

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF PROPHETS: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DEUTERONOMY 18:15–22 AND THE TRANSFIGURATION TO A POSITIVE INTERPRETATION OF 1 KINGS 19

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Three mountain-top experiences dot the landscape of Scripture. Moses witnessed Yahweh's glory on Sinai (Ex 33:12–34:8). Elijah stood before Yahweh on Horeb (1 Kgs 9:9–14). Jesus spoke with both on the mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:1–13; Mk 9:1–13; Lk 9:28–36). The Prophet Like Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15–22 connects all three mount top experiences. Moses was Moses; Elijah was almost like Moses; and the transfiguration voice points to Christ as the Prophet Like Moses (Mt 17:5, "Listen to him"). In addition, all three mountain tops have covenant connections. Moses wrote the words of the covenant after his theophany (Ex 34:10, 27–28). Yahweh responded to Elijah's covenant accusation with a covenant curse (1 Kgs 19:17). The Transfiguration looks back at those covenant themes through the inclusion of Moses, allusions to Exodus 24 and 34,² and the anticipation of the Messiah's suffering (Lk 9:31) and resurrection (Mk 9:9). Elijah has a prominent position at the Transfiguration that does not match the traditional negative view of him in 1 Kings 19. Dale Ralph Davis describes 1 Kings 19 as "one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament, and one, again in my opinion, most consistently misinterpreted."³ A careful examination of 1 Kings 19 calls into question the negative interpretation. In addition, the connections with Deuteronomy 18 and the Transfiguration support a positive interpretation of the passage. To support this conclusion, this paper briefly examines the identity of the Prophet Like Moses, the Mosaic influence within the Elijah Cycle (1 Kgs 17–19), the prophets' significance at the Transfiguration, and the harmony of that significance to the details of 1 Kings 19.

Identity of the Prophet Like Moses

Did Moses promise a prophetic order or a single prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15–22? If a single prophet, Elijah's ministry gains prominence as the narrator portrays him as the Prophet Almost Like Moses. If a prophetic order, the Mosaic allusions in Elijah's narratives weaken as Elijah recedes into the ranks of the many other prophets with perhaps slightly more fanfare (e.g., Mal 4:5).

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² Jamie Davies also ties these allusions to 1 Kings 19. He says, "The fabric of the Markan transfiguration account is thus woven together from imagery drawn from Moses's two mountaintop experiences found in Exod 24 and 34 (a conflation of the events which is also attested in the post-biblical Jewish tradition) along with the Elijah motifs." "Apocalyptic Topography in Mark's Gospel: Theophany and Divine Invisibility at Sinai, Horeb, and the Mount of Transfiguration," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2020): 142.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly*, (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2002), 253. Davis gives a helpful explanation for why he thinks commentators miss the point of 1 Kings 19 for both presuppositional and hermeneutical issues (253–65).

Daniel Block argues that “a prophet like me” in 18:15 is a series of prophets or a prophetic order whose message like Moses’ message came from Yahweh.⁴ To Block, Deuteronomy 18 promises a continuity of prophetic ministry through the generations. The singular נָבִיא (“a prophet”) in 18:15 and 18:18 means “something like a prophet in each generation.”⁵ Unlike the Canaanites who pursued direction through diviners (18:9–13), Israel must not listen (18:14, שָׁמַע) to diviners but must listen (18:15, 19, שָׁמַע) to the prophets that Yahweh will raise (18:15, קוֹם). Block claims that the imperfect form of קוֹם in 18:15 has a distributive sense just like the perfect form of קוֹם in Judges 2:18 where Yahweh raised many judges (שִׁפְטִים). He uses Numbers 12:6–8 as a paradigm to explain “like me.” To be in this Mosaic order, a prophet must receive direct and clear communication from Yahweh. Although Deuteronomy 34:10 uses “like Moses” to describe face-to-face interaction with Yahweh, Block concludes, “However, in my assessment, neither the present context nor any other First Testament text offers any support for interpreting Deut 18:14–19 messianically, either in its expectation of a singular eschatological prophetic Messiah or in its anticipation of an ideal Prophet at the end of a succession of prophets.”⁶

Block’s interpretation of a prophetic order has several weaknesses. First, he overemphasizes the role of context. Rather than being king, context becomes a dictator. Since 18:9–14 warns Israel against seeking guidance from unsanctioned and non-Israelite sources, the prophet of 18:15–22 must be the solution to the problem of the preceding context. In contrast, Deuteronomy emphasizes obedience to Yahweh’s written word as the key to Israel’s separateness (13:4) rather than a prophetic office which is mentioned only twice in the book (Dt 13 and 18).⁷ The control of 18:9–14 over 18:15–22 must align with the details of 18:15–22.

Second, Block fails to prove that קוֹם has a distributive sense in 18:15 and 18:18. Block offers Judges 2:18 as an illustration of this distributive sense. In Judges 2:18, Yahweh raised up judges (plural) who served at various times. Unlike Judges 2:18, קוֹם in Deuteronomy 18 does not have a plural direct object, making multiple prophets an interpretational stretch. In addition, the direct object (נָבִיא) of 18:15 and 18:18 comes at the beginning of the sentence drawing the reader’s focus more to the prophet than the action of raising.

Third, when Block describes Numbers 12:6–8 as the paradigm for membership in the order of Moses, he conveniently leaves out the final descriptor of Moses: Moses looked at Yahweh’s form (12:8, תִּמְנֶנָּה).⁸ Moses was different because Moses saw Yahweh. This distinction also appears in the two other Pentateuchal passages that talk about Moses as a prophet. Deuteronomy 34:10 places Moses in a unique category because “Yahweh knew him face to face.” The description “like Moses” in 34:10 uses the same preposition as 18:15 (18:15, כְּמֹשֶׁה; 34:10, כְּמֹשֶׁה).⁹ In Deuteronomy 18:16–17, Yahweh responded to Israel’s request to not hear or see by giving them Moses. Moses would hear and see for them. To be “like me,” a

⁴ Block, Daniel, “A Prophet Like Moses? Who or Why?” *The Asbury Journal* 72, no. 2 (2017): 21–34.

⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶ Ibid., 29. Block also argues that 18:14 forms the bridge between the two passages and should be considered part of 18:15–20 (24).

⁷ Consider also the following passages that describe Israel’s responsibility to keep Yahweh’s covenant commands: 4:2, 6, 9; 5:10, 29; 6:2, 17; 7:11–12; 8:2, 6; 10:13; 11:1, 8, 22; 26:17–18; 27:1; 28:9; 29:9; 30:10, 16

⁸ Deuteronomy 4:12 uses the same word for “form” when talking about how Israel did not see Yahweh’s form at Sinai but only heard his voice (קוֹל). Deuteronomy 18:16 alludes to that same Sinaiatic event.

⁹ Deuteronomy 18 uses the long form for the kaph preposition because it is used with the pronominal suffix while Deuteronomy 34 uses the short form. Block dismisses 34:10 as the explanation of 18:15 by saying, “While the expression ‘like Moses’ (כְּמֹשֶׁה) in 34:10 links this text to 18:15 and 18, in no way does it suggest either the failure or nonfulfillment of YHWH’s and Moses’ predictions of a prophet like Moses in Israel’s past, or invite them to look forward to a new Messianic ‘Moses’ who would speak with God face to face” (29).

prophet must hear and see Yahweh. If “like me” means something else, Moses could have said it clearer than he did.

Fourth, Block’s position does not align with later revelation.¹⁰ The Gospels indicate that the Jews expected a single, eschatological prophet as the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18. Both John 1:21–25 and 6:14 affirm their expectation. At the transfiguration, the voice from heaven alludes to Deuteronomy 18 (“hear him”). In addition, Peter quoted Deuteronomy 18:15 in Acts 3:22. “That prophet” in Acts 3:23 indicates a singular focus as does Peter’s contrast of “that prophet” in 3:22–23 with “likewise all the prophets” (3:24).

The original audience of Deuteronomy 18 did not need to understand all that later revelation would reveal about the Messiah, but they should have understood that Yahweh promised a single prophet. One prophet would come who was unlike other prophets because he would see God face to face, just like Moses. This interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 prepares the Old Testament reader for the Mosaic allusions contained in Elijah’s ministry and the New Testament reader for ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah.

Mosaic Influence in the Elijah Cycle

Many commentators have recognized Elijah’s connections to Moses in 1 Kings 17–19.¹¹ The narrator uses plot, setting, word choice, and characterization to slowly ramp up his comparison of Elijah to Moses. In 1 Kings 17:1, Elijah spoke authoritatively without clear instructions from Yahweh, raising a plot question about his authority. In 17:24, the widow provided the conclusion to the question. The word of Yahweh in Elijah’s mouth was reliable. Elijah met the Mosaic litmus test for a true prophet (Dt 18:22).

1 Kings 18 builds upon the comparison to Moses although still in seed form. Like Deuteronomy 18, 1 Kings 18 mentions Israel seeing (רָאָה) fire (אֵשׁ) from Yahweh (Dt 18:16; 1 Kgs 18:38). Elijah prayed that the people would realize that he spoke only the words (דְּבָרֵי) Yahweh gave (Dt 18:18; 1 Kgs 18:36). Finally, Elijah gave the Mosaic litmus test for a true prophet: efficacy of the prophetic word (Dt 18:22; 1 Kgs 18:36). 1 Kings 18 also contains several generic parallels to Moses. Both prophets received frequent directions from Yahweh. Both competed for the hearts of Israel (rebellion of Korah [Nm 16]) in a contest determined by Yahweh’s intervention. Both built altars that symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel (Ex 24:4). In fact, the altars of Exodus 24 and 1 Kings 18 are the only Old Testament altars built to symbolize the twelve tribes.

The subtle connections in 1 Kings 18 to the Mosaic ministry give way to the undeniable connections of 1 Kings 19. Mount Horeb is called the mountain of God (19:8; הַר הָאֱלֹהִים). All other occurrences of the phrase “the mountain of God” refer to Moses at Sinai (Ex 3:1; 4:27; 18:5; 24:13). The Sinai location heightens the reader’s sensitivity to the connection between Elijah and Moses.¹² At Horeb, Yahweh revealed himself to Elijah in the same manner in which

¹⁰ A single Qumran reference in 1QS IX about an eschatological prophet is possibly the earliest known Jewish interpretation of the Prophet Like Moses.

¹¹ For example, Walter A Maier III walks through sixteen correlations between Moses and Elijah before talking about their role in the Transfiguration. “Reflections on the Ministry of Elijah,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016): 64–66.

¹² For example, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 231; Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 184. In his comments on 1 Kings 19, Burke Long says, “[The setting] deeply breathes the air of Mosaic narratives, and thus encompasses a kind of thematic breadth that looks backward in time and evokes the literary heritage of the Pentateuch.” *1 Kings: With an Introduction to Historical Literature*, *Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 202.

he revealed himself to Moses when giving the law: the same elements of nature,¹³ the voice, and the mountain. Commentators also find non-Sinaitic allusions to Moses in 1 Kings 19.¹⁴ These general parallels include a divine provision in the wilderness (Ex 16:14), forty days (Ex 24:18), an audience with Yahweh on Sinai (Ex 34:28), and a prophetic appeal based on Yahweh's covenant with Israel (Ex 34:8–10). By the end of 1 Kings 19, Elijah has become more than just a major character. He is the symbolic representative of Yahweh's written word to the nation of Israel. This can be seen as Elijah's appearance in later narratives carries greater significance than the appearance of other prophets because of the symbolic connection.¹⁵

There once was a prophet who performed unprecedented miracles, confronted rebellious Israel, was confirmed as a servant of Yahweh, and spoke with Yahweh on the Mountain of God about Israel's unfaithfulness to her covenant. Is that Moses or Elijah? Despite the similarities, two points of dissimilarity make Elijah the Prophet Almost Like Moses instead of the Prophet Like Moses. First, whereas Moses advocated for Israel (Ex 32:30–32), Elijah accused Israel (19:10, 14). Second, Elijah did not see Yahweh face-to-face. When he went to meet Yahweh, he covered his face with a mantel (19:13). Elijah may not have fulfilled Deuteronomy 18, but his near fulfillment gives clarity to his appearance at the Transfiguration.

Significance of Prophets at the Transfiguration

The Transfiguration accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke make a connection with Deuteronomy 18:15 through the command to “hear him.”¹⁶ It is possible that Peter drew from his experience at the transfiguration when applying Deuteronomy 18 to Christ in Acts 3:22. The Transfiguration's allusion to the Prophet Like Moses ties the hilltops of Exodus 33–34 and 1 Kings 19 with the Transfiguration. An examination of the purpose of the prophets and the portrayal of Elijah this conclusion.

¹³ For a discussion of the purpose of the elements, see Davis, 263–65. In addition, the events of 1 Kings 19 resemble the Exodus accounts of Mount Horeb in that both mention fire (Ex 19:18; 24:17) and the ground shaking (Ex 19:18). Although mighty wind is not included in the theophany accounts in Exodus, it is used as a sign of Yahweh's work (Ex 10:19). Each element heralds the coming of Yahweh, but the narrator states that Yahweh is not yet present because he is “not in” the element. When Yahweh arrived at Mount Horeb, his voice revealed his presence.

¹⁴ For example, William Barnes lists several non-Sinaitic parallels between Moses and Elijah in 1 Kings 19. *1–2 Kings* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2012), 164–65. These parallels include fleeing from non-Israelite rulers (Ex 2:15), wishing for death (Nm 11:13–15), holding prophetic office (Dt 18), and not experiencing the end result of their ministry (Dt 34:1–4).

¹⁵ Consider how Elijah's words to Ahab in 1 Kings 21 become indistinguishable from Yahweh's words (21:17–26). Naboth's vineyard is Elijah's only appearance in 1 Kings 20–22 although several other prophets appear (20:13, 22, 38; 22:7). In a narrative full of allusions to law code, it makes sense the Elijah reappears as the symbolic representative of the law. In 2 Kings 1, Elijah sent down fire on his enemies in Moses-like judgment (Nm 11, 16).

¹⁶ There are mild variations within the word order and form. Matthew 17:5 and Mark 9:7 say ἀκούετε αὐτοῦ while Luke 9:35 switches the word order (αὐτοῦ ἀκούετε) and Deuteronomy 18:15 (LXX) changes the verb form (αὐτοῦ ἀκούσθε). Commentators who discuss the Transfiguration connection to Deuteronomy 18 include James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 261–70; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 704; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 411; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 348–56.

Purpose of Moses and Elijah

Commentators generally offer four possible purposes for the inclusion of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration. These purposes are not necessarily exclusive to each other. However, one should question the importance or legitimacy of a purpose the further it is from primary. The possible purposes include canonical, eschatological, typological, and theophanic.

First, in the canonical interpretation, Moses and Elijah represent the Old Testament Law and Prophets that culminate in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ Although Moses as Lawgiver is easy to see (e.g., Lk 24:27), neither testament connects Elijah to the writing or non-writing prophets in the same way. Apart from his letter in 2 Chronicles 21:12–15, Elijah was not a writing prophet. Within the historical books, Elijah is mentioned only four times after 2 Kings 2, once in a statement about Elisha (2 Kgs 3:11) and three times in restatements of Yahweh's promise in 1 Kings 19 (2 Kgs 9:36; 10:10, 17). Only one non-historical book mentions him in the Old Testament (Mal 4:5). If Elijah represents an entire section of the Old Testament canon, one expects him to have a greater role within the canon.¹⁸ The New Testament names Elijah twenty-nine times. Excluding the six appearances in Transfiguration accounts, none of the remaining appearances show any indication that Elijah represents a section of the canon.¹⁹ The canonical interpretation cannot explain the purpose behind Moses and Elijah because it attaches significance to Elijah which is unsupported within the Transfiguration context and the rest of Scripture.

Second, in the eschatological interpretation, Elijah is the harbinger of the end times.²⁰ Matthew and Mark's accounts provide contextual support for this view as they include the disciples' question about Elijah's return (Mt 17:10–13; Mk 9:11–13). Although the eschatological interpretation has some merit, it is less than satisfactory for four reasons. One, according to Mark, the disciples kept their questions about Jesus' resurrection to themselves (9:10) choosing instead to ask about Elijah. Perhaps Peter remembered Christ's earlier rebuke when Peter challenged the suffering and resurrection (Mt 16:21–23; Mk 8:31–33). The change from the question on their minds to the question asked downplay the connection between Elijah of Mark 9:2–5 and 9:11–13. Two, Jesus moved the focus of their question back to his suffering, the same topic raised before and during the Transfiguration (Mk 8:31; 9:9; Lk 9:31). In a way, he addressed their stated question about Elijah with more information on their unstated question about the resurrection. Three, the disciples understood that Jesus spoke about John the Baptist, the antitype of Elijah (Mt 17:13) which further shifts their focus from Elijah. If Elijah was at the Transfiguration primarily to point to John the Baptist, why not cut out the middleman and let John the Baptist appear instead? Four, the interpretation must assign different primary purposes to Moses and Elijah. Just because Elijah's presence may have prompted the disciple's question does not mean that Elijah was there primarily to prompt their question. While better than the canonical interpretation, the eschatological interpretation also falls short.

¹⁷ See James A. Brooks, *Mark*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 142; Edwards, 265; Morris, 439; Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 284.

¹⁸ For instance, it would only take one post-Elijah passage in the Historical Books, Major Prophets, or Minor Prophets to connect a prophetic ministry or word back to Elijah (e.g., “just like you did not listen to Elijah...”).

¹⁹ Ten appearances of “Elijah” connect him to John the Baptist (Mt 11:14; 17:10–12; Mk 9:11–13; Lk 1:17; Jn 1:21, 25). Elijah is named six times in the Transfiguration accounts, five times in speculations of Christ's identity (Mt 16:14; Mk 6:16; 8:28; Lk 9:8; 9:19), and four times at the crucifixion (Mt 27:47–49; Mk 15:35–36.). The remaining four appearances deal with his historical ministry and prayer life (Lk 4:25–26; Rom 11:2; Jas 5:27).

²⁰ France, 351.

Third, proponents of the typological interpretation find parallels between the mysterious deaths of the two prophets and Jesus' resurrection.²¹ The focus on the unusual deaths (or lack of death) highlights the upcoming resurrection. Unfortunately, the typological interpretation builds on too many assumptions to be a primary purpose. One could describe Moses' death as unusual because he was not terminally ill or feeble (Dt 34:7) and because Yahweh buried Moses personally (Dt 34:6). As for Elijah, the Old Testament does not record Elijah's death. Ken Burkett argues that 2 Kings 2 most likely describes Elijah's prophetic retirement more than his death or translation to heaven.²² With such uncertainty, it is hard to accept the typological interpretation by itself.

Fourth, the theophanic interpretation emphasizes the connections between the Sinai experiences of Moses and Elijah and the transfiguration of Jesus. Caleb T. Friedeman argues that the obscured theophanies of Moses and Elijah foreshadowed their unobscured view of Jesus.²³ In light of Deuteronomy 18, the attentive reader expects the Prophet Like Moses to have a theophany, but the voice from heaven does not speak to the Prophet Like Moses as the voice did to Moses (Ex 19:19) and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:12–13). Instead, the voice speaks about the Prophet Like Moses because Jesus was prophet and theophany. Friedeman makes a compelling case for the theophanic purpose, but he does not discuss how the covenantal significance of the prior theophanies contributes to the Transfiguration.

The Old Testament theophanies came at moments of great covenantal importance. Moses interceded after Israel's covenantal disobedience as Yahweh responded by affirming his covenant with Israel (Ex 33–34). Deuteronomy 30:6 (“circumcision of the heart”) and Israel's history make it clear that Israel's true need lay beyond the Mosaic Covenant. As for Elijah, he accused Israel of covenant unfaithfulness, an accusation for which Yahweh gave covenant judgment (1 Kgs 19:17). The Transfiguration gathers these interconnected threads together into a single scene. Jesus stood with Moses and Elijah as the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 18 and as the solution to Israel's sin problem that both prophets fought against. Rebellious Israel needed a change of heart that could only come from the salvific ministry of the Messiah. The theophanic interpretation with a covenantal focus best explains the purpose of Moses and Elijah's inclusion at the Transfiguration.

Portrayal of Elijah

Elijah stands alongside Moses at the Transfiguration rather than in his shadow. Mark shows a special interest in Elijah as his gospel brings Elijah to the literary forefront through foreshadowing and special emphasis during the scene. First, the foreshadowing begins in Mark 1:6 which nearly spoils the Mark 9 revelation that John the Baptist was the expected “Elijah”

²¹ Craig Blomberg lists this as a possible view although he also notes that the unusual death of Moses comes more from intertestamental literature than the Pentateuch. *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 263. I. Howard Marshall ties the typological interpretation into the eschatological interpretation as he comments, “At the same time, it is appropriate that the two men who had mysterious departures from this world and who were expected (either personally or in their counterparts) to appear again at the end of the world should be present in this scene of eschatological anticipation.” *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 384.

²² For a intriguing discussion of 2 Kings 2, see Ken Burkett, “Did Elijah Really Ascend into Heaven in a Whirlwind?”, *Journal of Biblical Theology and Worldview* 2, no. 2 (2022): 1–19.

²³ Caleb T. Friedeman, “Moses, Elijah, and Jesus' Divine Glory (Mark 9.2–8)” *New Testament Studies* 70 (2024): 71. William L. Lane adds, “The transfiguration scene develops as a new ‘Sinai’ theophany with Jesus as the central figure.” *The Gospel According to Mark*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 317.

(c.f., 2 Kgs 1:8).²⁴ Later, the people speculated that Jesus could be Elijah (Mk 6:15).²⁵ Finally, the disciples listed Elijah among the various popular opinions regarding Jesus' identity (8:28). Mark's foreshadowing leaves the reader unsurprised at finding Elijah in Mark 9:4. Second, Mark emphasizes Elijah at the Transfiguration by listing him before Moses (9:4). John Heil argues that Mark's use of συν places Moses in the position of emphasis as the individual mentioned last.²⁶ However, of the six appearances of συν in Mark, only Mark 9:4 connects two proper names (Ἠλίας συν Μωϋσεϊ). This makes Mark 9:4 different than "crowds with the disciples" (8:34) and "followers along with the twelve" (4:10).

The above discussion of the purposes and portrayal does not do justice to the Transfiguration but does demonstrate how foreshadowing and emphatic position spotlight Elijah who was more than Moses' plus-one on the mountain. Unfortunately, his positive portrayal and theophanic-covenantal purpose do not match the popular negative interpretation of his theophany in 1 Kings 19. We abuse Scripture if we allow a New Testament interpretation to change our interpretation of a passage without support within that passage. A text cannot mean what a text has never meant. However, the Transfiguration should be an interpretational landmark to help the exegete make interpretation choices for 1 Kings 19. In a way, the exegete can look to the hills from whence comes his help.

Toward a Positive Interpretation of 1 Kings 19

Many commentators view 1 Kings 19 as the record of a deeply depressed, self-absorbed, and disillusioned prophet whom Yahweh put back in his place.²⁷ From Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19, they set a trajectory that does not appreciate the influence of Deuteronomy 18 nor align with the Transfiguration end point because of their interpretational choices. However, this negative view is the less likely interpretation. The narrative details of 1 Kings 19 and the narrative's function within the Book of Kings support a positive interpretation that both appreciates the contribution of Deuteronomy 18 and sets a trajectory toward the Transfiguration. Rather than making Elijah a flat, static character (negative interpretation), Elijah is a dynamic, round character who was radically transformed before going to Mount Horeb so that he did not distract from Yahweh's focus on Israel in 1 Kings 19:12–18.

Narrative Considerations

Several narrative details move toward this positive interpretation. First, Yahweh provided for Elijah in 19:5–7 just like he provided for Elijah in 1 Kings 17. Both chapters include

²⁴ Consider how 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah in similar terms. Also, John the Baptist and Elijah both had ministries around the Jordan River (2 Kgs 2; Mk 1:9).

²⁵ Although a loose connection, the Pharisees requested a sign from heaven (8:11). Although likely they meant a miraculous sign, things falling from heaven was Elijah's forte (1 Kgs 18:38; 2 Kgs 1:10–14).

²⁶ John Paul Heil, "A Note on 'Elijah with Moses' in Mark 9.4," *Biblica* 80, no. 1 (1999): 115

²⁷ Commentators who propagate this general interpretation include H. J. Carpenter, *The First Book of Kings* (London: The Religious Tract Society), 155; Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 236–37; August H. Konkel, *1 & 2 Kings*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 302; Gene Rice, *Nations Under God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 156–57; Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996), 265; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Responsible* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2002), 142; Lissa M. Wray Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 251.

supernatural provisions (ravens, endless meal and oil, an angel)²⁸ and have parallel vocabulary.²⁹ Yahweh never wavered in how he treated Elijah, even when Elijah wavered. Yahweh's actions signal a restoration of Elijah as of 19:8. Second, Yahweh invited Elijah to Mount Horeb (19:8–9). The narrator makes no mention of Elijah having a prior intent to go to Horeb. Elijah requested to die in the wilderness (19:4) and lacked the necessary supplies for the trip. Furthermore, the angel made the first reference to a journey (19:7, “the journey is too great”). Elijah cannot be wrong for going to Mount Horeb if Yahweh invited him. As a result, the reader must find a negative interpretation of Elijah within the Horeb scene (19:9–18) because Yahweh restored Elijah pre-Horeb and invited Elijah to the Horeb.

Third, the setting of 1 Kings 19 on “the mountain of God” (19:8; הַר הָאֱלֹהִים) carries immense covenantal overtones due to its exclusive use in Mosaic narratives at Sinai (Ex 3:1; 4:27; 18:5; 24:13). The narrator uses these connections to raise the reader's sensitivity to the Moses-Elijah connection and to prepare the reader for Elijah's covenant accusations, which is also part of the Moses-Elijah connection. If the narrator did not intend a covenant-Israel focus in 19:9–18, his use of “the mountain of God” is like a young man who takes his girlfriend to the beach at sunset so that he can balance his checkbook—engagement expectations unmet.

Fourth, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the reliability of Elijah's words in 1 Kings 17–18. Neither Yahweh nor the narrator corrects Elijah's passionate accusation against Israel (19:10, 14) as one would expect if he was wrong. There was no rebuke because his accusations were accurate. Elijah acted zealously for Yahweh in his pronouncement to Ahab (17:1) and in his contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18). Israel was guilty of breaking their covenant. Their momentary attention turned to Yahweh on Mount Carmel (סבב; 18:37) but did not lead to genuine repentance. They likely were seeking his life at Jezebel's command.³⁰ From Elijah's point of view, he stood alone on Mount Carmel (18:22). Finally, Elijah made identical accusations (19:12, 14) that Yahweh and the narrator did not contradict.

Fifth, questions about Yahweh's presence drive the plot of 1 Kings 19.³¹ On Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18), Yahweh proved himself to be God. He directed Elijah's steps since 1 Kings 17:2, but he was silent in 19:1–3. For the first time in Elijah's ministry, the narrator records a major change of setting for Elijah without a command from Yahweh (17:2, 8; 18:1) or Yahweh's implied blessing (18:38, 46). The narrative moves from Yahweh's absence to Yahweh's dramatic return to Mount Horeb. Table 1 charts Yahweh's increasing presence in the narratives. This increasing presence ends in a theophany that sets up Elijah as the Prophet Almost Like Moses and focuses the reader on Yahweh's covenant with Israel.

²⁸ Alan J. Hauser also notes these similarities in vocabulary between 1 Kings 17 and 1 Kings 19. “Yahweh Versus Death—The Real Struggle in 1 Kings 17–19,” *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis* (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1990), 70. However, Hauser does not make any conclusions on the significance of the similarities.

²⁹ Yahweh commands Elijah to arise (קום; 17:9; 19:5), and Elijah eats (אכל; 17:15; 19:5) and drinks (שתה; 17:4, 6, 10; 19:6, 8). In addition, both passages use rare vocabulary including bread-cake (עֲגִינָה; 17:13; 19:6) and jar (צִפְחָת; 17:12, 14, 16; 19:6). Outside of 1 Kings 17 and 19, bread-cake (עֲגִינָה) is used only seven times while jar (צִפְחָת) appears only three times and only in 1 Samuel 26.

³⁰ The elders of Jezreel provide an example of Israelites who later carried out Jezebel's sinful plans (1 Kgs 21:8ff).

³¹ Richard D. Nelson disagrees with the idea that Yahweh's presence is central to the plot of 1 Kings 19. He says, “The story is really about Elijah's attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God's insistence that he continue. Elijah and his mission are the focus, not God's presence or absence.” *First and Second Kings, Interpretation*, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987), 123. He argues that the narrative form resembles a prophetic call narrative. As such, it is focused on Elijah's recommission and return to obedient service. However, the basis of his argument is a negative view of Elijah's journey to Mount Horeb.

Table 1: Progression of Yahweh's Presence in 1 Kings 19

	Description	Hebrew	English
19:2–3	Elijah flees without direction from Yahweh	NA	NA
19:5–7	Yahweh provides through a mediator	מִלְאָךְ	“angel” or “messenger”
19:9	Yahweh speaks as he did before with Elijah (17:2, 5; 18:1)	דְּבַר־יְהוָה	“word of Yahweh”
19:12	Yahweh is present outside the cave on Mount Horeb	קוֹל דְּמָמָה דָּקָה	“a still, small voice”
19:13	Yahweh repeats his question to Elijah	קוֹל וַיֹּאמֶר	“a voice, and it said”
19:15	Yahweh announces national judgment for national sin	וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה	“and Yahweh said”

Is it possible that Yahweh's care of Elijah in 19:5–7 was more act of grace than symbol of restoration? Yes. It is also possible that Elijah had intended to go to Mount Horeb after Beersheba, that the narrator used “mountain of God” to clarify the location rather than to create anticipation, that Yahweh chose not to rebuke Elijah's twice repeated error, and that Yahweh's increasing presence has no significance. However, each of these interpretational concerns has a valid solution that both appreciates the influence of Deuteronomy 18 and sets a trajectory aligned with the positive view of Elijah at the Transfiguration.

Literary Function within the Book of Kings

The negative interpretation of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 misses the chapter's literary importance. First Kings 19 is the climax of the Book of Kings. In 1 Kings 2:3–4, David established the plot question through his challenge to Solomon: will Solomon and the subsequent kings walk according to the law of Moses? When Solomon's sin is revealed in 1 Kings 11, the reader expects exile just as Yahweh promised after the Temple dedication (9:3–9) and in Deuteronomy (e.g., 28:41). The plot question after Solomon narrows to “How will Yahweh respond to Solomon's (and Israel's) sin?” The rising action builds as the narrator records the divine reasons for the divided kingdom (11:31–33), the religious chaos that ensued (12:28ff), and the re-Canaanization of Israel under Ahab (16:29–34). Structurally, Elijah's appearance (17:1) signals the central section of the book. This section (1 Kgs 16:29–2 Kgs 8:15) is characterized by a focus on the prophets rather than the kings and a slowed narrative pace. Both unique elements create suspense as the narrowed plot question propels the reader forward. First Kings 19 finally answers the narrowed plot question as Yahweh came down to the covenant mountain to hear a covenant accusation and pronounce in person a covenant curse (e.g., “swords” in 19:17). For the first time in the Book of Kings, Yahweh himself pronounced a covenant curse against the nation for the nation's sin. If there was any doubt of exile after 1 Kings 11, there should be no doubt of exile after 1 Kings 19. The falling action gains momentum after the third section ends in 2 Kings 8:15 and judgment crashes down on Israel in only a few short chapters (2 Kings 9–16). Despite the downward trend of 2 Kings 9–25 toward complete exile, Yahweh's promised remnant in 1 Kings 19:18 offers a gleam of hope that Israel will not stay in exile (c.f., Dt 30:5–6).

The interpreter misses how 1 Kings 19 functions in the book if he forces Elijah to be a flat, static character in the narrative. There is despair on Mount Sinai in 1 Kings 19, but it is not Elijah's. It is the reader's. Despair comes from considering Israel's spiritual state. They did not

listen, even after they saw a sign verifying that Elijah was Yahweh's servant.³² But there is also hope. Hope comes from considering Yahweh's faithfulness to his word despite Israel's unfaithfulness. These interpretational trajectories not only harmonize with the contextual function and textual details but also set the path toward Elijah's appearance with Jesus and Moses.

Conclusion

"Elijah, why are you here?" This paper has argued that the traditional negative view of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 does not align with the narrative's details, function within the book, connections to Deuteronomy 18, and the Transfiguration's purpose and portrayal of Elijah. The theophanic-covenantal purpose of Elijah and Moses may not significantly influence the Christological import of the Transfiguration, but it should have practical applications how we read Scripture. First, we must always ask "But what does the text actually say," especially when dealing with well-known narratives. Familiarity with Biblical narratives may not breed contempt, but it may breed flannel-graph Midrash like the negative view of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Second, we must be attentive to how narratives may use allusions to guide the reader. As seen in 1 Kings 19, if one misses Moses, one misses the point of Elijah. Third, we must expect to find connections like these mountain tops within God's Word. These hills are alive with a unified sound of prophets. We should look for other ways that Scripture connects to Scripture.

³² Consider how Israel was much like the Pharisees for Mark 8:11.