

# Constructing the Gospels with Elisha's Axe

Christian Soteriology, Discipleship, and Wonder-Working Focalized through  
the Medieval English Liturgy for the Ordeal by Water

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## Introduction

The reforms of the Lateran Council of 1215, an ecumenical council which Pope Innocent III called, ended clerical involvement in the procedures known as “ordeals.”<sup>1</sup> The ordeal intertwined the secular and clerical systems of medieval governance to render a judgement regarding the sin of an individual, calling upon the judgement of God (*iudicium Dei*) to adjudicate in cases where legal systems deemed lesser forms of proof inadequate.<sup>2</sup> In medieval England, the wager of law, a form of proof in which a defendant made an oath on the Gospels of his or her innocence without cross-examination, remained the lesser form of proof which the ordeal most commonly superseded.<sup>3</sup> Yet in cases in which the wager of law did not meet the social or legal procedural standard, defendants could opt to prove their oath via physical ordeal.

In England, the ordeal often took the form of ordeal by fire or by water. In both of these methods, a cleric invoked a complicated and miraculous religious ritual that clarified the guilt or innocence of an accused individual. As John Baker describes in his *An Introduction to English Legal History*: “Ordeals involved an appeal to God to reveal the truth in human disputes, and they required priestly participation to achieve this rapport with the Deity.”<sup>4</sup> In the ordeal by water, the defendant descended into a pond or body of (cold) water with the expectation, declared in a solemn liturgy, that the blessed water would accept him if innocent or reject him if guilty. In other words, if the accused floated, they were adjudged undeniably guilty by a miracle of God mediated through the authorized power of a cleric. Peter Leeson finds the invention of this procedure in the ninth century, with the roots of this practice extending even further into

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<sup>1</sup> On the end of sanctioned clerical involvement in ordeals, see Finbarr McAuley, “Canon Law and the End of the Ordeal,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 26, no. 3 (2006): 474-7.

<sup>2</sup> See generally J.P. Kirsch, “Ordeals,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). See also M.R.P. McGuire, “Ordeal,” *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 10 (New York: Gale, 2003): 626.

<sup>3</sup> See John H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 2002): 5.

<sup>4</sup> Baker, *English Legal History*, 5.

pre-medieval English custom.<sup>5</sup> Though banned in 1215, this method of proof survived in common folklore, particularly in the procedure of swimming witches—that is, subjecting accused witches to an ordeal by water. In England, a case of subjecting an alleged witch to an ordeal by water occurred near Chelmsford as late as 1863.<sup>6</sup>

Attempts to explain the ordeal by water often focus on the violence and social aspects of the procedure. Scholars focus on the role of clerics in (subversively or intentionally) administering a clerical judgement (*iudicium cleri*) or propose that the ordeal represented a primitive lie detector test. We, however, will take the priests at their word as recorded in preserved liturgies and accept the premise that they intended to effect a divine miracle, transformative in nature, that would reveal the guilt of defendants in accusations of criminality. Few scholars orient their studies of the ordeal from this standpoint, thus little analysis of the theological contents of the ordeal exists. Accepting the religious premise of the ordeal ritual opens the texts involved in the procedure to the type of exegetical study in which this present study will engage. An exegetical analysis brings the ordeal's religious considerations to the forefront, a rare supposition despite the fact that “the physical ordeal itself was part of an elaborate religious ritual that involved solemn preparation of the accused beforehand, and celebration of the mass.”<sup>7</sup> In the twelfth century liturgy for this elaborate religious ritual we read the following:

Then sprinkling them with blessed water he should say to each one: “This water shall put you to the test today.”

Afterwards he should entreat upon the water into which he will send them (saying thus): “I entreat you, water, in the name of the Father almighty, who created you in the beginning and ordered you to minister to human necessities, who also ordered you to be separated from the higher waters. I entreat you also through the ineffable name of Jesus

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Leeson, “Ordeals,” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 55, no. 3 (2012): 694, n. 8. See also n. 2 above.

<sup>6</sup> Baker, *English Legal History*, 5, n. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret H. Kerr, Richard D. Forsyth, and Michael Plyley, “Cold Water and Hot Iron: Trial by Ordeal in England,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22, no. 4 (1992): 582.

Christ, the son of the living God, under whose feet the sea and the divided element made itself capable of being trod upon, who also preferred to be baptized himself in the element of water. I entreat you also through the Holy Spirit, who descended upon the baptized God. I entreat you through the holy name of the indivisible trinity, by whose will the element of the waters was divided and the people of Israel immediately crossed with dry feet, also at whose invocation Elisha made an iron axe-head, which had flown off its handle, swim upon the water, so that in no way will you accept these men if they are culpable in any way of this thing which is cast against them. And if he is not culpable, it will be exposed to you either way.”<sup>8</sup>

Here we read the cleric invoking a divine miracle through reference to other transformative miracles in which divine agents manipulated water against the laws governing physical reality. Many of these we might expect: the division of waters in Genesis, Moses splitting the sea in Exodus, and Jesus walking on water. Yet we also find a distinct reference to a short pericope in 2 Kings 6 in which Elisha causes an axe head to float to the surface of the Jordan River. Why include this short, strange, and often overlooked pericope into such an elaborate ritual regarding the absolution of an accused individual? Elijah, like Elisha, split the Jordan River prior to his assumption, so would not a reference to Elijah, who receives multiple references and allusions already in the New Testament, be more fitting? And how is Elisha’s raising of the axe head deemed important enough to stand alongside Jesus and the Trinity? No scholar has satisfactorily addressed this question.

This paper will attempt to trace an answer by proposing a hypotext-hypertext relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle in 1 and 2 Kings and the Gospels. This schema acknowledges the fact that a reading of a text always occurs against the backdrop of one or more correlated texts. An intertextual relationship thus exists between a reference text, the “hypotext,” and a reception text, the “hypertext.”<sup>9</sup> The Elijah-Elisha narrative serves as a hypotext critical to

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<sup>8</sup> Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McSweeney (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1858): 491-3.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean Zumstein, “Intertextuality and Intratextuality in the Gospel of John,” *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel As Literature*, eds. Tom Thatcher and Stephen Moore, trans. Mike Gray (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008): 121-2.

understanding the composition and soteriology of the Gospel narratives, explaining why Elisha stands abreast Jesus in the English liturgy. Only recently have New Testament scholars begun to point to the narrative of Elijah and Elisha as bearing a significant role in the composition of the Gospels. More often, research into the literary origins of the New Testament attempts to link the Jesus narrative to wonder-workers and holy men from the Greco-Roman world, despite the model of itinerant prophets in the figures of Elijah and Elisha. This research will consequently illuminate the theological environment of the Gospels' composition and highlight the resulting theological novelties that enabled a medieval English cleric to perform the ordeal by water.

I begin in Part 1 with an investigation of the raising of the axe head pericope, illustrating its place within a proposed soteriology for the Elijah-Elisha cycle that centers the narrative upon miraculous restoration as mediated through the voice of the authorized prophet in whom dwells the divine spirit. This spirit passes from Elijah to Elisha, allowing the two figures to effect miracles such as the raising of the axe head. The entirety of the Elijah-Elisha cycle depends upon the conveyance of God's word, meaning his commands and admonitions to the Israelites, through his authorized prophets. Indeed, it is the word of God which brings life or death, condemnation or restitution, to the world. The wonders worked by both Elijah and Elisha approach this central importance of the word of God from various angles, as their actions demonstrate how a prophet that bears this word to the Israelites may act as a divine intermediary and effect, in the case of the axe head, physical restitution and spiritual absolution. This pericope stands alongside the narrative of the leper Naaman, in which the eponymous Syrian commander just hearing Elisha's words and following his instructions restores Naaman's health and saves his life. In the apposition of these two pericopes, we find a microcosm of the soteriology whereby the Israelites, by obeying the word of God as conveyed through his prophet, may be restored

from its perilous condition. More simply, the axe head pericope demonstrates how a prophet endowed with the spirit of God in order to relay God's word can effect miracles which allow physical and spiritual transformation—which we find in the anointing of Jehu in 2 Kings 9 and Joash's restoration of the Temple in 2 Kings 12.

I then move to the New Testament in Part 2, teasing out the relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels to demonstrate the impact these narratives had upon the composition of the Jesus narratives. While I primarily focus on the Gospel of Mark, significant linkages exist in each of the canonical Gospels. This relationship offers a deeper understanding of the soteriology of the Gospels, magnifying the salvation narrative in the Elijah-Elisha cycle to a grander scale. More simply, the narratives of Elijah and Elisha, particularly in the absolution of sin embodied in Elisha's raising of the axe head, are critical to understanding how and why the composers of the Gospels presented the Jesus narrative in the manner in which they did. This begins to diminish the aporia present in the liturgy for the ordeal by water, which places Elisha's prophetic activities alongside the more typically ascendant scenes from the Old and New Testaments found in this liturgy.

In Part 3, our investigation of how the evangelists composed the biography of Jesus through transforming elements of the Elijah-Elisha cycle will clarify a novel Christian theology of discipleship in which the divine spirit passes from teacher to disciple. In 1 and 2 Kings, the passage of Elijah's spirit to Elisha ends with the latter's death. Jesus, however, embodies elements of both Elijah and Elisha. In his interactions with John the Baptist, Jesus is an Elisha figure who receives the divine spirit from a teacher figure. Yet in his interactions with his disciples (most clearly in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles), Jesus embodies an Elijah figure who passes his spirit onto his (Elisha-like) disciples. In this way, a theory of discipleship is

expounded through which the divine spirit is able to pass to authorized prophetic figures. It is this spirit that then allows such figures to effect miraculous deeds. This paper proposes that this schema for discipleship theologically explains how the ordeal by water occurs. The medieval English cleric performing the ordeal liturgy stands in a direct line of descent from Peter, who receives the spirit from his teacher, Jesus. The cleric's inheritance of this spirit through Church structure actively allows him to induce a transformative miracle. In this way, we may begin to understand not only the relationship between the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospels, but also how the practice of the ordeal by water, which later critics decried as barbaric and violent, received this relationship as authorizing clerics to effect miracles without resorting to claims of magic.<sup>10</sup>

## Part 1: The Axe Head Pericope and the Hebrew Bible

### Overview of the Axe Head Pericope<sup>11</sup>

The pericope of Elisha and the axe head in 2 Kings 6:1-7 discomforts Biblical commentators. Inserted between two narratives involving international agents in the Ancient Near East (the healing of Naaman the Aramaean in 2 Kings 5 and the tricking of the Aramaean invaders in 2 Kings 6:8-23), this short interpersonal narrative leaves readers somewhat aporetic.

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<sup>10</sup> The claim that the ordeal by water reflected magical ritual dates to sixteenth century criticism. See Henry Lea, *The Ordeal*, trans. Arthur Howland (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 80-1. As the ordeal enjoyed particular use in accusations of witchcraft (see n. 6 above), an explanation of the ordeal by water as magic seems extremely aporetic and reductive.

<sup>11</sup> All Hebrew is drawn from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, eds. A. Alt, O. Eissfeldt, P. Kahle, R. Kittel, and A. Jepsen, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997). Septuagint Greek is drawn from *Septuaginta*, eds. Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006). All Greek New Testament text is drawn from *The Greek-English New Testament: UBS Fifth Revised Edition and New International Version*, eds. Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo Martini, and Bruce Metzger, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Zondervan, 2015). All English otherwise is drawn from NRSV.



Analyses from the perspective of form criticism waver between identifying the pericope as a “power demonstration narrative,” following Simon DeVries, or, as Otto Eissfeldt puts it, a “prophetic legend”.<sup>12</sup> While scholars like T.R. Hobbes and Paul House highlight that the passage shares elements with miracle narratives elsewhere in the Elisha cycle, Marvin Sweeney, Mordechai Cogan, and Hayim Tadmor emphasize syntactic connections and geographic associations with the Naaman narrative in particular. Most commentators seem to skip over the passage in entirety, either due its apparently strange placement adjacent to two grander narratives or as a result of its magical elements. To be sure, this discomfort stretches back to antiquity, as Josephus in his *Antiquities* skips the narrative entirely.<sup>13</sup> Yet even in contemporary commentary—whether secular or homiletic—the adduced intention of the pericope differs wildly.

The narrative begins with the company of prophets (בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים; lit. “sons of the prophets;” LXX: υἱοὶ τῶν προφητῶν) addressing Elisha about the space in which they live (2 Kings 6:1). They claim that the place is too narrow, offering to establish a building closer to the Jordan (2 Kings 6:2). Already, we can see how this pericope confuses readers attempting to find some sort of narrative unity in the Elisha cycle. The company of prophets driving this narrative appears suddenly, mostly absent following their definite role in Elisha’s purification of the stew.<sup>14</sup>

The disappearance and reappearance of the company of prophets may suggest redaction of the

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<sup>12</sup> See generally Stephen DeVries, *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David Hubbard, Glenn Barker, and John Watts, vol. 12 (Waco: Word Books, 1982). See also T.R. Hobbs, *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David Hubbard, Glenn Barker, and John Watts, vol. 13 (Waco: Word Books, 1982): 73.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus does maintain some of the prophetic and miraculous deeds involving Elisha, as he does retell the multiplication of oil. See Joseph. *AJ* 9.4.2. Most of Elisha’s most apparent miracles are lacking.

<sup>14</sup> See 2 Kings 4:38-41. This company is also referenced in the multiplication of the widow’s oil (2 Kings 4:1-7) and in the Naaman narrative (2 Kings 5:22), but they do not actually appear in either story. The widow and Gehazi both arguably relate to the company of prophets, but they themselves only appear in the background following the purification of the stew. Certainly, Elisha in the Naaman narrative is portrayed as living alone in 2 Kings 5:9. See John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976): 511 for reference to Šanda’s proposal that בְּנֵי־הַנְּבִיאִים is deferential and not suggestive of communitarian living.

Elisha cycle, but this holds little of importance for the overall exegesis of the passage.<sup>15</sup> Just as with the purification of the stew, the company establishes an interpersonal setting and presents a problem for Elisha to solve. Regardless, Elisha accepts their invitation (2 Kings 6:3b) and the company begins to cut down trees (2 Kings 6:4).

While working to construct the new dwelling place, the axe of one of the company breaks and its head (אֶת־הַבְּרִזְלִי) falls into the water (2 Kings 6:5a).<sup>16</sup> Here we encounter the core problem of the narrative. The axe, the member proclaims, was begged and did not actually belong to him (2 Kings 6:5b). Commentators generally come to the conclusion that אֶת־הַבְּרִזְלִי refers to a bladed iron instrument of some sort, the value of which was too great for the company member to provide restitution.<sup>17</sup> In his commentary, Paul House summarizes: “iron was expensive in Bible times, and the student-prophet was very poor.”<sup>18</sup> Sweeney further notes: “it is borrowed, which means that he is responsible for the loss of the axe head to its owner,” referencing Exodus 22:13-15, which presents a law of restitution in which a person who loses the property of another owes the original owner for their losses.<sup>19</sup> The loss presents two problems: one of power (how to recover the axe head lost in the Jordan) and one of guilt (the man is culpable for restitution of the lost axe head).

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<sup>15</sup> On the company of prophets and their abode, however, see Carl Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866): 323. See also Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988): 69.

<sup>16</sup> There is some debate about the strange wording of אֶת־הַבְּרִזְלִי in the Hebrew of this passage. The use of the direct object marker could be emphatic. Cf. Numbers 3:46; Judges 20:44, 46; Daniel 9:13; Jeremiah 36:22; Ezekiel 17:21, Nehemiah 9:19, 34. Alternatively, Hobbs suggests the direct object marker originally read אָז, following 1 Sam 13:20. See Hobbes, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 73. We could read here the singular of אָז, cf. Isaiah 2:4. See I.W. Slotki, *Kings: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1950): 197.

<sup>17</sup> On the identification of the instrument, see Gray, *I & II Kings*, 511.

<sup>18</sup> Paul House, *I, 2 Kings* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995): 275.

<sup>19</sup> Marvin Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2013): 301. See also Volkmar Fritz, *I & 2 Kings* (Mineneapolis: Fortress, 2003): 262. Fritz claims: “The iron tool is not only of high value as such, but is also borrowed, which increases the anxiety caused by its loss.”

Elisha solves both problems in bringing the axe head to the surface. He first asks the member where the axe head fell (2 Kings 6:6a). The member points out its location, prompting Elisha to shape a piece of wood and throw it into the water, with which he causes the iron to float to the surface (2 Kings 6:6b). The pericope ends with the member stretching forth his hand to take the axe head at Elisha's prompting (2 Kings 6:7). These final two verses present not only the resolution to the narrative, but also a question which divides commentators: what did Elisha do exactly? The medieval commentator David Qimḥi, commonly known as the Radak, claims simply: "He cut the stick so that it would be like the handle of the axe that had fallen, and so the stick would enter the eye of the axe. When the handle entered it, the axe head floated together with its handle."<sup>20</sup> Gray, dismissive of the strange event, follows this more rational explanation and suggests that later redactors transformed "simple instances of prophetic sagacity" into miraculous events.<sup>21</sup> These explanations, however, read far beyond the provided text so as to avoid the simpler explanation of Elisha as a wonder-worker.

Elisha's wonder-working provides resolutions for many other stories in the Elisha cycle. Just as Elisha throws (אֶלְשָׁרָה) the stick into the Jordan to retrieve the axe head, he also throws (אֶלְשָׁרָה) flour into the stew (2 Kings 4:41) and salt into a spring for similarly miraculous purifications (2 Kings 2:19-22). Furthermore, the event involves the Jordan River in some unnatural manipulation, similar to Elisha's parting of the Jordan with Elijah's mantle (2 Kings 2:13-14) and the healing of Naaman's leprosy via immersion into the Jordan (2 Kings 5:14).<sup>22</sup> House similarly points out that in three previous miracles—the multiplication of the oil (2 Kings

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<sup>20</sup> Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 70. Slotki provides this explanation without an alternative. See Slotki, *Kings: Hebrew Text & English Translation*, 197. Keil and Delitzsch, referencing the same explanation as given by Thenius, dismiss this as breaking the "laws of gravitation." See Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary*, 324.

<sup>21</sup> Gray, *I & II Kings*, 511.

<sup>22</sup> For an alternative view regarding the presence of the Jordan, see Hayim Rabinowitz, *Commentary to the Book of Melakhim*, ed. N. Vogel, trans. Yehoshua Starret (New York: H. Vagshal Publishing, 2002): 439. Rabinowitz claims: "There is no connection between choosing the Jordan banks and the miraculous healing which Elisha had recently performed with the Jordan waters. As said, there was nothing essentially special about these waters."

4:1-7), the purification of the stew (2 Kings 4:38-41), and the feeding of one hundred men (2 Kings 4:42-44)—Elisha further saves “the prophets or the prophets' families from physical want or financial disaster.”<sup>23</sup> In many ways, then, the Deuteronomistic Historian patterns this pericope after the miracles which Elisha performs previously, suggesting the floating of the axe head is to be similarly understood as a miraculous event. Some commentators also call this feat an act of “imitative magic,” following the *International Critical Commentary*, causing the axe head to rise in spite of its dense material in imitation of the floating stick.<sup>24</sup> It is unimportant whether we refer to this as explicitly magical or as a miracle since “Elisha here demonstrates his miracle-working powers that let him contradict the laws of nature.”<sup>25</sup> Elisha miraculously transforms one substance (iron) such that it acts like another (wood) to effect a restoration through which he absolves the sin of one of the company of prophets. Furthermore, we can extrapolate the soteriology of this passage to the broader narrative through its linkages with the preceding Naaman pericope.

## The Naaman Pericope and the Ax Head

The story of Naaman, a commander of the Aramaean army, carries distinct resonances with Elisha’s raising of the axe head. The narrative adjacency of the two passages (Naaman in 2 Kings 5, the axe head in 2 Kings 6:1-7) suggests a close connection. Viewing the axe head pericope in light of Naaman’s healing gestures towards a greater soteriological schema employed in the Elijah-Elisha cycle, in which the word of God, embodied in an authoritative prophet endowed with God’s spirit, facilitates salvation. Naaman’s healing embodies one part of a

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<sup>23</sup> House, *I & II Kings*, 275.

<sup>24</sup> James Montgomery and Henry Snyder Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951): 381. Michael Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 542.

<sup>25</sup> Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 262.

diptych alongside the axe head pericope, providing alternating macrocosmic and microcosmic views of this soteriology. That is, viewing the two narratives as apposite panels draws out the soteriology of the Elijah-Elisha cycle by portraying alternating stories in which a prophet performs a miracle of salvation.

Sweeney points out that this innate connection appears even at a verbal level from the beginning of both narratives: “They are joined syntactically by...‘and they said,’ in 2 Kgs 6:1” and the *waw*-consecutive attached to Naaman’s name in 2 Kings 5:1.<sup>26</sup> Naaman hears of the reputed power of the Samarian prophet, Elisha, who could potentially heal his leprosy, but Elisha’s reception of Naaman through a messenger almost dismissively instructs him to simply wash in the Jordan seven times.<sup>27</sup> Notably, Naaman first approaches Israel’s king to seek out healing. The king asks in 2 Kings 5:7: “Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” Already, then, we see the soteriological outline of this story—the power of God to give death or life, something far out of reach even of Israel’s king. Yet this is entirely possible for the man in whom God’s spirit dwells. Indeed, not only is it possible, but it can be accomplished through simple obedience to the prophetic word. When Naaman follows Elisha’s command and his condition disappears, it acts as a moment of conversion. The divine spirit in Elisha facilitates a miraculous restoration of Naaman’s condition using the water of the Jordan and leads Naaman to recognize that “there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”<sup>28</sup> The divine spirit within an authorized prophet facilitates a miracle to transform physical condition and thus inspire obedience to God’s word. As this word is conveyed through the admonitions and prophecies of Elisha, his raising of the lost axe head through the power of the spirit which God invests in him and Elijah is a microcosmic demonstration of how

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<sup>26</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 296. 2 Kings 5:1 begins וַיִּבְעֶקֶן and 2 Kings 6:1 reads וַיֵּאמְרוּ.

<sup>27</sup> See 2 Kings 5:8-10.

<sup>28</sup> 2 Kings 5:15.

obedience to God's prophet (and thus obedience to God) will facilitate the restoration of the Israelites and the absolution of their sins.

Thematically, "The two narratives are held together by their concern to demonstrate the prophet's ability to restore that which has been lost".<sup>29</sup> The divine spirit allows the prophet to accomplish this feat miraculously, in both cases using the water of the Jordan as a medium. Yet the two narratives also invert each other in a number of ways to accentuate their coupling. In Naaman, we find a restoration via the Jordan that involves a public display and a great personage disconnected to Israel. The axe head pericope, in contrast, involves a private display and an obscure (unnamed) personage in a rather insignificant and domestic affair. Naaman's restoration reflects a macrocosmic concern whereby the divine spirit indwells a prophet and allows the restoration of the physical condition of a named international individual. The raising of the axe head is opposedly microcosmic, in which the spirit absolves the guilt of a domestic unnamed individual. The differences in these two narratives reify the innate motif of the raising of the axe head discussed previously, which concerns the ability of the divine spirit to authorize a prophet's performance of miraculous transformation of substance, leading to a restoration. This reflects the greater soteriological thrust of the Elijah-Elisha cycle, a soteriological restoration of Israel through an authorized prophet endowed with the divine spirit.

## Soteriology of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative

Before discussing the Gospels, we must discuss briefly the soteriology of the Elijah-Elisha cycle. If this narrative serves as a hypotext for the composition of the Gospels, we ought to expect a magnification of the narrative purpose at which the story of Elijah and Elisha

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<sup>29</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 296.

aims. We saw in the previous sections how the raising of the axe head in conjunction with the Naaman pericope gestures towards the role of the prophetic word in effecting a restoration. The prophetic word is simply the admonitions, commands, and prophecies which God conveys through his prophets, which the prophet can relate due to the indwelling of God's spirit. This divine spirit authorizes the prophet to facilitate miracles and consequently glorify God, as the miracles demonstrate how God can enact miraculous restorations and absolve sins. Specifically in the pericope of the axe head, the sin of losing a borrowed axe head is absolved through the miracle which the prophet Elisha effects as the prophet in whom dwells the divine spirit.

The importance of the divine word in the Elijah-Elisha cycle is apparent. Not only is this tied to the achievement of miraculous transformations, as in the Naaman pericope, but in regards to the act of prophecy. Indeed, prophecy deeply intertwines with the unity of the narrative, with, arguably, "every single episode in the entire narrative governed by prophecy or following from prophecy."<sup>30</sup> Even in the formulaic passages that seem to diverge from the somewhat biographical narratives of Elijah and Elisha, the overriding concern of the prophetic word against the corruption of Israel and Judah—as introduced in 1 Kings 17 with Elijah's prophesying against the unfaithful Ahab—receives emphasis. In the formulaic description of kingships in 1 Kings 22:39-54, for instance, we find a notice of Ahaziah's wickedness and his worship of Baal. Just as with the introduction of Ahab's kingship, this does not sit separate from the narrative structure but rather neatly accords with the consequential prophetic action of Elijah aimed against the king.

Even the latter portions of the Elijah-Elisha cycle, in which Elisha is noticeably absent, connect to the prophetic figures via prophecy and hence the divine word. Jehu's anointing,

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000): 4.

initiated at Elisha's word, leads to a distinct narrative in which Jehu cleanses the land of its wickedness. Yet the anointing at 2 Kings 9:1-3 refers back to the words of God which Elijah receives at Horeb in 1 Kings 19:16-17. Jehu's narrative then serves as the momentum for the Athaliah-Joash Temple narrative in 2 Kings 11-12. The killing of Athaliah (2 Kings 11:13-16) echoes Jehu's prophecy-fulfilling killing of Jezebel (2 K 9:30-39), while Joash's repairing of the Temple (2 Kings 12) is set against the foil of Jehu's demolition of Baal's temple (2 Kings 10:18-27). Thus the power of the divine word, exhibited in a pattern of command-and-compliance, is an *inclusio* which encompasses the entire prophetic narrative. In 1 Kings 17, this revolves around creation-related prophecy (e.g. withholding of life-giving rain), whereas Elisha's dying words continue this same pattern of prophetic command-and-compliance (2 Kings 13:14-19). In the capstone of the cycle, Elisha's corpse revives a dead man, relating prophecy and the divine word to a wider phenomenon than simply the purification of the Temple and Jerusalem. Here, Elisha's body, in which God's spirit dwelled, accomplishes a miracle that gestures to the defeat of death.<sup>31</sup> Elisha in 2 Kings 13 is even called a messiah.<sup>32</sup>

To what does this narrative unity around prophecy and the divine word amount? In some ways we might consider it a rewriting of the Primary History—the historical narrative spanning from Genesis to 2 Kings—expanded to the future salvation of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Some scholars consequently note the parallels between Elijah and Moses as “deliverers” of Israel. Just comparing Exodus 2:13-4:31 and 1 Kings 19, some of these parallels seem obvious: Moses kills Egyptians and Elijah kills prophets of Baal, Moses and Elijah flee to the desert, Moses encounters God at Horeb/Sinai and Elijah encounters God at Horeb, Moses returns to meet his helper Aaron and Elijah returns to meet his helper Elisha. Moreover, Moses is considered unique

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<sup>31</sup> See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> 2 Kings 13:5. See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 26, n. 22.

<sup>33</sup> On the similarity between this and the intent of Chronicles, see Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 78, n 9.



(Deuteronomy 34:10-12) despite Joshua receiving some of his spirit (Deuteronomy 34:9) and God promises to raise someone like him (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). In comparison, Elijah is somewhat unique (1 Kings 19:10, 14) and is to be replaced by Elisha (1 Kings 19:16).<sup>34</sup> In totality, then, the Elijah-Elisha cycle offers a type of interpretive synthesis that distills and mirrors the Primary History in a manner that gestures towards a restoration from death. The key features of this narrative are the word, the prophet who bears the word, the primary effect of the word (e.g. life and transformation), and life restored from death. This narrative diverges from conquerors and kings, rather emphatically centered around divinely-mandated agents—prophets—the end of whose lives point to an escape from death.<sup>35</sup> Here, then, we locate the soteriology of the Elijah-Elisha cycle as concerned with the power of the word mediated through an authorized prophet in whom dwells the divine spirit to effect miraculous restorations. The raising of the axe head thus emblemizes a microcosm of this soteriology when paired with the Naaman pericope.

## Part 2: The Elijah-Elisha Cycle in the Gospels

### Investigating the Gospels

Thus far we have focused on the Hebrew Bible and the role of the axe head within the Elijah-Elisha narrative. The raising of the axe head's connection to the miraculous Naaman narrative, its association with the Jordan River and death, and its link to the absolution of guilt mediated through the divine word of a prophetic figure all suggest the pericope's interwovenness

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<sup>34</sup> On Elisha's miracles as illustrating Mosaic features, see Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 46, especially n. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Elijah's assumption to heaven has him seem to pass through death, while Elisha's bones literally revive a dead person.

with the salvation narrative underlying the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Elisha's raising of the axe head signals the authority of God's word as conveyed mysteriously through a divine prophet who receives his prophetic authority in the transfer of spirit from teacher to disciple. In the Naaman pericope, this conveyance actually occurs due to Elisha's spoken word, but in the axe head pericope it is a silent effecting of a miracle which demonstrates the restorative power of God. Obedience and faith in the prophet who mediates the word of God (and thus obedience and faith in God) results in the restoration of the sinner and the absolution of their sin. Not only does the transfer of prophetic authority in 2 Kings from Elijah to Elisha involve the Jordan River, but the manner in which Elisha absolves his companion's sin entails the miraculous transformation of substance through water. We thus begin to see the links between the liturgy which launched this investigation and the pericope of the axe head.

Nevertheless, the liturgy at hand belongs to the Catholic Church, and thus the Christian hermeneutical tradition. Locating the Elijah-Elisha narrative within the exposition of Jesus' life and death in the Gospels can more concretely position the story of the axe head within an explicit Christian liturgical context. This will not only offer us a more clear understanding of the reasoning behind the axe head's mention in the English liturgy, but also clarify the epistemological framework justifying the clerical administration of the ordeal by water. The medieval priest's ability to utilize water in a miraculous manner to adjudge and absolve sin in a legal setting depends upon the transfer of prophetic authority invested within Jesus to the Catholic Church via his disciples, a transferral of authority modeled on the prophetic relationship between Elijah and Elisha. If we can illuminate how early Christian texts applied this teacher-disciple relationship to the transfer of prophetic authority from Jesus to his disciples—and hence its transfer to the Roman Church via Peter—we will be able to

theologically justify and explain how an English priest could effect a water-based miracle in the style of Elisha's raising of the axe head in 2 Kings.

Evidence of how this ritual functions as a miracle mediated through the divine word via the transfer of prophetic authority from Jesus to his disciples and the Church would evaporate much of the aporia surrounding the clerical implementation of the ordeal by water. This liturgy would consequently reflect the ability for authorized prophetic speech to mediate a miraculous transformation of substance in the exact same manner as Elisha, Jesus, and his disciples. In this framework, the priest administering this liturgy is invested with the spirit of Jesus as passed down to his disciples—an investment transferred from teacher to disciple concomitant with prophetic authority according to the model of Elijah and Elisha—allowing the priest to effect a transformative miracle. The hypotext-hypertext relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels illuminates the soteriology of the Gospels, helping to align the references to Jesus and Elisha in the English liturgy for the ordeal by water. The teacher-disciple schema in which prophetic power passes with the transfer of the spirit to effect miracles not only serves this soteriology but also imposes a continuing theological justification for clerical figures to work miracles of a transformative nature. The purpose of the rest of this paper is to tease out the relationships between the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospels to identify how Elisha's raising of the axe head figures in Gospel soteriology and how this hypotext-hypertext relationship theologically justifies the type of wonder-working accomplished by a medieval English cleric.

New Testament scholarship has certainly addressed the figures of Elijah and, to a lesser extent, Elisha in the Gospels' construction of Jesus, with Raymond Brown, D. Gerald Bostock, and Ivan Caine initiating such investigations in the previous century. Only in the past two decades have more enriching studies emerged, which thoroughly connect the Gospel narratives

to the Elijah-Elisha narrative. The novel work in this field, led by scholars such as Thomas Brodie and Adam Winn, will lead us towards a granular investigation of the presence of the Elijah-Elisha narrative within the Gospels. While more research is certainly necessary to create a fuller picture of this relationship, our emphasis will land primarily upon the Gospel of Mark. Nevertheless, the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles contain multiple points of interest which we would be remiss to leave unattended. As part of the Synoptic tradition, the Gospel of Matthew shares many elements with Mark and Luke, but contains comparatively fewer unique aspects to justify extended investigation. The Gospel of John, finally, diverges most from the Elijah-Elisha cycle and therefore occupies the least space in this paper.

We will then turn our focus back to Elisha's raising of the axe head, offering an explanation for how the subsumption of this pericope into the Gospels reflects a core soteriological claim that belief in the word of God and in Jesus as the Christ engenders the absolution of sin as well as salvation from death. While this will reveal the implicit place of the raising of the axe head in the soteriology of the Gospels, it does not explain how the prophetic authority to effect comparable miracles passed to Christian clerical institutions. As such, we will end with a discussion of discipleship in the Gospels in light of their Elijah-Elisha hypotext, spotlighting Peter in Luke-Acts and the apocryphal Acts of Peter to demonstrate how early Christians envisioned the passing of the spirit from teacher to disciple as a transferral of prophetic authority. This schema theologically authorizes the liturgist of the medieval English ordeal by water to effect a miracle mediated through the divine word.

## The Elijah-Elisha Narrative in the Gospel of Mark

We will begin our critical analysis of Mark's use of the Elijah-Elisha narrative with an investigation of structural elements. As discussed above, scholars disagree on the conceptual foundation of the Gospels. Nevertheless, "Many readily acknowledge the miracles of Elijah and Elisha as patterns for the Markan miracle stories."<sup>36</sup> This recognition often amounts to identification of a micro-relationship between Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative, with scholars connecting the details of Markan pericopes to specific units within the prophetic narrative. Such a superficial analysis obfuscates the totality of Mark's dependence upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative, the recognition of which recasts the Gospel of Mark as biography in service of historiography. That is, if we can evidence significant parallels between Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative, Mark's portrayal of the "life of Jesus as it relates to the unfolding of God's divine plan in the history of Israel and the world"<sup>37</sup> would then reflect the Elijah-Elisha narrative's salvation narrative via divine prophetic agents. Both are then soteriological narratives describing how the word of God as mediated through prophetic figures results in a type of salvation.

Reading the Gospel of Mark through a soteriological framework premised upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative leads Thomas Brodie to propose: "It is as though the Elijah-Elisha text serves as a lens, a foundational model, through which to engage both the larger history and other sources."<sup>38</sup> He reads the Elijah-Elisha narrative as emphasizing the importance of God's word to salvation, beginning with a display of God's power over creation—Elijah's proclamation of a divinely-ordained drought over Israel in 1 Kings 17:1-7—and ending with the exhibition of

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<sup>36</sup> Adam Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative: Considering the Practice of Greco-Roman Imitation in the Search for Markan Source Material* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010): 51.

<sup>37</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 86.

God's power over death, reflected in Elisha's corpse resurrecting a dead man in 2 Kings 13:20-21.<sup>39</sup> The Gospel of Mark similarly recounts a narrative centered upon a prophetic figure, Jesus, who exhibits God's power over life and death towards fulfilling the salvation of humanity. If we adopt Brodie's hypothesis and consider both the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospel of Mark as historiographical *bioi* (an ancient genre of biographical literature focused on the life of an individual) in which "something apocalyptic...bubbles up as it were from beneath the surface"—namely, the interaction between the word of God and ultimate salvation—then biographical features in both texts would contribute to the depiction of a revelatory or apocalyptic history.<sup>40</sup> More simply, identifying the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext of the Gospel of Mark suggests theological and soteriological parallels at an hermeneutical level accomplished through resonant biographical features.

We can thus move beyond simplistic analyses of a textual relationship, often limited to source-critical analyses of Markan miracles and scriptural allusions, to illuminate how Elijah and Elisha are fundamental in shaping the Gospel of Mark. Our goal in this section, then, is to more granularly evidence a Markan dependency upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative from multiple perspectives.

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<sup>39</sup> Notably, Elijah's proclamation of a drought over Israel reads as originating in Ahab's disobedience to God in 1 Kings 16:31-34. Not only does his worship and his erection of an altar to Baal violate core doctrines of Israelite religion (see Deuteronomy 6:4-19, Exodus 20:1-6), but the reconstruction of Jericho, forbidden in Joshua 6:26, occurs during his reign. The entire Elijah-Elisha narrative, then, begins with a conflict resulting from Israel's disobedience to the word of God as expressed through his prophets.

<sup>40</sup> Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 87.

## Elements of Structure

### Length

In his analysis of the Gospel form in *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, Richard Burridge identifies length as an integral structural element of ancient *bioi*, a genre of ancient biographical narratives recounting the lives of important individuals. Although Burridge in this work attempts to link the Gospels to Greco-Roman literary and rhetorical practices, we are endeavouring instead to identify the Elijah-Elisha narrative of the Hebrew Bible as a relevant framework by which the author of Mark composed his Gospel. Nevertheless, Burridge's identification of ancient *bioi* as a genre of "medium" length (10,000 to 25,000 words) identifies the length of a text as one criterion for broadly judging the structural relationship between a Gospel and another text.<sup>41</sup> The Gospel of Mark fits into this "medium" category with 11,242 total words,<sup>42</sup> similar to other ancient *bioi* such as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (averaging 10,000 to 11,000 words) and Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (averaging around 10,000 words).<sup>43</sup> This categorization by length relating the Gospels generally to Greco-Roman *bioi* fails, however, when we take into account Philo's *Life of Moses* (c. 32,000 words), Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana* (c. 82,000 words), and Lucian's *Demonax* (c. 3,000 words).<sup>44</sup> Clearly, Greco-Roman *bioi* varied beyond Burridge's "medium" length, complicating any argument directly relating the Gospel of Mark to contemporary Greco-Roman *bioi* through this structural similarity. The Elijah-Elisha narrative at about 14,400 words actually more closely parallels the length of Mark than the *bioi* which Philo and Philostratus authored, both of which

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<sup>41</sup> See Richard Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018): 117-19, 168-69, 199-200.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zurich: Gotthelf, 1958): 164.

<sup>43</sup> Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, 168-9.

<sup>44</sup> Burridge, *What are the Gospels?*, 169.

scholars more often compare with the Gospels when seeking to explain their emergence as unique literature.<sup>45</sup> Although “the similarity of length proves nothing in and of itself regarding a relationship” between Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative, their similar length does “enhance the plausibility” that the author of Mark viewed this narrative as a hypotext.<sup>46</sup> In conjunction with other parallels, this similarity in length serves as the most basic guidepost indicating a structural relationship between these two narratives.

### Beginning

The beginning, middle, and end of an ancient text serve as critical locations in determining if a hypertext relies upon a hypotext.<sup>47</sup> In the Gospel of Mark, these critical locations all point to the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext. The aggregation of these parallels suggests the Markan author’s reliance upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a structural model for his composition. As Brodie summarily states: “Much ancient writing attached particular importance to a text’s beginning, middle, and end.”<sup>48</sup> The beginning, in particular, would offer “signals or clues to their readers regarding their literary sources at such stages.”<sup>49</sup> Scholars of intertextuality point to structural and thematic similarities between the beginnings of Vergil’s *Aeneid* and Homer’s epics, for instance, to demonstrate the ubiquity with which ancient Greco-Roman readers identified the beginning of a text as indicating a hypertext-hypotext relationship.<sup>50</sup> If we

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<sup>45</sup> See Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 65. Winn excludes 2 Kings 8:16-29 and 13:1-13 from this count, which he argues only loosely relate to the Elijah-Elisha narrative and consist of formulaic lists.

<sup>46</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 65. Brodie also points to the number of chapters in each text—19 chapters in the Elijah-Elisha narrative, 16 chapters in Mark. See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 88. Since chapter division is paratextual and not inherent to the texts’ compositions, however, this similarity is less useful.

<sup>47</sup> See Vernon Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 50-3.

<sup>48</sup> Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> See K. O. Sandnes, “Imitatio Homeri? An Appraisal of Dennis R. MacDonald's 'Mimesis Criticism'”, *Journal of Biblical Studies* 124 (2005): 31-32. See also Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 11-33. For an investigation of Markan intertextuality with Homer, see generally Dennis MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).



are to relate the Gospel of Mark to the Elijah-Elisha narrative, then, we must identify clear signs of this relationship in the first chapter of Mark.

Luckily, many such signs exist, beginning with the opening scriptural citation that gestures to the prophet Elijah as a model for John the Baptist. Mark’s narrative opens at Mark 1:2-3 with the conflation of two scriptural quotations: the first from the LXX of Malachi 3:1, which proclaims a messianic divine messenger, and the second from the LXX of Isaiah 40:3, which describes in a similar manner the coming of a messianic figure.

Mark 1:2	Malachi 3:1
καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν τῷ Ἡσαΐα τῷ προφήτῃ· <b>ἰδοὺ ἀποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου·</b>	ἐγὼ <b>ἐξαποστέλλω τὸν ἄγγελόν μου</b> , καὶ ἐπιβλέψεται <b>ὁδὸν πρὸ προσώπου μου</b> , καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἦξει εἰς τὸν ναὸν ἑαυτοῦ Κύριος, ὃν ὑμεῖς ζητεῖτε, καὶ ὁ ἄγγελος τῆς διαθήκης, ὃν ὑμεῖς θέλετε· <b>ἰδοὺ ἔρχεται</b> , λέγει Κύριος παντοκράτωρ.
Mark 1:3	Isaiah 40:3
<b>φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου, εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους αὐτοῦ,</b>	<b>φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ· ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν Κυρίου. εὐθείας ποιεῖτε τὰς τρίβους τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν.</b>

Mark’s conflation of these two prophetic quotations identifies Malachi’s ἄγγελόν with the φωνὴ βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ from Isaiah, immediately following this conflated reference to John the Baptist.<sup>51</sup> Despite the narrative association with John the Baptist, a further look at Malachi clarifies that the ἄγγελόν actually refers to Elijah, as Malachi 4:5 (LXX) directly names the one whom the Lord sends as Elijah.<sup>52</sup> Already, Mark’s opening scriptural citation extends a “clue to

<sup>51</sup> The immediate introduction of John the Baptist follows these scriptural quotations, suggesting the reader identify him as the figure to whom both prophets referred. The verbal resonance of ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ between Mark 1:4 and Mark 1:3 (Isaiah 40:3) intensifies the identification of John with this figure.

<sup>52</sup> In the LXX, this passage occurs at Mal 4:5 and refers to Elijah as Ἡλίαν τὸν Θεοσβίτην. In the Hebrew Bible, this passage occurs at Mal 3:23 and refers to Elijah as **עֲלִיָּהוּ הַתִּיִשְׁבִּי**.

the reader that the story of Elijah is an important background for the gospel,” particularly for the character of John the Baptist.<sup>53</sup>

A number of other signs appear in Mark 1 that connect the opening of the Gospel to the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Both 1 Kings 17 and Mark 1 begin with abrupt introductions to prophetic figures in the middle of their lives. Mark 1:4 describes John the Baptist as in the wilderness, echoing Elijah’s flight to the wilderness in 1 Kings 19:4.<sup>54</sup> John the Baptist baptizes at the Jordan in Mark 1:5, while Elijah flees beyond the Jordan in 1 Kings 17:3. The description of John the Baptist’s appearance in Mark 1:6 resonates with the description of Elijah’s appearance in 2 Kings 1:8—both are identified by hair (John wears camel’s hair whereas Ahab’s messengers describe Elijah as a hairy man) and both wear a leather belt around their waist. Angels attend to Jesus in the wilderness at Mark 1:13 just as angels attend to Elijah in the wilderness at 1 Kings 19:4-8. Finally, Jesus’ abrupt calling of disciples Simon, Andrew, James, and John while they work at Mark 1:16-20 echoes Elijah’s abrupt calling of Elisha as he works at 1 Kings 19:19-21. In just the first 20 verses of Mark 1, then, we discover quite a bit of resonance with the Elijah-Elisha narrative.

Beyond scriptural and motivic allusions to Elijah, the pericope sequence of Mark 1:12-20 clearly matches that of 1 Kings 19:4-21 in order and substance. From a structural viewpoint, the beginning of Mark points to the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a key hypotext. In fact, the sequence and substance of the three pericopes in Mark 1:12-20 match exactly the three pericopes in 1 Kings 19:4-21. Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness in Mark 1:12-13 parallels Elijah’s sojourn in the wilderness at 1 Kings 19:4-14: both spend forty days in the wilderness, are attended to by angels,

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<sup>53</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 70.

<sup>54</sup> The LXX of 1 Kings 19:4 describes Elijah as ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ, providing further verbal resonance with Mark 1:4.

and suffer from temptation.<sup>55</sup> The pericopes which follow in Mark 1 and 1 Kings 19 both include proclamations relating to God's Kingdom. In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God is near, while God in 1 Kings 19:15-18 makes a proclamation to Elijah of Jehu's kingship over the Kingdom of Israel. Despite the lack of verbal agreement in these pericopes, "both proclamations share strong thematic similarities."<sup>56</sup> Finally, Jesus' calling of disciples in Mark 1:16-20 parallels Elijah's calling of Elisha at 1 Kings 19:19-21, the similarities of which many scholars note.<sup>57</sup> In both, the disciples are found working, the teacher/master initiates the call, the disciples leave their livelihoods, and the disciples' interaction with their families (or lack thereof) are noted.<sup>58</sup> Slight verbal resonances also connect the wording used to describe the disciples' responses in the LXX and Mark.<sup>59</sup> The beginning of the Gospel of Mark, then, contains a plentitude of allusions to the Elijah-Elisha narrative.

## Middle

Although we expect to see a hypertext refer to its hypotext primarily at its beginning, the hypertext narrative's midpoint should also refer in some way to its hypotext. The actual location of this midpoint within a text, however, depends upon interpretive judgement. Brodie identifies the Transfiguration at Mark 9:4-13 as the Gospel's midpoint, which I will not dispute here. The

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<sup>55</sup> See Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 72. Jesus' temptation by Satan is explicit in Mark 1:13, but Elijah's temptation is more implicit. His flight to the wilderness results from fear of death at the hands of Jezebel, which Winn calls "temptation to abandon his divine prophetic call." Elijah's request that God take his life at 1 Kings 19:4 highlights how he seeks to abandon his prophethood. Elijah here also echoes Jonah's resignation at Jonah 4:3-8, in which the prophet seeks death due to the tribulations of prophethood.

<sup>56</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 91. A. Y. Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 156-7. J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): 183-4. B. M. F. van Iersel, *Mark: A Reader Response Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998): 129-34.

<sup>58</sup> While the family of Simon and Andrew is not mentioned, James and John are said in Mark 1:20 to immediately leave their father. Although this (non-)interaction inverts Elisha's request to wish farewell to his family at 1 Kings 19:20, the point here is that each narrative mentions the family of called disciples.

<sup>59</sup> The wording used to describe Elisha's response at (LXX) 1 Kings 19:20 is ἀκολουθήσω ὀπίσω σου, and at 1 Kings 19:21 ἐπορεύθη ὀπίσω Ἡλίου. Mark 1:18, in comparison, describes the response of Simon and Andrew as ἠκολούθησαν αὐτῷ and the response of James and John at Mark 1:20 as ἀπῆλθον ὀπίσω αὐτοῦ.

Transfiguration occurs on a mountain, involves disciples who see heavenly apparitions, and directly references Elijah five times. If we expect to see residue of a hypotext in Mark's middle, these references to Elijah act as a signpost. We can further relate the Markan "middle" to the midpoint of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, Elijah's Assumption, at 2 Kings 1-2.<sup>60</sup> Here, Elijah's disciple sees heavenly apparitions and Elijah ascends to heaven. While these parallels do not compare in number or scope to those at Mark's beginning, the repeated explicit references to Elijah in Mark 9:4-13—as well as his appearance during the Transfiguration—further signify the importance of the Elijah-Elisha narrative to the Gospel of Mark.

End

As with our investigation into the middle of Mark's narrative, the imagery of which seems to parallel that of Elijah's Assumption in the Elijah-Elisha narrative, we can draw some parallels between Mark's ending and the ending of the Elijah-Elisha narrative.<sup>61</sup> The Gospel of Mark ends abruptly and enigmatically, with Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome fleeing in terror from Jesus' open tomb upon encountering a heavenly figure. This broadly parallels the abrupt and enigmatic ending of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, in which a group burying an anonymous man flees in terror from Elisha's open grave.<sup>62</sup> At a very superficial level, in both endings a group flees in terror from an open grave.

We can draw further parallels between the deaths of Jesus and Elisha in that both are great prophetic figures who experience fairly mundane deaths. Jesus suffers crucifixion alongside two bandits, enduring the death of a common criminal.<sup>63</sup> Even in comparison to John

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<sup>60</sup> Elijah's assumption to heaven splits the Elijah-Elisha narrative, initiating the sole ministry of Elisha. We can comfortably propose that Elijah's ascent represents the midpoint of the narrative.

<sup>61</sup> For the purposes of this investigation, I utilize the short ending of Mark which ends at Mark 16:8.

<sup>62</sup> Elisha's grave must be open as a dead body is rapidly deposited there in 2 Kings 13:21.

<sup>63</sup> Mark 16:27.

the Baptist, whom King Herod executes due to his admonishment of Herod's marriage to Herodias and the resulting plot by Herodias and her daughter to kill the ill-speaking holy man, Jesus suffers an exceedingly plebeian death.<sup>64</sup> Such a death echoes that of Elisha, who succumbs quietly to illness.<sup>65</sup> Elijah, in comparison, ascends to heaven in a whirlwind surrounded by divine fire and chariots.<sup>66</sup> Both Jesus and Elisha, in comparison to the holy men at whose hands they receive the spirit, die mundane and common deaths. The two references to Elijah amidst Jesus' crucifixion may also activate this parallel.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, the deaths of both Jesus and Elisha result in resurrections. Although the resurrected Jesus does not appear himself in our reading of Mark, his opened tomb combined with the announcement of the mysterious figure that Jesus is raised (ἠγέρθη) signals Jesus' resurrection.<sup>68</sup> This broadly echoes the resurrection of the dead man in 2 Kings 13:21 after his deposition in Elisha's grave. We can thus claim that the deaths of Elisha and Jesus both result in a resurrection occurring at their grave sites. While less plentiful than at the beginning of Mark, some broad parallels between the Gospel and the Elijah-Elisha narrative occur at their ends. Our structural analysis of the Gospel of Mark, which identifies the Gospel's beginning, middle, and end as critical locations in which the Gospel would refer to a potential hypotext, thus firmly points to the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Although each parallel in itself suggests little of significance, their culmination suggests that the Markan author relied upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a structural model for his composition.

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<sup>64</sup> Mark 6:14-29.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Kings 13:14.

<sup>66</sup> 2 Kings 2:11-12.

<sup>67</sup> Mark 15:35-36.

<sup>68</sup> Mark 16:6. We could also point to the proleptic statements in Mark that Jesus will rise from the dead.

## Style

Having addressed some parallel structural elements in each narrative, we will now turn to stylistic parallels. As Winn comments: “None of the evidence we have presented here proves that Mark used the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a source. Yet, it is noteworthy that all of these similarities find an easy explanation in the theory that Mark is literarily dependent on the Elijah-Elisha narrative.”<sup>69</sup> The culmination of many smaller links in structure, style, and substance should fulfill any criteria necessary to hypothesize Mark’s dependency upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Here, we focus our attention on the episodic style of both narratives and on the geographic parallels relating each prophetic ministry. Both offer further evidence that the author of Mark employed the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext in the composition of his Gospel.

## Episodes

Both the Gospel of Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative consist of successive episodic narrative blocks. Winn argues that Mark’s “independent blocks are often connected by common themes, vocabulary, actions, or characters,” unifying otherwise disconnected narrative segments into a mostly-unified story about a prophetic figure.<sup>70</sup> This figure mediates the divine word to advance a soteriology that culminates in restoring rightful worship of God. Nevertheless, scholars disagree about any proposed hypotext in which the episodic style of Mark originated. Much scholarship looks to Greco-Roman literature rather than Biblical narratives. Greco-Roman *bioi* and historiographies could exhibit an episodic prose style, as in Lucian’s *Demonax* and the works of Herodotus. Continuous prose style otherwise dominates these two Greco-Roman

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<sup>69</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 68.

<sup>70</sup> Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 65. See Collins, *Mark*, 41 on the episodic nature of Mark.

genres, which scholars primarily investigate when struggling to locate the origins of any feature or element in the Gospels. Despite this common focus on Greco-Roman genres, we could more easily point to the episodic narrative style of the Hebrew Bible's Primary History (Genesis to 2 Kings) to identify a literary unit that best presages Mark's episodic prose style.<sup>71</sup>

When searching for miracle narratives in the Primary History, the overwhelming majority occur amidst the Elijah-Elisha narrative, with the two prophets responsible for a combined 21 miracles.<sup>72</sup> Many of these miracles occur in self-contained segments, only lightly unified into a singular narrative.<sup>73</sup> If the author of Mark were to draw his episodic miracle units from any literary source, the Elijah-Elisha narrative likely offers the best model. Perhaps coincidentally, Jesus in the Gospel of Mark performs 20 miracles, almost matching the number which Elijah and Elisha perform.<sup>74</sup> In comparing the frequency and number of miracle episodes in both texts—without inquiry into the substance of any miracle pericope—the Elijah-Elisha narrative offers the best model for Mark's episodic style in which miracle units constitute a large portion of the Gospel text.

Investigating the prophetic episodes in both narratives reinforces this hypothesis. In the Elijah-Elisha narrative, we read eight prophecies about specific events which find fulfillment in

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<sup>71</sup> D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987): 36-41.

<sup>72</sup> Of course, both number and frequency matter. As frequency depends upon textual length, Mark's ideal stylistic hypotext (e.g. a text with an episodic narrative style similar to that of Mark, plausibly serving as its hypotext) would parallel Mark in the number of miracle/prophecy units belong to both texts as well as their total lengths.

<sup>73</sup> For instance, during Elisha's journey back to Gilgal following Elijah's assumption he raises the Shunammite Woman's son (see 2 Kings 4:25-37), which substantively connects to the preceding prophecy narrative in which Elisha tells this Shunammite she will bear a son despite her husband's age (see 2 Kings 4:11-17). The miracle following both Shunam pericopes, Elisha's purification of the pot of stew in Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38-41), begins abruptly without mention of leaving Shunam or Mount Carmel. This miracle pericope only relates to the preceding two units centered on Shunam in that all three occur during Elisha's journey from the Jordan to Gilgal. This does create some sense of unity, explaining how the setting silently transitions from Shunam and Mount Carmel to Gilgal. We can easily read the two Shunam units as a unified narrative couplet, but those units which precede and follow are not as easy to unify. This mixture of unity and disunity exhibits the episodic narrative style at the center of this section.

<sup>74</sup> We have noted above the similarities in length between the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospel of Mark. See nn. 40-2 above.

the narrative—a number and frequency not paralleled elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. In Mark, comparatively, Jesus makes six prophecies which find specific fulfillment within the narrative.<sup>75</sup> No other narrative unit in the primary history maintains the Elijah-Elisha narrative’s episodic style in which we encounter so many prophecy episodes that find fulfillment. In frequency and number, then, prophetic and miracle episodes in Mark best parallel those in the Elijah-Elisha narrative, further evidencing our argument that on the basis of episodic style a hypotext-hypertext literary relationship links the Elijah-Elisha narrative to the Gospel of Mark. In other words, our analysis of prophecy and miracle episodes in the two narratives suggests that the author of Mark utilized the episodic style of the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a stylistic model for his Gospel composition.<sup>76</sup>

Additionally, we argue that Mark echoes the Elijah-Elisha narrative in the manner in which both narratives transition from episodic blocks to continuous narrative. Both narratives begin episodically with a greater frequency of disjoint pericopes, yet episodes gradually grow longer and display greater unification as the texts progress. Mark begins with distinct, short, sometimes disjoint episodes, for instance, but after Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in Mark 11:15-19 the narrative essentially becomes a continuous and unified sequence of events. The Elijah-Elisha narrative similarly begins with distinct episodes, but the anointing of Jehu in 2 Kings 9 initiates an essentially continuous narrative proceeding up to Elisha’s death (2 Kings 9-13). Though Brodie also argues the episodes in both narratives progressively lengthen, shorten, expand again, and conclude in a final unbroken sequence—which he calls a “spiralling

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<sup>75</sup> See Winn, *Mark and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative*, 65, n 19. Winn excludes the prophecies in Mark 13 due to disagreement about whether they are *vaticinium ex eventu*. He also excludes prophecies regarding the parousia in Mark 13 and 14.

<sup>76</sup> We might also discuss the Moses narrative as a stylistic model, which similarly consists of an episodic narrative in which a prophetic figure performs miracles and prophecies. But the narration of Moses’ life occurs across multiple books (Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), resulting in a much lower frequency of miracle and prophecy episodes than in the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Nevertheless, I do not disagree that Moses remains in the background of the Mark.



narrative”—this argument seems somewhat difficult to appraise.<sup>77</sup> Ultimately, if we had to identify a Markan hypotext on the basis of style, our evidence would point to the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Such stylistic parallels strengthen our argument that the Elijah-Elisha narrative served as a hypotext for Mark.

## Geography

Generally, both the Elijah-Elisha narrative and Jesus’ ministry in the Gospel of Mark follow a north-south movement with comparable geographic movements at the beginning, middle, and end of the narratives. Both Elijah and Elisha work and live in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in which most of the events in their ministries occur, while the narrative closes with a narration of events surrounding the Temple in Judah. At face value, this geographic organization of narrative material parallels that of the Gospel of Mark. The brunt of Jesus’ ministry occurs in the Galilee, but Mark’s narrative concludes around Jerusalem and the Temple. Both Brodie and Winn note specific similarities in geography and location relating these two narratives.

At the beginning of Mark, for instance, the narrative of Jesus opens with his Jordan baptism at the hands of John the Baptist, after which Jesus suffers temptation in the wilderness.<sup>78</sup> Immediately after his wilderness sojourn, Jesus begins his ministry by evangelizing in the north, in Galilee.<sup>79</sup> The Elijah-Elisha narrative begins similarly, with Elijah escaping persecution in the wilderness east of the Jordan.<sup>80</sup> Just as that of Jesus, Elijah’s wilderness travels end with him

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<sup>77</sup> See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 89. He identifies “short” Markan episodes at Mark 6:45-52, 53-56; 7:24-30, 31-37; 8:1-10, and a “long” concluding sequence from Mark 11 to 16. This might reflect the Elijah-Elisha narrative, with “short” initial episodes at 2 Kings 2:19-22, 23-25; 4:1-7, 38-41, 42-44, and a continuous concluding narrative from 2 Kings 9 to 13. While we could perform stylometric analyses of each individual episode in both Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative to judge whether their episodes “spiral” in length, we would gain more trouble than insight. I mention Brodie’s “spiral” hypothesis as one plausible stylistic model which, if correct, strengthens our argument that a hypertext-hypotext relationship links Mark to the Elijah-Elisha narrative. We will have to leave the appraisal of Brodie’s episodic model to future scholarship.

<sup>78</sup> Mark 1:9-13.

<sup>79</sup> Mark 1:14-15.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Kings 17:2-10.

moving north to Zarephath and Sidon to begin his ministry.<sup>81</sup> As we discussed from a structural standpoint earlier in this paper, such parallels (in this case, geographic) in the beginnings of each narrative suggest that Mark's author considered the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext upon which he modeled his Gospel.

We expect to see the clearest evidence of this possibility at the beginning of a hypertext, but we can identify further geographic parallels at the middle of both narratives which gestures to the fact that in the ministries of both Jesus and Elijah/Elisha, the prophetic figures in a central portion of the text travel outside the typical boundaries of Israel. In the central portion of Mark, for instance, Jesus leaves the Galilee to travel to Gentile territory in Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis.<sup>82</sup> We can compare this to the central portion of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, where the two prophets travel east of the Jordan prior to Elijah's Assumption.<sup>83</sup> This parallel does seem weaker than those at the narratives' beginnings, especially if we identify the Transfiguration as the midpoint of the Gospel of Mark.

The ends of both narratives more plausibly correlate geographically, climaxing in Jerusalem, particularly at the Temple, and concluding with the Northern Kingdom/Galilee. The radiant figure in Jesus' tomb tells Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome that Jesus is moving north, ahead of Peter and the other disciples, towards the Galilee.<sup>84</sup> Moving away from the Jerusalem Temple in Judea and towards the Galilee constitutes the final geographic orientation of Jesus' ministry. This is particularly noteworthy given that the final

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<sup>81</sup> 1 Kings 17:10-24. While we could argue that Elijah's ministry begins in Samaria with his prophecy of drought, or even east of the Jordan in Gilead in which Elijah is introduced, only the opening verse of 1 Kings 17 provides these data. Without any narrated response from Ahab or of surrounding events, it is difficult to call this prophecy the opening of Elijah's ministry. The narrative dedicates much more space to his interactions in Zarephath, where Elijah's miraculous abilities manifest in providing aid. Thus, we can more justifiably argue that Elijah's ministry begins with his travels north.

<sup>82</sup> Mark 7:24, 31.

<sup>83</sup> 2 Kings 2:6-12.

<sup>84</sup> Mark 16:7. Although we are utilizing the shorter ending of Mark in this paper, even when including the extended ending this is the last reference to a specific location in Jesus' itinerary.

events in Jesus' earthly life, including his crucifixion and resurrection—the climactic point for the soteriological thrust of the Gospel—occur in/near Jerusalem. We see something similar in the ending of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, where Elisha's final scenes, in which he performs a sort of prophetic military ritual with King Joash, occur in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the same region to which the figure at Jesus' opened tomb directs Jesus' disciples.

The soteriological climax of the Elijah-Elisha narrative occurs just prior to Elisha's death with the cleansing of Samaria and repair of the Temple—both to restore the rightful worship of the Lord—before Elisha gives a final prophecy in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>85</sup> Essentially, this parallels Mark, in which a soteriological climax centers upon a transition to the rightful worship of God, and in which a prophetic figure gestures north to the Galilee as the final geographic orientation.<sup>86</sup> Though the specific geographical features in the middles of each narrative are tough to reconcile, the similarities we can point to—particularly in the beginnings and ends of each narrative—support the overall argument that Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative roughly align geographically. This further suggests that the author of Mark held the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a critical hypotext and modeled much of his Gospel in light of this prophetic narrative. When we seek out the place of Elisha's axe head in the Gospels and their soteriology, the accumulation of evidence suggesting a critical relationship between the Gospels and the Elijah-Elisha narrative will help justify our arguments in spite of the silence surrounding the axe head in the Gospels.

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<sup>85</sup> Jehu cleanses Samaria in 2 Kings 10. Jehoash repairs the Temple in 2 Kings 12:1-16. After Elisha anoints Jehu at 2 Kings 9:1-13, the narrative moves entirely away from him to focus on the results of Jehu's anointing, which culminates the prophetic mediation of the word of God beginning at 1 Kings 19:16. Elisha gestures east in 2 Kings 13:14-19, then personally disappears from the narrative. No narration of his death or burial follows, just the subsequent events occurring at his open grave.

<sup>86</sup> We might point to Jesus' cleansing of the Temple in Mark 11:15-19 as an echo of Jehu and Jehoash's actions in the Elijah-Elisha narrative.

## Characterization

Thus far we have focused on comparing structural and stylistic elements to demonstrate the Gospel of Mark's use of the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a critical hypotext. Having illustrated these parallels, we will now focus on two characters within the Gospel of Mark: John the Baptist and Jesus. This section will argue that John the Baptist utilizes Elijah as a character model, echoes of which appear variously in this paper already. Both are anti-authority prophetic figures who, near the Jordan, facilitate their follower's receipt of the spirit and thereby initiate ministries replete with miracle episodes. Demonstrating a parallel between Elijah and John the Baptist further implies a relationship between their disciples: Jesus and Elisha. As such, we will then argue that Elisha served as a prophetic model for Mark's Jesus, particularly in relation to the miracles performed during both figures' ministries.

We must note, however, that the author of Mark complicates the argument that Elijah and Elisha serve as direct character models for John the Baptist and Jesus. Mark sometimes characterizes Jesus as an Elijah figure in the Gospel narrative, suggesting that Jesus' character actually conflates *both* Elijah and Elisha. This conflation is extremely critical in understanding how the Gospels utilized the Elijah-Elisha narrative to construct a model of discipleship through which prophetic authority passes. That is, Jesus starts off in Mark as subordinate to a prophetic teacher, but is granted prophetic authority after receiving the spirit that descends to him. His teacher figure induces this descent of spirit after Jesus has a spiritual experience at the Jordan. Thus far, John the Baptist parallels Elijah, while Jesus parallels Elisha. Yet Jesus eventually passes this spirit to his own disciples, echoing Elijah—not Elisha—in his extension of prophetic authority to disciples. We will address later how the conflation of these two prophets in the figure

of Jesus helps construct a theological framework in which discipleship enables the passage of the spirit and prophetic authority.

### Elijah and John the Baptist

Numerous scholars note the similarities between the characters of Elijah and John the Baptist. In *Hebrew Gospel: Cracking the Code of Mark*, Wolfgang Roth links John the Baptist to Elijah because both are known for commissioning individuals who ultimately purify the Temple. Elijah acts as a model of a master/teacher who passes on his authority to a disciple, reflected in Mark with John the Baptist. Roth argues that this patterning actually constricts the Markan narrative, as Elijah appears abruptly without any background. John the Baptist thus has to appear in a similarly sudden manner as a prophetic figure without, for instance, a birth narrative. D. Gerald Bostock adds in his article “Jesus as the New Elisha” that both John the Baptist and Elijah are “austere, puritanical figures who live a life of protest against the immorality and irreligion of their times.”<sup>87</sup> They are both rough and hirsute individuals who live in the hills. Elijah only seems to descend to cities for condemnations, just as John the Baptist’s chief role consists of warning and reprimanding. Indeed, the thesis of Ivan Caine’s article “Elisha as Antecedent to Jesus” holds that John the Baptist and Jesus serve as typological reflections of Elijah and Elisha. We can even find ancient texts in the periphery of the Gospel traditions equating Elijah with John the Baptist, as Raymond Brown points out in his article “John and Elisha.” The Syriac version of the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, for instance, portrays John the Baptist as “being hidden away, presumably to return like Elijah.”<sup>88</sup>

When structurally comparing the beginnings of the Gospel of Mark and the Elijah-Elisha narrative earlier in this paper, we illustrated many of the parallels between Mark’s John the

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<sup>87</sup> D. Gerald Bostock, “Jesus as the New Elisha,” *Expository Times* 92, no. 2 (1980): 41.

<sup>88</sup> Raymond Brown, “Jesus and Elisha,” *Perspective* 12 (1971): 86. [Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions*, I 54].

Baptist and Elijah. Since Mark portrays John the Baptist in the Gospel primarily in Mark 1 and 6, we will not retread the features in Mark's introduction relating him to Elijah, such as the scriptural allusions, descriptions of appearance, and geography. We have also previously identified the five direct references to Elijah during (and after) the Transfiguration in Mark 9.

We can further point to Jesus' implication in Mark 9 that John the Baptist is Elijah, which stands alongside allusions to Malachi to reify the appraisal of John the Baptist as a messianic figure. Jesus explains to his disciples that Elijah has already appeared to herald the coming of the Son of Man and that "they did to him whatever they pleased" (καὶ ἐποίησαν αὐτῷ ὅσα ἤθελον)<sup>89</sup>—a tacit allusion to John the Baptist's execution.<sup>90</sup> This suggests that John the Baptist serves within the narrative as an Elijah figure who presages the appearance of a messianic figure. Indeed, we are already primed to understand John the Baptist as a messianic Elijah figure due to the Gospel's opening scriptural quotation from Malachi 3.<sup>91</sup> A later verse in Malachi identifies this figure "who will prepare your way" (LXX: ὃς κατασκευάσει τὴν ὁδὸν σου) as Elijah, but the narrative immediately following the scriptural quotations introduces John the Baptist (ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ).<sup>92</sup> In conjunction with Jesus' statements in Mark 9:12-13 which implicitly conflate Elijah and John the Baptist, then, a Markan reader with a firm grasp of the prophetic texts would easily identify John the Baptist as an Elijah figure.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Mark 9:13.

<sup>90</sup> See Mark 6:14-29. Notably, Jesus' activity to this point leads some in Mark 6:14-16 to suggest that he is either John the Baptist or Elijah. We can conclude from this that the characters within the narrative of Mark—if not the author himself—view John the Baptist and Elijah as similar figures.

<sup>91</sup> See Mark 1:2.

<sup>92</sup> Mark 1:2, 4.

<sup>93</sup> Ivan Caine discusses the use of Malachi to identify John the Baptist as the Messianic figure of Elijah. See generally Ivan Caine, "Elisha as Antecedent to Jesus," *Jewish Civilization; Essays and Studies* 3 (1985). Although Caine focuses on the allusion to Malachi 3:23-4 in Luke 1:16-7, when Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist, he argues that Luke's allusions to Malachi reflect the evolution of Elijah into a transcendent harbinger of the anointed. He suggests that John the Baptist's identification with Elijah in Luke reflects how early Christ-believers incorporated Elijah's messianic portrayal into the Gospel. That is, portraying John the Baptist as Elijah consequently implies Jesus' status as the messiah. Despite his focus in this argument on the Gospel of Luke, Caine's inquiry holds when considering the use of Malachi in Mark 1. Here, too, the conflation of John the Baptist with Elijah suggests Jesus' identity as the prophesied messiah.

Thus far, we have focused on parallels between John the Baptist and Elijah which illuminate Jesus as a messianic figure. But this relationship further implies the identification of John the Baptist's disciple, Jesus, with Elijah's disciple, Elisha. Jesus thus shares with Elisha the teacher-disciple schema by which one receives the spirit and the concomitant ability to effect miraculous wonders, suggesting a typological relationship between the two characters while also reifying the parallels between Elijah and John the Baptist. If we conclude that John the Baptist is an Elijah figure, we should also find instances where the author of Mark models Jesus upon Elisha—particularly when Jesus and John the Baptist interact. We see just this in the baptism of Jesus narrated in Mark 1:9-12—the most extensive interaction involving the two figures within Mark. Jesus first appears in Mark 1:9-10 to receive baptism in the Jordan from John the Baptist, which results in a vision of the heavens torn open (σχιζομένους τοὺς οὐρανοὺς) and the descent of the spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα) on him. The four defining elements of Jesus' baptism, then, are: (1) the presence of two individuals with a teacher-disciple relationship, (2) the presence of the Jordan, (3) the perception of heavenly visions, and (4) the receipt by the disciple of spirit.<sup>94</sup>

All four of these defining elements perfectly align with Elisha receiving the spirit from Elijah in 2 Kings 2:9-12. Elijah and Elisha maintain an explicit master-disciple relationship which is also divinely ordained,<sup>95</sup> leading Elisha to accompany Elijah beyond the Jordan until Elijah's Assumption.<sup>96</sup> Elisha requests that Elijah pass to him a double share of his spirit (LXX: διπλᾶ ἐν πνεύματί σου ἐπ' ἐμέ), which Elijah authorizes if his disciple can perceive Elijah's

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<sup>94</sup> We might hesitate to identify John the Baptist as an explicit teacher of Jesus, but Jesus clearly is subordinate to John the Baptist prior to receiving the spirit. John attracts many to his teachings (Mark 1:5) and we later hear of a group of his disciples interacting with Jesus and his disciples (Mark 2:18), so we can conclude he is a charismatic teacher. The very fact that John baptizes Jesus positions him in a subordinate relationship to John, even though Mark does not explicitly refer to him as John's disciple. Without any further explication of their relationship, the teacher-disciple (or master-disciple) model is the best framework through which to interpret Jesus' interactions in Mark 1 with John the Baptist.

<sup>95</sup> See 1 Kings 19:19-21 for the calling of Elisha. God specifies that Elisha become a prophet in Elijah's place at 1 Kings 19:16-17.

<sup>96</sup> 2 Kings 2:1-8.

Assumption.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, Elisha does perceive a chariot and horses of fire as well as a whirlwind which carries Elijah to heaven.<sup>98</sup> He confirms his receipt of Elijah's spirit by striking the Jordan with Elijah's fallen mantle, chiastically repeating the same action which Elijah performed to facilitate their travel east of the Jordan.<sup>99</sup> The prophets divide the Jordan River in both cases, implying that Elisha inherited Elijah's spirit and that the ability to perform such a miracle derives from the presence of the spirit. Indeed, the company of prophets—associated variously with Elijah and Elisha throughout the Elijah-Elisha narrative—declare that Elijah's spirit rests on Elisha upon seeing the disciple return alone.<sup>100</sup> Of the four elements constituting Jesus' baptism, then, all appear in the Assumption of Elijah: (1) two individuals with a teacher-disciple relationship are present, (2) Elijah's Assumption occurs near the Jordan, the miraculous division of which also serves to demonstrate the passage of Elijah's spirit to his disciple, (3) Elisha sees visions of fiery chariots and a whirlwind carrying Elijah to heaven, and (4) Elisha receives the spirit.

If the relationship we have sketched between John the Baptist and Elijah—and by extension Jesus and Elisha—holds true, this not only suggests that Jesus' receipt of spirit enables him to perform miracles (just as Elisha) in order to convey the word of God but also that the presence of this spirit is deeply tied to a disciple's engagement with their prophetic teacher. Although this model appears most clearly in the Elijah-Elisha narrative—the spirit descends to Jesus from heaven and not directly from John the Baptist—we see the same framework in Mark, in which Jesus' baptism reflects a teacher-disciple relationship with John the Baptist and induces the descent of the spirit from heaven. In other words, Mark's use of Elijah as a model for John

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<sup>97</sup> 2 Kings 2:9-10.

<sup>98</sup> 2 Kings 2:11-12.

<sup>99</sup> 2 Kings 2:13-14. Elijah strikes the Jordan with his mantle at 2 Kings 2:7-8.

<sup>100</sup> 2 Kings 2:15.



the Baptist accomplishes more than just alluding to Jesus as a messianic figure. This characterization significantly draws upon Elijah's relationship with Elisha to construct a teacher-disciple model which incorporates John the Baptist and Jesus. By recognizing this model, we see how in Mark the spirit passes from (or at the behest of) a teacher to their disciple, granting the disciple prophetic authority that enables them to perform miracles.

### Elisha and the Miracles of Jesus

One of the defining aspects of the Jesus narrative in the Gospel of Mark is the performance of miracles. Leslie Houlden utilizes a tripartite schema to categorize such wonder-working: (1) remarkable events that have a strong theological significance, (2) deeds performed by Jesus involving "nature" in one form or another, and (3) acts of healing and exorcism.<sup>101</sup> In the world of the Gospels, however, such categorization perhaps obscures the nature of these events. At Mark 13:22, for instance, Jesus warns about false messiahs and false prophets who will show "signs and miracles" (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα) to lead astray the elect. Indeed, τέρατα does not imply a specific category of event, but rather a marvel at which onlookers wonder, which includes both monsters and portents.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, our concern remains the performance of unnatural actions, by which we mean events contrary to natural laws governing our world. Jesus performs many such actions in the Gospel of Mark, from healings to walking on water.

If we locate Mark's hypotext in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel's emphasis on miracles suggests a source in which miracles similarly abound. More specifically, a source in

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<sup>101</sup> See Leslie Houlden, *Jesus the Complete Guide* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003): 421-5.

<sup>102</sup> For a long list of references in Greek literature demonstrating the wide semantic range of the term, see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "τέρας" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

which a figure effects events contrary to nature during an itinerant ministry to the advantage and wonder of onlookers, beneficiaries, and the general public. In only the Elijah-Elisha narrative does this exist, suggesting a formal relationship between the Gospel and the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Other wonder-workers abounded in contemporary literature, most famously exemplified in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, but these generally characterized itinerant wonder-workers. Elisha in the Elijah-Elisha narrative performs miracles with substantive parallels in the Gospel of Mark, leading Bostock to describe Elisha's actions as a "most perfect parallel" for Jesus' miracles.<sup>103</sup> Though we could discuss such a parallel at length given the substantive similarities in miracles of transformation, healing, multiplication, levitation, and raising of the dead, here we will focus on the feedings of the 5,000 and of the 4,000 in Mark 6 and 8, respectively.

In 2 Kings 4:42-44, Elisha miraculously distributes a relatively small number of loaves of barley and ears of grain to a crowd of 100. The similarity between this feeding and the two feedings of the 5,000 and 4,000 seem obvious enough at face value, with many commenters noting how both Jesus and Elisha multiply loaves of bread.<sup>104</sup> The narrative in which these three feedings occur all note the necessity for food. Elisha's multiplication miracle seemingly occurs in Gilgal, and 2 Kings 4:38 describes the region as suffering a famine. Comparatively, Mark 6:31 notes that the travelling of the crowd to a deserted location left no opportunity to eat, and Mark 8:1-2 claims the crowds had nothing to eat for three days. Only a small amount of food is available, specifying too few loaves of bread: 20 barley loaves (2 Kings 4:42), five loaves of bread (Mark 6:38), and seven loaves of bread (Mark 8:5). Both Elisha and Jesus distribute this

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<sup>103</sup> Bostock, "Jesus as the New Elisha," 40-1.

<sup>104</sup> See Marcus, *Mark*, 415-6. See also Iersel, *Mark*, 225-30. F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002): 133. J. R. Donahue and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002): 209-11.

food, despite the doubt of both Elisha's servant and Jesus' disciples.<sup>105</sup> Elisha and Jesus then issue a second command, after which Elisha's servant and Jesus' disciples distribute the food. A large number of people then eat the small amount of food, yet extra food remains.

Beyond the substantive similarity in these accounts, the most notable formal aspect of these three multiplications is the structural similarity. Despite the shortness of the pericope in 2 Kings, the expanded accounts in Mark 6 and 8 follow nearly the same arc of Elisha's multiplication. Certainly, Mark adds an extra element in the breaking of the loaves at Mark 6:41 and 8:6, which he follows contrastingly with blessing (εὐλόγησεν) and giving thanks (εὐχαριστήσας). We also see a slight modification in the second command given by Elisha and Jesus. In 2 Kings 4:43 Elisha simply repeats his command, whereas in Mark 6:39 and 8:6 Jesus issues orders for the crowd to sit. These slight differences, however, do not detract from the overall structural parallelism in the three passages. The narrative order remains overwhelmingly similar, suggesting—along with the parallels in details (e.g. hunger, loaves, issuing of commands, doubt of companions)—Mark's multiplications derive from Elisha's miracle in 2 Kings 4. Consequently, Mark's Jesus reflects Elisha.

More than just a reflection of Elisha, however, Mark portrays Jesus as a greater version of Elisha through literary intensification. We see this same intensification in the Elijah-Elisha narrative itself, with Elijah traditionally performing eight miracles and Elisha performing 16.<sup>106</sup> This doubling accords with Elisha's receipt of double Elijah's spirit, which Elisha requests in 2 Kings 2:11-2. In Louis Ginzberg's survey of Jewish legends, this doubling of spirit signifies a duplication of power reified in many of Elisha's miracles repeating those of Elijah both

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<sup>105</sup> Some lexical similarity exists between the commands to distribute the food in 2 Kings 4:42 and Mark 6:37. No command explicitly appears to distribute the food in Mark 8, though this is implied in Mark 8:2-3.

<sup>106</sup> See Nachman Levine, "Twice as Much of Your Spirit: Pattern, Parallel and Paronomasia in the Miracles of Elijah and Elisha," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24, no. 85 (1999): 25.

thematically and substantively.<sup>107</sup> In Mark, we find not just a single loaves-multiplication miracle, but rather two with significant parallels, implying Jesus as an even greater wonder-worker than Elisha. Moreover, the details of the multiplication miracles in Mark point to intensification of Elisha's miracle. Jesus feeds a far greater number of people while using fewer loaves of bread, while a relatively large number of baskets containing leftover food remains.

Here, then, we see the result of Mark's use of the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext. Jesus is not just a figure patterned upon the model of Elisha, but a far greater figure. This greatness results from our knowledge of Mark's model, Elisha, while the intensification of Elisha's miracles illustrates Jesus as an even more transcendent figure. We might similarly acknowledge how Jesus does not receive his spirit directly from a teacher figure, like Elisha receiving a double portion from Elijah, but from heaven itself. Though the Elijah-Elisha hypotext provides an origin for the Markan narrative, recognizing this model and how Jesus far surpasses Elisha thus identifies Jesus as the ultimate wonder-worker who will messianically restore God's kingdom in a fashion even greater than Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings—a soteriological intensification, in other words.

## The Elijah-Elisha Narrative in the Gospel of Luke

Outside the Gospel of Mark, most discussion of the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospels focuses upon the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. To be sure, Luke is replete with direct references to Elijah and Elisha. In Luke's opening chapter an angel announces to Zechariah and Elizabeth the birth of their son John and specifically states: "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, (καὶ αὐτὸς προελεύσεται ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ

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<sup>107</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913): 239.

δυνάμει Ἡλίου) to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:17). The comparison of John the Baptist to Elijah with regards to “spirit” and “power” places John in a schema in which Jesus, whom John presages, occupies an Elisha role. This infancy narrative in Luke 1 and 2 arguably follows a diptych structure as well, which Brodie relates to the general diptych structure of the Elijah-Elisha cycle.<sup>108</sup> As with the Gospel of Mark, a reference to Elijah in the very beginning of Luke gestures to the Elijah-Elisha narrative as a hypotext upon which the Lukan evangelist organizes his Gospel.

Moreover, the opening of Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth invokes both Elijah and Elisha. These references in Luke 4:25-7 seem to carry soteriological undertones, alluding to Elijah providing salvation to a widow in Sidon rather than the widows in Israel (1 Kings 17:8-16) and to Elisha healing the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5). Jesus’ claim to fulfill the scriptural line that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ’ ἐμέ) in reference to these miraculous acts thus proleptically relates his own actions and those of Elijah and Elisha to the indwelling of the divine spirit, which allows the performance of miraculous transformations—the multiplication of flour and oil and the healing of leprosy, respectively. Elijah also restores the widow’s son to life (1 Kings 17:17-24) which further underlines how the spirit facilitates a restoration of life itself, gesturing to the soteriological role of Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus seems to specifically recreate this latter miracle of life restoration when reviving the widow of Nain’s son in Luke 7:11-17. Both involve the sons of widows restored to life and the miracle in Luke 7 exhibits distinct verbal resonance with Elijah’s revivification in the LXX of 1 Kings 17. In 1 Kings 17:23, Elijah revived the child and “gave him to his mother” (ἔδωκεν αὐτὸ τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ) while in Luke 7:15 Jesus revived the child and also “gave him to

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<sup>108</sup> See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 84, n. 12.

his mother” (ἔδωκεν αὐτὸν τῇ μητρὶ αὐτοῦ). The narrative and verbal resonances relate Jesus’ miracle here to Elijah’s earlier. Much as we saw when investigating the Gospel of Mark, Jesus does not neatly fit into an Elisha mold, as this parallel with Elijah indicates. Yet Brown argues this Lukan pericope more closely draws upon Elisha’s raising of the son of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:18-37. Nain lies close to Shunam, which places both these stories of revival in a similar location. Furthermore, Jesus and Elisha come to Nain and Shunam from a distance, whereas Elijah seems to reside in Sidon. This miracle in Luke, then, seems to conflate both Elijah and Elisha into a single typological model, drawing upon both figures to portray Jesus and his ministry. This creates an effect where Jesus simultaneously embodies the disciple to whom the spirit passes (Elisha) and the teacher from whom the spirit descends (Elijah).

Luke disperses references to the Elijah-Elisha narrative throughout, though we will not place these parallels into too much focus. Elisha’s raising of the Shunammite’s son, for instance, parallels mainly the pericope of the widow of Nain, but the detail in 2 Kings 4 that Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, can not revive the Shunammite’s son seems to have been dispersed to Jesus’ healing of a possessed boy in Luke 9:37-43. Not only does Jesus heal this child only after his own disciples could not do so, but both Elisha and Jesus perform these miracles upon descending from a mountain. Later in Luke 9:54, a Samaritan town rejects James and John, leading them to ask Jesus if he ought command heavenly fire to descend and consume them.<sup>109</sup> This suggestion clearly alludes to Elijah’s calling down of fire from heaven upon the Samaritan soldiers of Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1:10, who treat Elijah with a similar disdain. That Jesus refuses this suggestion, Drury claims, illustrates that “an Elijah greater than Elijah has come.”<sup>110</sup> This intensification of prophetic action matches what we saw in Mark, but also applies to occasions

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<sup>109</sup> On the Septuagintal tone of this rejection, see John Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel: A Study in Early Christian Historiography* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976): 67.

<sup>110</sup> Drury, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel*, 68.

premised upon Elisha's miracles in 2 Kings. In Luke 17:11-19, for instance, Jesus cures 10 lepers—significantly outperforming Elisha's curing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5.<sup>111</sup> Elisha's curing of Naaman occurs in Samaria and Jesus' curing of these lepers takes place in between Samaria and Galilee. In fact, the one leper who returns to Jesus is specifically described as a Samaritan.<sup>112</sup> In both stories, the cure is not effected in the presence of the healer and a healed individual returns to thank the healer. The aspect emphasized in both these miracles is the foreign nature of the healed individual—Elisha heals Naaman, a Syrian, and Jesus heals a Samaritan. That is, foreigners return to praise God for the actions of the prophetic individuals in whom the divine spirit indwells. Luke thus portrays Jesus as a conflated Elijah and Elisha, dispersing and combining the narrative details regarding the two earlier prophets to illustrate Jesus as a pastiche who actually transcends his predecessors.

Finally, the structural parallels between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and Luke-Acts gestures to the hypotext-hypertext relationship between the two narratives. Luke-Acts is a diptych centered upon an assumption to heaven, exactly like Elijah-Elisha cycle. This leads Brodie to exclaim: "In all of ancient literature, these are the only two cases of such a structure."<sup>113</sup> Jesus in Luke 24:51 ascends to heaven (ἀνεφέρετο εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν) just as Elijah ascends in 2 Kings 2:11 (LXX: ἀνελήφθη Ἡλιοῦ ἐν συσσεισμῷ ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν). Though the verbs differ (ἀναφέρω in Luke; ἀναλαμβάνω in 2 Kings), both are written in the passive voice. When combined with the phrasal similarity of εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, the two lines thus resonate with each other. Both in this Lukan scene and in its renarration in Acts 1:6-11, Jesus' disciples are present and watching the ascension, paralleling Elisha's presence at the ascension of Elijah. Again, we see an Elijah scene as a hypotextual model for the ascension of a prophetic figure, but just as important is the role

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<sup>111</sup> See also Luke 7:21-22, which describes Jesus as curing leprosy.

<sup>112</sup> Luke 17:16.

<sup>113</sup> Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 83. See also 85, n. 16 for Brodie's division of Luke-Acts into 8 blocks of diptychs.

implicitly assumed by Jesus' disciples in Acts. That is, Jesus' disciples assume the position of Elisha, upon whom their teacher's spirit descends. This reifies the diptych structure centered around an assumption to heaven while transforming the disciples into figures who receive their teacher's divine spirit, thus allowing them to perform similar miracles. Presumably, this conflation and diffusion of the Elijah-Elisha model of discipleship across John the Baptist, Jesus, and Jesus' disciples then allow Jesus' disciples to similarly receive and pass down the divine spirit.

## Comments on the Gospel of Matthew

In the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of Matthew offers the least evidence for a hypotext-hypertext relationship with the Elijah-Elisha cycle. Unlike the variety of structural and narrative parallels found in the Gospel of Mark and Luke-Acts, Matthew simply offers a variety of episodic parallels. Many of these episodes, moreover, are reflected in the Synoptic tradition generally. While I will not comment on what this means for the composition of the Synoptics, it is worthwhile to point out a few elements of Matthew which tie it to the Elijah-Elisha literary tradition. These include details of John's appearance matching descriptions of Elijah, similar activities and temperaments, explicit references to John the Baptist as Elijah, and parallels between the miracles which Elisha effects and those which Jesus accomplishes.

Matthew associates John the Baptist with Elijah a number of times. Though this is not unique in the Synoptics—including the scriptural reference at Matthew 3:3—we do find a detailed description of John's activities that clearly relate him to descriptions of Elijah. In Matthew 3:4, for instance, we are told John has a garment of camel's hair (τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τριχῶν καμήλου), a leather belt around his waist (ζώνην δερματίνην περὶ τὴν ὀσφὺν αὐτοῦ), and



eats food from the wilderness. In the LXX of 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is similarly described as hirsute and wearing a leather belt around his waist (ἄνηρ δασύς καὶ ζώνην δερματίνην περιεζωσμένος τὴν ὄσφον αὐτοῦ). Though Elijah's shagginess differs verbally from John's garment of camel's hair, the visual parallelism is striking. Reifying this visual parallel are the leather belts both wear, the description of which in Matthew almost perfectly matches that given apropos of Elijah. Both characters live in the wilderness in connection to their admonishment of the contemporary order while nourished by natural creatures. While these don't match exactly—John eats locusts and wild honey whereas ravens tend to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:6—the similarities are close enough to establish a relationship between how both characters are portrayed, suggesting Elijah as a model for Matthew's version of John the Baptist.<sup>114</sup>

Jesus also explicitly refers to John the Baptist as Elijah in Matthew 11:14. While others suggest an identification of John the Baptist with Elijah in Mark and Luke, only here in Matthew do we have a clear announcement from Jesus himself that John is Elijah. This same point is reified at the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:9-13. When Jesus' disciples ask about Elijah's coming, Jesus explains that Elijah has already come. Verse 13 then clarifies that the disciples understood this to refer to John the Baptist. Since Jesus seems to dismiss his own association with Elijah in Matthew 16:14-17, all these pieces of evidence point to a clear depiction of Jesus as the one who follows the contemporary Elijah, John the Baptist. Of course, this has apocalyptic and messianic undertones, as discussed previously. But at a literary level, this also gestures to the

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<sup>114</sup> Of course, Matthew's description of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:4 matches that of Mark 1:6. However, the Matthean version is lengthier than that of Mark, including references to fire in Matthew 3:11-2. This seems to resonate with Elijah's calling of fire down upon, alternatively, the temple of Baal in 1 Kings 18:38 and Ahaziah's men in 2 Kings 1:10-4. Furthermore, John the Baptist in Matthew more clearly admonishes societal elements than does John the Baptist in Mark. This aligns the Matthean John narratively with the consistently cantankerous Elijah. Finally, John's references to stones in Matthew 3:9, especially adjacent to wood thrown into a fire in Matthew 3:10, may match Elijah's construction of a stone altar in 1 Kings 20:31ff. Elijah uses twelve stones to match the tribes of Israel and wood for a burnt sacrifice. Since there is no explicit relationship in Matthew 3:9 between calling upon Abraham as an ancestor and stones, this parallel to Elijah could offer an explanation. Heavenly fire consumes Elijah's altar just as John proclaims fire will consume the Pharisees and Sadducees.

prophetic wonder-worker who directly followed Elijah, Elisha. Implicitly, then, Jesus seems to accord with an Elisha model in Matthew. Strengthening this identification is the unique (among the Synoptics) report in Matthew 27:52-53 that directly following Jesus' death the tombs of the dead opened, the bodies of the sleeping holy men (πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων) revived. The only other location where a dead prophetic figure revives a corpse from its tomb appears in 2 Kings 13:21, at the burial of Elisha. While the circumstances differ, the similarities suggest the influence of Elisha's burial pericope upon Matthew's crucifixion. This aligns Jesus with Elisha, just as Matthew clearly aligns John the Baptist with Elijah.

## Comments on the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John shows perhaps the least direct influence of the Elijah-Elisha cycle. A scanty similarity includes how both Elisha and Jesus know the happenings of far-off locations. When Jesus calls Nathanael in John 1:48-9, for instance, he references having seen him without being physically present. Elisha seems to have similar knowledge of far-off events, such as knowing of Gehazi's moral transgression in seeking payment from Naaman in 2 Kings 5:26. A similar aspect of Elisha's power is reported in 2 Kings 6:12, where he is said to know the words which the king of Aram speaks in his bedchamber. Elisha exhibits the same type of knowledge in 2 Kings 6:32, where he forewarns of a murderer coming to kill him. While this does align Jesus with Elisha to some degree, it is far behind what we see in the Synoptics.

The most clear use of the Elisha-Elijah cycle in John appears in John 6:1-15 with the feeding of the 5000. We have discussed the multiplication of loaves in Mark and its relationship to Elisha's multiplication of loaves in 2 Kings 4:42ff, the details of which correlate with John's account. John's account, however, exhibits some unique verbal resonances that further tie it to

the LXX of Elisha's multiplication. Firstly, John's account specifies in John 6:9 that the loaves present are of barley (πέντε ἄρτους κριθίνους), just as in 2 Kings 4:42 (LXX: εἴκοσιν ἄρτους κριθίνους), despite this detail's absence in the Synoptic accounts. Moreover, the original possessor of these loaves is stated to be a boy (παιδάριον). This specific detail is, again, lacking in any Synoptic account of loaves being multiplied. In the LXX of 2 Kings 4:41 regarding Elisha serving a poisoned stew, the prophet has a boy (παιδάριον) pass around the food. Though this is arguably disconnected from the following line, the verbal resonance may imply an association between Jesus serving food and Elisha serving food, as in both cases a παιδάριον is on the scene. Regardless, there are very few unique reasons to otherwise suspect a direct association between John and the Elijah-Elisha cycle other than those enumerated here (*pace* Bostock). Compared to the Synoptics, John does not structurally resonate with the narrative of Elijah and Elisha. While there are episodic parallels, the most we can conclude is that Jesus reflects Elisha to some degree. Of course, this is purely speaking in terms of directly identifiable evidence suggesting a hypotext-hypertext relationship. Much of what we have said about the broader schemata of wonderworking, authorized prophethood, the divine spirit, master-disciple relationships, etc. apply to John as well.

## Part 3: The Axe Head and the Ordeal by Water

### The Importance of the Axe Head

The pericope of the axe head (2 Kings 6:1-7) acts as a microcosm of salvation from sin and a transformation of nature. In relation to the medieval English liturgy for the ordeal by water, calling upon the axe head to adjudge an individual relies upon the soteriology of the Gospels in

recalling how prophetic authority in those endowed with God's spirit allows a transformation of believers in Jesus as the Christ. In analyzing the pericope, we find a nexus connecting the miraculous event, death, and remission of sin. Elisha's receipt of Elijah's spirit endows him with the prophetic authority to effect a miracle that restores his disciple's loaned property by utilizing the medium of water. Certainly, some scholars focus upon this physical restoration by pairing this pericope with, for instance, the restoration of the Shunamitess' property in 2 Kings 8:1-6.<sup>115</sup> The basic concern here is restoration of property, but we can extend this idea of restoration further through the association of this pericope with the Naaman pericope in the chapter preceding the raising of the axe head (2 Kings 5). Clearly, Elisha raising the axe head reflects a broader concern with restoration not only of property, but also a physical and spiritual restoration. God's power over life and death is mediated through authorized prophets—Elijah and Elisha—who receive this authorization from their endowment with God's spirit. In the grander scheme of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, too, the axe head pericope acts as a microcosm of the salvation narrative where God restores his kingdoms in Israel and Judah through the workings of these authoritative prophets.

Having demonstrated the hypotext-hypertext relationship between the Elijah-Elisha narrative and the Gospels, we can then assert the criticality of this Hebrew Bible salvation narrative in interpreting the soteriology of the Gospels. That is, Jesus' crucifixion acts as a remission of sins, restoring God's kingdom in an even grander scale than Elijah and Elisha's restoration of the temporal kingdoms of Israel and Judah in 1 and 2 Kings. Though the axe head does not appear explicitly in the Gospels, the Gospel writers intensify this basic concern of the Hebrew Bible pericope into a grander schema whereby Jesus restores the status of his followers through which the restoration of God's kingdom to humanity is accomplished. We find this sense

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<sup>115</sup> See Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*, 21.

of restoration explicitly discussed in the Petrine Epistles. In 1 Peter 1:22, belief in Jesus as the Christ leads the epistolarian to claim: “you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth” (Τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν ἡγνικότες ἐν τῇ ὑπακοῇ τῆς ἀληθείας). Indeed, a number of authorities append “through the spirit” (διὰ πνεύματος) to this line, reifying the role of the divine spirit in this restoration. The following verse adds: “You have been born anew,” again reinforcing how belief in Jesus as the saviour (σωτήρ) in the salvation narrative as expressed in the composition of the Gospels transforms and restores believers at a fundamental level. This echoes the restoration of Naaman and the raising of the axe head in 2 Kings, to be sure, but the intensification elevates these more simplistic miraculous deeds to a level of ultimate salvation which is transformative in nature. In 2 Peter 1:9, the communitarian elements of this belief in Jesus as a saviour are further connected to “the cleansing of past sins” (λαβὼν τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ τῶν πάλαι αὐτοῦ ἁμαρτημάτων).<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the claim in 1 Peter 2:24 that “He himself bore our sins in his body on the wood (ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον), that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” verbally resonates with the LXX of 2 Kings 6:6, in which Elisha similarly utilizes wood (LXX: καὶ ἀπέκνισε ξύλον καὶ ἔρριψεν ἐκεῖ, καὶ ἐπέόλασε τὸ σιδήριον) to absolve the guilt of the son of the prophets. This type of restoration can not just be physical, however, as this type of transformation can even be applied to the dead, as Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15:29. Reception into the community believing in Jesus as the Christ thus seems to rely upon Jesus’ death as allowing a remission of sin that transforms and restores the believer to an entirely different state and which occurs at a level beyond just the physical.

As such, the axe head’s invisibility in the Gospels does not signal its lack of importance in the Gospel narratives. Rather, the schema of salvation reflected in Elisha’s work in 2 Kings 6 is augmented in Jesus’ crucifixion. The axe head allows us to then decipher, in part, how Jesus’

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<sup>116</sup> We see a similar reflection in 1 Clement 1.8.4 which connects washing to the removal of sins.

death is received in the early Christian tradition. It is critical to an utmost degree, in other words, and its invisibility follows not from exclusion but rather from adaptation into the salvation narrative of the Gospels. This paper, which aims to investigate the appearance of the axe head pericope in the medieval English liturgy for the ordeal by water, thus lands upon the axe head as a microcosm of salvation from sin and a transformation of nature. Calling upon the axe head to adjudge the sins of an individual through the medium of water tugs at the soteriology of Jesus in the Gospels, recalling how prophetic authority in those endowed with God's spirit allows a transformation not only of physical substance but also of some innate nature of believers in Jesus as the Christ. While I hesitate to call this the "soul," the specific terminology matters little. Rather, the conceptual foundation of the procedure builds upon the raising of the axe head as an act of salvation connected to sin. Prophetic authority provides for the remission of this sin, as the divine spirit allows the authorized prophet to effect transformative miracles in demonstration of how obedience to God's word (in the mouth of his prophet) leads to restoration and absolution. This still leaves us with a question, however. That is, how can the cleric who performs this liturgy effect such a miraculous deed? The schema we have laid out with our investigations of Elijah, Elisha, John the Baptist, and Jesus points to the divine spirit as authorizing the prophetic figure to perform miracles. This implies the priest performing the liturgy ought to have that same spirit. To evidence this claim, we will turn to the disciples of Jesus, who continue the wonder-working of Jesus by similarly occupying an Elisha role in the master-disciple relationship through which the divine spirit passes.

## Discipleship, Jesus, and the Elijah-Elisha Narrative

### Elisha and Peter

The transformation of the Elijah-Elisha cycle seen throughout this study constructs a schema through which the spirit passes from teacher to disciple, who then as a teacher passes down this spirit again to his own disciples. Nevertheless, an identification of Jesus with Elisha presents some issues. In a purely mimetic schema whereby Jesus occupies only the role of Elisha in a master-disciple relationship based upon the Elijah-Elisha narrative in 1 and 2 Kings, the implication that follows would assert an end to prophetic authority via the passage of the divine spirit. That is, although Elisha associates with an enigmatic group, the “sons of the prophets” (בְּנֵי-הַנְּבִיאִים) which seem to maintain a disciple role, this guild falls from the Biblical narrative with the conclusion of the Elijah-Elisha cycle without Elisha passing anything onto them. Indeed, this group refers to Elijah as their master in 2 Kings 2:3-5, recognize Elisha as their new master and bow to him upon declaring that Elijah’s spirit had transferred in 2 Kings 2:15, request approval from Elisha to undertake certain actions in 2 Kings 2:16-18, associate in common spaces in 2 Kings 6:1-2, and share a common table in 2 Kings 4:38-44. Though the exact significance or purpose of this guild seems to have fallen out from the recensions of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, they clearly consider Elijah and Elisha masters due to the presence of the divine spirit upon them.<sup>117</sup> Curiously, however, Elijah does not take a direct disciple from this group but rather lands upon Elisha, with whom he had no previous connection. Elisha does not take any direct disciple himself, dying without the divine spirit passing to a disciple—whether chosen from the sons of the prophets or otherwise.

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<sup>117</sup> On the sons of the prophets, see R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (New York: Macmillan, 1942): 46-49; H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord, and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965): 97-134.

Jesus also maintains a group of disciples around himself, many of whom he calls in a similar fashion to Elijah's calling of Elisha. If Jesus were purely premised upon Elisha, this would not occur. Rather, Jesus' calling of his first four disciples in Mark 1:16-20, as mentioned previously in this paper, echoes Elijah. This suggests that Jesus is not purely an imitation of Elisha; rather, Elijah and Elisha, the two premier itinerant wonderworkers, are sublimated into a single literary figure. In other words, Jesus retains elements of Elijah, particularly of Elijah the master who passes on his spirit to his disciple. Jesus, then, would be able to pass on some portion of his spirit to his own disciples in imitation of Elijah, allowing them to perform similar wonders and miracles.

Some parallels between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels strengthen the claim that Jesus' disciples imitate Elisha and the sons of the prophets—just as Jesus variously imitates *both* Elijah and Elisha. Peter's offer to make dwellings for the suddenly-appearing prophets during the Transfiguration in the Synoptics (Matt 17, Luke 9:33, Mark 9:5) echoes the sons of the prophets constructing dwellings adjacent to the Jordan (2 Kings 6:1-7). Jesus' power over water in his calming of the sea fills his disciples with awe (Mark 4:35-41), which may parallel Elisha's power over the Jordan waters following Elijah's ascension that similarly causes the sons of the prophets to recognize him with respect (2 Kings 3:15). Elisha is said to have washed the hands of Elijah in 2 Kings 3:11, a sign of servant-master relationship which the author of John subverts in John 13:1-20 when Jesus washes the feet of his own disciples. Since this footwashing precedes the Farewell Discourse of John during which Jesus seems to pass on his final teachings to his disciples before the authorities accost him, this suggests that washing deeply relates to the master-disciple relationship. Indeed, it is in the Farewell Discourse when Jesus claims to have appointed his disciples to "bear fruit" (John 14:16), asserts the "spirit of truth" rests in his



disciples (John 13:17), and declares “The glory that you have given me I have given them” (John 17:22). All of these imply some transference from Jesus to his disciples to effect things after his death, in the same way Elijah passes his own spirit in a double portion to his disciple Elisha following Elijah’s ascension. While certainly more parallels exist that place the disciples of Jesus into the role of disciples in the Elijah-Elisha narrative, the basic suggestion that arises from viewing these figures in the Gospels in light of their Hebrew Bible analogues is that Jesus’ spirit will descend upon them and allow them to effect miraculous wonders.

The canonical Acts of the Apostles confirms this descent of the spirit as allowing disciple figures to perform miraculous deeds. In Acts 1:8, Jesus reportedly tells his disciples prior to his Ascension “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you”. The very fact that power comes upon disciples through the passage of the spirit following the ascension of a prophetic figure to heaven strongly parallels Elijah’s own ascent and the passage of his own spirit to Elisha, quickly affirmed through the repetition of Elijah’s splitting of the Jordan. In fact, throughout Acts the disciples effect miraculous deeds that strongly echo those wonders worked by Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus. Peter in Acts 3:1-10 heals a crippled beggar and a paralytic in Acts 9:32-35, similar to Jesus’ healing of paralytics in Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26, and John 5:1-16. Certainly, not all of the details exactly match, but the basic shape of the miracle remains the same. The apostles, Peter specifically among them, are reported in Acts 5:12-16 to have healed many, described as “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα). Peter further revives Tabitha in Acts 9:36-43, echoing Jesus’ raising of a dead girl in Mark 5:37-43 and Luke 8:49-56, the widow of Nain’s son in Luke 7:11-17, and Lazarus in John 11:1-44. Peter’s actions in all of these deeds seem to rely on his receipt of the spirit following his master’s crucifixion, which

subsequently allows him to effect miracles similar to Jesus. This places Peter into the role of Elisha and Jesus into the role of Elijah.

As such, the similarities between the Gospels and the Elijah-Elisha cycle allow for the evangelists to portray Jesus as a commingled Elijah and Elisha, both the recipient of the spirit at the hands of a teacher (John the Baptist) and as the master from whom the spirit passes to disciples. The passage of this spirit endows the disciples, mainly Peter, with the same ability to effect miraculous deeds. The Gospels' transformation of the Elijah-Elisha cycle create a schema by which the spirit passes down from teacher to disciple, who then becomes a teacher passing it down to his own disciples. That is, the mingling of the figures of both Elijah and Elisha into one character allows for the continued passage of the spirit, and concomitantly the prophetic authority to effect miracles. Whereas this ends with Elisha's death in 2 Kings, the Gospels, as suggested in Acts, gestures to the continued passage of this spirit down.

### The Transfer of Prophetic Authority to the Church

Our discussion of the schema created in the Gospels by which the spirit passes across multiple generations of master-disciple relationships suggests a model by which to understand how a Catholic cleric could effect the ordeal by water. If Jesus could receive the spirit at his baptism by John the Baptist and then pass it down to his own disciples—primarily Peter—then Peter ought to be able to similarly pass down this spirit to his own disciples. Given the tradition that Peter founded the Roman church, as preserved, for instance, in the *Liber pontificalis*, the reception of the Petrine apostolic tradition would cohere with this discipleship model so as to allow the spirit to pass through the master-disciple relationships in the Catholic church. This would allow Peter's disciples, the disciples of *those* disciples, and so on to receive the spirit received originally from Jesus and hence to effect the same miraculous deeds.

With this lens, we may come to some understanding of how the ordeal by water may have theologically functioned. Despite discussion surrounding the ordeal which attempts to explain it as sympathetic magic, the properly appointed Catholic cleric would theologically—at least in theory—receive the divine spirit which passed from Jesus to his own disciples through the legacy of Peter. In other words, the cleric performing the ordeal by water performs a miracle precisely due to his receipt of the spirit passed from Jesus to Peter, providing the same prophetic authority to effect a miraculous deed using water as Jesus did. Since Jesus’ own miraculous works follow the deeds of Elisha upon his receipt of Elijah’s spirit, the reference to Elisha’s raising of the axe head in the liturgy for the ordeal by water calls upon this pericope in recognition of Elisha’s prophetic authority as paralleled in the “new” Elisha figured embodied in Jesus.

## Conclusion and Future Avenues of Study

In this paper, we have attempted to tease out the literary relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the New Testament Gospels. Taking the liturgy of the medieval English ordeal by water as a starting point, we based this investigation upon the aporia presented in the disjoint references and allusions to various Old and New Testament events in the English liturgy. Elisha’s raising of the axe head stands next to Jesus and the Trinity, suggesting some level of interrelationship between Elisha and Jesus in terms of adjudging sin. We proposed a hypertext-hypertext relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels, through which the composers of the Gospels utilized the Elijah-Elisha narrative and its soteriological thrust as a structural, stylistic, and thematic foundation. As such, we began our study with the pericope of the axe head in 2 Kings 6:1-7 before moving to its parallel in the healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 and the Elijah-Elisha narrative more broadly. This investigation illustrated the salvation narrative

of the Elijah-Elisha narrative, suggesting that miraculous restoration—a type of transformation—followed the voice of God and the actions of the authorized prophetic figure in whom dwells the divine spirit. The prophet's ability to perform miracles of transformation or restoration directly relates to the indwelling of the divine spirit and serves as a microcosm of the greater miracle afforded to Israel through the power of God.

This led us to the Gospels, in which Jesus and John the Baptist are modeled upon Elijah and Elisha. The teacher-disciple relationship of Elijah and Elisha afforded the transfer of the divine spirit, a schema which the Gospel writers transformed in constructing Jesus and John the Baptist. However, Jesus conflates elements of both his prophetic forebears, becoming a sort of Elijah to his own Elisha-like disciples. This literary construction manipulates the teacher-disciple relationship envisioned in Elijah and Elisha, creating a model for how the divine spirit passes down in the Church such that Jesus' disciples gained the ability to perform miraculous transformations and restorations. I demonstrated how the soteriology of the Gospels generally expands the salvation narrative first introduced in the Elijah-Elisha cycle. In this way, the hypotext-hypertext relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels reveals Elisha's miracles as critical to understanding those of Jesus, while simultaneously creating a theological model for the Church through which priests descending from the authority of Peter have the legitimate ability to effect miracles. This allows us to begin to make sense of the liturgy for the ordeal by water and resolve the aporia present in its high evaluation of Elisha. Theologically, this also closes off some paths of scholarly explanation by which clerical involvement in the ordeal by water relies on appeal to, for instance, sympathetic magical ritual.

Nevertheless, numerous avenues of study remain open for which this paper only serves as a signpost. The relationship between the Elijah-Elisha cycle and the Gospels of Matthew and

John deserves more modern investigation to round out the conclusions in this paper. Furthermore, much more study could be applied to the reception of the Elijah-Elisha cycle in early and medieval Christianity. Particularly in relation to the ordeal by water, a broader study of the liturgies for the ordeal could reveal facets of the medieval English procedure that complicate the criticality of Elisha and his prophetic biography in understanding how a divine miracle effects physical and spiritual transformation. As much of the study concerning the ordeal by water attempts to either explain away the method, reappraise its seeming cruelty, or recontextualize its use, the theological aspect of the procedure as emblemized in its liturgy remains a fruitful area of research. Finally, the relationship between this liturgy and the continued swimming of witches (despite disuse of the ordeal by water in criminal procedures following 1215) draws this research closer to modernity and connects the theological rationale for the ordeal by water to American Colonial law.

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