

GRACE IN THE FACE OF DEFIANCE, WEAKNESS, NARCISSISM, \_\_\_\_\_

AHAB

*Scripture references:*

**1 Kings 16–18; 20–22;**

**2 Chronicles 18**

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*Date: Ruled Israel 874–854 B.C.*

*Name: Ahab [AY-hab; “father is brother”]*

*Greatest Accomplishment: Although one of Israel’s most wicked kings, he was one of the most successful.*

AHAB’S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE

Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, **aggressively** promoted the worship of Baal-Melqart in an attempt to replace worship of the Lord in the northern Hebrew kingdom, Israel. The prophet Elijah thwarted Ahab’s efforts by demonstrating decisively that the Lord is God and turning the populace back to Him (see Elijah, page 87). **The religious struggle between the royal family and Elijah was so significant that no other king of either Judah or Israel was given as much space in the Old Testament account of the history of the divided kingdom. [WHAT WOULD THIS LOOK LIKE TODAY?]**

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**BAAL-MELQART**

The particular form of idolatry Ahab and Jezebel sought to introduce into Israel had its origins in Phoenicia, Jezebel’s home. Worshipers of Baal-Melqart seem to have possessed a missionary zeal, although the primary motivation may have been political. **Like other Canaanite religions, the worship of Baal-Melqart was morally degrading and included religious prostitution.**

The deity was also worshiped in the Phoenician colony of Carthage. Findings by archaeologists in a sacred garden in Carthage demonstrate just how depraved this religion was. There, in thousands of burial urns, the remains of children ranging in age from infants to four-year-olds have been found. These were children offered to Baal in a ceremony in which they were burned alive while drums beat loudly to drown out the children’s anguished screams.

The struggle between Elijah and the royal family to establish which deity would be the God of Israel, the Lord or Baal-Melqart, was truly a matter of life and death.

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AHAB’S LIFE AND TIMES

Nelson’s *Illustrated Bible Handbook* fills in details about Ahab’s political accomplishments that are not recorded in Scripture.

The biblical record focuses on the religious conflict. But from OT hints and other historical sources we can reconstruct other elements of Ahab's **long rule**. In general, he was a capable leader. He **continued to build (1 Kings 22:39)**. **Twice he defeated the Aramean forces of Ben-Hadad II**. He also **joined a coalition of kings** who temporarily stopped the advance of the Assyrians under Shalmaneser II at Qarqar in 853 B.C. **Ahab also made an alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah**, maintaining the peace that had existed between the two nations since the time of Omri (p. 197).

## EXPLORING AHAB'S RELATIONSHIPS

Ahab's relationship with the prophet Elijah is explored in the article on Elijah (p. 87). Two of the king's other relationships are significant.

***Ahab's relationship with Jezebel (1 Kings 21)***. Jezebel was from Sidon, a center of the worship of Baal-Melqart. When Jezebel came to Israel, she influenced her husband to worship her deity; **in time, Ahab converted to her religion**. The text tells us that Ahab "set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria" (the capital of the northern kingdom), and that Ahab "made a wooden image" (1 Kings 16:32, 33). Together Ahab and Jezebel **set out to replace worship of the Lord in Israel with the worship of Baal**. To accomplish this, Jezebel attempted to kill off all prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18:4) and imported hundreds of prophets of Baal to spread the new religion. Jezebel was the driving force behind these efforts, but Ahab was her willing accomplice.

**First Kings 21** provides special insight into the relationship between these two. Ahab wanted a plot of land near his palace for a vegetable garden. When the owner refused to sell or trade the land, Ahab went home and sulked. When Jezebel found what was wrong, she promised to take care of the matter. She organized a plot in which the owner was killed, and she then presented the field to her husband. **The incident suggests that Ahab while wicked was also weak and in many ways depended on his wife**. He might have been a gifted military commander, but he clearly lacked the strength of character which Jezebel, a truly evil woman, possessed. No wonder Jezebel had been able to win Ahab over to the worship of Baal and to her plans for turning the Israelites away from the Lord.

***Ahab's relationship with God***. Early in his reign Ahab turned from God to the worship of his wife's deity, Baal-Melqart. **Yet God did not leave the apostate king alone, nor did God abandon efforts to turn him back to the true faith.**

***Elijah predicted God's judgment (1 Kings 17)***. Elijah confronted Ahab and announced that there would be neither rain nor dew in Israel except at his word for three years. Elijah then dropped out of sight. Although Ahab sent officials to scour the kingdom, they could not find Elijah. Ahab clearly blamed Elijah for the drought that brought economic disaster on Israel rather than acknowledging his own responsibility for the divine judgment.

***Ahab accepted Elijah's challenge (1 Kings 18)***. After three years had passed, Elijah again met Ahab. Elijah proposed a contest between himself and the 450 prophets of Baal who owed allegiance to Ahab. The king's acceptance of the challenge suggested that Ahab truly did believe in Baal and expected that deity to respond to the prayers of Baal's prophets. In contrast, Jezebel was unwilling to expose the four hundred prophets of Asherah (Baal's consort) that she controlled to the contest. **Apparently Jezebel viewed promotion of her nation's religion more as a political than a religious mission!**

When God answered Elijah's prayers and decisively demonstrated that He is God, Ahab did not attempt to intervene when Elijah ordered the death of Baal's prophets. **But Jezebel expressed her determination to see Elijah dead!**

***God assisted Ahab against the Syrians (1 Kings 20)***. When Ben-Hadad of Syria attacked Samaria, God sent a prophet to instruct Ahab on how to defeat his enemy. The prophet announced that the Lord intended to deliver the enemy into his hand, "and you shall know that I am the LORD" (1 Kings 20:13). Ahab followed the prophet's instruction, and the Syrians were defeated. The same prophet continued to inform Ahab of Syrian plans, enabling Ahab to block every effort of the enemy. However, when Ahab again defeated the Syrians and captured Ben-Hadad, the defeated Syrian offered a treaty. Ahab, without consulting the Lord or his prophet, agreed! The prophet then announced that Ahab would now suffer the fate God had intended for the Syrian enemy.

**Ahab had been shown God’s ability to help as well as to judge, but Ahab continued to be unresponsive to God.**

*Ahab feared God’s judgment (1 Kings 21).* After Jezebel arranged the murder of the owner of the land Ahab coveted, the king hurried to take possession of the property. He met Elijah, who pronounced a terrible judgment on the king and Jezebel.

**This time Ahab took the prophet’s word seriously, and displayed some repentance in the traditional way.** He “tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning” (1 Kings 21:27). God then told Elijah that since Ahab had humbled himself before the Lord, the terrible judgment pronounced on Ahab’s line would be delayed until after Ahab’s death.

*Ahab disregarded the warning of the prophet Micaiah (1 Kings 22).* Later Ahab, in alliance with the king of Judah, laid plans to attack Syria. Ahab’s court prophets predicted victory, but the king of Judah asked Ahab to inquire of a prophet committed to the Lord. Ahab responded: “I hate him, because he does not prophecy good concerning me, but evil” (1 Kings 22:8).

When Micaiah appeared he told the king plainly that an evil spirit inspired his prophets and that if he fought the Syrians he would die in battle. Ahab had Micaiah imprisoned, to be dealt with when he returned from the conflict. Ahab did not return, but was killed in battle as God’s prophet had foretold.

#### AHAB: AN EXAMPLE FOR TODAY

Ahab is a complex figure whose weaknesses made him vulnerable to domination by his wife, Jezebel, and whose tendency toward sin made him unresponsive to God despite the many opportunities God gave him to repent.

Ahab demonstrated many traits against which believers must be on guard.

- **Ahab warns us against choosing a spouse whose faith is at odds with God’s Word.** Ahab not only chose Jezebel but also succumbed to her influence. He adopted her faith and her ways, and in the end brought judgment on himself and his people.
- **Ahab warns us against showing contempt for God’s grace.** God helped Ahab against the Syrians despite Ahab’s abandonment of the Lord in favor of Baal. Ahab showed contempt for this gracious revelation of God’s willingness and ability to come to his aid. When Ahab showed contrition, God relented and put off the judgment decreed against the king and his line. Even after this, Ahab showed himself unwilling to respond to the Lord by his hatred for Micaiah, God’s prophet. The only valid responses to God’s grace are gratitude and faith.<sup>1</sup>

#### L. King Ahab of Israel and the Prophet Elijah (16:29–22:40)

**Ahab the son of Omri was king of Israel for twenty-two years (874/73–853 B.C.).**

##### 1. *The Sins of Ahab (16:29–34)*

**Ahab** was an exceedingly **evil king**, not only because he followed **Jeroboam** in idolatry, but also because he married **Jezebel**, a **daughter of the king of the Sidonians**. This villainous woman was a Baal-worshiper who succeeded in influencing **Ahab** to promote Baal-worship in Israel by building **a temple, an altar, and a wooden image**. The godlessness of the times is witnessed by the brazen attempt by **Hiel of Bethel** to rebuild **Jericho** in defiance of God’s curse (Josh. 6:26). When **he laid the foundation**, his oldest son, **Abiram**, died. As the **gates** were erected, **his youngest son, Segub**, died.

#### Life of Elijah

##### 1. Elijah the Tishbite Prophesies to Ahab.

<sup>1</sup> Richards, L. (1999). *Every man in the Bible* (pp. 121–124). Nashville: T. Nelson.

2. **Elijah hides by the Brook Cherith.**
3. **Elijah goes to Zarephath.**
4. **En route to Ahab, Elijah meets Obadiah.**
5. **Ahab agrees to meet Elijah on Mt. Carmel.**
6. **Elijah outpaces Ahab to Jezreel.**
7. **Fearing Jezebel, Elijah goes to Beersheba.**
8. **Elijah departs into the Wilderness of Beersheba; from there he goes South all the way to Mt. Sinai.**
9. **Elijah journeys to Damascus by way of the desert to anoint Hazael King of Syria.**
10. **Elijah finds Elisha.**
11. **Elijah condemns Ahab's murder of Naboth.**
12. **Elijah confronts Ahaziah's servants en route to Ekron.**
13. **Elijah prophesies Ahaziah's death.**
14. **Elijah and Elisha's last journey.**
15. **Elijah taken to heaven by a whirlwind.**

## 2. *Elijah and the Drought (17:1–7)*

**17:1** In chapter 17 we are introduced to the Prophet **Elijah**. His ministry extends through 2 Kings 2:11. God spoke to His people through prophets during times of sin and declension. These prophets were really mouthpieces for Jehovah. They fearlessly cried out against idolatry, immorality, and all other forms of iniquity. They urged the people to repent and return to the Lord, and then warned of dire consequences if they failed to do so. Some prophets ministered primarily to Israel, some to Judah, and some to both. Since Israel was the more wicked of the two kingdoms, God accompanied the prophet's messages to Israel with miracles and wonders. This left Israel without excuse.

**Elijah** is mentioned in the Gospels in connection with the ministry of John the Baptist. John came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17).

**Elijah** came from Tishbe in **Gilead**, east of the Jordan River, and was thus called a **Tishbite**. His history is recorded only in Kings. We are told nothing about his background, family, or call to the prophetic ministry. But that he was a man sent from God no one could deny. He was God's chosen instrument to bring adulterous and haughty Israel to her knees. His prayers could bring down blessing (rain) or wrath (drought and fire). He served his generation as a fearless, embodied conscience. His first recorded act was to announce **to Ahab** that the land would suffer a drought. This was obviously a divine judgment against idolatry. God chose to use a severe drought to get the people's attention. They did not care that idolatry had brought a spiritual drought upon the land, but they could not ignore the physical drought that typified it.

**17:2–7** In obedience to **the LORD**, Elijah went **from** Samaria to **the Brook Cherith**, east of **the Jordan**. There he was sustained by water **from the brook** and by food which was miraculously brought to him morning and evening by **ravens**. **After a while**, however, due to the drought **the brook dried up**.

## 3. *Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath (17:8–24)*

**17:8–16** In obedience to **the word of the LORD**, Elijah journeyed **to Zarephath**, on the Mediterranean coast between Tyre and Sidon. There God had arranged that a Gentile **widow** would feed him. At first she hesitated because she had only enough meal **for her son** and herself. However, the prophet ordered her to **make ... a small cake for him first**. By doing this she was, in effect, giving God the first place. When she obeyed, she learned the precious lesson that those who put God first never lack the necessities of life. Her **bin of flour** and **jar of oil** never failed. Jesus made note of the fact that Elijah was sent to a **Gentile widow** and not to any of the numerous *Israelite* widows (Luke 4:26).

During the drought Jehovah provided for His prophet in most humbling ways—first through unclean birds and then through a Gentile woman, and a poor widow at that. The king in his palace was hard-pressed, but Elijah had all he needed. God's man, obeying God's voice, will always have his needs met, despite the conditions that prevail around him.

**17:17–24** Later **the son of the woman** was stricken with a **serious sickness** and died. Immediately the mother suspected that **Elijah** had ordered his death because of some **sin** she had committed. The prophet **took** the lad up to his bedroom, **stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord**. The boy **revived** and was taken **down ... to his mother** in normal health. This convinced **the woman** that **Elijah** was **a man of God** and that the Lord's **word** was **the truth**. As a Gentile, she showed faith in the God of Israel.

#### 4. *Elijah's Challenge to the Priests of Baal (18:1–19)*

**18:1–6** Three years after Elijah left Israel, and three and a half years after the drought had begun (Luke 4:25), the prophet was instructed to appear before **Ahab**—an action that, humanly speaking, was extremely dangerous. So **severe** was the **famine** that **Ahab** and his steward, **Obadiah** (not the prophet who wrote the book of Obadiah), had searched **the land** for **grass** to feed the animals. (It was this **Obadiah** who had saved **one hundred prophets** of the Lord when **Jezebel** had murdered some and was seeking to exterminate others.)

**18:7–15** While **Obadiah was on his** search for grass, **Elijah met him** and ordered him to notify **Ahab** of Elijah's whereabouts. Obadiah feared that this would result in his death, since Ahab had been searching relentlessly for Elijah in order to silence him once and for all. If Obadiah revealed Elijah's presence, the king would undoubtedly respond. But by then **the Spirit of the LORD** might have carried Elijah away. Then Ahab would **kill** Obadiah for his "false" report. And besides all this, Obadiah's position in the royal court was already precarious because he had protected **the LORD's prophets**. Elijah promised that he would not leave the place, and a meeting was then arranged.

**18:16–19** King Ahab went to meet Elijah and accused him of being a **troubler of Israel**, not realizing that the man of God was one of the best friends **Israel** ever had. Not fearing for his own life, Elijah answered Ahab fearlessly and accusingly. He blamed the king for mixing the worship of Jehovah with **Baal-worship** and challenged him to assemble his idolatrous **prophets** for a contest **on Mount Carmel** to determine who was the true God. (**The four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal** went to **Carmel**, but **the four hundred prophets of Asherah** did not; cf. vv. 19, 22.)

#### 5. *Elijah's Victory over the Priests of Baal (18:20–40)*

**18:20–25** Addressing the assembled representatives of Israel, Elijah accused them of wavering between two opinions; they should choose either **the LORD** or **Baal**. Then the contest began. **Two bulls** were to be killed and laid **on kindling wood**. **Elijah** would represent **the LORD**, whereas **four hundred and fifty** of Ahab's **prophets** would represent **Baal**. **The God who answered by fire** would be acknowledged as the true **God**.

**18:26–29** The prophets of Baal cried out to their god and hopped around **the altar from morning ... till noon**. **Elijah mocked them** with "helpful" excuses for Baal's failure to answer. "Perhaps he was such a small, weak god that he could not do two things at once." In desperation, **they ... cut themselves (as was their custom)** with **knives and lances** and raved on **until the time ... of the evening sacrifice**. **But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention**.

**18:30–35** Then **Elijah ... built an altar** of **twelve stones in the name of the LORD**, representing the twelve **tribes of Israel**. Then, to eliminate any possibility that the altar might be ignited in any way other than by a miracle, he saturated the oxen and the wood with twelve barrels of **water (four waterpots emptied three times)**.

Some wonder how Elijah obtained so much water during a time of drought. But this is not a real difficulty. Twelve barrels of water is not an impossible amount during drought time. The drought had affected farmlands, but drinking water must have been obtainable or else everyone would have died. Another explanation is that this water could have come from the Mediterranean Sea, a few miles away. Williams says:

The Kishon (v. 40), the sea (v. 43), and a well which still exists could severally or collectively supply the water needed to fill the trench (v. 35).

**18:36–40** **At the time of ... the evening sacrifice, ... Elijah** prayed that God would reveal himself by sending fire from heaven. Immediately **the fire of the LORD fell** from heaven, consuming not only the **sacrifice** but also **the wood and the stones and the dust, and ... the water ... in the trench** around the altar. **The people** were thus compelled to acknowledge **the LORD** as the real **God**. Then they obeyed Elijah's order to slay **the wicked prophets of Baal**. Only after the people *acknowledged* that Jehovah was God and *executed* the prophets of Baal could the rain come. Confession of sin and obedience to the Word of God are the steps to blessing.

#### 6. *Elijah's Prayer for Rain (18:41–46)*

The prophet advised **Ahab** to **eat** a meal because he would soon have to leave Mount Carmel to escape the oncoming **rain**. While **Ahab** sat down **to eat**, **Elijah** rose up to pray. He ascended **to the top of Mount Carmel**, **bowed down on the ground** with **his face between his knees**, and fervently asked the Lord to fulfill His word by sending rain. He continued in prayer until **his servant** reported a tiny **cloud** on the horizon. That was enough for Elijah. He immediately sent word **to Ahab** to make haste for **Jezebel**, a city in Issachar where the royal family lived

at times (21:1). As a loyal subject and faithful servant, the prophet **ran** before Ahab's chariot in a drenching **rain** twenty miles **to Jezreel**.

#### 7. *Elijah's Flight to Horeb (19:1–18)*

**19:1–4** When **Ahab told Jezebel** of the defeat and death of **the prophets** of Baal on Mount Carmel, she swore that she would slay **Elijah** within a day. Then the prophet whose faith had gained such a mighty victory the previous day lost courage. He **ran for his life** from Jezreel, south across the land **to Beersheba**, about one hundred miles away, at the southern boundary of **Judah**. Leaving **his servant** at **Beersheba**, Elijah continued south **a day's journey into the wilderness**. At length he rested **under a broom tree**, despondent, defeated, and depressed.

**19:5–8** It is interesting to notice God's treatment for this severe depression: rest; food and drink; more rest; more food and drink. Thus fortified, the prophet traveled **in the strength of that food** 200 miles in **forty days and ... nights** to Mount **Horeb** (Sinai), where God had given the law to Moses.

**19:9–14** There in **a cave ... the LORD** dealt with him. In a self-righteous spirit, Elijah protested his own faithfulness and denounced **the children of Israel**. He said in effect that he was the only one who had remained true to the Lord. God then commanded him to **stand on the mountain** of the law, but Elijah did not obey. We know this because later (v. 13) **he went out and stood in the entrance of the cave**. In rapid succession **the mountains** were visited by **a great ... wind, an earthquake, and a fire**. These violent storms must have reminded Elijah of his harsh, censorious spirit. None of them brought him out of the cave. Finally, **after the fire** the prophet heard **a still, small voice**. It was this gracious voice of the Lord which brought him to **the entrance of the cave**. There he again exalted himself as God's sole remaining witness. George Williams comments:

Had his heart not been occupied with self, he would have learned that tempests, earthquakes and fires cannot accomplish what the gentle voice of love can. He should have recognized that there was no difference between his heart and that of the nation; and, that as coercion failed to make him leave his cave, so it failed, and must fail, to compel men to leave their sins.

**19:15–18** It seems that Elijah's usefulness as a servant of God suffered when he adopted this attitude of self-importance. God told him to return north **to the Wilderness of Damascus**, where he would conduct three anointings: (1) He would **anoint Hazael** to be **king over Syria**. The disobedient nation of Israel would be punished by this king. (2) He would **anoint Jehu** to be **king over Israel**. Jehu would execute God's judgment on the house of Ahab. (3) He would **anoint ... Elisha** as his own successor. This would teach him that he was not indispensable. These three men would execute God's judgment on idolaters in Israel (v. 17), but the Lord would leave **seven thousand** who had **not bowed the knee to Baal** or **kissed him**.

#### 8. *Elijah's Appointment of Elisha (19:19–21)*

**19:19** **Elijah** traveled north to Abel Meholah, in the Jordan Valley near Beth Shean. There he **found Elisha**, a farmer **plowing** in the field. The fact that Elisha had **twelve yoke of oxen** indicates that he was not poor. He was probably plowing with one yoke and his servants with the other eleven. **Elijah threw his mantel on Elisha**, a sign that Elisha was to be his successor.

**19:20, 21** Elisha asked permission to return home and make a farewell feast for his family. Elijah gave consent but warned him not to forget what had just happened to him—i.e., how Elijah had anointed him. After a sumptuous feast, Elisha **arose and followed Elijah and became his personal servant**.

Elisha's request to say goodbye to his parents sounds dangerously like that of a would-be disciple whom Jesus pronounced unfit for the kingdom (Luke 9:61, 62). The difference is that in Elisha's case it was a no-nonsense decision to sever ties immediately, whereas in the other case it was a delaying tactic and an excuse.

#### 9. *Ahab's First Victory over Syria (20:1–22)*

**20:1–6** **Ben-Hadad, the king of Syria**, was formerly thought to be the son of the Ben-Hadad mentioned in 15:18, 20. But later research has raised the possibility that he was the same person. He formed an alliance of **thirty-two Aramean kings** and marched against **Samaria ... with horses and chariots**. When the city was in a state of siege, he sent surrender terms to Ahab—**"Your silver ... your gold ... your loveliest wives and children."** Ahab meekly and

weakly agreed. Not satisfied with Ahab's capitulation to his first terms, **Ben-Hadad** next demanded right of entry for his **servants** and the right to seize anything they wanted.

**20:7–12** The **elders of Israel** were indignant at this second demand and urged noncompliance. When **Ben-Hadad** was notified of Israel's refusal, he flew into a rage, boasting that he would strip Samaria so bare that there wouldn't be a **handful of dust ... for each of his soldiers**. To this, Ahab replied that a soldier putting **on his armor** should not **boast** as if the victory were already won. This taunt stirred the carousing Syrian and his confederates to action.

**20:13–15** At this point a **prophet** of the Lord **approached Ahab**, assuring him of victory. God used a small force of **two hundred and thirty-two** servants of the governors of the districts, followed by **seven thousand** of the people of **Israel**, to defeat the assembled armies from the north. The phrase "**all the children of Israel**" (v. 15b) means all the soldiers in **Samaria**. A small number of young servants was chosen to begin the battle, to make it all the more apparent that victory was *from the Lord* and not from the arm of the flesh.

**20:16–22** Ahab attacked **at noon**, when **Ben-Hadad and his allies were getting drunk**. When Ben-Hadad heard that the 232 men of Israel were advancing, he ordered that they be taken **alive**. This, of course, gave a military advantage to the Israelites and resulted in a **great slaughter of the Syrians**. The survivors retreated to their homeland. **The prophet** of the Lord warned Ahab that the Syrian army would return **in the spring**.

#### 10. *Ahab's Second Victory over Syria (20:23–34)*

**20:23–25** Ben-Hadad's **servants** attributed their shameful defeat to two factors: (1) The Israelites had won the battle in hill country. Doubtless **their gods were gods of the hills**. But they would be impotent on the plains. So the Syrians should engage them the next time on the plains. (2) The thirty-two kings who fought against Ahab had apparently proved themselves unskilled in warfare. Ben-Hadad's **servants** advised that they be replaced by professional **captains**.

**20:26–30a** **In the spring, ... Ben-Hadad** marched **against Israel** again. The army of Israel looked like **two little flocks of goats** compared to the host of Syria. **A man of God** told Ahab that **the LORD** would show Ben-Hadad that He was the **God of the valleys** as well as **of the hills**. In the **battle, Israel killed one hundred thousand foot soldiers**. **The Syrians** who escaped tried to take up positions on the walls of the city of **Aphek**, but the walls collapsed, killing **twenty-seven thousand** of them.

**20:30b–34** **Ben-Hadad** hid in an **inner chamber** of Aphek. **His servants** persuaded him to **let them go out to Ahab**, clothed with symbols of surrender and mourning, and to plead for mercy. In the interview, Ahab stupidly referred to the king as his "**brother**." The men of Syria quickly caught that word and said, "Yes, **your brother Ben-Hadad!**" Ahab ordered that the king of Syria be brought to him. Ben-Hadad promised to **restore the cities** which had been taken from Ahab's predecessor (15:20) and to allow Israel to establish **marketplaces ... in Damascus** (v. 34). **Ahab** made a **treaty** on these terms and let Ben-Hadad escape instead of killing him, as he should have done.

#### 11. *Ahab's Disobedience (20:35–43)*

**20:35, 36** Ahab wanted a strong Syria as a buffer between Israel and the growing menace of Assyria. The incident that follows was an object lesson, acted out by the prophet, to illustrate the folly of Ahab's action.

One **of the sons of the prophets** ordered his fellow **by the word of the LORD** to **strike him**. **The man** disobeyed him and therefore disobeyed **the LORD**. For his failure to obey the Lord's voice, he was destroyed by a **lion**.

If a good prophet were thus punished for sparing his friend and God's, when God said *Smite*, of much sorer punishment should a wicked king be thought worthy, who spared his enemy and God's, when God said *Smite*.

**20:37–43** The prophet **found another man** who obeyed him by striking and wounding him. Then **the prophet ... disguised himself with a bandage over his eyes and waited for King Ahab**. When **the king** was passing by, the prophet told of being in the battle and of being charged with the custody of an enemy prisoner. He had been warned that if the prisoner escaped, he would have to pay either with **his own life** or with the exorbitant figure of one **talent of silver**. The disguised prophet told how he had become preoccupied with other things and how the prisoner had escaped. **The king** showed no leniency; he insisted that the original terms of punishment be carried out. Then the prophet sprang the trap. He removed his bandage to reveal himself as a prophet known by Ahab. **Ahab** had had an enemy prisoner, **Ben-Hadad**, in his grasp. Obedience to the Lord required that the Syrian king be killed. For his disobedience Ahab would be slain. Campbell Morgan explains:

This was the meaning of the parable: Ahab had one thing to do by the command of God, and while he did a hundred things, he neglected the one. What a revelation of a perpetual reason and method of failure! We are given some one responsibility by God, some central, definite thing to do. We start to do it with all good intentions, and then other things, not necessarily wrong in themselves, come in our way. We get “busy here and there” doing many things and we neglect the one central thing.

Like King David before him, Ahab condemned himself by his own words. But unlike David, who repented, Ahab became **sullen** and stormed off to his palace to pout. Instead of asking the Lord for mercy, he continued to incite the Lord to wrath, as we read in the remaining chapters of 1 Kings.

## 12. *Ahab's Crimes against Naboth (Chap. 21)*

**21:1–4** Chapter 21 traces the events leading up to Ahab's death. The scene is in **Jezebel**, where **Ahab** and Jezebel had a **palace**. Adjoining the palace was a **vineyard** owned by **Naboth the Jezreelite**. **Ahab** desired to annex the **vineyard** so he could plant a **vegetable garden** there. **Naboth** refused to sell or exchange his land, since the law of Israel decreed that property should remain in the family to which it was originally assigned (Lev. 25:23–28; Num. 36:7; Ezek. 46:18).

**21:5–16** When **Jezebel** found her husband vexed and **sullen** and learned of Naboth's refusal to sell his **vineyard**, she assured Ahab that the vineyard would soon be his. **She** ordered a **fast** and a court of inquiry. **Two** evil **men** were appointed to charge Naboth with blasphemy against **God and the king**. Accordingly, **Naboth** was taken **outside** the city and **stoned** to death.

The treacherous Jezebel thus framed Naboth so that it would appear he was being executed for breaking the law of Jehovah. Since the property would pass on to Naboth's sons after his death, Jezebel had them murdered as well (2 Kgs. 9:26). The iniquitous queen was as thorough as she was wicked.

**21:17–26** When **Ahab** was on his way to take possession of the vineyard, **Elijah** met him and condemned him for murder and theft. Elijah predicted that **Ahab** himself would be slain, that his **male** descendants would be slain, ending his dynasty, that the body of **Jezebel** would be eaten by **dogs** in **Jezebel**, and that Ahab's descendants would not be given a decent burial (v. 24). The severity of Ahab's punishment is explained by the extremes to which he went in idolatry—“**there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do wickedness.**”

**21:27–29** When **Ahab** heard his doom, he **humbled himself before** the Lord. For this, the Lord decreed that the judgments on his wife and family would not take place until after Ahab's death.

If we learn anything from these verses, it is that God is a God of grace and mercy. “ ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die?’ ” (Ezek. 33:11). Even Ahab's superficial repentance brought a respite. But the next chapter proves that his heart was unchanged. Grace was met by pride, so the Lord handed Ahab over to the angel of death, and Jehu was appointed to carry out the bloody decree against the rest of his house according to the prophecy of Elijah (2 Kgs. 9, 10).

## 13. *Ahab's Last Battle (22:1–40)*

**22:1–6** After **three years** of peace **between Syria and Israel**, Ahab conceived the idea of recapturing **Ramoth Gilead**, on the east of the Jordan, from the Syrians. Ben-Hadad had promised to return Israel's cities when he received amnesty from Ahab (20:34), but he apparently had failed to do so. **Jehoshaphat**, king of Judah, happened to be visiting Ahab at the time and expressed willingness to cooperate in the military venture. But first **Jehoshaphat** suggested that they **inquire** of **the LORD** through **the prophets**. **Four hundred** prophets in Ahab's court advised in favor of the plan and promised victory. These may well have been the 400 prophets who did not go to Mount Carmel for the showdown with Elijah (18:19, 22).

**22:7–12** Jehoshaphat must have felt uneasy because he asked if there were a **prophet of the LORD** who could be consulted. This brought to the fore **Micaiah**, a fearless prophet who was hated by Ahab because of his uncompromising messages. At the time Micaiah was summoned, the 400 prophets were unanimously urging the kings of **Israel** and **Judah** to march against Syria. One of them, **Zedekiah**, **made horns of iron** to depict the irresistible power of Ahab and Jehoshaphat against **the Syrians**.

**22:13–17** Micaiah was informed that his message should agree with that of **the other prophets**, but the advice was wasted on him. When Ahab asked if the campaign **against Ramoth Gilead** should be undertaken, Micaiah first

said the same thing as the prophets: “**Go and prosper, for the LORD will deliver it into the hand of the king!**” But it is probable that he said it in a mocking manner. The tone of his voice must have dripped with irony and sarcasm.

Ahab sensed this and put Micaiah under oath to **tell ... the truth** (Lev. 5:1). The prophet then related a vision in which **Israel** was **scattered** because they had **no shepherd**, intimating that Ahab would be killed and his army dispersed.

**22:18–23** King Ahab presented this to **Jehoshaphat** as evidence that Micaiah could speak nothing but evil against him. Then the brave prophet spoke up again. He related a vision in which a **lying spirit**, appearing before **the LORD**, agreed to trick Ahab into going against **Ramoth Gilead** and be slain. The **lying spirit** would put this advice into **the mouth of all** the king’s **prophets**. This is an example of how God, while not the author of evil, uses it to achieve His ultimate ends. He sent the **lying spirit** only in the sense that He permitted it.

**22:24, 25** The point of this parable was not lost upon **Zedekiah**. Realizing that he and the other prophets were being accused of lying, he **struck Micaiah** and asked, “**Which way did the spirit from the Lord go from me to speak to you?**” In other words, Zedekiah was saying:

I spoke by the Spirit of God when I advised Ahab to go against Ramoth Gilead. Now you profess to speak by the Spirit, yet you advise the very opposite. How did the Spirit go from me to you?

**Micaiah** answered calmly that Zedekiah would know the truth when he would **hide** in terror in a secret place—evidently when Ahab’s death would expose Zedekiah to the fate of a false prophet.

**22:26–30** The infuriated **king of Israel** ordered that **Micaiah** be **put ... in prison and fed with bread ... and water, ... until** he (Ahab) returned **in peace** from Ramoth Gilead. Micaiah’s parting salute was, “**If you ever return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me.**” Ahab decided to **disguise** himself before going **into battle**, hoping in this way to avoid the disaster predicted by Micaiah. **Jehoshaphat**, on the other hand, would wear his kingly **robes**, exposing himself to the very danger that Ahab was trying to escape. Ahab thus attempted to fool the Lord and the king of Syria, but “God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal. 6:7). Ahab was *slain*, but Jehoshaphat was *saved*.

**22:31–36** The Syrians had been ordered to kill **the king of Israel**; this was their prime military objective. At first they mistook **Jehoshaphat** for Ahab. The king of Judah **cried out** in terror, perhaps revealing his true identity in this way. Then Ahab was **struck between the joints of his armor** by a **random** arrow and was removed from the active fighting. He was **propped up in his chariot** so that his army would not lose heart. When he **died at sunset**, the fact became known, and his soldiers retreated to their homes.

**22:37–40** Ahab’s body was taken back to **Samaria** and **buried**. His bloodstained **chariot** was **washed** beside a **pool in Samaria, ... while the harlots bathed**. This was only a partial fulfillment of Elijah’s prophecy (21:19); it took place **in Samaria** rather than in Jezreel. Because Ahab had humbled himself (21:29), God compassionately deferred the complete fulfillment to the king’s son, Joram (2 Kgs. 9:25, 26).

Ahab received three separate prophetic warnings of his death. One was pronounced by an unnamed prophet when Ahab spared Ben-Hadad (20:42); one was given by Elijah when Ahab took the vineyard of Naboth (21:19); and the third prophecy was uttered by Micaiah on the eve of the eventful battle (vv. 17–23).

## M. King Jehoshaphat of Judah (22:41–50)

**Jehoshaphat** the **son of Asa** was king of Judah for **twenty-five years** (873/72–848 B.C.).

For the first three or four years, **Jehoshaphat** co-reigned with his father **Asa**. We have already been introduced to Jehoshaphat in verses 2–4, where he made a shameful alliance with the wicked king of Israel and nearly lost his life as a result. In general, however, his reign was good. The following are significant features of Jehoshaphat’s administration.

1. He followed his father’s example in combating idolatry, though he was not successful in eradicating it completely (v. 43).
2. He reigned jointly with **his father Asa**.
3. He **made peace with** Ahab, **king of Israel** (v. 44).
4. He expelled the male cult prostitutes **from the land** (v. 46).
5. His kingdom included the land of **Edom** (2 Sam. 8:14), where he was represented by a **deputy** (v. 47). His son Jehoram later lost Edom through a revolution (2 Kgs. 8:20).
6. He allied himself with **Abaziah**, Ahab’s son, in a shipbuilding project at **Ezion Geber** (2 Chron. 20:35, 36). Their plan was to send the **ships ... to Ophir for gold**. But **the ships were wrecked** before they ever left

port (v. 48), no doubt by a windstorm. The prophet Eliezer told Jehoshaphat that this was because the Lord disapproved of the unholy alliance with Ahaziah (2 Chron. 20:37). When **Ahaziah** suggested renewing the project, **Jehoshaphat** declined (v. 49).

#### N. King Ahaziah of Israel (22:51–53)

**Ahaziah the son of Ahab** was **king of Israel**, for **two years** (853–852 B.C.; cf. 2 Kgs. 1:1–18).

The reign of **Ahaziah** was one of gross idolatry and wickedness. His mother, Jezebel, no doubt urged him on in ungodliness even as she had pushed **his father**. **He** worshiped **Baal ... and provoked the LORD God of Israel to anger**. Like father, like son. There is no formal close to 1 Kings, since 1 and 2 Kings were originally one book, and the break was made strictly for convenience. Second Kings continues the narrative from this point.

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#### 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*

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*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.*

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#### 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,

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<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*. (A. Farstad, Ed.) (pp. 378–388). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

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.

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Elijah's victory on Mount Carmel convinced the wavering Israelites that the Lord truly was God.

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*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.

## ELISHA

### *Scripture references:*

*1 Kings 19; 2 Kings 2–13;*

*Luke 4:27*

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*Date: About 850 B.C.*

*Name: Elisha [ee-LI-shuh; "God is salvation"]*

*Greatest accomplishment: Elisha was the successor of Elijah whose ministry confirmed God's active presence in Israel.*

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## ELISHA'S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE

Elisha had a very different ministry from that of Elijah. Elijah's role as a prophet of judgment was to display God's power in a time of apostasy. Elisha, his successor, seems to have focused his ministry on a display of God's grace toward those who would trust Him.

The Old Testament records fourteen miracles of Elisha compared with seven miracles performed by Elijah. These miracles help us sense the healing nature of Elisha's ministry and their promise of overflowing grace should the Israelites simply turn to Him completely. Here is a list of Elisha's miracles as reported in 2 Kings:

1. Elisha separated the waters of the Jordan (2:14)
2. Elisha healed bitter spring waters (2:21)
3. Elisha cursed young men who ridiculed God (2:24)
4. Elisha won a battle for Israel (3:15–26)
5. Elisha multiplied a poor widow's oil (4:1–7)
6. Elisha promised a good woman a child (4:14–17)
7. Elisha raised the good woman's child from the dead (4:32–37)
8. Elisha made poison stew edible (4:38–41)
9. Elisha multiplied loaves to feed many (4:42–44)
10. Elisha healed a Syrian general's leprosy (5:1–19)
11. Elisha made a borrowed ax head float (6:1–6)
12. Elisha trapped an Aramean army (6:8–23)
13. Elisha showed his servant an angel army (6:15–17)
14. Elisha predicted an excess of food for starving Samaria (6:24–7:20)

These miracles were certainly less spectacular than those performed by Elijah; they were also different in nature. Yet, each prophet's miracles displayed different aspects of God's character. God reveals himself in judgment; He also reveals Himself in gracious acts to nations, individuals, and even to enemy generals.

## ELISHA: AN EXAMPLE FOR TODAY

Elisha replaced Elijah as God's premier prophet in Israel. When we compare Elisha with his mentor, we come to appreciate the lessons he has to teach us.

- Elisha had a less spectacular ministry than that of Elijah, but one that was as significant in its revelation of God's character to His people. He reminds us that we each have our calling and are not to measure ourselves or our mission against that of the great people of our time. The role we play in God's plan is the role He has designed for us, and this makes us significant indeed.
- Elisha had a ministry to common people as well as to kings. In every context, Elisha displayed God's grace and showed that the Lord cares about every detail of our lives. This is important to remember as we serve others. We should bring our ordinary needs to the Lord as well as the big things.<sup>3</sup>

### 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.

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

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<sup>3</sup> Richards, L. (1999). [Every man in the Bible](#) (pp. 85–89). Nashville: T. Nelson.

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.<sup>4</sup>

**ELIJAH** (ə lī' jāh) Personal name meaning "my God is Yah." The prophet from the ninth century B.C. from Tishbe of Gilead in the Northern Kingdom has been called the grandest and the most romantic character that Israel ever produced (1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 2:18). He was a complex man of the desert who counseled kings. His life is best understood when considered from four historical perspectives that at times are interrelated: his miracles, his struggle against baalism, his prophetic role, and his eschatological relationship to Messiah.

**Miracles** His first miracle was associated with his prophecy before King Ahab (1 Kings 17:1) in which he said there would be no rain or dew apart from his declaration. Immediately after the prophecy, he retreated to the brook Cherith where he was fed by ravens. His next refuge was Zarephath where he performed the miracle of raising the widow's dead son (1 Kings 17:17–24). Here he was first called "a man of God."

On Mount Carmel his greatest public miracle involved his encounter with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19–40). The contest was to determine the true God. The false prophets called on their gods, and Elijah called on His God to see which would rain fire from heaven. After the false prophets failed to hear from their gods, Elijah wet the wood on his altar to the true God by pouring four jars of water over it three times. In response of Elijah's prayer, Yahweh rained fire from heaven to consume the wet wood. As a result of their deception, Elijah ordered the false prophets killed.

Elijah next prophesied that the drought was soon to end (1 Kings 18:41) after three rainless years. From Carmel, Elijah prayed. He sent his servant seven times to see if rain was coming. The seventh time a cloud the size of a hand appeared on the horizon. Ahab was told to flee before the storm. Elijah outran his chariot and the storm to arrive at Jezreel.

**Baalism** Interwoven in the life of Elijah is his struggle with Baalism. Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon and Tyre (1 Kings 16:31), was Ahab's wife and Israel's queen. She brought the worship of her god Baal into Ahab's kingdom. Even "Ahab served Baal a little" (2 Kings 10:18). The contest on Carmel showed a contrast between the contesting deities. Yahweh's power and Baal's impotence was further revealed through the drought. Jezebel planned revenge toward Elijah for ordering the false prophets slain, so Elijah retreated to Judah and finally Mount Horeb. There he observed the power of the wind, earthquake, and fire; but the Lord was not seen in these forces. In a small voice the Lord commanded him to go anoint Hazael king of Syria, Jehu king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor (1 Kings 19:1–17).

**Prophet** His prophetic role constantly placed Elijah in opposition to the majority of the people of his nation. His prophetic confrontations involved King Ahab and later his son Ahaziah. Their toleration of polytheism was the ongoing reason for Elijah's prophetic denunciations.

#### *Entrance to Elijah's cave near Tyre.*

When Ahaziah fell and injured himself, he sent messengers to ask Baal-zebub (lord of flies) about his fate. Elijah intercepted them and sent word back to Ahaziah that he was soon to die (2 Kings 1). Ahaziah sent three different detachments of 50 soldiers each to arrest Elijah. The first two units were destroyed by fire from heaven. The captain of the third group pleaded for his life. He safely escorted Elijah to the king where he delivered the prophecy of his pending death personally.

**Relationship to Messiah** Elijah and Elisha were involved in the schools of the prophets when Elijah struck the waters of the Jordan and they parted to allow their crossing (2 Kings 2:1–12).

#### *The Chapel of Elijah on Mount Sinai, commemorating the traditional site to which Elijah fled.*

Malachi promised God would send Elijah the prophet before the coming "day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5). John the Baptist was spoken of as the one who would go before Messiah "in the spirit and power" of Elijah (Luke 1:17 HCSB). John personally denied that he was literally Elijah reincarnate (John 1:21, 25). Some considered Jesus to be Elijah (Matt. 16:14; Mark 6:15).

<sup>4</sup> Richards, L. (1997). *Every angel in the Bible* (pp. 30–31). Nashville: T. Nelson.

Elijah appeared along with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus to discuss His “departure.” Here Peter suggested that three tabernacles be built for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah (Matt. 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).

The two witnesses referred to in Rev. 11:6 are not identified by name, but their capacity “to close the sky so that it does not rain” (HCSB) leads many to conclude they are Moses and Elijah.

*Nelson Price*<sup>5</sup>

**LIJAH 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” (מִתְּשֻׁבֵי 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, *nabi*; 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**

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

<sup>5</sup> Price, N. (2003). [Elijah](#). In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (pp. 478–480). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

famous tablets discovered at Ras Shamra from ancient Ugarit. Because Baal in Hebrew simply means “lord, owner” (בַּעַל, *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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AMY BALOGH<sup>6</sup>

### PHILIP YANCEY

#### *The Jesus We Never Got*

I once attended a Jewish Passover meal. Noting an empty chair, I asked, "Are we expecting another guest?" "No, by tradition we set a place for Elijah," came the reply. For the Jews, Elijah represents a longing for a type of messiah they never got. It occurred to me later that for many Christians, too, Elijah represents what we think we want in a messiah. Who among us does not harbor a secret desire for God to act now as in Elijah's day?

Our cartoon image of a prophet comes largely from Elijah, who lived in the wilderness, wore the skins of animals, and emerged from hiding to make lightning raids on a pagan empire. When John the Baptist appeared centuries later, for many Jews (including Jesus), he brought Elijah vividly to mind.

Observers wondered for a time if Jesus himself might be Elijah reincarnate, but he soon disabused them of that notion. Jesus simply did not fit the Elijah mold:

- *Elijah solved problems*. Ravens fed Elijah in the desert, and he became a popular houseguest by providing a widow an endless supply of oil and flour. When the widow's son died, Elijah promptly resurrected him. Some of these miracles prefigured Jesus' own, but with an important difference: Jesus' miracles benefited others but not himself. He fed 5,000, yet went hungry in the wilderness. The source of Living Water died with the words "I thirst" on his lips.

- *Nobody messed with Elijah*. Children love hearing stories about Elijah because, frankly, they have a Terminator aspect to them. This scraggly desert prophet strolled into the gleaming city of Samaria and took on a thousand false prophets in their fancy white robes. He blasted the king for seizing a commoner's vineyard. When a company of soldiers came to arrest him, fire dropped from heaven to incinerate them. The contrast with Jesus could hardly be greater. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him," Jesus said. His disciples earned Jesus' rebuke by calling for fire on unrepentant cities. And when the powers strung him up like a common criminal, he had only these words for his tormentors: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, W. L. (2016). [Elijah Cycle](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

• *Elijah gave absolute proof.* Is there a biblical scene more theatrically staged than Elijah’s confrontation on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal? It was quite a day: after disposing of the 850 pagan priests, Elijah ended a three-year drought and bested a chariot in a 17-mile race. In great contrast, Jesus declined every opportunity to prove himself (“A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign,” he said), resisted Satan’s temptations toward a more dazzling style, did not call on rescuing angels, and died listening to the skeptics’ taunts.

• *Elijah did not die.* “Swing low, sweet chariot, comin’ for to carry me home,” the slaves used to sing, harking back to Elijah’s dramatic departure. Those chariots of fire, fodder for spirituals and movie titles, furnished Elijah an escape route around death. A prophet who did not die? Little wonder Jews anticipate his return. As for Jesus, yes, he surely died, an ignominious death reserved mostly for slaves and insurrectionists. In a great irony, when he called out from the cross, “Eli, eli . . .,” onlookers presumed he was calling for Elijah’s help. On reflection, I easily understand why the Jews value Elijah. He stands for what I want in a prophet, what I want in a God: someone to solve my problems, protect me, give me absolute proof, and offer an escape route around life’s messiest problems.

Yet on further reflection, from Elijah I learn why God does not always act as we may want.

In the first place, Elijah’s style did not achieve the desired results. Despite all the fireworks, his ministry accomplished little. Even the Mount Carmel scene made barely a dent in the nation’s faith. The Bible shows again and again that spectacular miracles have minimal long-term effect on faith. Elijah himself, who had just stared down 850 priests and an angry king, fled like a scared dog from the threats of Queen Jezebel. The God we think we want does not always produce the results we think we’ll get.

In a tender scene following Elijah’s flight from Jezebel, God revealed a different style. At Elijah’s lowest point, God visited him—pointedly, not in a powerful wind, earthquake, or fire; rather, in a gentle whisper. Instead of overwhelming Elijah with supernatural power, of which the prophet had seen plenty, God found a way to descend, to restore his confidence from the inside out. (I think of a similar scene centuries later when Jesus tenderly led Peter back from despair toward faith.)

I understand why Jews still leave a place for Elijah at the Passover table, for in some ways faith in Elijah is easier to understand than faith in Jesus. “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself,” said Jesus. He called on us to take up a cross, not a lightning bolt. And if this world is to be won for Christ it will probably be won by a gentle voice and self-sacrificing love, not by loud shouts and spectacle. Jesus’ style, not Elijah’s.<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER 6

### 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.

<sup>7</sup> Yancey, P. (1997). [The Jesus We Never Got](#). *Christianity Today*, 41(14), 88.

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.

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).

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Elijah promised the widow’s flour and oil supply would not run out.



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 [*nepesh*] 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.”

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**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!

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***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.

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After three and one-half years, Elijah prayed for God to restore the rains.

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### **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 animal 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 Shalmanesser 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.

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God carried Elijah up to heaven.

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**LIJAH [ee LIE juh]** (*the Lord is my God*) — the name of three or four men in the Old Testament:

1. A Benjamite, the son of Jeroham (1 Chr. 8:27).

2. An influential prophet who lived in the ninth century B.C. during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah in the northern kingdom of Israel. Elijah shaped the history of his day and dominated Israelite thinking for centuries afterward.

Elijah’s prophetic activities emphasized the unconditional loyalty to God required of the nation of Israel. His strange dress and appearance (2 Kin. 1:8), his fleetness of foot (1 Kin. 18:46), his rugged constitution that resisted famine (1 Kin. 19:8), and his cave-dwelling habits (1 Kin. 17:3; 19:9) all suggest that he was a robust, outdoors-type person.

Elijah was opposed to the accepted standards of his day, when belief in many gods was normal. He appears in the role of God’s instrument of judgment upon a wayward Israel because of the nation’s widespread idolatry. The miracles that Elijah performed occurred during the period when a life-or-death struggle took place between the religion of the Lord and BAAL worship.

Elijah’s views were in conflict with those of King Ahab, who had attempted to cultivate economic ties with Israel’s neighbors, especially Tyre. One of the consequences was that he had married Jezebel, a daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre. Ahab saw no harm in participating in the religion of his neighbors, particularly the religion of his wife. Therefore, he established a center of BAAL worship at Samaria. Influenced by Jezebel, Ahab gave himself to the worship of Baal. Suddenly Elijah appeared on the scene.

***Prediction of Drought.*** As punishment against Ahab for building the temple for Baal worship at Samaria, Elijah predicted that a drought would grip the land. Then he fled to the eastern side of the Jordan River and later to Zarephath on the Mediterranean coast to escape Ahab’s wrath. At both sites he was kept alive through miraculous means. While staying at a widow’s home, he performed a miracle by bringing her son back to life (1 Kin. 17:1–24).

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<sup>8</sup> Richards, L. (1998). [Every miracle in the Bible](#) (pp. 112–121). Nashville: T. Nelson.

**Contest on Mount Carmel.** After the drought had lasted three years, the Lord instructed Elijah to present himself before Ahab with the message that the Lord would provide rain. Elijah then challenged the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah to a contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kin. 18:21). Each side would offer sacrifices to their God without building a fire. The ignition of the fire was left to the strongest god, who would thereby reveal himself as the true God.

The best efforts of the pagan prophets through the better part of a day failed to evoke a response from Baal.

Elijah poured water over his sacrifice to remove any possibility of fraud or misunderstanding about the offering. After Elijah prayed briefly to the Lord, his sacrifice was consumed by fire from heaven. The people of Israel responded strongly in favor of God (1 Kin. 18:39). Then the prophets of Baal were slaughtered at Elijah's command (1 Kin. 18:40), and God sent rain to end the drought (1 Kin. 18:41–46).

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The fertile plain surrounding Mount Carmel, site of Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal (1 Kin. 18; 19:1-2).

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**Flight from Jezebel.** Queen Jezebel was furious over the fate of her prophets. She vowed that she would take revenge on Elijah. He was forced to flee to Mount Horeb—the mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. Like Moses, Elijah was sustained for 40 days and nights in the wilderness.

While Elijah was at Mount Horeb, the Lord revealed Himself in a low, murmuring sound. The prophet received a revelation of the coming doom on Ahab and Israel (1 Kin. 19:14). Then Elijah was given a threefold charge: He was instructed to anoint Hazael as king of Syria, Jehu as the future king of Israel, and Elisha as the prophet who would take his place (1 Kin. 19:16). These changes would bring to power those who would reform Israel in the coming years.

**Naboth's Vineyard and the Challenge of Ahaziah.** In the years of war that followed between Ahab and Ben-Hadad of Syria, Elijah did not appear (1 Kings 20). But he did appear after Jezebel acquired a family-owned vineyard for Ahab by having its owner, Naboth, falsely accused and executed (1 Kin. 21:1–29). Elijah met the king in the vineyard and rebuked him for the act (1 Kin. 21:1–24). Ahab repented, and Elijah brought him word from the Lord that the prophesied ruin on his house would not come during his lifetime, but would occur in the days of his son.

Shortly after Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, took the throne from his father, he was involved in a serious accident. He sent messengers to inquire of Baal-Zebub ("Lord of Flies"), the god of Ekron, whether he would recover. Elijah intercepted the messengers and predicted his death because of his belief in other gods (2 Kin. 1:1–17). This event would also be a fulfillment of the doom pronounced earlier upon Ahab's house.

Twice King Ahaziah sent a detachment of soldiers to capture Elijah. But both times they were consumed by fire from heaven. The third group sent by the king begged for mercy, and an angel of God directed Elijah to go with the commander to see the king. Elijah repeated his message of doom to Ahaziah, who soon died (2 Kin. 1:9–17). Elijah's prophecy that Jezebel would meet a violent death was also fulfilled (2 Kin. 9:36).

Photo: Levant Photo Service

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Statue of the prophet Elijah at the Muhraqah on Mount Carmel, commemorating his victory over the pagan worshippers of Baal.

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**Ascension to Heaven.** The prophet Elijah did not die. He was carried bodily to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kin. 2:1–11). This was an honor previously bestowed only upon ENOCH (Gen. 5:24). ELISHA, the only witness to this event, picked up Elijah's mantle which fell from him as he ascended. He carried it during his ministry as a token of his continuation of Elijah's ministry (2 Kin. 2:13–14).

Elijah's influence continued even after he ascended into heaven. King Jehoram of Israel received a letter from the prophet seven years after his ascension, indicating that the king would be punished severely for his sins (2 Chr. 21:12–15).

**Elijah's Contribution.** The prophet Elijah understood that the nation of Israel had a mission to preserve its religious system—the worship of the one true God—in a pure form without any mixture with idol worship. Elijah was strongly opposed to the worship of pagan gods such as Baal and Asherah. This uncompromising stand often endangered his life by bringing him into conflict with those in positions of power, especially Queen Jezebel and her followers.

Elijah's impact on the prophetic movement among the Hebrew people was extensive. He stands as the transitional figure between Samuel (the adviser and anointer of kings) and the later writing prophets. Like the prophets who

followed him, Elijah emphasized Israel's responsibility for total commitment to their God and the covenant responsibilities that God and His people had sworn to each other. Both ideas are more fully developed in later prophets, such as Amos and Hosea.

In later Jewish thought, the messianic age was frequently associated with Elijah's return. The Old Testament spoke of the reappearance of Elijah. The prophet Malachi prophesied that the Lord would send Elijah before the day of the Lord arrived. This prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of JOHN THE BAPTIST (Matt. 11:4; 17:10–13; Luke 1:17). John the Baptist was similar to Elijah in his preaching as well as his dress and physical appearance (Matt. 11:7–8; Luke 7:24–28). During Jesus' earthly ministry, some identified him with Elijah (Matt. 16:14; Luke 9:8).

The New Testament also mentions the reappearance of Elijah in person. Along with Moses, he appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3).

3. A son of Harim (Ezra 10:21). Elijah divorced his foreign wife following the Captivity in Babylon.

4. An Israelite who divorced his foreign wife (Ezra 10:26). He may be the same as No. 3.<sup>9</sup>

**4:13** According to the prophecy of Ahijah, all the male descendants of Jeroboam would die and be unburied (14:10, 11). The exception to this was Abijah (14:1, 13). Abijah received an honorable burial (v. 18) **because in him there is found something good toward the LORD** God of Israel (v. 13). What this "something good" refers to is unclear. Perhaps Abijah had not been corrupted since he was still a child (vv. 3, 12, 17).

**14:14** This predicts the actions of Baasha against Nadab in 15:27-29.

**14:15** Ahijah's prophecy points toward the captivity of Israel by Assyria in 722 B.C.

**14:17** Jeroboam had moved from Shechem (12:25) to **Tirzah**. Tirzah was the capital city of the northern kingdom until Israel's sixth king, Omri, built Samaria and made it the seat of government (16:23, 24).

**14:19** The book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel: This is not to be confused with the OT books of 1 and 2 Chr., which were written much later than 1 and 2 Kin. (compare "Date" in the introductions to 1 Kin., 2 Kin., 1 Chr., and 2 Chr.). From the time of David, several individuals acted as recorders of the events experienced by God's people in the kingdom period (4:3; 2 Sam. 8:16; 20:24; 2 Kin. 18:18, 37; 2 Chr. 34:8). Such historical documents would have been kept in the royal archives. These records were probably a source for 1 and 2 Kin., since such chronicles are mentioned 32 times in 1 Kin. 14:19-2 Kin. 24:5. The author then was guided by the Holy Spirit to select and record the events found in 1 and 2 Kin.

**14:21** Under **Rehoboam**, the southern kingdom of Judah was not doing any better than Israel to the north. Their sinful state made them no match for the invasion of **Shishak** of Egypt (which 2 Chr. 12 regards as divine retribution).

**14:29** The chronicles: See note on v. 19.

**15:1** The second king in the southern kingdom was **Abijam**. He did little better than his father Rehoboam, yet God remained faithful to His promise to David by letting this descendant rule Judah.

**15:3** See section 6 of Truth-In-Action at the end of 1 Kin.

**15:9** Asa, the third king of Judah, was a refreshing contrast. Of the 20 regents who reigned in the south, Asa was the first of only eight good kings. Asa was a reformer and promptly set out to purge the land of idolatry (v. 12). Though Kings tells us that **Asa's heart was loyal to the LORD** all his days (v. 14), Chronicles explains that in his later years he departed from his total devotion to God (2 Chr. 16).

**15:11** See section 6 of Truth-In-Action at the end of 1 Kin.

**15:18** Ben-Hadad: There were three kings of Damascus in Syria whose names were Ben-Hadad, and all are referred to in Scripture. Ben-Hadad I is mentioned here. His son, Ben-Hadad II, was unsuccessful in his war against King Ahab, and was smothered to death by Hazael (20:1-43; 2 Kin. 7; 8). The third Ben-Hadad was the son of Hazael (2 Kin. 13:24).

**15:25** Nadab was the second king in Israel, but after two years he was assassinated by **Baasha** in fulfillment of Ahijah's prophecy (14:14). This ended Jeroboam's dynasty. However, as the third king of Israel, Baasha was just as sinful as his two predecessors.

<sup>9</sup> Youngblood, R. F., Bruce, F. F., & Harrison, R. K., Thomas Nelson Publishers (Eds.). (1995). In *Nelson's new illustrated Bible dictionary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

**16:1** These verses record the prophecy of **Jehu . . . against Baasha**, and although we do not know how it happened, these words were fulfilled (v. 4).

### WORD WEALTH

**16:2** **anger**, *cha.as* (*kah-ahs*); Strong's #3707: To grieve, exasperate, vex, provoke, make angry. This word portrays the kind of anger that results from repeated irritation, and not the anger that suddenly explodes for no apparent reason. Thus *cha.as* is closer to "exasperation" than to "wrath." The verb *cha.as* is usually translated "provoke to anger."

**16:8** The fourth king in the northern kingdom was **Elah the son of Baasha**. He reigned as an evil king for almost two years, and one day when Elah was drunk he was murdered by **Zimri**. Zimri then proceeded to dispose of all the survivors of the house of Baasha. This fulfilled Jehu's prophecy (16:3) and ended Baasha's dynasty.

**16:15** Zimri was Israel's fifth king, but he only reigned for seven days. When the people discovered what he had done to Elah, they selected **Omri** as their captain and rebelled. Zimri feared being taken, so he committed suicide as he burned the palace down.

**16:21** With the vacuum of Zimri's death, half of the people of Israel followed **Omri** and half followed **Tibni**. However, Omri took quick action and did away with Tibni. Omri, as the sixth king in the north, perpetuated Jeroboam's apostasy. See note on v. 24.

**16:24** Samaria: Omri's most noteworthy accomplishment was building the new capital city Samaria. Shechem was the capital of the 10 northern tribes for a brief time (12:25), then Jeroboam moved it to Tirzah (14:17) where it remained until Omri moved it to Samaria. The location of Samaria was almost impregnable and withstood vicious assaults (2 Kin. 6:24, 25) until it was finally captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. (2 Kin. 17). Samaria was repopulated by foreigners (2 Kin. 17:24) who brought idolatrous practices with them. The intermarriage of these foreigners with the native Jews created a mixed race known as Samaritans, who were hated by full-blooded Jews at the time of Jesus (John 4:1-10).

**16:29** Asa came to reign in Judah when Jeroboam was still on the throne in Israel. He continued his reign in the south, while the north was ruled by the kings Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, and Omri. Asa was still ruling when **Ahab**, the seventh and worst king (v. 33) of Israel came to reign.

**16:31** He took as wife Jezebel: This wife was a zealous participant in the worship of **Baal**. Ahab's marriage to her led to the official endorsement of this immoral and idolatrous worship.

**17:1** See section 8 of Truth-In-Action at the end of 1 Kin.

**17:1** God answered Israel's worst king by raising up one of the greatest and most powerful prophets in the OT, **Elijah the Tishbite**. The Tishbite means that he was from the city Tishbe in **Gilead**. The significance of the prophecy of no rain becomes apparent when we understand that those who worshiped Baal believed that Baal controlled the rain. In effect, Elijah cut to the heart of Baalism and challenged their so-called god, proclaiming that the **LORD** God of Israel controlled the weather.

**17:3** The location of **Cherith** is unknown. Evidently this area was not under the jurisdiction of Ahab.

### KINGDOM DYNAMICS

**17:8** **You Must Give God an Opportunity**, SEED FAITH. This episode teaches us to invite God to work by His unlimited power within our limited circumstances and resources. Two important principles for our giving are illustrated by this passage of Scripture.

First, we must give something out of our need. That is the kind of giving that involves our faith. This woman had a need for herself and her family, but she gave to sustain the ministry and life of God's prophet, Elijah. Then God multiplied her giving back to her.

Second, this woman gave first. Her giving activated the miracle supply of God flowing back into her life. For perhaps as long as three years God multiplied her seed sown.

Your giving causes something to happen according to God's eternal principles of seedtime and harvest. There is an old saying that bears repeating: "Without God, you cannot; without you, God will not." God has already given from His side. Now we must step out in our giving to Him. Doing so will release His flow of provision on our Earth-side of things. Sow! Give Him something to multiply!

**17:8** Zarephath, a city on the Mediterranean coast in Phoenicia, was the location of the first miracle of Elijah. A **widow** who was nearly without foodstuffs was asked to give her last food to Elijah. If she did, God would give her an unfailing provision. The woman overcame her fear, responded in faith, and God was faithful to His promise.

**17:17** The second miracle of Elijah was to restore to life the dead son of the widow of Zarephath. Some skeptics have said that the boy was not really dead, but only unconscious. However, from vv. 18, 20, 22, and 23 it is very clear that the youth was dead. Kings includes these incidents of ch. 17 to demonstrate that the Lord God of Israel is more powerful than Baal.

**18:1** After nearly three years of drought, the looming question of whether it was the Lord God of Israel or Baal who controlled the rain was about to be answered in a contest on Mt. Carmel.

**18:3** The **Obadiah** mentioned here was certainly a believer in the Lord, but he is not the prophet Obadiah who authored the biblical book by that name.

**18:12** The Spirit: This is the only direct reference to the Holy Spirit in the Book of 1 Kings. Apparently the Holy Spirit sometimes transported Elijah from one location to another (see 2 Kin. 2:16). Philip has a similar experience in Acts 8:39, 40. For further insights on the Holy Spirit in the kingdom period, see "The Holy Spirit at Work" in introductions to 1 Kin., 2 Kin., 1 Chr., and 2 Chr.

**18:17** Elijah was quick to clear the record. The drought was not his fault; instead it had resulted from Ahab's failure to acknowledge the Lord and his allowing himself and all Israel to be seduced into Baal worship by Jezebel.

**18:19** Elijah was calling for a showdown between their god and the Lord. All Israel was to observe the contest between Elijah and the prophets who were cared for and protected by Jezebel. **Baal** was the chief male deity of the Canaanites and Phoenicians. He symbolized the productive forces of nature. **Asherah** was the wife of Baal in Canaanite mythology.

**18:20** The contest was to take place on **Mount Carmel**, a prominent peak in a range of mountains stretching southeast from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. On this mountain Canaanites built sanctuaries to pagan weather deities. This was the ideal place for a confrontation to show the superiority of the Lord over Baal.

**18:21** The classic challenge of Elijah, **How long will you falter**, betrays the double-mindedness of the people. They must follow the Lord wholeheartedly or not at all.

**18:22** By human reasoning, the odds of 450 to 1 would be nearly impossible. Yet nothing is impossible with the Lord God of Israel!

**18:26** The prophets of Baal had spent six hours crying out to their god with no response.

**18:36** The time of the *evening sacrifice* was about 3:00 P.M.

**18:41** Much can be learned about prayer from observing Elijah: First, even though we have a promise for God's provision, we are not to stop praying for its fulfillment (v. 41). Second, we see one of the postures of prayer as we read that **he bowed down on the ground, and put his face between his knees** (v. 42). Third, we learn the importance of persistence in prayer as we read that Elijah prayed **seven times** (v. 43). And fourth, we understand the necessity of faith as we pray by realizing that Elijah believed his prayer was answered before the answer actually came (vv. 44, 45). James 5:17, 18 explains that the prayer of a Christian can be as effective as the prayer of Elijah.

**18:45** The coming of the rain was the final proof that Baal was impotent and that the Lord God of Israel was supreme.

**18:46** Elijah was divinely empowered by **the hand of the LORD** to outrun Ahab's chariot from Carmel to Jezreel, a distance of approximately 25 miles. The phrase "the hand of the LORD" is a formula that refers to the divine inspiration of the prophets and probably is an indirect reference to the Holy Spirit (compare 2 Kin. 3:15 and Ezek. 1:3 with 1 Sam. 10:6, 10 and 19:20, 23). Here Elijah was supernaturally strengthened by the Spirit of God to do a

miraculous feat. Read Judg. 14:6, 9 and 15:14 for similar accounts. For more on the work of the Holy Spirit in 1 Kin., see note on 18:12.

**19:1** Elijah had just challenged and defeated 450 prophets of Baal, as well as confronted Ahab himself. Evidently **Jezebel** had not been present on Mt. Carmel, and now just one threat from her sent Elijah running. He ran to **Beersheba**, which is the southernmost city in the southern kingdom of Judah.

**19:4** Elijah was so despondent that he wanted to die.

**19:8** Mt. **Horeb** is a variant name for Mt. Sinai, and was about 200 miles from Beersheba. Elijah was going to the very place where the Lord had revealed Himself to Moses and the children of Israel.

**19:11** The Lord did not reveal Himself to Elijah in the spectacular ways by which He had shown Himself to Moses. To this discouraged, despondent old prophet, God responds in gentleness.

**19:14** To the Lord's inquiry, Elijah retorts with self-pity. Instead of rebuking him, the Lord gently pulls him from his despair by giving him three new assignments (vv. 15, 16) and by assuring him that he is not alone (v. 18). Indeed, there were 7,000 others. God has always had a remnant (see Paul's use of vv. 10, 14 in Rom. 11:3).

**19:19** That **he was with the twelfth** means that there were 12 teams of oxen plowing, and Elisha was driving the twelfth team. That Elijah **threw his mantle on him** symbolized that he was electing Elisha to receive the authority and power of his office (see v. 16).

**Elijah and Elisha.** Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel ended with the slaying of 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kin. 18:20–40). His ministry spanned Canaan from the Brook Cherith near his birthplace (1 Kin. 17:1–7) to Zarephath where he performed the miracle that sustained the widow and her son, and to as far south as Mt. Horeb in the Sinai Peninsula. In Samaria Elijah denounced King Ahab's injustice against Naboth of Jezreel (1 Kin. 21:17–29). Near Jericho Elijah separated the waters of the Jordan River to cross over and subsequently was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kin. 2:1–12). Elisha healed Naaman of leprosy in the Jordan River (2 Kin. 5:1–19) and led the blinded Syrians to their defeat at Samaria (2 Kin. 6:8–23). In Damascus, Elisha prophesied the death of King Ben-Hadad of Syria and the succession of Hazael as king of Syria.

**19:20** The phrase **Go back again, for what have I done to you?** is Elijah's approval that it is appropriate to say farewell to his family. Elisha uses the animals and implements of his former livelihood to host a farewell celebration. From this point on he does not turn back.

**20:1** Ben-Hadad: See note on 15:18 about the three Ben-Hadads in Scripture.

## WORD WEALTH

**20:8** **listen**, *shama*. (shah-mah); Strong's #8085: To hear; to listen, consider, pay attention; to listen carefully and intelligently, to obey. The word conveys a sense of intensity. The most famous reference containing *shama* is Deut. 6:4, which states, "*Sh.ma Yisrael!* Hear, O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one!" These words are called the *Sh.ma*, which is the central creed of Judaism. Moses was calling Israel to listen attentively and very carefully with a mind to obey what God would say. The verb *shama* also appears in the name *Shmuel* (Samuel), "Heard of God." Samuel was so named after his mother asked for a son, and the Lord listened to her (1 Sam. 3:20).

**20:10** Ben-Hadad threatens to destroy Israel totally in a life-jeopardizing oath where he boasts of parceling off Samaria to his followers. When Ben-Hadad refers to his gods, he is implying this is not just a contest of military strategy, but a test of the stronger deity.

**20:11** Ahab's answer to the threat of Ben-Hadad means that Ben-Hadad should not boast of victory when he has not yet won the battle. He calls Ben-Hadad's bluff, inviting him to attack, or if not, to quit intimidating Israel.

**20:12** At the word of the Lord, through a prophet, **Ahab** attacked the drunken **Ben-Hadad** and won an initial victory. However, the prophet warned Ahab that the Syrians would regroup and attack (v. 22). That Ahab heeded the voice of a prophet of God is an indication that there were some lasting effects to Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel.

**20:23** The Syrians assumed they had lost because they were not fighting in the dominant territory of their deity. They were not just challenging the Israelites, but asserting that their gods were more powerful than the God of Israel.

**20:28** The **LORD** affirms that He will give Ahab the victory over the **Syrians** since they had spoken against Him.

**20:31** Ahab unwisely spared Ben-Hadad, an action that is reminiscent of Saul's sparing King Agag (1 Sam. 15:9).

**20:35** Ahab's act of sparing Ben-Hadad is denounced by the Lord in an illustrated message by one of the prophets.

**21:1** According to the Mosaic Law, ancestral property was to remain in the family and not to be sold. Therefore, Ahab and Jezebel were not just expressing interest in something they wanted, but were displaying open contempt for God's laws.

**21:4** Ahab behaved more like a spoiled child than a king of Israel.

**21:13** There were **two men** because the law specified that there must be at least two witnesses to condemn a person (Deut. 17:6, 7). They **stoned** Naboth because that was the penalty for cursing God (Lev. 24:16).

**21:19** Though Ahab had not actually **murdered** Naboth, he and Jezebel were the guilty parties for they had instigated his death.

**21:25** This verse sums up the crux of the trouble in Israel. **Ahab** sold himself out to evil because he was incited by **Jezebel**, as the incident with Naboth so aptly illustrates. For this, God would judge them and their descendants.

**21:27** The judgment had been pronounced, yet God responds in kindness even to one so wicked as Ahab when he humbles himself and repents. God would be merciful and not let the calamity happen in Ahab's lifetime. Though God postpones the consequences of Ahab's sin, He does not negate the punishment.

**22:1** Ahab enlists the support of **Jehoshaphat** in his struggle with Syria. Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram had married Ahab's daughter Athaliah. In ch. 15, we saw Asa reigning in Judah, during the reign of Ahab in the north; now Jehoshaphat had succeeded to the throne in the south.

**22:5** Jehoshaphat wisely insists on divine counsel before he engages in a battle, yet he is hesitant about the advice of Ahab's prophets, discerning that they are only interested in saying what Ahab wants to hear. This is confirmed by Ahab's contempt for **Micaiah**.

**22:11** Before Micaiah arrived, an optimistic prophecy was given by **Zedekiah** confirming the word by Ahab's prophets.

**22:14** See section 6 of Truth-In-Action at the end of 1 Kin.

**22:15** Micaiah, in an encounter very reminiscent of Elijah's on Mt. Carmel, stands alone and speaks the **truth**. Ahab, Jehoshaphat, and the prophets wanted to believe a lie more than they really wanted the Lord's will. God is not the father of lies; the Devil is (John 8:44). So God permitted an evil spirit to accomplish what Satan is always intent on doing.

**22:17** Jesus uses this picture of **sheep that have no shepherd** in Mark 6:34.

**22:24** A slap in the face was a horrible insult. Zedekiah's response implies that he believed his own prophecy to be genuine and not a lie. The **spirit from the LORD** probably refers to the lying spirit in vv. 22, 23 because "spirit" is not capitalized. However, in the original Hebrew there are no capital or lowercase distinctions. Therefore, some take "the spirit from the LORD" as a reference to the Spirit of the Lord who enabled the prophets to prophesy (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23). In the first interpretation, **Zedekiah** would be taunting **Micaiah**, asking him to tell him which way the lying spirit went, if he could indeed see it. In the second, Zedekiah would be affirming his belief that he was inspired by the Spirit of God, and would be asking Micaiah to prove his ability to tell that the prophecy of Zedekiah and the other prophets was not divinely inspired. In either case, only time would tell who was correct (v. 25).

**22:41** Kings now explains how **Jehoshaphat** had begun to reign in the southern kingdom. As Judah's fourth ruler, Jehoshaphat was a godly king like **his father Asa**. For more information on Jehoshaphat's noteworthy achievements, see 2 Chr. 17-19.

**22:51** Shifting back to the north, 1 Kin. ends by explaining that **Ahaziah**, the son of Ahab and Jezebel, had become the eighth king in Israel. The book concludes on the sad note that Ahaziah was as wicked as his parents.

## TRUTH-IN-ACTION through **1 KINGS**

*Letting the LIFE of the Holy Spirit Bring Faith's Works Alive in You!*

### Truth 1 Kings Teaches

### Action 1 Kings Invites

**Guidelines for Growing in Godliness** The godly person has confidence that God cares about his character, faithfulness, and integrity and that He rewards those who walk faithfully with Him.

**1:29** *Remember and carry out* vows and promises you make. *Be assured* the Lord has heard and will enable you to do so.

**2:3** *Remember* that the Lord prospers and grants success to those who walk in His ways.

### Steps to Holiness

Holiness implies a life that is separate from the world. Taking even small steps across this line too easily makes room for greater compromise.

**3:3** *Avoid* even small compromises in holiness, purity, and worship. *Understand* that even the slightest deviations from what you know to be right may eventually become major transgressions.

### Steps in Developing Humility

Humility refuses to promote or exalt itself, trusting the Lord to bring advancement. It quickly acknowledges the Lord when anything it does is recognized, knowing that all accomplishments are realized through God.

**1:5, 29** *Avoid* self-promotion. *Rely* upon the Lord to bring promotion to you. *Remember*: He who exalts himself will be humbled (see Matt. 23:12).

**8:27** *Be aware* that your life is only a conduit for or a reflection of God's life. *Know* that even the greatest thing you build will manifest only a small facet of God's glory.

### Keys to Wise Living

God is the only source of true wisdom, and He promises to give it to anyone who asks for it. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord and finds its fulfillment in love for others.

**3:7-14** *Do not presume* to know how to do what the Lord has called you to do. *Cleave* to the Lord. *Depend* upon him for wisdom.

**3:16-28** *Choose to believe* that God will give wisdom to all who ask for it (see James 1:5).

**8:39, 40** *Be assured* that only God knows the hearts of men; we cannot. *Allow* this to cause you to reverence God.

### Steps to Dynamic Devotion

Make no mistake about it: God gives special recognition to those whose hearts are wholly His. To believe that casual devotion to God is as blessed as whole-hearted devotion is self-deception.

**8:61** *Be assured* that the Lord's promises are for those whose hearts are fully committed to Him and His ways. *Examine* yourself for any lukewarmness you need to confess.

**11:1-8** *Be very careful* not to let those for whom you have affection lead you away from full devotion to the Lord.

### Lessons for Leaders

God's leaders serve Him on the people's behalf, not vice versa. Confusion on this point has caused many a tragedy among God's people. The kings who sought to please the people rather than God opened the way for great sin and received a bad report. What an important lesson in a day when popularity has become such an idol to many! God's leaders are encouraged to follow His Word closely and to be careful regarding other sources of advice.

**12:6–11** Leaders, *be wise* and *seek counsel* from other seasoned and fruitful leaders. *Avoid* the exclusive counsel of untried leaders who have borne little fruit.

**12:28; 13:34; 22:14–28** Leaders, *be faithful* to God's Word. What you say may not always be popular, but it must measure up to the standards of Scripture. Otherwise, your ministry may promote idolatry.

**15:3, 11** Leaders, *pattern your lives* and ministries after leaders who have God's approval and follow His Word closely. *Avoid* patterns that, although successful by worldly standards, contradict God's Word.

### Steps to Dealing with Sin

Deception begins when we forget that all of us are inclined to sin.

**8:46** *Be assured* that there is no one who does not sin. *Let God search your heart daily* to guard you against sin, which you might not notice.

### Key Lessons in Faith

Believe that where the Lord leads, He feeds. Where He guides, He provides. Faith does not let a threat of privation alter the course the Lord has set.

**17:1–9** *Do not allow* the threat of reduced income to cause you to disobey the Lord's direction for your life. *Choose to believe* that the Lord knows how to care for His servants.