





Elijah

A Man of God

BY ROBERT C. DUNSTON

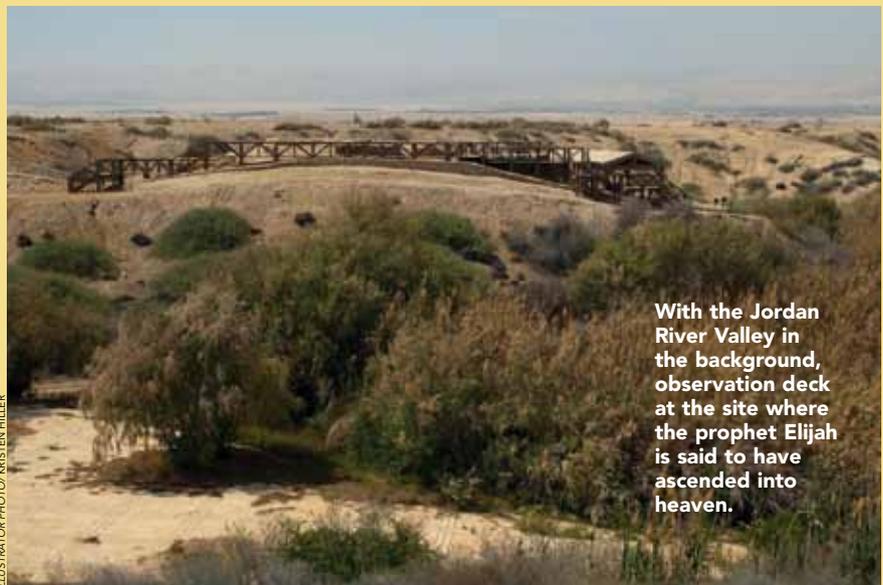
THE BIBLE REFERS several times to Elijah as a “man of God” (1 Kings 17:24; 2 Kings 1:9-13) placing him in the company of faithful individuals like Moses (Deut. 33:1), Samuel (1 Sam. 9:6-10), David (2 Chron. 8:14), and Elisha (2 Kings 4:7,22). In Hebrew, Elijah’s name translates either “my God is Yahweh” or “Yahweh is my God.” He lived up to his name by demonstrating exclusive faith in God and seeking to lead Israel and its leaders to follow only God as well.

Elijah came from Tishbe, a village of uncertain location, in the area of Gilead east of the Jordan River. During Elijah’s time Gilead comprised a forested, sparsely settled area of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Since “Tishbite” is so similar to the Hebrew word for “settler,” Elijah’s identification as a Tishbite may describe him more as

a settler in Gilead than as an inhabitant of a particular village.¹ The Bible describes Elijah as a hairy man who wore a leather belt around his waist (2 Kings 1:8), further suggesting he lived apart from the society of his day. His ability and willingness to survive off bread and meat ravens brought to him (1 Kings 17:6)

and his moving from place to place at the Spirit’s direction (18:12) also imply he did not live a settled life.

Elijah’s ministry occurred during the reigns of Ahab (874-853 B.C.) and Ahaziah (853-852 B.C.), both kings of the Northern Kingdom. A good economy had enabled Omri to build a capital city of Samaria. Omri also



With the Jordan River Valley in the background, observation deck at the site where the prophet Elijah is said to have ascended into heaven.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: KRISTEN HILLER

created a stable government that allowed him to pass his kingship peacefully to Ahab.²

Ahab married Jezebel, a princess from the Phoenician city of Tyre. Ahab and Jezebel's marriage cemented ties between the Northern Kingdom and Phoenicia, provided expanded opportunities for trade, and created an alliance against the expanding power and influence of Damascus. As Solomon had done before him, Ahab allowed his wife Jezebel to worship her gods; he built a temple in Samaria to Baal and set up an Asherah pole (16:31-33). Having freedom of worship and a place to worship were not enough for Jezebel. She became an evangelist for her god Baal, actively seeking to lead the Israelites to worship him rather than God, and killed those who opposed her.³

Baal's followers worshiped him as the storm god who brought rains, and thus fertility, to the land and as the one who provided for the agricultural needs. Baal worshipers believed that during the annual dry season, their deity was trapped in the land of the dead unable to return without help. Baal worship

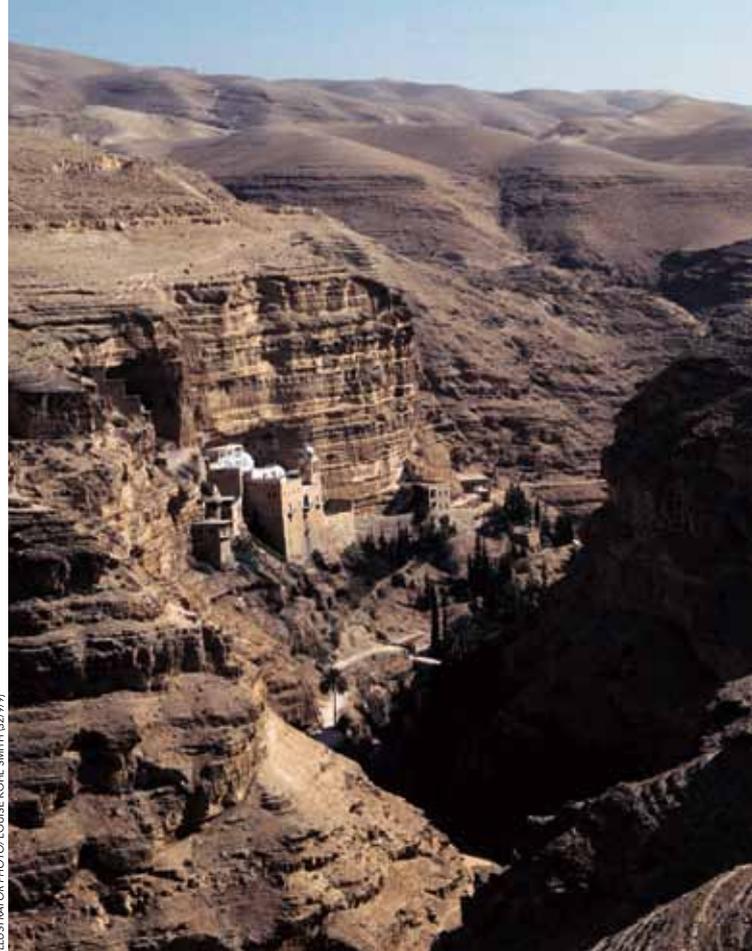
Right: The 5th cent. monastery of Saint George, along the northern bank of the Wadi Kelt. Tradition holds that the ravens fed Elijah here. After telling Elijah that Israel would experience a drought, the Lord instructed the prophet to go to this wadi. "You are to drink from the wadi. I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there" (1 Kings 17:4, HCSB).

Below: Overlooking Ajloun, Jordan from Mar Elias, which tradition holds to be Tishbe, the hometown of Elijah.

involved fertility rites and ritualistic prostitution as the people sought, through sympathetic magic, to coax Baal's sister and lover Anat to go to the underworld and rescue him. Worshipers wrote stories about the deity that suggested Baal "could go on a journey, fall asleep, or even resort to bloody self-mutilation."⁴ Baal prophets sometimes employed

mutilation in an effort to get his attention (18:27-28).

Most of Elijah's ministry focused on combating belief in Baal and trying to bring Israel's leaders and people back to exclusive faith in God. In Elijah's initial confrontation with Ahab, Elijah prophesied God would withhold rain and dew for the next several years. God intended



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the extended drought to underscore Baal's inability to free himself from death and provide for people's needs and to demonstrate His (God's) living reality and power (17:1). While Ahab blamed the drought on Elijah, Elijah explained the drought as God's punishment for Ahab and Jezebel leading the Israelites to worship Baal (18:17-18).

The climactic showdown occurred on Mount Carmel, when Elijah challenged the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah to see whether Baal or God could provide fire to consume a sacrifice. "As [the] storm god Baal was thought to be responsible for lightning as well as rain, so this should [have been] an easy contest."⁵ The prophets of Baal, however, received no response to their shouts and activities (vv. 19-29).

After repairing the altar and having the people drench the sacrifice and altar three times with water, Elijah prayed, asking God to demonstrate His existence and power so the people would know Him. Elijah was not content to have the people simply abandon their Baal worship. He wanted them to embrace God exclusively and enter into a covenant relationship with Him. When God sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice, wood, altar, and water, the people professed their loyalty to Him. Their loyalty, however, was short-lived (vv. 30-39).

Elijah's final conflict with Baal worship involved King Ahab's son and successor Ahaziah. After injuring himself, Ahaziah sent messengers to inquire of Baal-zebub, a Philistine god, regarding whether or not he would recover. Elijah intercepted the messengers and told them Ahaziah's consulting a foreign god rather than the Lord had doomed him (2 Kings 1:1-6).

Elijah also demanded justice in Israel. When Ahab and Jezebel engineered

Naboth's death so they could seize his vineyard, Elijah confronted Ahab and pronounced God's judgment on him and Jezebel (1 Kings 21).

Elijah's conflict with Ahab and Jezebel continuously placed him in danger. Throughout the prophet's ministry God protected and cared for him and those close to him. God miraculously provided Elijah with food as the drought began (17:6) and when he fled from Jezebel (19:5-8). When Ahab and later Ahaziah sought to kill Elijah, God hid him from Ahab (18:10) and consumed two groups of soldiers Ahaziah sent to capture him (2 Kings 1:9-16).

During the lengthy drought God instructed Elijah to go to Zarephath, near the Phoenician city of Sidon in the heart of Baal worshiper territory, and stay with a widow there. The widow was preparing to cook the last of her food, but Elijah requested she make him a small loaf of bread. Miraculously, her flour jar and oil jug continuously provided flour and oil for Elijah, the widow, and her son until the drought ended. When the widow's son became ill and died, Elijah prayed and God restored the son to life (1 Kings 17:8-24).



Miracles Associated with the Prophet Elijah

1 KINGS

17:1	Drought – No Rain for 3 1/2 Years
17:2-6	Ravens Fed Elijah with Bread and Meat
17:8-16	Provision of Flour and Oil for Widow of Zarephath
17:17-24	Raised (resuscitated) the Widow of Zarephath's Son
18:16-40	Fire from Yahweh Consumed Elijah's Offering (Elijah and the Prophets of Baal)
18:41-46	Rainstorm Ended Drought and Famine
21:17-22	Prophesied the Death of All King Ahab's Male Descendents (End of His House)
21:23	Prophesied that Jezebel Would Be Eaten by Dogs

2 KINGS

1:2-4	Prophesied the Death of King Ahaziah
1:9-10	Called Down Fire from Heaven to Consume First Captain and 50 Soldiers
1:11-12	Called Down Fire from Heaven to Consume Second Captain and 50 Soldiers
2:7-8	Parted the Jordan River
2:9-10	Prophesied Concerning Elisha Receiving a Double Portion of Elijah's Spirit
2:11	Taken to Heaven in a Whirlwind

Right: Site in Sinai referred to as Elijah's basin. According to tradition, this is the location where Elijah stayed after he fled from Jezebel (1 Kings 19:8-18).

Lower right: Dated to Iron Age II (1000-800 B.C.), small ceramic juglet made of gray-black clay. Piece has a widening neck opening, and a handle that attaches at the rim. One of the miracles associated with Elijah involved the Lord providing an unending supply of oil, which sustained a widow and her son during a severe drought (1 Kings 17:9-16).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE

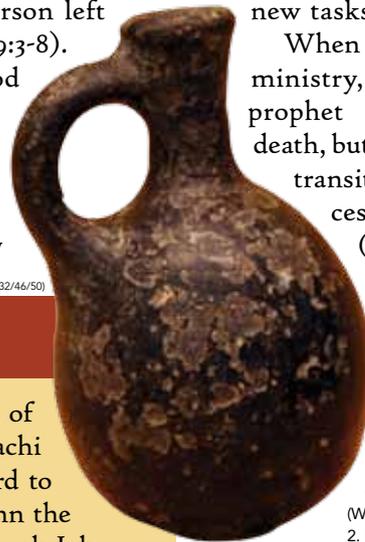
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (9/40/03)

Even a “man of God” can experience despair. When the widow’s son died, Elijah cried out to God wondering why He had brought tragedy on the woman after she had shown such kindness to him (vv. 20-21). After God’s victory on Mount Carmel, Elijah fled in terror from Jezebel’s wrath,

complaining to God that he was the only faithful person left and asking to die (19:3-8). In both cases, God cared for Elijah and responded to his prayers by raising the widow’s son (17:22-23) and by

providing food, His presence, and new tasks (19:15-18).

When Elijah completed his ministry, God brought His prophet home not through death, but through a miraculous transition that Elijah’s successor Elisha witnessed (2 Kings 2:11-12). Elijah left behind an enduring legacy and example of what a man of God can accomplish. **B**



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Elijah in the New Testament

Elijah became a central figure related to the coming of the Messiah in later Judaism and Christianity. Malachi promised Elijah’s return before the Day of the Lord to prepare the way (Mal. 4:5-6). The Gospels identified John the Baptist as fulfilling Malachi’s prophecy (Luke 1:17), although John denied being Elijah (John 1:21) and some considered Jesus to be Elijah (Matt. 16:14). Modern Judaism continues to place a cup on the table during the Passover celebration in hopes that Elijah will return.

At Jesus’ transfiguration Elijah appeared with Moses (Matt. 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30). The two witnesses mentioned in Revelation (Rev. 11:3-6), though not identified, are often assumed to be Moses and Elijah since God used both in their ministry to restrain the rain.¹

1. Nelson Price, “Elijah” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen eds. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 479-80.

1. Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings*, vol. 12 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 216.
2. Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 203, 212, 242.
3. *Ibid.*, 211.
4. *Ibid.*, 220.
5. *Ibid.*, 219.

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