallace's explanation suffers from hermeneutical schizophrenia, for Yahweh's response implies that Elijah's request was proper in these circumstances.

¹¹ Occasionally Jesus' rebuke of James and John in Luke 9:54-55 is taken as his implicit disapproval of Elijah's actions in 2 Kings 1. It is no such thing. Jesus rebukes

Now we must consider *intent*: What was the king trying to do by sending two military contingents to apprehend the prophet? This question mystifies some commentators: '[I]t is unclear why Ahaziah, who had already received Elijah's word through messengers (v. 6), should now wish to consult him through military personnel.'¹² Unclear? Ahaziah wished to 'consult' Elijah? Do you send a fifty-man posse to procure a consultant? Some interpreters never understand this passage because they never consider Ahaziah's intention. Ellison is right: 'The fifty men were not intended to be a guard of honour! It was an open declaration of hostilities, and Elijah treated it as such.'¹³ Ahaziah planned to silence the word of God through Elijah—probably by liquidating Elijah (cf. the implied danger to Elijah's life in the angel of Yahweh's words in v. 15). The king was not inviting Elijah to dinner. Why is this so hard to see? Here is an undefended prophet accosted by royal military muscle. The palace intends to use its police in order to dispose of the prophet.

We are ready then to consider the *function*. That is, why the fire (vv. 10b, 12b)? What was Yahweh's objective in sending his judgment in this form?

One cannot understand 2 Kings 1 unless one remembers 1 Kings 18. The latter passage relates the 'god contest' on Mount Carmel, Yahweh versus Baal. Fire was the burning issue of the day: the God who answered by fire would show himself to be the real God (1 Kings 18:21, 23-24, 36-39). It was a matter of *proof*. That is the function of the fire in 2 Kings 1 as well. Oh, it should have been unnecessary. King Ahaziah surely knew what had taken place just a few years before at Mt. Carmel. It was a public, prime-time affair covered (if one may be anachronistic) by all the major news networks. It was not done in a corner. It scared the liver out of the folks who saw it and they never

James and John for misreading the present situation (a Samaritan village refusing him hospitality) - such judgment is not yet called for since 'his present mission is not as judge but as saviour' (E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Century Bible Commentary [London: Oliphants, 1974], 152).

¹² G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, New Century Bible Commentary, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 2:376.

¹³ H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 34. Cf. also Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 285.

stopped talking about it. Carmel Day made the point: Yahweh is the real God, Baal a sorry non-entity. But Ahaziah didn't get the point. When he has an urgent need for health care, he appeals to Baal (v. 2)—Baal the loser (1 Kings 18). What do you do when someone is so dense, so 'thick,' that he doesn't grasp what fire (1 Kings 18:38) means? You send more fire (2 Kings 1:10b, 12b)! The point is the same, i.e., Yahweh is the only God, but the fire is not only demonstrative (as at Carmel in 1 Kings 18) but destructive (102 seared remains, thanks to Ahaziah). The first commandment really matters to Yahweh, and Ahaziah just doesn't get it.¹⁴

The fire, however, also functions as *protection*. Here it is Yahweh's means of defending the bearer of his word, his undefended prophet. God does not always provide such protection, as 1 Kings 18:4, 13 show. Even in Elijah's own time Yahweh did not grant all prophets immunity from Jezebel's bloody pogroms. Yet in this instance Elijah *is* protected from Ahaziah's clutches. What is the significance (i.e., the sign-value) of this? Does not Ahaziah represent the power of any kingdom, any throne, any ruler, any government that tries to stifle Yahweh's word and silence his witnesses? And does not this little scenario testify that no king, no despot, no tyrant will ever be able totally to extinguish the witness of the word of God in this world?

Perhaps Cornelius Martens is another case in point. Martens, a Baptist preacher in the 1920s in the Soviet Union, was once taken to the office of the local Communist Party boss, apparently for interrogation. The Party boss ordered two men to strip Martens of his clothes, but Martens told them not to trouble themselves, that he would undress, adding, 'I don't fear to die, for I shall be going home to the Lord. If He has decided my hour hasn't come, you can't do me any harm here.' This last remark drove the Party boss into a rage: 'I'll prove to you that your God will not deliver you out of my hands!' He lifted his revolver to drop Martens in his tracks, but his finger

¹⁴ This episode should keep us from hankering after miracles. The miracle in this text (sending fire) is not a compliment to faith but a judgment on unbelief. If God must go to that extreme to get your attention then you, like Ahaziah, must be in nigh-hopeless unbelief. Miracles may be a sign of our perversity rather than a mark of God's pleasure.



froze on the trigger. Three times he tried to fire and failed. His face grew red, his body began to shake, and he looked ready for a coronary episode. At last he lowered the gun and asked a lesser official what Martens was condemned for. The official answered, 'He is a Baptist. Can't you see God is fighting for him?' The boss ordered Martens to get out and stay away.¹⁵

Did that usually happen? No, the blood of God's servants ran deep in the Soviet Gulag where they were mashed without pity. But sometimes, in the midst of it all, the Lord of the church gives the power-grubbers of this age a sign of how abysmally helpless they are. That fuels the holy defiance of God's servants, for it shows them again that the word of God *will* have free course and none of the puny, piddly, royal Ahaziah's of this age can stop it!

The God who deflates our pride (vv. 13-15)

What if there had been cable television news coverage in 850 BC? Here is this officer sitting in the barracks with a few of his men, eyes glued on the monitor, watching the live report of the recent tragedy, with shots of emergency vehicles rushing to the scene and clips of some arriving at hospital emergency rooms. Then a dispatch arrives from the palace for our captain. His face drops as he reads the first line: 'Take fifty men...'

This third captain does not spout the previous arrogance (vv. 9, 11). He is different in his posture ('and knelt on his knees before Elijah,' v. 13b), in his purpose ('and he made a plea for grace to him,' v. 13c), and in his petition ('O man of God, let my life and the life of these fifty servants of yours be valued in your eyes,' v. 13d). The man was clearly terrified, for he fully knew what had happened to the former two contingents. In verse 14 he so much as says, 'I know I am within a centimeter of destruction—please spare me.' He knelt, he pled, he trembled—he lived.

In my previous studies of this passage I have usually ignored the response of this third captain. I think that was patently wrong. His response stands in dead opposition to that of the first two officers. Surely the writer wants us to note that. Perhaps the writer even wants to suggest that here, in this

¹⁵ James and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 233-34.



third captain's words, Israel has a model response to Yahweh's wrath. Here Israel can see the way to life.

There are always some who will object. They will say that our motives should be more positive, that we should not be driven to repentance by something so servile or negative as the simple terror that drove this captain. But this captain *is* walking down the hill alive at Elijah's side (v. 15) and he knows such sentimentality is nonsense. There is nothing wrong with terror, so long as it is a *true* terror for that can become—as it did for him—a *saving* terror. Better to be trembling and alive than a puddle of carbon.

It must have been a similar fear that gripped hearers that August day in 1756 when George Whitefield preached in William Grimshaw's Yorkshire parish. Grimshaw had had an elevated pulpit constructed outside the south wall of the parish church—the number of hearers would not then be restricted to the capacity of the church building. Whitefield stood there as he addressed a massive throng. After prayer he solemnly announced his text. It was Hebrews 9:27. 'It is appointed unto men once to die and after this the judgment.' He paused, was about to proceed but was cut off by a wild, curdling shriek from the middle of the congregation. Pastor Grimshaw hurried to investigate and, after some minutes, returned to tell Whitefield that 'an immortal soul has been called into eternity.' This news was announced to the people. After a few moments Whitefield again announced his text: 'It is appointed unto men once to die...'

Another piercing shriek rose from another part of the crowd. Horror settled over the assembly when they heard a *second* person had fallen dead. After the turmoil had subsided somewhat, Mr. Whitefield indicated his intention of proceeding with the service. He did so, doubtless announcing his text again to an assembly as still as death.¹⁶ Do you suppose they listened to Whitefield that day on that text? And why did they do so? Fear. Indeed, terror. It was unnerving but not unhealthy. Not if it humbled them to hear. If we ever get past the first stanza of Newton's hymn we understand that: 'Twas *grace* that taught my heart to *fear*.'

¹⁶ Faith Cook, *William Grimshaw of Haworth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 192-94 (citing, in part, A. C. H. Seymour).

The God who delivers on his threats (vv. 17-18)

There was no interview. Elijah simply announced to Ahaziah, eyeball to eyeball, the same word the king had already heard (vv. 3, 6) and rejected, ending with 'You will surely die' (v. 16). 'So he died according to the word of Yahweh' (v. 17a). The writer's comment is both immediate and almost laconic. As if to say, 'What do you expect? If Yahweh speaks, it happens.'

We haven't time nor space to punch rewind or fast forward buttons on the text of 1-2 Kings. So permit me to dogmatize: the fulfillment of Yahweh's word is a major theme of 1-2 Kings. Here is another case in point. The writer wants you to see it again in verses 16-17a: what Yahweh says, Yahweh does. He is the God who delivers on his threats. 'So he died according to the word of Yahweh.'

This point cuts both ways, however, for this text implies that if Yahweh so certainly fulfills his threats he will just as certainly fulfill his promises. What Yahweh declares can be counted on—that is the point. Hence his assurances are as reliable as his judgments. Christ's flock needs to know that when they look at John 6:37 or 14:3. King Ahaziah experienced one side of the certainty of God's word, but that sure word can shield as well as shatter you, can support you as well as smash you.

The writer cleans up Ahaziah's reign, using his semi-conventional formulas (vv. 17b-18).¹⁷ B. O. Long draws attention to the peculiar nature of the account:

Aside from the brief notice about Moab's rebellion, v. 1, this narrative is the only incident reported for the reign. Curiously, the writer recounts not how the king ruled but how he died!¹⁸

There's something haunting then about this record of Ahaziah's brief tenure. In the supreme need of his life he did not seek the real God—that's all we know about him. That's both sad and stupid. Yet Ahaziah is not the focus of the story. God is. I've tried to stress this in the way I have stated the main points. You ought to deal with him. Of course, you can do what you

¹⁷ The chronological problem of verse 17b will be addressed in our treatment of 2 Kings 3.

¹⁸ Burke O. Long, *2 Kings*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 17.



want with this strange story. You can call it legend; you can aver that it deals with a primitive level of religion; you can claim it is morally offensive; or you can face the God of whom it speaks.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is God so intolerant of Ahaziah?
2. Why is idolatry such an affront to God?
3. Why would Ahaziah turn to Baal rather than Yahweh in his time of need? What was the pull of Baal over Yahweh?
4. Do you think that God's action of destroying the 102 men is a defense for Elijah?
5. What are the parallels between the episodes with the two captains at Mt. Carmel?
6. Why use Believers so ready to claim the promises of God but not follow seriously His threats?

