**The God of Zion ignored (H.J. Schilder)**

2 Kings 1; 15-17 (reading: 2 kings 1)

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Having an address is one of the most important things in life. You must know the right address in order to associate with one another, in order to be able to make provision for all types of necessities.

Everyone would find this self evident in daily life, but as soon as it comes to spiritual and religious matters an address, the right address, suddenly appears to have little to do with it.

You notice this whenever there is talk of a church address. It is not at all found to be self evident that the church has an address, and that you must seek that church at the right address. It is rather the opposite. You are pointed out as being narrow minded, if not hateful, when you say that the church can not have all kinds of addresses next to each other, that it is very much to the point when it comes to the one lawful church address.

Indeed we would not be so particular about a church address, congregation, if it was only concerned with people who came together to practice religion. But it is so much more to the point because the church is where the Word of God is lawfully proclaimed. For He is to be sought and to be found there. The importance of the church address does not lie in the church itself but in the Word of the Lord, and so in the Lord Himself. Your life, this one and the one to come, depends on seeking Him, the one true God.

It is contingent that you seek Him as He makes Himself known. And therefore in the place where He reveals Himself: in the lawful proclamation of His Word and in the communion He establishes there.

So wouldn’t the accuracy and the reliability of spiritual and religious address information be much more important than that of the civic and day to day movement of human traffic?

Congregation the second book of Kings begins with a story in which everything is affected by the matter of a proper address. By itself it is not so extraordinary that a new bible book begins with it. For it is clear that both these bible books are actually one. The death of Ahab and the succession of his son Ahaziah is described in the previous chapter and the story continues. This chapter (2 Kings1) again begins with the death of Ahab and then relates the story of the sickness and death of Ahaziah.

Yet we can profit from the fact that this story receives extra emphasis as the beginning of a bible book. All the more because this beginning coincides approximately with the end of the prophet Elijah’s work. The story of Elijah’s ascension and his successor Elisha is told in chapter 2.

These happenings take a special place in the history of Israel’s kings and even more of Israel’s prophets. That is because of the content. For here it deals with the question of the right address. Not the address of a good friend, or a provider, not even of a hospital or fire department, but rather the address where the final decisions are made and decisive pronouncements occur about life and death, salvation and destruction.

In this story Yahweh lets it be known that He is Himself the only salvation address, and that he does not let Himself be forced out of that place, does not let Himself be ignored and passed over as the One Savior.

We take the main points that the text speaks of together. When it speaks of:

Yahweh as the only saving address as is shown by His commission to Elijah in pronouncing the death sentence over Ahab’s sick son Ahaziah.

We see that this commission

1) comes as a message from the Lord to Elijah himself (vs. 15);

2) is carried out in a personal meeting with the king (vs. 16);

3) is confirmed by the death of Ahab’s childless son (vs. 17).

**ONE**

The first verse of the text assimilates much of the history that precedes this chapter. The Angel of the Lord speaks to Elijah. This was already stated in verse 3. But at the same time the text shows that in the mean time the story did not stop. For there also lies a distinction in this text (verse 15) different from verse 3. There is a climax in it, a final exaltation. In verse 3 the Angel of the Lord says to Elijah: stand up, go to the messengers of the king of Samaria and say to them….here, in verse 15, it tells of the instruction: ‘go down with the king’s captain and have no fear of the king’. Elijah does so: he stands up ~ he was actually sitting on a hill top ~ and went down with the captain and his military column in order to go to the king.

In the first instance the message of the Lord would reach king Ahaziah indirectly, via envoys he had sent out. In the last instance the message must reach the king from Elijah’s own mouth.

This difference is connected to what occurred between these events. We will speak more about this. But first we will note the result of the development of these undertakings, namely that extra emphasis comes upon the fact that the commission comes from the Angel of the Lord and therefore to Elijah from the Lord Himself. He must completely and more than ever be a direct instrument, must be the complete messenger of the Lord, must be an ‘angel of the Lord ‘ himself who gives answer to the king on the question of life and death.

At the same time this is the last story of Elijah’s rising up as prophet with regard to the house of the king of Israel, which at this time is the house of Omri and of Ahab. The entire history of Elijah’s going as prophet amongst Israel reaches its climax here, in this chapter. And in this history of 2 Kings 1 our text again becomes a high point. The conflict between Elijah, and behind him the Lord, and the house of Ahab is seen in its sharpest focus.

This focusing also appears from the reiteration of the remark that the Angel of the Lord speaks to Elijah and comes to him with this difficult commission. There are some reasons for the difference of opinions about the question of who or what is meant by the expression ‘angel of the Lord’. Often, and especially in the older portions of the Old Testament it is clear from what He says and from what is said about or to Him, that it is not a ‘name” for ‘an’ angel but for the Lord Himself. Then the Lord Himself comes as His own messenger. We may go further and say that it is the Son of God who appears and speaks and takes immediate action in specific instances long before His incarnation. This happened repeatedly at critical, decisive moments in the long history during which Christ is busy coming and to come to the salvation of sinners, for the gathering of the people of God to eternal life.

It appears to us that this is also likely the case here: the Angel of the Lord is the Lord Himself. But in this case we do say it with some reservation. Why? Because not as much is said here about it as in other instances. Out of respect for what the bible does or does not say we have to leave some room for the possibility that a heavenly messenger, a created angel, which the Lord sends to give Elijah divine instructions, could have been meant here. It is noteworthy that in this event it is not said that the Lord says something to the Prophet, as is most often the case in Elijah’s history (that ‘the word of the Lord comes to him), but that the angel of the Lord does it. In this story the reason for this must lie in the fact that there is talk of ‘messengers’, envoys, sent out by the king of Israel. In sharp contrast to this the Lord, in His turn and in His sovereign manner, speaks to the prophet via a “messenger“. Whether the Lord Himself is meant here or an angel speaking in the name of the Lord - in either case the emphasis is stressed on the opposite of what the king of Israel undertakes, Yahweh the God of Israel is taking the lead through His commission to Elijah.

That is what is emphasized. Even if the Angel is the Lord Himself - which we think is the case - there is no different emphasis placed on that ’appearance’ of God. The bible asks for significant and full attention to the fact that the command of the Lord to Elijah is in sharp competition with the commission that Israel’s king gives his men.

The bible emphasizes this, makes a contrast, because here it is all about salvation history. Perhaps at first sight this might look very unlikely. Does this text belong to salvation history? For judgment is made against a king, and that judgment is hard. This judgment does not leave any possibility of escape. It already begins with: let the messengers answer their king that he has no chance of healing, that he will perish. And this judgment is maintained to the utmost, even made sharper now that Elijah must go to the king himself to say, to directly pass on the word received straight from the mouth of the Lord, the Angel of the Lord Himself.

Let us not put the question, how could this be salvation history, aside too easily. The answer will come later. We have to see this situation in its full clarity. There are reasons for the question: is this salvation history, and is this judgment not too harsh? Even more reason when we think of what was the matter with the king, as a patient that is.

The story seems to begin so innocently. King Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, became sick. However, little is said of the serious sickness at first. It was more like an accident. The king had fallen through the balustrade over the first floor of his palace. Apparently he had leaned over too far and fell.

This is written about somewhat nonchalantly. We would not be aware that something serious was afoot if nothing more was said. This communication would stir up some involuntary sympathy perhaps - who, whether friend or foe, would not take pity on a king who suffers such a blow? And he being a young king at that. Moreover - when the king appears to be seriously wounded from the fall, as is seen from the fact that he becomes very sick - he takes a religious road to seek deliverance from his distress. Which roads - more about this later, in any case: he does not try to do it on his own, and he does not only consult a doctor, he looks “higher” in a religious sense.

That can be very moving. A sick king looking for religious ways to find recovery.

Yet in the end it is: Elijah, go tell him yourself that he will die.

The Lord does not ignore the susceptibilities of a sick king here but the susceptibilities of a soundly healthy Elijah. For Elijah is frightened. The Lord also says: have no fear of him. This proves all the more how difficult the message was, so difficult that Elijah barely dares to join the officer in order to appear before the king. Yahweh comes to help Elijah with those words because He, the Lord, will certainly not come to help this sick king. The Lord wants to let that become completely clear. Do not fear him - the Lord does not in the first place say this for the sake of Elijah himself, but because He wants to fully prepare Elijah to be an instrument of his judgment. The susceptibilities of the prophet may not get in the way of bringing over the hard message to the king of Israel.

**TWO**

And so Elijah goes, and comes to the king in person, personally brings the message, verse 16. This message is an answer to the question which preoccupied the king: Will I be healed? The answer is without pardon: no, you will not come off of your bed, you will die.

A hard message. Yet not a new one for the king. He had also heard it at the beginning of this story. Didn’t he look for a religious answer for his sickness? He had sent an envoy to a religious address for that reason, an address where people could receive an answer from the gods. In a way the distress had taught him to pray, drove him to put the matter before a god who knew the answer to human uncertainties.

He received a speedy answer to that question. Faster then he expected. The company would have had to make a rather lengthy trip from Samaria. But while on the way his envoys met the prophet Elijah. The Lord had let him know about the question of Ahaziah, and the Angel of the Lord had also communicated the answer to the prophet.

But that answer had infuriated the king. It was apparently not because of an unfavorable answer - which he had considered a possibility. It was because the answer came from Elijah, because it came from Yahweh. That is why he sent an infantry column in order to take Elijah prisoner and parade him before all. But the column was killed by fire and lightening, which Elijah cast down in God’s name. Then the king sent a second column - and it happened to them as had happened to the first. And again another third fifty under a third captain. And indeed this one brings Elijah along with him. But the roles are actually reversed. Elijah appears before the king, but in fact it was he who had taken the column along, rather than the captain having taken Elijah. This was because this third captain had behaved differently then the first two. He had begged Elijah for mercy - and so his life was preserved.

It was no longer Elijah who was exposed to the king’s judgment when he passed on the answer at the king’s sickbed, but it was the king who was placed before the judgment of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Elijah was not taken prisoner, rather it is the Lord who legally confiscated the life of the king. Yahweh takes him prisoner in the deadly grip of His judgment.

And why is that? Was it because of the seriousness of Ahaziah’s fall? Or that the sickness was terminal? No. The story leaves room for the opposite. Because the judgment had a motive. He dies, not because death had become established in parts of the body on account of the fall from the window, but because he drew it upon himself by his apostasy against God. His question was answered in the negative because he did not ask it from the Lord Himself.

Had he done so, had he gone to Elijah himself, or had he asked Yahweh lawfully for a decisive answer by other means at an address pointed out by Him - perhaps the answer would have been more favorable. If he had not learned to pray in his own way when in need, but had walked in the ways of prayer which the Lord had taught His people - who knows if the Lord would have favored him with compassion. But the answer is fatal, simply and only because had gone with his prayer, his request for an oracle, to another address and another god.

For the envoys were sent to Ekron, the Philistine city where they worshiped a deity who was regarded as a specialist in such matters. They had to consult a certain “type” of Baal. This is in accord with the religious needs of that age. Today we have to do with a world full of religious needs - but who go their own way for this, and create their own cult. It was also the same then. So Ahaziah acts according to the mode of his time. In this he walked the same road that Ahab and especially Jezebel walked before him. But with Ahaziah it was even more arrogant.

For with Ahab God had clearly eliminated Baal through Elijah on Mount Carmel. So in going to a Baal in his sickness Ahaziah, in his turn, sets the clock back, sets the clock of reformation back in the direction of deformation.

Moreover he does it very demonstrably and deliberately. Because he sends his envoys from Samaria to Ekron. In that Philistine city there is also the service to Baal. So this special and fairly distant journey was a very clear gesture: that is where I must be, that is the address where I can expect deliverance. There at Baal-Zebub. This is what the deity was called here. A particular portrayal of Baal, specializing in such oracles. Although the name was probably different. Baal-Zebub was a type of royal Baal, also known in the territory of Tyre which was closely affiliated with Philistia. However the bible immediately speaks disparagingly about Baal-Zebub, which could mean something like a “lord of the flies”. In the writing of the story the prophetic word proves itself sovereign over Baal worship.

But above all this sovereignty is guaranteed to Ahaziah by Elijah in as many words. This had already been done the first time by the messengers who returned after meeting Elijah. But now Elijah himself personally says it straight to the king’s face.

In this the Lord Himself speaks as directly as possible to the king. And it is fully a sentence in a lawsuit; the legal action of Carmel due to Ahab is enacted in the sick room of Ahaziah. This judgment has a motivation, it is a complete summons: you will die because you have sent envoys to Baal-Zebub, to seek counsel from the god of Ekron - as if there is no God in Israel.

And there you have the answer to that involuntary question which occupied us, against a king who had suffered such an unfortunate fall. Is it not severe? The answer must sound out: it is hard indeed, it must be hard - especially because compassion comes into play here, the mercy, the salvation of the people of God, of the king and his subjects. The answer did not have to be hard beforehand if only Ahaziah had traveled on the right road of prayer, if he had gone to the true God with his need, the God of Israel, Yahweh. The One Who Elijah had so clearly proclaimed as the Only One who can preserve… who therefore kills those who do not let themselves be preserved by Him.

**THREE**

Therefore the Word is also confirmed by an act. The word: you shall die, is confirmed by the fact: the king dies. The word of Yahweh, spoken by Elijah, becomes effective. In this last act of publicly going up to the king’s house all of Elijah’s previous service is simultaneously confirmed: the king dies. And he dies completely. That is he dies without leaving a son after him. For a king that signifies childlessness, without royal descent.

For eastern awareness this means deader than dead - for otherwise Ahaziah would have lived on in his own descendants. Here we see how busy the Lord is in his lawsuit with Ahab’s house, with Omri’s house, in order to bring it to an end. Joram, Ahaziah’s brother, follows him - and, as foretold by Elijah, that becomes the end of the collapse of all of the king’s house.

Yes, this is how the Lord settles His account with the king and the king’s household. For do not forget - it is already fixed in advance, but this last text shows it extra clearly. In this dispute with the king the Lord does not only have something to do with one person, one or another sick Israelite, but with Israel’s shepherd, with one who must be a leader for the people. Therefore the Lord takes it to extra heights. For by seeking a false address the king gave false leadership to the whole nation. The sick shepherd goes ahead of all the people and pulled them all along on the road of his apostasy and fall from the living God.

And by punishing the king with death on account of this apostasy the Lord preaches so clearly as possible to all the sheep, to the whole nation, that only He is the Shepherd of Israel, and that kings are to be His underling shepherds. And that all sheep are to be with Him, and can only be with Him in order to find life and be preserved in time and eternity. This must be confirmed as much as possible here at the end Elijah’s career before his ascension into heaven. All of Elijah’s lifelong career must come onto the stage here. Even stronger, here all of the shepherding of the Good Shepherd comes into the spotlight. The labor of Him who would say: “I am the Good Shepherd, do the sheep really hear My voice? Seek and you shall find, knock and it will be opened. But do knock at the right, the good door.

That is what is at stake in this story. The Lord has set all other things to the side on account of it. Or, rather He has made all other things dependent on this. For great and important things were happening exactly when the king was lying sick. This was indicated at the beginning of the chapter; Moab had rebelled after the death of Ahab. So Ahaziah’s sickness had come at the most inopportune moment: it was a severe political crisis and Israel’s existence was at the crossroads. His recovery was not just significant for himself, it is the people, the nation, who were affected by it. The king must recover during such critical circumstances, to be able to actively take the rudder of the national ship in hand. Yet his death means the direct opposite; things become even more critical. For a switch on the throne will mean more opportunity for Moab and others to rebel against Israel and do Israel harm. The nations will all too willingly make use of such a political vacuum.

So there was much at play here. We might say: the Lord risks much. But speaking according to Scripture we say: He risks nothing. For He points out the road for His people to escape from all risks. The risk of sickness, the dangers of political life, economic threats: for Moab’s rebellion meant higher taxes for the Israelites. And whenever that happens in history it is not just written down for one time. The Lord reveals Himself to prove that this is His way and will be through all eternity.

He still says so today. Christ says it now as exalted Savior, He says it in a world full of need, he says it in the middle of every critical situation of sickness and health, in the threats of the history of the nations and difficulties due to volatile business cycles and heavy taxation. He says this in a world which screams out its religious need and is everywhere searching for and creating addresses to receive spiritual solutions. In this history and through this old text also in our time Christ says “I am the only address”.

So, congregation, it is therefore of vital importance and of world importance in these days to preach of the only true God and the way that he lets Himself be found. Therefore it is of world importance in this time to confess Him as the only address. It is important to recognize His church as the address where in the world He is to be found through the preaching. And when they tell you today that you put much at stake when you place so much emphasis on it, then do not just push that aside. Add to it and say it even stronger and better: deny that you have put anything at stake. Know and say, confess and have it preached everywhere that everything stands at stake by it. Naturally that is not to say that someone is finished with everything by “coming into the church”. For the church and the church address only comes to the point because you must and may seek and call upon the only true God, Israel’s Shepherd, in the unity of the true faith. It is vital that in a world full of need you seek Him and shall find Him.

Now then, seek Him where He lets Himself be found. Seek Him as the only address. Seek Him at the right address. In the right path.

Knock and it will be opened. The doors of life will open where you humble yourself for Him.

The Good Shepherd calls and the sheep hear His voice and follow Him.

In the middle of various persecutions, in the midst of many voices, in the middle of all kinds of religious proclamations, in the middle of all kinds of life problems, the sheep hear His voice and follow Him.

**Amen.**

Sing ~ Ps. 103: 8,9; Ps. 103: 11; Ps. 81: 10, 11, 12; Ps. 116: 1, 2, 3

Read ~ 2 Kings 1