

ELIJAH

Scripture references:

*1 Kings 17–19; 2 Kings 1–2;
Malachi 4; Matthew 11, 17;
Mark 9; Luke 1, 4, 9;
John 1; James 5:17*

Date: About 875 b.c.

Name: Elijah [ee-LI-juh; “Yahweh is my God”]

Greatest: Elijah checked the efforts of evil

accomplishment: King Ahab and his wife Jezebel to replace the worship of Yahweh with worship of Baal in the northern Hebrew kingdom.

ELIJAH’S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE

Elijah lived at a critical time in the history of the northern kingdom, Israel. From its origin in 930 B.C., Israel had been ruled by kings who refused to submit to God’s will. The first ruler of the north, Jeroboam I, had designed a counterfeit worship system to keep his citizens from going to Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom, Judah, to worship. In the 850s, King Ahab, encouraged by his wife Jezebel, initiated an active campaign to wipe out the worship of Yahweh in Israel and replace it with worship of Baal. Jezebel had imported some 850 pagan prophets from her homeland and at the same time had set out to exterminate any prophets of the Lord who remained in Israel. It was then that Elijah appeared, and demonstrated the power of the Lord first by bringing a three-and-a-half-year drought that devastated Israel, and then by defeating 450 prophets of Baal in a contest on Mount Carmel. The outcome was that the people of Israel, who had been wavering, affirmed that “the LORD, He is God!” (1 Kings 18:39). The efforts of Ahab and Jezebel were stymied, and while the counterfeit religious system existing in Israel was not changed, the Israelites were turned back to the Lord.

This confrontational ministry of Elijah and its great national impact serve in Scripture as a model for the ministry of a prophet predicted in Malachi 4:5–6.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.
And he will turn
The hearts of the fathers to the children,
And the hearts of the children to their fathers,
Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.

Elijah and the Malachi prophecy are referred to frequently in the Gospels. A prophet with an Elijah-like ministry (or, some say, Elijah himself!) will appear before the Messiah sets up His kingdom. John the Baptist had this kind of ministry, but Israel did not respond, and so the Elijah prophecy was not fulfilled in John.

James 5 also contains a significant reference to Elijah. James encouraged his readers to pray and declared that “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:17–18). The inspired author focused on two matters: Elijah’s humanity and his prayer.

EXPLORING ELIJAH’S RELATIONSHIPS

Elijah’s relationship with Israel’s rulers (1 Kings 17–19; 2 Kings 1). Elijah dealt with rulers who were utterly hostile to God and thus to him. Four incidents illustrate the antagonism that existed between the rulers and God’s prophet.

Elijah announced a drought (1 Kings 17). God sent Elijah to Ahab to announce that for three years there would be neither rain nor dew in Israel. For those three years the prophet was hidden from the king, who searched for him as the land withered under the drought. Ahab had the largest chariot army in the region, and he was unable to find provisions for his horses.

Elijah proposed a test (1 Kings 18). After three and a half years, God sent Elijah to confront Ahab again. Elijah proposed a test of God’s power versus Baal’s power. Ahab, who seems actually to have had some confidence in Baal’s powers, agreed. For hours, the prophets of Baal called on their deity with no response. But as soon as Elijah prayed, fire fell from heaven and consumed the offering

Elijah had laid out. The people, who had been wavering, were convinced. At Elijah's words, the people killed the prophets of Baal. Elijah then prayed for rain, and the drought was broken.

Elijah pronounced Ahab's doom (1 Kings 21). Ahab's wife Jezebel arranged the judicial murder of Naboth, a man whose vineyard Ahab coveted. Although Ahab had not conspired to commit the murder, he gladly went down to inspect the property when Jezebel told him what she had done. Elijah confronted Ahab there, and announced God's judgment on the wicked pair. Ahab put on sackcloth, fasted, and wept to demonstrate his repentance. God put off the punishment He decreed on Ahab's dynasty. Later the king ignored the warning of another prophet and was killed in battle.

Elijah announced the death of Ahaziah, Ahab's son and successor (2 Kings 1). When King Ahaziah was injured, he sent messengers to inquire of a foreign deity whether he would survive. Elijah intercepted the messengers and announced that since Ahaziah had not seen fit to inquire of the Lord, he would surely die. The king sent several troops of soldiers to bring Elijah to him. Elijah called down fire from heaven on two of the companies, but when the captain of the third squad showed respect for the Lord and His power, God told Elijah to accompany them to the king.

In each of these situations Elijah was called to a ministry of judgment. Each placed Elijah in potential danger at the hands of a hostile king. Yet, Elijah faithfully carried out each mission and was protected by the Lord.

Elijah's relationship with Elisha (1 Kings 19:19–21; 2 Kings 2). Near the end of his ministry Elijah became despondent and discouraged. It seemed to him that everyone had abandoned the Lord. At this point, God selected Elisha as a companion and an apprentice for Elijah.

When God took Elijah into heaven, Elisha became the premier prophet in Israel. While Elijah's ministry had been one of confrontation and judgment—as demonstrated in the miracles attributed to him—Elisha benefited from his predecessor's impact on the average Israelite. Elisha's ministry was marked by miracles that aided both the nation and godly individuals.

Elijah's relationship with the Lord (1 Kings 19). When we read of Elijah's accomplishments, he comes across as a fierce and fearless individual. Whatever God called Elijah to do, he did boldly. Yet, James reminded us that Elijah was a "man with a nature like ours" (James 5:17).

God provided for Elijah (1 Kings 17). During the years of drought when Elijah was hiding from Ahab, God provided for him in supernatural ways. Ravens provided his food by the brook Cherith, and later God miraculously extended the supply of food of a widow with whom Elijah stayed.



God ministered to a despondent Elijah (1 Kings 19). Elijah's humanity came through most clearly after his victory on Mount Carmel. When Jezebel heard that Elijah had ordered the prophets of Baal killed, the queen sent a death threat to the prophet. Elijah was terrified, and ran for his life.

While terror gripped Elijah, the Lord supplied him with the strength he needed to flee. Finally exhausted after a forty-day journey, Elijah stopped running at Mount Sinai [called Horeb here]. God spoke to him there, and Elijah shared his despair:

"I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10).

Often emotional highs are followed by emotional lows. This was surely Elijah's experience. In the grip of depression, Elijah could not see matters clearly.

Rather than rebuke Elijah, God ministered to His prophet in specific and gracious ways.

- God spoke to Elijah in a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). Elijah needed to know God cared and the gentle response of the Lord communicated this reality powerfully.
- God gave Elijah a task to complete (1 Kings 19:15–17). Elijah was sent to anoint two future kings who would bring an end to Ahab and his line. A depressed person often feels overwhelmed. Elijah needed to have a clear and obtainable goal set for him.
- God gave Elijah a companion, Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). A depressed person typically feels isolated and alone. This certainly describes Elijah, who had complained, "I alone am left." Elisha would become Elijah's friend and companion as well as his successor.
- God gave Elijah perspective (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah was wrong in his belief that all except him had abandoned the Lord. God told him, "I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal."

Truly Elijah was "a man with a nature like ours" (James 5:17), and just as surely God graciously ministered to Elijah. Elijah had given his life to serve God, but God also was dedicated to serve Elijah.

ELIJAH: AN EXAMPLE FOR TODAY

Elijah provides us a picture of the prophet as a lonely man—a man dedicated to God in a hostile society. Elijah was bold and brave, but Elijah was merely human. His dedication to God placed strains on him that led to the recorded bout of fear and depression. Elijah's experience reminds us that while commitment to the Lord may increase the stress in our life, the Lord is committed to us and will meet us in our need. From Elijah we discover much about the cost and the rewards of commitment.

- Elijah reminds us that we may find ourselves in situations where we feel that we alone have remained faithful to the Lord. Should this happen, we are to be bold and speak up for Him as Elijah did.
- Elijah reminds us that when we feel weakest God may be the closest to us, ready to whisper to us in a still, small voice.
- Elijah reminds us that God is never critical of our human limitations. God understands us, and cares. He knows how to provide what we need to go on with life.
- Elijah reminds us that we need God’s perspective always. However alone we may feel, many others love God equally and share our experiences.
- Elijah reminds us that we, too, need the companionship of like-minded believers. Today, you and I can find this companionship with others in the church, the body of Christ. Let’s seek fellowship there, that we might offer and receive support.¹

THE MIRACLE MINISTRY OF ELIJAH

*GOD’S CHAMPION AGAINST BAAL
1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2*

- **MIRACLES LIGHT UP A DARK LAND**
- **MIRACLE FAMINE EXPOSES FALSE GOD** (1 KINGS 17:1–8)
- **MIRACLE ANSWER TO PRAYER** (1 KINGS 17:17–24)
- **MIRACLE CONTEST WON BY GOD** (1 KINGS 18:1–40)
- **THE MIRACULOUS IN ELIJAH’S LIFE** (1 KINGS 19)
- **ELIJAH’S FINAL MIRACLE** (2 KINGS 2:1–11)

Some marriages seem made in heaven. The union of King Ahab of Israel and Jezebel of Phoenicia seemed made in hell.

The two set out together to exterminate God’s prophets and brought hundreds of pagan prophets of Baal and his consort Asherah into the northern Hebrew kingdom, Israel. They intended to replace Yahweh with Baal as the official god of the nation.

A single, bold figure stood up against the evil king and his pagan queen. At this critical moment in sacred history, God raised up the prophet Elijah, and through Elijah God performed a series of miracles which demonstrated conclusively that the Lord, not Baal, was the true and only God.

The Recorded Miracles of Elijah

1. Elijah stops the rains.
2. Elijah multiplies a widow’s food.
3. Elijah restores the widow’s son.
4. Elijah calls down fire at Carmel.
5. Elijah restores the rains.
6. Elijah calls down fire on soldiers.
7. Elijah divides the Jordan’s waters.

ELIJAH STOPS THE RAINS *1 Kings 17:1–8*

King Ahab is introduced in 1 Kings 16. Verses 30–33 sum up his character and career.

Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And it came to pass, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took as wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians; and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a wooden image. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

Elijah the prophet. Elijah is one of the most striking figures in the Old Testament. Second Kings 1:8 describes him as a hairy man wearing a leather belt. The name *Elijah* means “Yahweh is God,” so his name sums up his mission. Elijah was called to proclaim to Israel that Yahweh was the true God and to turn back the tide of Baalism that threatened to sweep the nation. All of Elijah’s miracles demonstrated the truth that “Yahweh is God.”

Elijah announced a drought (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah did not warn Ahab of the coming drought or give him a chance to repent. The king was committed to evil, and he was rapidly leading his people to a commitment to Baal. It would take a dramatic miracle to make Ahab pay attention to any prophet of the Lord.

¹ Richards, L. (1999). *Every man in the Bible* (pp. 85–88). Nashville: T. Nelson.

So at God's leading Elijah sought out Ahab and announced, "As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word."

"As the LORD God of Israel lives." To Ahab, the name *Yahweh* was an empty term, a word which he could safely ignore. It was "Baal" who seemed real to Ahab. Elijah announced the miracle as proof that "the Lord God of Israel lives." Only a God who was real could cause a drought at the word of one of his prophets—or bring rain at that prophet's word. Ahab and all Israel needed unmistakable evidence that *Yahweh* lived.

"Not be dew nor rain." This particular judgment was doubly significant. First, drought was to be one of the consequences of abandoning the Lord, a fact which Moses had spelled out for Israel in Deuteronomy 28. That passage warned, "Your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron. The LORD will change the rain of your land to powder and dust; from the heaven it shall come down on you until you are destroyed" (28:23–24).

Second, and more significantly, Baal was a nature god. He was viewed as god of the storm. One of his responsibilities was to provide rains and maintain the fertility of the land. The drought which would prove that God lives would also prove the impotence of Baal, challenging the king's claim that Baal was the deity on whom Israel could rely.

In New Testament times, Jesus revealed that this drought announced by Elijah lasted for three and a half years and that "there was a great famine throughout all the land" (Luke 4:25). God's power over the elements supposedly controlled by Baal was made plain.

"Except at my word." Droughts are natural happenings. But a drought that comes and goes at the command of a man is not natural. Such a drought is an extraordinary event, and Elijah declared it was caused by God. Its purpose was to demonstrate the power and presence of Israelliving God.

Miracles and the miraculous (1 Kings 17:2–7). After making his announcement, Elijah hid. God directed him to a brook that flowed into the Jordan River. In this location, "ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening" (1 Kings 17:6). This was not a miracle performed *by* Elijah—but God's miraculous intervention *for* Elijah.

The drought affected the whole land and brought terrible suffering. But God took care of his faithful prophet.

ELIJAH MULTIPLIES A WIDOW'S FOOD 1 Kings 17:8–16

As the drought worsened, the brook where Elijah was staying dried up. God then sent him to the home of a widow in Zarephath.

The irony of the location (1 Kings 17:9). The city of Zarephath was in Sidon, a territory ruled by the father of Ahab's wife Jezebel. This was the land from which the pagan missionaries intent on turning Israel to the worship of Baal had been recruited!

While Israel suffered from the drought, Elijah would be safe in the homeland of his persecutors. What an echo of Psalm 23:5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." God had thrown his protective mantle over Elijah; he was safe in the land of his enemies.

The widow and her situation (17:10–12). When Elijah arrived in Zarephath, he found a widow who was about to prepare the last remaining food in her house. The drought which struck Israel had also affected surrounding nations. There was no one to whom she could appeal for food when the little amount she had was gone (see 1 Kings 17:14). The widow was destitute and on the verge of starvation.

It is interesting that the widow recognized Elijah as a prophet. But her words, "As the LORD your God lives," are best understood as a polite greeting rather than an indication that she believed in *Yahweh* (see 1 Kings 17:24).

The woman's amazing faith (17:13–15). When the widow told Elijah of her desperate situation, the prophet directed her to feed *him* first, and only then feed herself and her son. The prophet also promised in the name of the Lord God of Israel that "the bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth" (1 Kings 17:14).



In one way, it is amazing that the woman did as Elijah asked. On the other hand, she really had little choice. If she kept the last of the food for herself, she and her son would surely starve. If she did as Elijah said and God *did* maintain their food supply, they would live. Facing the options of certain death versus possible life, the widow made the wisest choice.

It is strange how few people today show similar wisdom. Many who are introduced to the gospel, which promises eternal life, are unwilling to *listen*. How important in life-or-death issues to listen when someone speaks in the name of the Lord!

The widow made her choice, and “did according to the word of Elijah.” Her risk of faith was rewarded, and “she and he and her household ate for many days.”

Again, God demonstrated his power as well as his gracious provision for those who place their faith in him.

ELIJAH RESTORES THE WIDOW’S SON 1 Kings 17:17–24

While Elijah was staying with the widow, her son died. The widow confronted the prophet, who took him to the upper room where he was lodging and prayed for his restoration. The Lord answered Elijah’s prayer, and the prophet took the living boy downstairs and presented him to his mother.

The widow’s bitter words (1 Kings 17:17, 18). We can understand the widow’s anguish. Had God preserved her family from the drought, only to take her son? Was God the kind of person who gives with one hand while taking away with the other?

But the widow also blamed herself as well as God. This is shown in her words, “Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?” The word “remember” has a distinct connotation in the Hebrew language. She implied that Elijah’s presence drew God’s attention to her as a sinner and that he remembered her sins and acted appropriately in taking her son.

People who do not know the Lord sometimes assume their tragedies are divine punishment. But the widow was about to learn that her tragedy would become an occasion for God to display his power and grace.

Elijah’s prayer (17:19–21). Elijah questioned God’s permitting the boy to die. But he also prayed that the child’s life would be restored. His prayer was answered and the child revived.

“Have You also brought tragedy?” Like the widow, Elijah struggled to understand the boy’s death. Why would God do this? Did he intend to “bring tragedy”?

Elijah’s reaction differed from that of the woman. She immediately concluded God was punishing her. But Elijah asked God about his intention. Did the Lord intend to bring tragedy, or was this event to be understood differently? In fact, the “tragedy” would soon become a cause for rejoicing, demonstrating that the widow needed to trust completely in the Lord and his spokesman (compare 1 Kings 17:24).

How often what we interpret as tragedy is intended by God as a blessing. How wise to adopt Elijah’s stance—and look for the blessing that is hidden in the pain.

“He stretched himself out on the child three times.” Elijah was truly a “man of God.” An Israelite who touched a dead body was made unclean (Num. 19:11). Yet Elijah, out of his deep concern for the widow and her son, not only touched the child; he stretched out on his body. This was a symbolic act—an acted out way of praying, “Let this lifeless body be as my living body.”

“Let this child’s soul come back to him.” The prayer, literally, was “let this child’s life [*nephesh*] return.”

Some people have called this miracle a “resurrection.” It was not. History’s only resurrection was that of Jesus. Raised, Jesus lives forever—his body transformed. The miracle described here, like the raising of Lazarus, was a resuscitation—a return to mortal life. The boy whose life was restored grew old and died again, just as Lazarus did. The restoration of mortal life is a miracle—but far less a miracle than the transformation we will experience in our resurrection when Jesus comes again.

God answered Elijah’s prayer (17:22–23). The Lord answered Elijah’s prayer and restored the child. Elijah brought the boy downstairs and presented him to his mother: “See, your son lives” (1 Kings 17:24).

The meaning of the miracle (17:24). The woman summed up the meaning of the miracle: “Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.”

“You are a man of God.” The miracle authenticated Elijah as God’s spokesman. But the miracle did more. It also revealed Elijah as a caring, godly man. We need to keep this in mind as we read later accounts of what seem to be harsh acts of the prophet.

“The word of the LORD in your mouth.” The miracle also authenticated the God whose word Elijah spoke. If there had been any doubt in her mind that the Lord is the living God, that doubt was erased. By giving life, Yahweh was revealed as living himself. There could be no doubt of his reality.

“The word of the LORD is truth.” Truth as understood in the Bible has an unbreakable link to reality. What is true corresponds with what is real. What is false is unreal, and thus unreliable. The woman realized that the ultimate reality in our universe is God.

ELIJAH CALLS DOWN FIRE AT CARMEL 1 Kings 18:1–46

The most spectacular of Elijah’s miracles was performed near the end of the three-and-one-half-year drought.

Ahab and Jezebel had massacred most of the prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:4). Yet the Lord told Elijah to go to Ahab, and that he would send rain. Before the return of the rains, however, Elijah proposed a contest with the prophets of Baal. The outcome would convince the people of Israel that the Lord is God.

Ahab’s greeting (1 Kings 18:17–18). Ahab greeted Elijah as “troubler of Israel.” The title was ironic, as Elijah pointed out. “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed the Baals.” How often the guilty person blames others for the consequences of his own sins.

The gathering on Mount Carmel (18:19, 20). Throughout this story, Elijah took the initiative. He proposed gathering all Israel at Mount Carmel and calling the 450 prophets of Baal whom Ahab had imported. Ahab quickly agreed. This suggests that he fully expected Baal to defeat Yahweh. We might call Ahab a “true believer,” who was completely wrong, in spite of his sincerity!

Elijah also called for the “four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” to join the contest. Asherah was the female counterpart of Baal who served as his consort. The prophets “who eat at Jezebel’s table,” were under the queen’s direct authority. Jezebel chose *not* to send them to Carmel! This may imply that Jezebel was not convinced of the power of her gods. The conversion of Israel to Baal worship may have been motivated by politics rather than the queen’s religious convictions!

Elijah’s challenge to the people of Israel (18:21). The Israelites were vacillating between the claims of the two deities, Yahweh and Baal. Elijah called for commitment. The people must make a choice. A literal translation of the verse reads, “If Yahweh is God, go after Him; if Baal is, go after Him.” The commitment Elijah sought was not belief alone but action as well. The Israelites must live out their commitment, “going after” [obeying, walking in the path laid out by] either Yahweh or Baal.

At this point, the people remained silent. They were unsure and indecisive. They wanted proof that one of the competing deities truly was God.

The test (18:22–24). When Elijah explained the test, he emphasized how unequal it appeared—a lone prophet of the Lord, facing 450 prophets of Baal. Surely they had the advantage!

Then Elijah proposed that each side build an altar, cut a bull in pieces, and place the sacrifice on wood laid out on the altar. But neither side would light the fire. This had to be provided in the form of fire from heaven. Only the true God would be able to perform this miracle: “The God who answers by fire, He is God” (1 Kings 18:24).

The failure of the prophets of Baal (18:25–29). Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first. Their futile efforts provoked a series of sarcastic remarks from Elijah. From morning until noon, the pagan prophets cried out “O Baal, hear us.” Finally Elijah began to offer suggestions.

“Cry louder. After all, he’s a god.”

“Maybe he’s meditating?”

“Maybe he’s busy.”

“Maybe he’s off on a journey.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping, and you have to wake him up!”

Elijah’s mockery stimulated Baal’s prophets to greater efforts. The text indicates they “cut themselves... with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them.” But at evening there was still “no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention.”

BIBLE BACKGROUND:

WHY BAAL’S PROPHETS CUT THEMSELVES

The following is from one of six broken clay tablets called “Stories of Ba’al and Anat” from Ugarit. They reveal the bloodthirsty nature of these pagan deities. One tablet describes Anat destroying two armies and then, unsatisfied, building bleachers for massed warriors she engaged in deadly games. The text reads,

Once again Anat could fight with vigor,
Slaughter everyone in sight.

Anat's body trembled with gladness,
Her heart filled with joy
Her soul gloated with triumph,
As, again, she waded knee deep in warrior's blood,
Up to her thighs in their guts (I. ii).

The prophets of Baal cut themselves because they believed their god was stimulated and excited by the scent of blood. And they were desperate to attract his attention!

Elijah's miracle victory (18:30–38). Elijah called the people to draw closer. He built his altar, made a trench around it, and prepared the wood and sacrifice. He also ordered that the offering and altar be saturated with water.

Some have ridiculed this account, arguing that if the drought was so severe, no water would be available. However, archaeologists have located wells below Mount Carmel which do not go dry even in droughts.

When all had been done, Elijah prayed aloud that God would “let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word” (1 Kings 18:36).

When Elijah prayed, fire fell. It consumed the sacrifice and burned up the altar stones and the pools of water in a trench Elijah had dug around the altar.

The people's response to the miracle (18:39–40). The people of Israel were convinced. They shouted, “The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God.”

Wherever the word *Lord* appears in the Old Testament, the Hebrew reads “Yahweh.” This decisive event on Mount Carmel tipped the scales against the deities of Ahab and Jezebel, convincing the population that Israel's ancestral God, Yahweh, was the one true God.

Elijah commanded the people to seize the prophets of Baal. There was not one survivor among those who had conspired with the king to corrupt the faith of Israel. Deuteronomy 13:5 explains the execution. God had commanded,

That prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.

The religious purpose of the miracle (18:36–37). There are few miracles in Scripture performed with clearer intent. Elijah summed it up in his prayer. He called for fire to “let it be known this day that You are God in Israel.” The miracle proved decisively that the Lord is the one true God.

But Elijah's prayer expressed another purpose as well. Elijah asked God to act “that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again” (1 Kings 18:37). The miracle was intended to turn Israel's hearts away from Baal-Malquart, and back to the Lord. And for a time—through the ministry of Elijah and his successor Elisha—Israel's hearts were turned.

The king and queen remained stubborn. But the ordinary people no longer hesitated between deities. They chose the Lord.

God can perform the most wondrous miracles. Jesus performed many that were unmistakably God's work. Yet he was eventually rejected by Israel and crucified. There is no such thing as *compelling* proof. Individuals who are determined *not* to believe will not believe—no matter what God does to demonstrate his power. For at least this moment in Israel's history—as a nation's destiny hung in the balance—the people of Israel were open and responsive to the Lord.

ELIJAH RESTORES THE RAINS 1 Kings 18:41–46

Three and one-half years earlier, Elijah had told King Ahab that there would be no rain in Israel “except at my word” (1 Kings 17:1). After the defeat and execution of the prophets of Baal, Elijah announced to Ahab “there is the sound of abundance of rain.”

Elijah went to the top of Mount Carmel and prayed [“bowed down on the ground”]. At first only a tiny cloud appeared on the horizon over the Mediterranean. But soon the clouds filled the sky, and wind-driven rains saturated the parched lands. Elijah warned Ahab to hurry home before the wheels of his chariot became bogged down in the mud!

Again, the miracle was in the timing, as well as in the abundance. God miraculously restored what he had miraculously taken away.

The extent of restoration. We can gauge how fully God restored the prosperity of the land from the biblical text and from history. First Kings 18:5 reports that Ahab had previously assigned one of his officials the task of identifying every spring and brook in the land which still had water that “perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive.” If the official was unsuccessful, the last of Ahab’s livestock would have to be killed.

Why was Ahab so concerned about horses? Because these animals were needed to pull his military chariots, which might be described as the “tanks” of ancient warfare. How do we know the rains restored prosperity? We know because the records of Shalmaneser III of Assyria indicated that Ahab of Israel provided the most chariots—2,000—to the coalition of kings that defeated him in 853 B.C.

God sometimes uses his miracles to judge.

But God will also use his miracles to restore.

The miraculous in Elijah’s life (1 Kings 19). The highest spiritual peaks sometimes lead directly to the darkest spiritual valleys. This was true for Elijah. When Ahab returned to his capital, he told Jezebel everything that had happened. Jezebel immediately sent a messenger to Elijah, threatening his life (1 Kings 19:2).

Jezebel’s strategy. Jezebel could just as easily have sent soldiers to kill Elijah, but she didn’t want to create a martyr. Her goal was to frighten the prophet and thus expose him to the charge of being a fraud. She could not fight God. But she might be able to discredit God’s prophet.

Elijah’s response to Jezebel’s threat. Elijah fell into Jezebel’s trap. Terrified, the prophet abandoned his ministry. The text indicates he “ran for his life” (1 Kings 19:3). Finally, after traveling for miles and growing exhausted, the prophet dropped to the ground and begged God to let him die.

God’s response to Elijah’s flight. Rather than speak harshly to Elijah, the Lord provided him with food that sustained him on a forty-day journey to Horeb [Mount Sinai]. There, where God had given Israel the Law accompanied by an awesome display of his presence (see Ex. 24:16–18), God spoke to Elijah in a whisper (1 Kings 19:11–12). The Lord reassured Elijah that other people in Israel also worshiped him. Elijah was not alone. The Lord also gave Elijah specific tasks to accomplish and provided him with a companion, Elisha.

The God who had judged the apostate King Ahab and his pagan prophets so harshly was gentle with his depressed prophet. With a series of quiet miracles—strengthening for the journey, a gentle revelation—the Lord ministered compassionately to the man of God.

Encouragement from the incident. Elijah had abandoned his ministry and run away. Even more, his disappearance provided Jezebel with a propaganda advantage. But the Lord neither criticized nor condemned. Instead, he showed great compassion for Elijah and eventually restored his ministry.

What an encouragement to us. We are also vulnerable to those deep valleys that lie beyond the spiritual and emotional peaks in our lives. At times, we will also give God’s enemies occasion to criticize him. How important to remember the quiet miracles that God performed for Elijah. Our Lord will strengthen and restore us in our “down” times, as he did his prophet of old.

ELIJAH CALLS DOWN FIRE ON SOLDIERS 2 Kings 1:1–17

After Ahab died, his successor Ahaziah was seriously injured in a fall. Ahaziah sent messengers to a pagan deity to ask if he would recover. God sent Elijah to confront the messengers. Since Ahaziah had showed contempt for the Lord by not seeking information from him, Ahaziah would die, Elijah declared. When his messengers reported this to the king, he sent fifty soldiers to bring Elijah to him.

“Man of God, the king has said” (2 Kings 1:9). These words alert us to the significance of the coming miracle. Jezebel still lived, and her son Ahaziah had adopted her religion and her policies.

Jezebel had earlier won a propaganda victory by forcing Elijah to flee. In that confrontation between the political and spiritual powers, Elijah had surrendered to the state. Confronted once more with the power of the state—expressed in the soldiers standing before him—would he surrender again, admitting the authority of the state over God? Or would this confrontation have a different outcome?

“Come down” (1:9). The army officer was confident. He commanded, “Man of God, the king has said, ‘Come down.’ He fully expected spiritual power, which he acknowledged by addressing Elijah as “Man of God,” to bow to the secular power. To this officer, “the king has said” settled every matter.

“Let fire come down from heaven” (1:10). Elijah answered by announcing, “If I am a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men.” In uttering the phrase “if I am a man of God,” Elijah accepted his role as representative of the spiritual authority of God. When Elijah spoke, fire fell and consumed the soldiers.

The second fifty met the same fate (1:11–12). A second officer approached Elijah, arrogantly commanding him in the King’s name, “Come down quickly.” Again Elijah called down fire on the soldiers.

A third officer appealed for his life (1:13–14). A third officer approached Elijah with a totally different attitude. He never mentioned the king or his command. Instead, he appealed to Elijah as a man of God to “let my life and the life of these fifty servants of yours be precious in your sight.”

“Let my life.” The state is feared because it has the power of life or death. This officer had learned that the real power of life or death is God’s, not the king’s.

“These fifty servants of yours.” The first two officers were committed to serve the state. But God requires our first allegiance. In any conflict between the two powers, the claims of the state must come last.

“Be precious in your sight.” What a blessing that the Lord does have priority over the state. We can appeal to God because he *cares*. We cannot expect political powers to have any real concern for individuals.

This officer’s appeal was heard, and his life was spared.

“Go down with him; do not be afraid” (1:15–17). It is unlikely that Elijah fully understood the issue involved in this confrontation. The angel’s reassuring words, “Don’t be afraid,” suggested that Elijah himself feared the power of the king. But the angel’s command, “Go down with him,” reminds us of a vital truth. We live in a world in which believers must deal with the secular powers. We cannot and must not try to isolate ourselves from the society in which we live. Yet in our interaction with the powers of this world, we need not be afraid. God rules, and he is far greater than any secular power.

“Thus says the Lord” (1:16). When Elijah met the king, he spoke boldly. He announced God’s judgment on the apostate ruler: “You shall surely die.”

Elijah walked away unharmed.

And Ahaziah died.

The message of the miracle. A miracle is an extraordinary event caused by God for a religious purpose. It would be wrong to interpret the fire which killed a hundred soldiers as a petty act performed by a frightened prophet. God’s purpose in performing this miracle was far more significant.

Because of this confrontation, all Israel would remember that in a direct conflict between the spiritual and political powers, the state was powerless. And we today are to take heart in this truth as well. As the palmist wrote in Psalm 56:11,

In God I have put my trust,

I will not be afraid;

What can man do to me?

ELIJAH DIVIDES THE JORDAN’S WATERS 2 Kings 2:1–11

When Elijah’s ministry was completed, God revealed that he and his companion Elisha would be carried to heaven without experiencing death. As the two walked together into the Jordan River valley, they were observed by a group of fifty prophets. When they got to the river, Elijah rolled up his cloak and struck the water. The river “was divided in this way and that, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground.”

◆

BIBLE BACKGROUND:

THE “SONS OF THE PROPHETS”

The phrase “sons of the prophets” occurs only in 1 and 2 Kings, where it occurs 10 times in 11 different verses. Some take the phrase to mean “prophets in training,” assuming that Elijah and Elisha set up a sort of seminary for prophets. Others interpret the phrase to mean “prophet,” pointing out that “son of…” is idiomatic in Hebrew, indicating membership in a class or group. To say “sons of the prophets” indicates that the persons so identified are members of the group known as “prophets.”

In either case, the fifty who witnessed the miracle performed by Elijah and later duplicated by Elisha were the future spiritual leaders of Israel.



The miracle by Elijah (2 Kings 2:8). The miracle of dividing the waters was clearly linked with two earlier miracles: the crossing of the Reed Sea and the dividing of the waters of the Jordan in the time of Joshua.

But why would Elijah perform this miracle now, at the end of his career? The answer was obvious when Elisha performed the same act a little later. This served as a sign that he had succeeded Elijah as Israel’s premier prophet.

The miracle for Elijah (2:11–13). In earlier days, God had performed several miracles *for* Elijah. The Lord sent ravens to feed Elijah during the drought when he lived by the brook Cherith. God provided supernatural food that sustained Elijah for a forty-day journey to Mount Sinai. Now the Lord performed one other miracle for the prophet. As Elijah and Elisha walked in the Jordan valley, “suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). God took Elijah into heaven without sending him through the experience of death.

We often focus on the more spectacular miracles of Scripture: the crossing of the Reed Sea, the fall of Jericho’s walls. But the more personal miracles God performed for his people are a rich source of encouragement and hope. God does the great things that a whole nation remembers. But the same God also does the small, compassionate things that we as individuals remember with wonder, thanksgiving, and praise.



THE ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED TO ELIJAH (*1 Kings 19:7; 2 Kings 1:3, 15*)

The covenant connection. Elijah is perhaps the Old Testament’s premier prophet. He ministered at a time when worship of the Lord was threatened with extinction, while a particularly virulent form of Baal worship was actively promoted by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The Angel of the Lord appeared to Elijah three times during this critical period, and Elijah stood, seemingly alone, against the rising tide of paganism that was engulfing Israel.

The Angel of the Lord’s first appearance to Elijah (1 Kings 19). The first time the Angel of the Lord appeared to Elijah was after his great victory over hundreds of prophets of the pagan god Baal. This victory led the people of Israel once again to acknowledge the Lord as the one true God (1 Kings 18:27–40). When the victorious prophet was threatened by Queen Jezebel, he was filled with terror and fled (19:1–4). Finally, utterly exhausted, Elijah collapsed and fell asleep. The Angel of the Lord gently woke him and provided food and drink to strengthen him so that he could continue his flight (19:5–8). Later, the Lord spoke to His despondent, depressed prophet and led him back to his ministry.



The Angel of the Lord’s second appearance to Elijah (2 Kings 1:1–8). When the Angel of the Lord appeared to Elijah the second time, he told Elijah to pronounce God’s sentence of death on King Ahaziah, the son of Queen Jezebel (1:3). Despite the danger involved in confronting an absolute ruler who wielded power over life and death, Elijah sent the message as he had been commanded.

The Angel of the Lord’s third appearance to Elijah (2 Kings 1:9–17). Ahaziah reacted as we might expect: He sent soldiers to bring Elijah to him. These soldiers were destroyed by fire from heaven in answer to Elijah’s prayer, as was a second group of 50. The captain of the third group of 50 soldiers sent after Elijah fell on his knees and begged for his life and for the lives of his soldiers. The Angel of the Lord told Elijah not to be afraid, but to go and confront the King. Elijah boldly restated God’s judgment, and Ahaziah died.

² Richards, L. (1998). [Every miracle in the Bible](#) (pp. 112–121). Nashville: T. Nelson.

What an important role the angel of God's presence played in Elijah's life! When Elijah despaired, the Angel of the Lord strengthened him. When Elijah lacked direction, the Angel of the Lord gave him a mission. When that mission seemed to endanger Elijah's life, the Angel of the Lord guaranteed his safety.

Through the ministry of Elijah the immediate threat of Baal worship was turned back, and the people of Israel once again acknowledged the Lord. Our Covenant-keeping God had intervened at the critical moment.

The meaning of the Angel of the Lord's appearances to Elijah for Israel and for us. We are reminded once again of the faithfulness of God to His word. At the same time, we need to remember that the God Who Is Always Present can play many roles in our lives, just as He did in Elijah's. He can and will gently lift us up when we're down, give us purpose when our lives seem empty, and protect us as we do His will.³

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MIGHTY IN PRAYER

LEARNING FROM ELIJAH, NEHEMIAH, DANIEL, AND JEREMIAH

1 Kings; Nehemiah; Daniel; Jeremiah

- **ELIJAH: PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE (1 KINGS 17-19)**
- **NEHEMIAH: PRAYER AND LEADERSHIP (NEHEMIAH)**
- **DANIEL: PRAYER IN A SECULAR SOCIETY (DANIEL)**
- **JEREMIAH: THE SUSTAINING POWER OF PRAYER (JEREMIAH)**

It was something my mother laughed about. When sitting in a car, I always cocked my head just a little to the left. What made it funny was that my dad, who had been injured in a fall, sat just that way when he drove our car. Sitting behind him in the back seat, I had picked up his mannerism without being aware of it.

We do learn from the company we keep. That's why it's important for us to keep company with Old Testament saints who had significant prayer lives. We can learn from them, even without being consciously aware of their influence. Of course, when we study their prayer lives intentionally, we may learn even more. Certainly the four persons we looked at in the last chapter, and the four we will visit now, have important lessons to teach.

ELIJAH, GOD'S WARRIOR PROPHET

Elijah wasn't the kind of warrior we usually picture, clad in armor and carrying a sword. Elijah looked like a very ordinary eighth-century B.C. Jewish man. His beard was long, his clothing typical. But throughout his life, Elijah was deeply involved in spiritual warfare.

Ahab, the ruler of the northern Hebrew kingdom, Israel, had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon. Together they set out to replace worship of the Lord in Israel with worship of the pagan deity Baal. Ahab built a temple to Baal in his capital city, Samaria, and placed a wooden image there. As part of their campaign, the two also murdered all the prophets of the Lord they could find. They imported 850 prophets of Baal and his consort, Asherah, to "evangelize" Israel.

The aggressive persecution of believers instituted by the royal pair had an impact on the nation. Many followed the politically correct path by choosing to worship Baal. Others, who refused to turn their backs on the Lord, were forced to worship Him in secret. The great majority stood back, confused, uncertain about which deity was the true God.

The Lord sent Elijah the Tishbite to stand against this apostasy. As a first step, God told Elijah to find Ahab and to announce that the entire land was to be struck with a terrible drought that would last for years. Elijah was then told to go into hiding. As the land dried up, Ahab and Jezebel would become desperate to get their hands on Elijah.

The Old Testament records three special prayers of Elijah, God's "warrior prophet." One prayer reveals the prophet at war with tragedy, a second shows him at war with his nation's unbelief, and a third portrays him at war with his own depression.

At war with tragedy (1 Kings 17:8-24). For part of the three and one-half years that Israel had suffered from the drought, the prophet was hidden in the home of a widow in Zerephath. Ironically, Zerephath lay in Sidonian territory. Elijah hid in the homeland of the queen who was so intent on corrupting Israel's faith!

³ Richards, L. (1997). [Every angel in the Bible](#) (pp. 30-31). Nashville: T. Nelson.

While Elijah was with the widow, her small supply of flour and olive oil was miraculously extended to feed the widow and her son as well as Elijah. But after some time, the son became seriously ill and died. Deeply moved by the widow's pain, Elijah carried the boy to his room and cried out to the Lord.

“O LORD my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?” (1 Kings 17:20).

Elijah then stretched out on the child's body and cried out three times,

“O LORD, my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him” (1 Kings 17:21).

The Bible tells us that the Lord heard the voice of Elijah and that the soul of the child came back to him. The child revived, and Elijah brought him down from his room and presented him to his mother.

The story is a simple one, yet it reminds us of a great truth. In this world where tragic incidents occur daily, believers are called to spiritual warfare on behalf of the sufferers. Like Elijah, we are called to care for the hurting and, when possible, to alleviate their suffering. This is a challenge that calls for action—but action bathed in prayer. Ultimately, only the God who gives life to the dying can heal a broken heart. Our part is to be with others, to act for them and, like Elijah, to pray.

At war with the nation's unbelief (1 Kings 18). When about three and one-half years had passed, God sent Elijah to confront Ahab again. Elijah challenged Ahab to a test. The king was to bring his own 450 prophets of Baal and Jezebel's 400 prophets of Asherah to Mount Carmel. Elijah would meet them there. He would call on the Lord, and they could call on their god. The deity who answered the prayers of his servants would be acknowledged as the true God.

Surprisingly, Ahab accepted the challenge and sent for the 450 prophets of Baal. In this, Ahab showed himself a true believer. But Jezebel did not send her 400 prophets to the contest. By this action, she showed that she was using religion as a pretext to strengthen her own position. Although she was from Sidon, the source of the cult, she was not a true believer at all!

As word spread, a multitude of Israelites came to witness the contest. Two altars were prepared, and Elijah invited the prophets of Baal to call on their god first. The hours passed as the prophets cried out and cavorted—all to no avail. When noon came, Elijah began to mock them. Perhaps Baal was on a journey. Perhaps he was asleep, and if the prophets cried louder they could awaken him. As the sun drifted toward the western horizon, the desperate prophets of Baal cut themselves with knives. They believed that Baal delighted in the smell of fresh blood.

At last, Elijah declared it was his turn. He prepared his sacrifice and even soaked it in water. Then Elijah cried out to the Lord. His prayer was brief and simple:

“LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the LORD God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again” (1 Kings 18:36, 37).

Fire fell from heaven immediately, consuming not only the sacrifice but the water and even the stones of the altar.

The people who witnessed the contest were convinced. They shouted, “The LORD, He is God. The LORD, He is God” (1 Kings 18:39). And then, at Elijah's command, the people seized the prophets of Baal, and executed them.

Elijah's public prayer and God's answer turned the nation back to God. Then clouds formed on the horizon, and the rains fell on the parched land of Israel.

We also live in a day when competing beliefs and values are at war with God. Some who seek to do away with biblical faith are, like Ahab, “true believers,” honestly convinced that their way is best. Others, like Jezebel, manipulate the nation for their own benefit. Whatever such leaders' motives, our nation is today drifting away from its spiritual moorings.

For three years there was no dew or rain in Israel; then Elijah prayed, and God sent a rainstorm.



How we need prayer warriors like Elijah—men and women of prayer who have faith enough to take a stand. Who have faith enough to contend with popular views and put truth to the test by expecting God to answer prayer and call our nation back to him.

At war with depression (1 Kings 19). Elijah had won the people back to God. But then Jezebel sent a messenger to the prophet: Before a day passed, she would see Elijah dead!

We can't explain Elijah's reaction. The warrior prophet ran for his life! Finally, completely exhausted, Elijah collapsed under a broom tree and prayed,

“It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4).

At the moment of his greatest public triumph, Elijah experienced depression and defeat.

There was no logic to Elijah's reaction. He had just experienced the awesome power of God. Yet he fell almost immediately into deep depression. How ashamed he was that he had fled in terror. Surely he was weak and useless, no better than his fathers. Gripped by despair, Elijah fled for another 40 days until he reached Mount Horeb (Sinai).

Still in the grip of depression, Elijah expressed his feelings to the Lord:

I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life (1 Kings 19:10).

Elijah's words are consistent with deep depression. Every perception was colored by the dark pit in which he felt himself. The victory on Carmel was forgotten. Black images of the unbelief against which he struggled dominated the prophet's thoughts. The situation seemed hopeless, and Elijah's emotions exaggerated his isolation so deeply that he felt alone and abandoned. "I alone am left, and they seek to take my life."

When depression tightens its grip, even the boldest spiritual warrior may find himself or herself sharing Elijah's emotions. Then even our prayers, like Elijah's, will reflect our sense of hopelessness.

But even when our prayers are lifeless and without hope, God responds to us. In Elijah's case, God helped his prophet find his way back by taking several specific steps:

When Elijah's depression led him to despair, and he ran from his ministry, God was not angry. Instead God actually *provided food to sustain* Elijah while he ran (1 Kings 19:6–9). Then God *spoke* to Elijah in a "gentle whisper" (9:12). God gave Elijah a *simple task* to do, and also *reassured* Elijah that there were others who were faithful to the Lord (19:15, 16, 18). Finally, God *gave Elijah a companion*, who would be with him and would one day take on his prophetic ministry (*The Believer's Guidebook*, 1983, p. 183).

When we must battle our own human weaknesses, we need not pretend to be strong. We can pour out our sense of helplessness before the Lord. And He will come to our aid.

Lessons from Elijah's prayer life. Elijah was called to be God's prayer warrior, fighting against the pain of human tragedy as well as hostile forces which dragged his nation toward unbelief. We learn from Elijah's prayers how to stand through the suffering, opposing the forces that threaten the foundations of a nation.

But Scripture also shows us the human face of Elijah, revealing his vulnerability to despair and hopelessness. We are reminded that God hears our prayers when we feel inadequate, and that in the Lord we have the promise of victory over ourselves.

4

ELIJAH CYCLE Overviews the themes and significance of the Elijah Cycle (1 Kgs 17–19; 21; 2 Kgs 1–2)—Elijah's role, activities, and conflicts with the kings of Israel and the prophets of Baal.

Elijah's Titles and Authority

In the Hebrew text of 1 Kgs 17:1, Elijah is called "the Tishbite" (הַתִּשְׁבִּי, *hattishbiy*) and a "sojourner in Gilead" (מִתְּשׁוּבֵי גִלְעָד, *mittoshavey gil'ad*; see also 1 Kgs 21:17, 28; 2 Kgs 1:3, 8; 9:36). Not much is known of his hometown; Greek versions of the Bible locate Tishbe in the Transjordan region of Gilead (ἐκ Θεσβῶν τῆς Γαλααδ, *ek Thesbōn tēs Galaad*).

Elijah bears two titles indicating his status as a spokesman of Yahweh and as a powerful individual:

1. "prophet" (נָבִיא, *navi*; see 1 Kgs 18:22, 36; 19:16; see also Mal 3:18; 2 Chr 21:12)
2. "man of God" (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים, *ish elohim*; First Kings 17:24; Second Kings 1:10)

These two titles describe two central aspects of his character: he was a prophet proclaiming the word of Yahweh and a powerful individual in close contact with the divine realm. Elijah is emblematic of the way in which prophets operate in the Deuteronomistic History; royal politics, military affairs, natural disasters (i.e., drought), religious practice, and worship all fall within the realm of authority of the prophet. For example, he abruptly appears in the book of Kings to deliver an oracle to King Ahab that God will withhold rain (1 Kgs 17:1).

Elijah as a Successor to Moses

One key theme of the Elijah Cycle is that of prophetic succession. Elijah is cast in the mold of Moses when he proclaims the word of Yahweh on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:19–40) and meets Yahweh on Mount Horeb, as Moses did on Sinai (1 Kgs 19:9–18). In this way, Elijah represents the Deuteronomistic idea of prophetic authority being passed down in Mosaic succession (Carroll, "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas," 408–14). Elijah's call for the people's repentance echoes the same summons given by all the prophets before him. Similarly, the rejection and persecution Elijah faces represents that of the prophets in Mosaic succession with him.

Elijah and Early Prophecy

⁴ Richards, L. (1998). [Every prayer in the Bible](#) (pp. 115–119). Nashville: T. Nelson.

In the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament, a basic distinction can be made between the writing and non-writing prophets. Although they share many similarities with the prophets who wrote books, like Amos, Isaiah, Micah, or Jeremiah, prophets in the Pentateuch or Deuteronomistic History represent different stages in the development of prophecy in ancient Israel and Judah. Elijah's portrayal in the books of Kings includes both his prophetic oracles and his miraculous actions.

In places, Elijah prophesies much like the writing prophets, delivering oracles with a standard introductory formula such as "the word of Yahweh came to Elijah" (1 Kgs 21:28–29). These instances are somewhat outweighed by the recorded acts and deeds of Elijah, which are not necessarily linked to the delivery of a specific word, such as his healing of a child (1 Kgs 17:8–24) or calling down fire on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:36–40). These acts are demonstrations of the prophet's power and the authenticity of his connection to Yahweh. It is this mixed presentation of both word and deed that marks many of the stories of early prophets in the Old Testament. Although prophets would continue to perform signs and deeds, the transmission of oracles becomes more important in the writing prophets.

Elijah, Baal, and Asherah

One of the most important aspects of the Elijah Cycle is the conflict with Baal and Baalism (Beck, *Elia und die Monolatrie*, 189–237). The Old Testament commonly refers to Baal as the singular Canaanite deity who represents the varieties of religious worship rejected by Yahwistic monotheism (Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, 70). Baal worship is attested throughout ancient Phoenicia and Canaan and is best known through the famous tablets discovered at Ras Shamra from ancient Ugarit. Because Baal in Hebrew simply means "lord, owner" (בעל, *ba'al*), there is an inherent ambiguity in the term. It often appears that Baal worship in the Old Testament is a catch-all description of either non-Yahwistic, Canaanite worship or non-sanctioned religious practice. The case is similar with Asherah, a female deity also attested in ancient Ugarit tablets but whose presence in rituals and religion in ancient Israel is debated (Wyatt, "Asherah", 99–105).

Elijah's conflict with the prophets of Baal and Asherah in 1 Kgs 18 concerns a debate over which deities control the elements: Baal, a storm deity who rides on the clouds, versus Yahweh, who controls lightning, rain, wind, and thunder (see Exod 19:9, 16; Amos 4:7; Nah 1:3; Pss 18:14–15; 77:18–19). The narrative clearly demonstrates the superiority of Yahweh and the powerlessness of Baal, and the passage exemplifies the Deuteronomistic and prophetic rejection of any contamination of Yahweh-worship with elements of Canaanite religion.

Literary Considerations of the Elijah Cycle

The Elijah Cycle has long been recognized as a distinct narrative segment of the books of Kings. The distinct pause in the narrative flow at 1 Kgs 17:1 introduces Elijah and his cycle of events. Several themes are unique to the narrative structure of this section, including Elijah's prophetic critiques of Ahab and Ahab's support of Canaanite forms of worship and wars with Aram. However, it is possible to view the critique of Ahab himself as the most fundamental of these themes, especially because the account of Jehu's coup in 2 Kgs 9 is strongly linked to Elijah's prediction of Ahab's death in 1 Kgs 21:17–29.

Lehnart and McKenzie, among others, have debated the ways in which the other Elijah material was sequenced together (Lehnart, *Prophet und König im Nordreich Israel*, 177–89; 327–57; McKenzie, *The Trouble with Kings*, 81–100). More broadly, there is a vast amount of literature concerned with the sources, composition, and redaction of the Deuteronomistic History as a whole (for an overview, see Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*). It is difficult to make conclusions regarding the textual unity or literary development of the Elijah Cycle without also considering the larger shape of 1–2 Kings (for further discussion, see Gunkel, Alt, Noth, and Cross). However, Kissling and Begerau demonstrate that this does not prevent modern scholarship from analyzing the cycle as a complete narrative (Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History*, 96–148; Begerau, *Elia vom Krit zum Jordan*).

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WILLIAM L. KELLY

ELIJAH THE PROPHET A miracle-worker and prophet during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah, kings of Israel (ninth century BC); known for his opposition to Baal worship and his ascent into heaven. Elijah is an important figure in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

Overview

Elijah is a miracle-worker and prophet known from the book of Kings (1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 2), who becomes an important figure in later traditions, both biblical and extrabiblical. His name means "my God is Yahweh [the Lord]" (*eli* = "my God"; *yah* = "Yah[weh]"), which is fitting since most of his efforts are aimed at proving that the Lord, Yahweh, is superior to the local storm deity, Baal. Elijah's miracles and interactions are all geared toward presenting a proper vision of who God is, with great power over nature, but also with a nurturing and just eye for the disadvantaged. His popularity as a figure continues well into the New Testament and beyond.

Biblical Account

In addition to his exploits against Baal and conflicts with leaders in the book of Kings, Elijah is known in later biblical books as the precursor to the Day of the Lord. Like most biblical prophets, nothing is known of Elijah's life prior to his prophetic activities as recorded in the Bible (other than where he is from—Tishbe in Gilead; 1 Kgs 17:1). With little introduction, he arrives on the scene with the power to halt or bring rain using only his word (1 Kgs 17:1–7; 18:41–46). That same power enables him to perform other miracles, as well, which include creating the never-empty jar of flour and flask of oil (1 Kgs 17:8–16) and raising the widow's son from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24). These examples also demonstrate Elijah's commitment to continually advocate for the village-class people, who regularly experience oppression at the hand of the Omride dynasty (e.g., 1 Kgs 21; Rentería, "The Elijah/Elisha Stories," 75–126).

Commitment to Yahweh

Another thread that runs through Elijah's ministry is his commitment to promote Yahweh over the more popular deity Baal, the ancient Canaanite storm god. To this end, Elijah controls drought and rain (1 Kgs 17:1–7; 18:1–19, 41–46), contends with and kills 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:20–40), and defeats the armies of Ben-Hadad ("son of Baal/Hadad"; 1 Kgs 20:13–25). As a result of his radical outspokenness and activism, Elijah is also known for his life-threatening conflicts with King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and King Ahaziah (1 Kgs 19, 21; 2 Kgs 1).

The book of Kings further boosts Elijah's rapport as a leader and ambassador of Yahweh's will and character by drawing parallels between Elijah and Moses. The two major points of comparison are the parting of waters (Exod 14:15–31; 2 Kgs 2:8) and the mentorship of a successor (i.e., Joshua and Elisha). This analogy is picked up in the New Testament, where Moses and Elijah appear together with Jesus at His transfiguration (Matt 17:3–8; Mark 9:4–8; Luke 9:30–36; see below: "Anticipated Return").

Ascent into Heaven

In addition to his miraculous power over certain elements of nature, Elijah also has the ability to simply disappear and reappear (1 Kgs 18:7–12; 2 Kgs 2:1–12), a quality for which he is well-known among Israel's officials and prophets (2 Kgs 2:1, 11, 16). The best-known illustration of this is his ascent into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1–12). Elijah does not die; rather, while walking alongside Elisha, the two prophets are separated by a chariot of fire driven by horses aflame, and Elijah is taken up into heaven in a whirlwind (1 Kgs 2:11; see also Gen 5:24; Jer 4:13; Job 38:1; 40:6).

Anticipated Return

Although the narrative of his life and acts is contained solely within the book of Kings, the memory of the power and mystery of Elijah did not fade. Roughly 400 years later, the prophet Malachi (sixth—fifth centuries BC) receives a word from the Lord promising that "before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes," He will send Elijah the prophet (Mal 4:5). Elijah will bring with him a spirit of reconciliation, so that God may relent from bringing disaster (Mal 4:6).

In the Christian Bible, this passage closes the Old Testament. Turning the page, the reader finds the Gospel of Matthew and a description of John the Baptist in Matt 3. In both Matthew and John, Jesus publicly interprets John the Baptist as the Elijah to come (Matt 11:14; John 1:19–25). In doing so, Jesus addresses the common expectation that Elijah would return at a particular moment in history—one which many people believed to be drawing near (e.g., Matt 16:14; 17:10–12). The portrayal of John the Baptist as one who prepares the way of the Lord (Matt 3:2–3), wears a mantle (Matt 3:4), and speaks with the message of a militant God (Matt 3:10–12) echoes the Elijah known from 1–2 Kings and Malachi.

Elijah himself appears in the Gospels at the transfiguration, when he and Moses speak with Jesus and then disappear into a cloud (Matt 17:3–8; Mark 9:4–8; Luke 9:30–36). This tradition is in keeping with Elijah's ability to appear and disappear before one's eyes. Elijah's anticipated return seems to be in the mind of bystanders at the crucifixion who think that Jesus is calling out to Elijah from the cross (Matt 27:46–49; Mark 15:34–36).

Further Usage in the New Testament

There is mounting evidence that the narrative of Elijah's ministry, as found in 1–2 Kings, might have served as a literary model for the Gospel writers (Brodie, *The Crucial Bridge*; Kloppenborg and Verheyden, *The Elijah-Elisha Narrative in the Composition of Luke*). Elijah also appears in the writings of Paul and James, albeit each refer to him only once. In Romans 11:2–5 Paul appeals to the exchange in which God promises Elijah that he is not alone in his faith (1 Kgs 19:13–18), using this example to encourage the Roman church that there is a remnant of Jews who are chosen by grace. In a different vein, James encourages people to pray fervently for one another, because Elijah, too, prayed fervently as one who is righteous, and the effects of his prayer were seen daily (Jas 5:16–18).

Significance

Elijah became such a strong figure in the biblical text and beyond because he serves as an ambassador of the Lord and as a model of leadership. The prominent issues of Elijah's ministry—for example, serving the proper deity, and the scarcity or abundance of rain, food, and life—all point to the strength of the institution of Baal worship in the eyes of the author(s) of the book of Kings (Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 346–67). Baal ("Lord") was the chief deity in the pantheon of the ancient Canaanites and a popular figure throughout the Levant in the centuries prior to and during Israel's habitation of the land. Baal was believed to be the god of storms, which meant that he was considered responsible for the success or failure of agricultural production and, by extension, human life. The parallels between Elijah and Baal are numerous and explicit throughout the text (Bronner, *Stories of Elijah*). Elijah's miracles over rain, produce, and life, in addition to his confrontations with Baal and Baal's supporters, demonstrate that even the power of Yahweh's prophet is greater than that of the most powerful god of the local pantheon. It is Yahweh and his prophet who have power over life and death, not Baal (Hauser and Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb*, 9–82).

In a related theme, the narrative of Elijah's activities is intertwined with that of King Ahab's reign. The various conversations and conflicts—some of which turn violent—that the two men experience serve to highlight Elijah's role in the development of monotheism (Millgram, *The Elijah Enigma*, 5). Unlike most of the deities of antiquity, including Baal, the Lord's vision includes both the cosmos and the individual creature. Elijah's God is a god who not only controls large-scale issues, such as weather patterns, but is directly involved in the minutiae of human life (1 Kgs 17). This is reflected in another shift with which Elijah is credited: the long transition from a preoccupation with the Lord himself as an object of worship, to a focus on honoring the Lord by doing justice (Millgram, *The Elijah Enigma*, 5).

Another key component of Elijah's ministry is raising up leaders who literally carry his mantle (1 Kgs 19:19) and who train others in turn (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:38). The most famous of his disciples is the prophet Elisha, whom Elijah calls to his side at the word of the Lord, so that he may mentor Elisha as his successor (1 Kgs 19:15–21). Elijah is also known as the founder of the group "sons of the prophets," which appears in Kings as a sort of school for prophets-in-training that Elijah and Elisha visit periodically (e.g., 1 Kgs 20:35; 2 Kgs 2:3–15; 2 Kgs 6:1; compare Amos 2:11; Acts 3:25). Elijah's ability and drive to make disciples who also make disciples is an important part of his legacy.

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