

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. XIX, No. 4

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June/July 1997

Elijah's Job

by Gary North

And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word. And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. So he went and did according unto the word of the LORD: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan (I Ki. 17:1-5).

Elijah's ministry was a depressing one, as was true of most of the prophets of Israel. His was not a ministry of redemption and reconciliation. His was a ministry of condemnation and confrontation. His was not a ministry of positive sanctions; it was a ministry of negative sanctions. This was true of most of the prophets to Israel. The one major exception was Jonah, but Jonah was not sent to Israel.

The office of prophet was unique to Old Covenant Israel. This covenantal office no longer exists. What was unique about the prophetic office was that it was legitimized by predictable sanctions. A prophet's word was superior to a king's word or a high priest's word. A prophet, who had been neither anointed by a high priest or ordained by the people, nevertheless possessed lawful authority over church and state. But this authority was not permanent. It lasted for only as long as God's corporate negative sanctions were imminent. The prophet came in the name of God in God's capacity as sanctions-bringer. Sometimes the prophet called on men to repent; most of the time he simply warned of the imminent sanctions. The command to repent was implied by God's law: positive corporate sanctions for covenant-keeping; negative corporate sanctions for covenant-breaking. Every warning about imminent judgment was a call to return to God's law.

There was a two-fold test of the prophetic office: accurate predictions of the immediate future and adherence to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The death penalty was mandatory for any prophet whose predictions failed to come true – signs and wonders (Deut. 13:1-5) or any other event (Deut. 18:22) – or who announced the sovereignty of any other god (Deut. 18:20). There was a very high risk for anyone claiming to be a prophet whose words had not been put into his mouth by God. Or so it seemed. But there really wasn't. A true prophet would come in times of apostasy. But in times of apostasy, the word of God is not honored. The false prophet was honored; the true prophet was not. So, the negative civil

sanctions would be imposed on the true prophet, which was the case in Israel. Then God's corporate negative sanctions would come with a vengeance.

Jesus Christ's ministry was the fulfillment of the prophetic office, which He annulled when He came in judgment in the final act of corporate negative sanctions against Old Covenant Israel: the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He knew what was in store for Him and what would then be in store for Israel. He warned the religious rulers that this would be the case, for it had always been the fate of prophets to be put under negative sanctions by the rulers of Israel, leaving the nation exposed to God's wrath.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate (Matt. 23:29-38).

Elijah's Message

As a prophet, Elijah had access to divine revelation. God told him that negative corporate sanctions were coming. Elijah came before the king and warned him of the imminent destruction. He did not tell Ahab to repent. He also did not go to the people to warn them. Then he departed – first from the king's immediate presence, then from the nation.

There were righteous men in Israel in Ahab's day, but Elijah did not have a ministry to them. Only in the final days of Elijah's life did God tell him that there were 7,000 Israelites who had not bowed the knee to Baal (I Ki. 19:18). There was no way that he

could have known this. Jezebel would soon lash out against Israel's prophets, killing those she could locate (I Ki. 18:4). Obadiah, the king's counsellor, hid 100 prophets in two caves and fed them (v. 4). All of the righteous men of Israel went into hiding, either in caves or in anonymity. They would remain in hiding throughout the subsequent drought and famine.

God did not tell Elijah to tell everyone in Israel that there was a killing drought on its way. Elijah did not walk through the streets of the cities of Israel to warn them that the wrath of God was imminent. He told only the nation's senior political representative, who in fact was little more than a pawn in his wife's hand. Emotionally, Ahab was a servant of his wife. There was no likelihood that Elijah's warning would have any effect on Ahab's actions, for his wife refused to hear God's word, right up until the day she died.

God did not expect the king to repent. He did not expect the nation to repent. He therefore expected the nation to suffer. He called on Elijah to inform the king of the imminent sanction, and then told Elijah to make himself as scarce as water was about to become. He took Elijah to a brook: the sign of God's grace in a time of drought. It was in the presence of the brook that God showed Elijah that the sanction had begun: "And it came to pass after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land" (I Ki. 17:7).

Hidden in a Cave

Elijah's place of security in the desert was about to end. Without water, his location was a death trap. God told him to get out of Israel. He was to go to Sidon, where a widow would care for him (v. 9). He did exactly as he was told.

Elijah's work in Israel was put on hold for the next three and a half years – time, times, and half a time. He had no message of healing for Israel. There was no legitimate hope inside Israel for the next 42 months.

Elijah needed anonymity. In anonymity was safety. This he learned only after his return from Sidon. Obadiah told him: "As the LORD thy God liveth, there is no nation or kingdom, whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee: and when they said, He is not there; he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they found thee not" (I Ki. 18:10). God had already prepared a place for him: a cave. In that cave lived a poverty-stricken widow and her son. It was not the sort of place where an unmarried prophet of God was expected to live. The civil authorities of Sidon would not have thought to look for him there.

In a cave, Elijah had no message of salvation for the Sidonians. They were not suffering from the drought. The widow was suffering, and she was healed by the miraculous daily supply of flour and oil. Yet even this did not persuade her of the sovereignty of Elijah's God. Only after her son died and was raised to life by Elijah did she confess faith in God (v. 24). The miracles of flour and oil had not persuaded her; only death and resurrection of the son did.

Jesus understood the hardness of Israel's heart. He knew that even His own death and resurrection would not persuade the nation. But gentiles would believe. He enraged the Jews by pointing out to them the obvious implications of Elijah's time in the widow's cave. It is significant that His invocation of the Sidonian widow occurred immediately after His reading of the scroll of Isaiah and His announcement that He was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy regarding the jubilee year of liberation for Israel.

And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when

the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. (Luke 4:23-26).

Elijah's healing of the gentile widow and her son was an affront to the Jews in Jesus' day, just as it would have been in Elijah's day, had they known where he was and what he was doing. Jezebel would have killed Elijah as surely as she killed the other prophets. Her pliant husband would have cooperated as surely as Pontius Pilate cooperated with the Jewish leaders in the execution of Christ.

Out of the Jaws of Victory

After Elijah's execution of the false priests of Baal and Asherah (I Ki. 18:40), the rain came. "And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain" (v. 41). In faith, Elijah could hear the sound of abundance; Ahab could not. But this time Ahab believed Elijah. He immediately went up to eat and drink (v. 42). He celebrated the coming abundance of the harvest, which was months away. This was a ritual act of faith on Ahab's part, and God rewarded him and all of Israel with the rain. But Jezebel would not repent. She swore she would kill Elijah (I Ki. 19:2). So, Elijah had to flee once again (v. 3).

In the wilderness, God fed him again (v. 6). Then he journeyed to another cave (v. 9). He believed that he was the only righteous man left in Israel (v. 10). God then commanded him to go to a gentile country again, this time Syria (v. 16). Elijah was told to anoint a gentile king who would someday defeat Israel on the battlefield (vv. 16-17). Elijah did not do this personally; Elijah did it in great sorrow as his delegated agent (II Ki. 8:13). God took Elijah to heaven directly, not burdening him with the negative sanction of death. Elijah would never again confront Israel in person. But he would through Elisha, and he would through John the Baptist, the ultimate representative of Elijah (Matt. 11:14) and the greatest of all the Old Covenant prophets (Luke 7:28).

The Righteous 7,000

After God told Elijah that he was to anoint Hazael of Syria, He informed him of the 7,000. "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (v. 18). Consider what this meant. Elijah believed that he was the last righteous man in Israel. Soon, he would no longer be in Israel. He was to anoint a gentile who would bring judgment against Israel. Well, why not? No righteous man would die. The sanction of defeat was appropriate for Israel. A murderous gentile was the operational king of Israel, and a woman at that. A military defeat might call the nation to its corporate senses. Israel might repent.

But then God gave Elijah troubling information: there were 7,000 righteous people still alive in Israel. This meant that they would have to suffer a military defeat and political subordination to a gentile king. They would see Israel defeated by gentiles. This was a painful prospect. They had suffered the drought. They had suffered Jezebel. Now they would suffer a military defeat. Was there no hope?

Of course there was hope. They had survived the drought. They had survived Jezebel's persecution. They would survive an invasion by Syria. But they would have to suffer in the future, just as they had had to suffer in the past. God had hidden Elijah in a cave. He had sent birds to feed him miraculously in the wilderness, then sent miraculous oil and flour in the widow's cave, and finally fed him in another wilderness. God had taken care of Elijah with a series of miracles. Whether He would continue to take care of all 7,000 was His affair. He did not guarantee this to Elijah. All he said was that these people were

still representing Him in the land.

They had gone though the wringer, both politically and economically. When would this end? God made it plain: not yet. They had lots more to suffer. God had not sent their farms rain during the national drought; neither would He send a revival to deliver them from evil. Instead, He would send a gentile army.

Elijah knew what was coming, but he was not to tell anyone in Israel except Elisha. He was to tell only a gentile, Hazael. He would not again come before the nation to confront the religious establishment. He would leave them to perish in a military defeat. But the corporate negative sanction of military defeat would also afflict the righteous 7,000, assuming that they all lived long enough to see it. The negative corporate sanctions that would reveal God's wrath against the rulers of Israel and the vast majority of the nation that shared their covenantal confession would also burden the righteous remnant. There had been no caves outside the land for them, no oil for their empty pots. Neither would they escape the bad times to come. Their deliverance would be postponed. Again.

Was this bad news? Yes and no. Famine is bad news. It is also a way to soften up the enemies of God. It was a way to condemn them and their way of life. "You think that Baalism works?" God asked. "Well, let me show you the fruits of Baalism, first-hand." First the drought, then the test on Mt. Carmel: Baalism clearly did not work. Yet all but that remnant of 7,000 still clung to Baalism, and their leaders did so defiantly. The hearts of the people had not been changed by God's negative sanctions. So, there had to be additional negative sanctions. But Elijah would not live to see them.

False Prophets

Ahab died on the field of battle. Before he did, however, he had a moment of truth. He knew it was truth, yet he paid no attention. Again.

Ahab and the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, had decided to go to war with Syria. They were unaware of Elijah's anointing of Hazael. Elisha had previously told Ahab that he and his wife would be killed (1 Ki. 21:19-24), but this did not change Ahab's mind. He did not repent. "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up" (v. 25). So, judgment day had arrived.

But first, Ahab would experience his moment of truth. At Jehoshaphat's request, he called his court prophets to predict the outcome of the battle. They told them that Israel should go to war (1 Ki. 22:6). Jehoshaphat was still not convinced. "And Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the LORD besides, that we might enquire of him?" (v. 7). Ahab knew the difference between his court prophets and God's prophet. "And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, There is yet one man, Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may enquire of the LORD: but I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. And Jehoshaphat said, Let not the king say so" (v. 8). Ahab called him to the court.

What happened next has created almost as much trouble for Bible commentators as it did for Ahab. Micaiah lied to the two kings. Let us get this clear: he lied. He lied in the name of God. "So he came to the king. And the king said unto him, Micaiah, shall we go against Ramoth-gilead to battle, or shall we forbear? And he answered him, Go, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver it into the hand of the king" (v. 15). Ahab knew it was a lie. "And the king said unto him, How many times shall I adjure thee that thou tell me nothing but that which is true in the name of the LORD?" (v. 16). So, Micaiah told the truth. "And he said, I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd: and the LORD said, These have no master: let them return every man to his house in peace. And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, Did I not

tell thee that he would prophesy no good concerning me, but evil?" (vv. 17-18).

Now the two kings had to make a decision. The court prophets had revealed one vision of the future; Micaiah had revealed another. Who was telling the truth? Micaiah explained the cause of their dilemma. His explanation has created enormous problems for Bible commentators ever since – so great that they prefer to skip over this passage whenever possible.

And he said, Hear thou therefore the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left. And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee (vv. 19-23).

That final verse is the problem verse: "Now therefore, behold, the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD hath spoken evil concerning thee." It could not be any clearer. It cannot legitimately be avoided. God put a lying spirit into the mouths of the prophets. God spoke evil of the kings, yet He made the court prophets testify otherwise.

This was not a message well-received by the court prophets. Because the issue was prophecy, it was a matter of sanctions. Which sanctions would come on which group? The prophet's test was two-fold: accurate prediction and declaring the sovereignty of God. The court prophets spoke in God's name; otherwise, Jehoshaphat would not have allied himself with Ahab. So, the deciding issue was the outcome of the sanctions. Which prophets would come under God's negative sanctions?

As happened over and over in Israel's history, the state imposed initial sanctions and God imposed the final sanctions.

But Zedekiah the son of Chenaanah went near, and smote Micaiah on the cheek, and said, Which way went the Spirit of the LORD from me to speak unto thee? And Micaiah said, Behold, thou shalt see in that day, when thou shalt go into an inner chamber to hide thyself. And the king of Israel said, Take Micaiah, and carry him back unto Amnon the governor of the city, and to Joash the king's son; And say, Thus saith the king, Put this fellow in the prison, and feed him with bread of affliction and with water of affliction, until I come in peace (vv. 24-27).

Micaiah then warned them one last time. "And Micaiah said, If thou return at all in peace, the LORD hath not spoken by me. And he said, Harken, O people, every one of you" (v. 28).

The false prophets deeply resented being called dupes of a lying spirit. They had to redeem themselves. First, the religious leader applied negative sanctions by striking Micaiah. Then the state imposed negative sanctions by imprisoning him. Then God imposed His negative sanctions by leading their army into a trap. The prophetic words of Elijah and Elisha came true.

You Get What You Pay For

What we have here is an example of a well-known phenom-

enon in history. It is called "kill the messenger." If a messenger brings bad news, the authorities kill him or in some way impose negative sanctions on him. This leads to another well-known phenomenon: good news from messengers. The authorities get what they pay for. They pay for good news. They impose penalties for bad news. This leads to large supplies of good official news.

In the days of Ahab, there were no elections. There was no need for press releases. But if the techniques of modern politics had been in operation back then, the following press release would have been dutifully handed out to reporters.

Office of Joint Communications
April 1

King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat consulted the prophets of Israel this afternoon. With only one exception, the prophets were agreed: God will bring victory to the joint military operations against Syria. Micaiah was the only exception.

This would have been rewritten by a wire service as follows:

(Jerusalem, April 1.) King Ahab and King Jehoshaphat met in closed session in Jerusalem this afternoon. They called in the nation's prophets for advice concerning the escalating tensions between Syria and the two nations of God.

With only one exception, the prophets were agreed, the Joint Office of Communications reports: If Syria decides to launch an attack on the joint forces, she will be crushed within days.

The lone critic was a man identified as Micaiah. According to a high-level administration official, who requested anonymity, "Micaiah is a representative of the religious right. While he is not as well known as Elisha and Elijah, who disappeared under highly suspicious circumstances, he has consistently sided with the extreme right wing of the conservative movement."

The government reports that Micaiah is being questioned regarding his knowledge of Syrian military matters. A statement from the Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that Israel's National Security Council and the joint military command are now investigating his alleged connection with Syrian embassy officials.

The Joint Chiefs indicate that they are prepared to meet any Syrian challenge. Meanwhile, diplomats from both sides continue their eleventh-hour negotiations. One senior diplomat reported, "While the two sides have not come to any agreement, continued discussions offer the best hope that the dispute can be resolved peaceably. I remain optimistic that we can reach agreement in the near future."

While there have been rumors of widespread food hoarding, evidence of this is scant, according to local officials. "You get these rumors when times get tense," said Jerusalem's mayor, Joseph ben Achan, "But there is no indication of food shortages. The bazaars remain open. Things remain calm."

The Jerusalem Board of Trade, a private commodities exchange, reports that corn futures were limit-up for the third consecutive day. Exchange rules deter-

mine that no further trades in corn can be made until tomorrow. "Speculators are driving this market," according to Solomon Price of the Agriculture Department. He denied the rumor that the government intends to close the Board of Trade temporarily before it opens tomorrow. "I don't know where these rumors got started," Price said.

The Prophet's Offense

The prophets predicted bad news for the Israelite Establishment. The Establishment deeply resented this. Establishments always do. The prophet comes before the court and tells them that their efforts will come to nothing or even worse. Their dreams and schemes will soon blow up in their faces. The best laid plans of mice, men, and Establishments are overthrown by God.

In the days of Ahab, the prophets disappeared. They either hid out or lit out. God did not call them to call Israel to repentance. He called them to survive. They did nothing wrong by shaking the dust off of their feet and getting out of Jezebel's line of fire.

Different prophets were given different tasks. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were called by God to go through the horrors of military defeat and exile. Some men are called to bear this sort of burden; others are given advance warning and told to hide in caves. Elijah ministered to a widow and her son, not to the 7,000. The point is, each prophet knew his calling and conducted himself accordingly.

When bad times seem to be coming, there are always Christians on the scene who honestly do not believe that bad times will come in their day. They trust the Establishment and its civilization. When they hear about bad news, they dismiss it as follows: "God won't abandon his people." What they really mean is this: "God won't abandon the Establishment." They like to identify themselves as missionaries to the lost – not foreign missionaries living in huts, but urban missionaries living in suburbia. They do not want to hear about the possibility that living in a hut on a foreign mission field may soon be more safer and pleasant than living in suburbia.

Each Christian should think clearly about where he is called to, what he is called to, why he is called to it, and what the price is likely to be. Then he should count the cost (Luke 14:28-30).

Conclusion

Ahab did not ask for Elijah's opinion. He got it anyway. Micaiah did not volunteer his opinion, and when Ahab demanded it, he lied. He told them what they wanted to hear. Only under pressure from Ahab did he tell the truth. Elijah fled; Micaiah was arrested. God imposed a devastating drought in the first case and military defeat in the second. The negative corporate sanctions came as the true prophets had predicted.

There are no prophets today. Fire does not come down from heaven on any man's command. No man knows the future so well that ordained rulers are required by God to heed his instructions. But similar sins still produce similar negative sanctions. Men do not believe this today, any more than they believed it in Elijah's day, so new strains of drug-resistant syphilis and then AIDS have arrived to remind them of the covenantal reality of cause and effect. Nevertheless, they do not listen, any more than Ahab and Jezebel listened.

The negative corporate sanctions will come. The longer they are delayed, the more devastating they will be. Count on it. Plan in terms of it.

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