

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 35 · Number 4 · October 2011

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# Salvation, Pseudo-modernism, Suffering and Hope: A Study of I Kings 17

John Lewis

**KEYWORDS:** *Postmodernism, technology, texting, despair, Elijah, drought, response*

## I The Drought of Pseudo-Modernism

Over the past fifteen years the Christian church has concerned itself with the dynamics of Postmodernism. While conservatives initially saw it as a threat to biblical religion, post-modernism soon became a necessary tool for the restructuring of churches seeking to connect with the pulse of a rapidly changing society. In many respects, with the exception of a few excesses, it has proved to be a worthwhile enterprise. However, as we enter into the second decade of the twenty-first century we must ask if these rapid changes have led society out of post-modernism and into a new reality, 'post' postmodernism.

Indeed, one could say that as rapidly as postmodernism moved in and took us all along with it, it has

moved out and left its offspring. Alan Kirby, for example, has asserted that postmodernism is dead and buried. 'In its place comes a new paradigm of authority and knowledge formed under the pressure of new technologies and contemporary social forces.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, technology, Global Warming and the War on Terror, have drawn the world into a new paradigm. Pseudo-modernism is the reality that encompasses it all.

Supreme importance is placed on the recipient of the text. Evidence of this is seen in the multitude of 'text-in to comment and/or vote' reality TV programs. The postmodern Christian immediately thinks of interaction. However, 'interactivity' is inappropriate here, 'since there is no *exchange*: instead, the viewer or listener enters—writes a segment of the programme—then departs, returning to a passive

---

<sup>1</sup> A Kirby, [http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The\\_Death\\_of\\_Postmodernism\\_And\\_Beyond](http://www.philosophynow.org/issue58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond) (accessed, 10 Feb 2011).

role.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, submissions are vetted for their ability to fit the needs of the programme, leaving only the illusion of involvement. What the viewer has, instead, is the experience of technology. Consequently critics, like Kirby, view the products of pseudo-modernism to be exceptionally banal. Indeed, he believes that 'a shallowness dominates all'. According to Kirby the pseudo-modern era, at least so far, is a cultural desert.<sup>3</sup>

There has been created, therefore, a tension between the highly sophisticated means of gathering information and communicating and the 'vapidity or ignorance of the content conveyed by it—a cultural moment summed up by the fatuity of the mobile phone user's, "I'm on the bus"'.<sup>4</sup>

Yet for Kirby the problem goes deeper and is more alarming. He sees pseudo-modernism as being characterised by a kind of fatalistic anxiety mixed with ineptitude. Technology has given us access and the chance to respond immediately, but we are not more knowledgeable or wiser. He pictures a world endlessly texting responses to the nightly news while watching the natural world melt and disintegrate and terrorist blowing up what's left. While all this is occurring there emerges an urgent need to present TV programmes about how to clean your house, bring up your children or remain solvent.

It now appears the time to meet people in their responsiveness so as to draw them into a dialogue of responses that ultimately leads to a dynamic interaction with Jesus Christ. Karl Barth may well be, once again, a valuable mentor who guides our journey. Under the heading of *The Doctrine of Providence*, in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth 'investigates the relation of Creator and creature'.<sup>5</sup> 'In providence God allows the creature a meaningful role as the subject of the history which forms the external basis of covenant history.'<sup>6</sup> Importantly for Barth, humanity has a listening role in which God's Word is heard and received. It is Christological, in that this Word must be heard through Jesus Christ, with philosophy being rejected outright. Significantly, it is a Word to be acted on. In contrast to the ways of pseudo-modernism, the person must never be content with passivity, but engage in the world as a servant on an errand, as God works through the believer in the theatre of action.<sup>7</sup>

Geoffrey Bromiley points to the role of the individual in the providential rule of God. Indeed, the actions of individuals 'serve to advance the whole'.<sup>8</sup> 'By the providential disposing of God, events in the lives of individuals are woven into the story of their individual relationship with God in Christ, and of

2 Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond*.

3 Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond*.

4 Kirby, *The Death of Postmodernism And Beyond*.

5 G. W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 141.

6 Bromiley, *Karl Barth*, 142.

7 Bromiley, *Karl Barth*, 143.

8 G.W. Bromiley, 'Providence' in Bromiley, G.W. (ed), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia-V 3* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1021.

the service that they then render in the further advancement of His word and work.<sup>9</sup> Thus Scripture portrays a scene of God seeking responses, and working through those responses to fulfil his ultimate purposes. This way through dialogue is often perplexing, complicated, and loaded with surprises. Yet throughout, humanity is guaranteed a role in the divine drama by a thoughtful and gracious God who weaves a multitude of strands to accomplish his grand design.

The Bible is filled with narratives which arose from responses to God. Covenant history was played out and progressed at significant moments of response that led to meaningful dialogue; standing in clear contrast to the banal self-interest and shallowness of pseudo-modernism. In our passage under consideration response that leads to faithful allegiance to Yahweh in the context of anxiety, is the key to the narrative.

We are introduced to a world of anxiety and peril, where rivers are dry, food is scarce, and death is pervasive. In this famine of body and soul, of darkness and despair, a spark is lit and hope emerges. A miracle takes place. Someone hears the impossible from God and believes.

## II Out of the Desert

The context of Elijah's ministry is a divided kingdom specialising in apostasy and shallow responses to complex issues. Evil pervades the landscape as faithfulness to Yahweh is ditched for the promises held out by the local

deity, Baal. Indeed, Ahab's dynasty sought to fuse the Yahweh worshippers and the Baal worshippers into a single people under the same national god.<sup>10</sup> Despite the political advantages promised by such an alliance, the result is devastating. The people cut themselves off from the source of life and begin to wither and die. Covenant unfaithfulness is met with a lonely abandonment.

However, it is not the people who have been abandoned, as some may have supposed. It is Yahweh who stands without a partner. The covenant relationship that talked of milk and honey and descendants as numerous as the stars, is replaced by cracked earth and dry wells. Yahweh may now be pictured in this narrative of despair; as a widow who sees no future for herself or her child. Only faith in Yahweh's Word, and a resolute conviction to act on that faith, will redeem this sorry state.

Chapter Seventeen of 1 Kings begins with a proclamation to King Ahab from Elijah that God has decreed that there will be a drought in the land. The announcement is abrupt and to the point. Elijah is not even introduced as a prophet; he simply speaks God Word and expects to be listened to. However, his message indicates that he needs no introduction. He speaks with authority and his assertion of Yahweh's divine rule cannot be argued with.

In the context of an agrarian society the news is devastating. Drought will bring death and a nation to its knees.

---

9 Bromiley, 'Providence', 1021.

---

10 K. J. Kung, 'Baal' in G. W. Bromiley, (ed), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 378.

No amount of military strength or political manoeuvring will alter a thing. While the god Baal was believed by the wayward king Ahab to be the provider of rain and its resulting prosperity, the evidence clearly points to the contrary. Their hopes and assurances in the god of the nations are shown to be a vain diversion and an assurance based on a powerless and empty idol.

Yahweh will not be deterred. With his Name flies hope and promise. God will bring their arrogant self-assertions to a desert and replant it with the scene of his sovereign hand. Anxiety will give way to hope and shallowness to the riches of covenant. There is a clear assertion that all narratives must ultimately subsume themselves under Yahweh's design. Over the surface of this parched land that gasps for its last breath, God's determination to love will come as a cool change to illicit life and hope.

### III The Tale of Two Responses

The clue as to our role in this grand narrative is found in the movement of Elijah. In stark contrast with Ahab, who has clearly ignored God's commandments, Elijah responds with resolute enthusiasm. And why not? The promises are alluring. In an age of drought and famine a brook will be provided and there he will be fed. The story might well end there. Sinful Ahab and his lot will die of thirst while Elijah, the faithful follower, dwells in a kind of paradise on earth. However Elijah, as faithful as he is, is also caught up in the devastation of the land. Through his faithful servant, God will

enter into the valley of the shadow of death and reveal himself in sparks of revelation that will stand as beacons, beckoning the reader away from the banal and close to the heart of God. Through silent pain faith will echo loudly and provide the means of redemption.

### IV A Flicker of Light in the Valley of Death

Elijah is again given his instructions. However, the context of the command is profoundly different. Instead of miraculous ravens Elijah will be met by a widow living in her eleventh hour. He is to go to Zarephath of Sidon in Phoenicia, home of the Baal cult. That Yahweh is ruler over all is clearly implied by Elijah's journey. Indeed, God does not seek to protect his nation from outside incursions. He is the creator of all and will dominate all.

The reader might well prefer the simple destruction of sin, yet the narrative takes its audience on a careful journey to the heart of hopeless despair to find the voice of God in faith. Yet despite what appears to be an avalanche of miracles the reader must not forget that life comes to only one small family unit and death still pervades the region. Indeed, Elijah does not enter the scene as some kind of super hero, but as a faithful advocate of the love of God who brings life, hope and transformation, even at the hour of death. As the bell of despair tolls for each one, as most assuredly it will, the voice of God often comes quietly. Yet, as with here, it is enough.

The prophet arrives at his destination and a new dialogue begins. The

optimist of faith, who is listening astutely to the voice of God, interacts with such poverty of existence that life can only be consumed by the present, since tomorrow does not exist. This clash of realities leads to a conversation that initially appears out of place. Elijah seeks refreshments from a widow gathering sticks for her and her child's last meal. What we find in the prophet, however, in this scene of crises is a call to faith based on the promises of God. This is not a miracle man driving a situation to the edge before he 'brings one out of the hat', but a thoughtful follower of Yahweh who has heard his voice, carefully discerned the situation, and is ready to move and proclaim the good news that while death pervades, God is alive.

To be sure, the widow is not to fear but trust in the provision of God. While the famine lasts the food will keep coming. The widow acts on Elijah's promise and is not disappointed. It is a bold step of faith based on the conviction that what God has said will come to pass. This provision of God's Word, and the means for survival, is a clear allusion to the redemptive theme of the exodus, still in Israel's collective memory. Therefore the covenant imperative is again asserted here: while sin brings death, God brings life to all who honour him by responding attentively and acting on his promises. However, we are soon averted from any thought that prosperity is merited on account of our

acts of faith.

Soon after the widow's son becomes ill and dies. She assumes her tragedy has resulted from her sin. Yet the narrative quickly shifts our thinking away from self to God, who delivers the boy from death to life in response to the heartfelt prayer of Elijah. The narrator draws the reader to the conclusion that while sin brings death, life is delivered from a gracious God who does not necessarily act predictably in response to acts of righteousness, but through faithful, prayerful and attentive hearts. While Sidon's child has died, life comes from God through bold and passionate faith. Indeed, hope is found in courageous faith. It is a small flicker of light on the edge of oblivion, but it is enough. The way has been opened for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of many.

## V The Dialogue of Response

In a pseudo-modernistic world of anxious banality and shallow text messages, we hear the voice of God. He speaks to a dry and desolate land of compromise and capitulation to the gods of our age. By this voice we are drawn into a dialogue of response and participation in the divine imperative. It is a response that requires depth of thought, decision, and courageous faith that hears and acts on the promises of God. By way of this outrageous and bold conviction the way is open for the renewing work of God.