

Elijah the Prophet: The Man Who Never Died

1. *Ahab son of Omri did evil in eyes of YHVH, more than all who preceded him. As though it were a light thing for him to follow in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat [who had set up golden calves], he took as his wife Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and he went and served Baal and bowed down to him. And he set up an altar to Baal in the house of Baal that he built in Samaria. And Ahab made האשרה (ha-asherah), an asherah [a cultic pole or stylized tree symbolizing the goddess Asherah, a consort of Baal]. Ahab did more to vex YHVH, God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who preceded him. (1 Kings 16:31–33)*

2. *Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, “By the life of YHVH God of Israel, whom I have served, there shall be no rain or dew these years except by my word.” (1 Kings 17:1)*

3. *Eliyyahu, “My God is Yahu.”*

4. *Go from here and turn eastward and hide in the wadi of Cherith, which is by the Jordan. And it shall be, that from the wadi you shall drink, and the ravens I have commanded to sustain you there” (1 Kings 17:3–4)*

The wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land (17:7).

5. *The widow says to Elijah: By the life of YHVH your God, I have no loaf but only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the jug, and here I am gathering a couple of sticks, so I can go in and make it for me and my son, and we will eat it and die (17:12).*

Elijah responds: Fear not. Come, do as you have spoken; but first make me from there a little loaf and bring it out to me, and for you and for your son make afterward. For thus YHVH God of Israel has said: The jar of flour will not go empty nor the jug of oil be drained until the day YHVH sends rain upon the land (17:13–14)

After some time, the widow’s son became ill, so severely that no breath was left in him (17:17). The distraught mother lashes out at Elijah:

What is between you and me, O man of God, that you have come to me to recall my crime and to put my son to death? (17:18).

Elijah replies simply, “Give me your son.” Then, he took him from her bosom and brought him to the upper chamber where he was staying and laid him on his bed. And he called out to YHVH, saying, “YHVH my God, have You brought evil even upon the widow with whom I lodge, putting her son to death?”

He stretched out over the child three times and called out to YHVH, saying, “YHVH my God, let this child’s life-breath return into him.”

And YHVH heeded Elijah’s voice, and the child’s life-breath returned into him, and he revived. Elijah took the child and brought him downstairs from the upper chamber and gave him to his mother, and Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.”

And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of YHVH in your mouth is truth” (17:19–24)

6. Elijah had “parched the world” for several years, when God commanded him: *Go, appear before Ahab, that I may send rain upon the land (1 Kings 18:1).*

Ahab went to meet Elijah. And when Ahab saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, troubler of Israel?”

He replied, “I have not troubled Israel but rather you and your father’s house, by your forsaking YHVH’s commands and following the Baalim” (18:16–18).

Elijah declares that the time has arrived for a fateful contest between Baal and YHVH. He tells the king, *“Now, send out, gather for me all Israel at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table” (18:19).*

Ahab sent out among all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between the two branches? If YHVH is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word (18:20–21).

Elijah said to the people, “I alone remain a prophet of YHVH, and the prophets of Baal are four hundred fifty men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose for themselves one bull and cut it up and set it on the wood, but let them set no fire. And I on my part will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood, but I will set no fire. You shall call on the name of your god, and I on my part will call on the name of YHVH, and it shall be that the god who answers with fire, he is God.”

And all the people answered, saying, “The matter is good!” (18:22–24).

Having set the terms of the contest, Elijah turns to the prophets of Baal and offers that they go first.

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls for yourselves and go first, for you are the majority, and call on the name of your god, but set no fire.”

They took the bull that was given to them, and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning till noon, saying, “O Baal, answer us!” But

there was no sound and no one answering. They hopped about the altar that they had made.

At noon, Elijah mocked them, saying, “Call out loudly, for he is a god. Maybe he is defecating or urinating, or off on a journey. Perhaps he is sleeping—and will wake up.”

They called out loudly and gashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, till blood spilled upon them. When noon passed, they flung themselves into a frenzy until the hour of the meal offering, but there was no sound and no one answering and no attention (18:25–29).

All the intense efforts of the prophets of Baal have yielded nothing but silence. Now, Elijah prepares for his attempt.

Elijah said to all the people, “Draw near me.” And all the people drew near him. Then he mended the wrecked altar of YHVH. Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob—to whom the word of YHVH came, saying, “Israel shall be your name.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of YHVH, and around the altar he made a trench with a capacity of two seahs of seed. He laid out the wood and cut up the bull and placed it on the wood. He said, “Fill four jugs with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.” He said, “Do it a second time,” and they did it a second time. He said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. The water ran around the altar, and the trench, too, was filled with water (18:30–35)

Having grandly set the stage, Elijah prays to God:

At the hour of the meal offering, Elijah the prophet approached and said, “YHVH, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! This day let it be known that You are God in Israel and I am Your servant, and by Your word have I done all these things. Answer me, YHVH, answer me, that this people may know that You, YHVH, are God, and it is You who turned their heart backward” (18:36–37).

What did Elijah say? “.... Answer me, YHVH, answer me, that this people may know that You, YHVH, are God. And if You do not answer me, then I will say, It is You who turned their heart backward.”¹

The prophet’s passionate words evoke an immediate response:

Then the fire of YHVH came down and consumed the offering, the wood, the stones, and the soil, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. And all the people saw and fell on their faces and said, “YHVH, He is God; YHVH, He is God” (18:38–39).

¹ Bemidbar Rabbah 18:12.

Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Let not one of them escape.” They seized them, and Elijah took them down to the wadi of Kishon and slaughtered them there (18:40–41).

Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink, for there is a rumbling sound of rain.” So Ahab went up to eat and drink, while Elijah went up to the top of Carmel, crouched on the ground, and put his face between his knees (18:41–42).

He said to his lad, “Go up, look toward the sea.” He went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.”

Seven times [Elijah] said, “Go back.” On the seventh time, [the lad] said, “Look, a cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”

[Elijah] said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Harness [your chariot] and go down, so that the rain will not hold you back.’” Meanwhile, the heavens grew dark with clouds and wind, and there was heavy rain. Ahab mounted up and went to Jezreel. And the hand of YHVH came upon Elijah, and he girded his loins and ran before Ahab all the way to Jezreel (18:43–46).

7. *He walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God, Horeb (19:5–8).*

There he went into a cave, where he spent the night. And, look, the word of YHVH came to him and said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been so zealous for YHVH, God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant—Your altars they have destroyed, Your prophets they have killed by the sword, and I, I alone remain, and they have sought to take my life” (19:9–10)

He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before YHVH. Look, YHVH is passing by, with a great and mighty wind tearing out mountains and shattering rocks before YHVH. Not in the wind is YHVH. And after the wind, an earthquake. Not in the earthquake is YHVH. And after the earthquake, fire. Not in the fire is YHVH. And after the fire, a sound of sheer silence” (19:11–12).

When Elijah heard, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And look, a voice came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

He replied, “I have been so zealous for YHVH, God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant—Your altars they have destroyed, Your prophets they have killed by the sword, and I, I alone remain, and they have sought to take my life” (19:13–14).

YHVH said to him, “Go, return on your way..., and Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place” (19:15–16).

Midrash: The wording *in your place* indicates: “I do not want your prophesying.”²

8. *As they went along, walking and talking, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, separating the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha was watching and kept crying out, “My father, my father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” And he saw him no more. Then he grasped his garments and tore them in two.* (2 Kings 2:11–12)

In rabbinic literature, the nearly unanimous view is that Elijah became immortal. “Elijah lives and endures forever.”³ He “did not taste the taste of death.”⁴ Rather, he was translated, body and soul, to heaven or paradise.

9. The view that Elijah never died—but rather ascended to heaven and therefore remains available—is indicated by the final prophecy in the Hebrew Bible in the closing verses of Malachi, composed around 500 B.C.E., after the return from the Babylonian exile:

Look, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of YHVH, great and awesome. He will bring fathers’ hearts back to their children and children’s hearts to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with sacred destruction. (Malachi 3:23–24)

² *Mekhilta, Pisha* 1. See Rashi on 1 Kings 19:16: “[And Elisha son of Shaphat] you shall anoint as prophet in your place—I do not want your prophesying, since you are accusing My children!”

³ *Vayiqra Rabbah* 27:4, in the name of Rabbi Yehudah.

⁴ *Bereshit Rabbah* 21:5, in the name of Rabbi Hanina.

Elijah in Talmud and Midrash

1. A story about Rabbi Me'ir, a leading sage of the second century. Me'ir had boldly rescued his sister-in-law, who was condemned to slavery in a Roman brothel. Consequently, Me'ir's "wanted picture" was posted on the gates of Rome.

They went and engraved Rabbi Me'ir's image at the entrance of Rome and proclaimed, "Anyone who sees this face—bring him!" One day [some Roman officers] saw him and ran after him; he ran away from them.... Some say that Elijah appeared to [the Roman pursuers] as a prostitute and embraced [Rabbi Me'ir]. [The pursuers] said, "Heaven forbid! If this were Rabbi Me'ir, he wouldn't have done that." [Thereby he was saved.]⁵

2. Elijah reveals God's emotions in the famous Talmudic story known as "the Oven of Akhnai." The setting is the rabbinic house of study, where the Sages are engaged in a legal dispute concerning a technical matter: whether a certain type of oven, built from detachable sections, is subject to ritual impurity. Rabbi Eli'ezer has tried to convince his colleagues that such an oven is not subject to impurity, but the majority of sages have decided that it is subject to impurity. Still, Rabbi Eli'ezer does not relent.

It has been taught: On that day Rabbi Eli'ezer brought forward all the arguments in the world, but they did not accept them.

[Rabbi Eli'ezer] said to them, "If the *halakhah* is as I say, let this carob tree prove it!" The carob tree was uprooted from its place and it moved a distance of one hundred cubits—some say, four hundred cubits. They responded, "One does not bring proof from a carob tree." The carob tree returned to its place.

[Rabbi Eli'ezer] said to them, "If the *halakhah* is as I say, let the aqueduct prove it!" The water in the aqueduct flowed backwards. They responded, "One does not bring proof from water." The water returned to its place.

[Rabbi Eli'ezer] said to them, "If the *halakhah* is as I say, let the walls of the academy prove it." The walls of the academy inclined and were about to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked them, saying, "When scholars grapple with one another in a halakhic dispute, what does it have to do with you?"

It has been taught: [The walls] did not fall, in deference to Rabbi Yehoshua; and they did not stand upright, in deference to Rabbi Eli'ezer. They still remain inclined.

⁵ BT *Avodah Zarah* 18a-b.

[Rabbi Eli'ezer] said to them, "If the *halakhah* is as I say, let it be proved from Heaven!" A Heavenly Voice issued, saying "What do you have against Rabbi Eli'ezer, since the *halakhah* agrees with him everywhere!"

Rabbi Yehoshua arose and said, "*It is not in heaven* (Deuteronomy 30:12)." What does this mean? Rabbi Yirmeyah said, "One pays no attention to a Heavenly Voice, since You already gave [the Torah] to us on Mount Sinai and it is written there: *Follow the majority* (Exodus 23:2)."

Rabbi Nathan encountered Elijah, and asked him, "What did the blessed Holy One do at that moment?"

He replied, "He laughed and smiled, and said, 'My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!'"⁶

3. In a midrash describing the Messianic revelation of God's word, Elijah plays a prominent role: "At that time, [Elijah] will bring forth *Sefer ha-Yashar*, of which this entire Torah is but one song."⁷ The book known as *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Book of the Upright) is a lost work, which is quoted twice in the Bible. From these quotations, it seems to have been an anthology of archaic Hebrew poems or epics. Here the scope of *Sefer ha-Yashar* is expanded, turning it into the immense original Torah, of which our current Torah is just a single sample. As the Messiah arrives, Elijah will transmit the full pristine text, whose contents accord with the dawning eon.

4. "Israel has already been assured that Elijah will not come on the eve of *Shabbat* [i.e., on Friday] or on the eve of a Festival, due to the effort [required to prepare for the holy day]."⁸ As Rashi explains, "because people would abandon the necessary preparations for *Shabbat* and go out to greet him."

5. Elijah the prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Gileadite! Speedily in our days may he come to us, along with the Messiah son of David!

6. Rabbi Yehudah says, "If Israel does not engage in *teshuvah*, they will not be redeemed. Israel engages in *teshuvah* only out of distress, oppression, wandering, and lack of sustenance. And Israel will not excel in *teshuvah* until Elijah, fondly remembered, comes, as is said: *Look, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of YHVH, great and awesome; והשיב (veheshiv), and he will bring back, fathers' hearts to their children and children's hearts back to their fathers* (Malachi 3:23–24)."⁹

⁶ BT *Bava Metsi'a* 59b (per Munich MS 95).

⁷ *Shir ha-Shirim Zuta* 5:2; *Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim*, ed. Schechter, 38. The two biblical quotations of *Sefer ha-Yashar* appear in Joshua 10:12–14; 2 Samuel 1:18–27.

⁸ BT *Eruvin* 43b.

⁹ *Pirquei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* 43.

For Rabbi Yehudah, the word **והשיב** (*ve-heshiv*), *and he will bring back*, alludes to **תשובה** (*teshuvah*), “turning back,” which Elijah will inspire Israel to do, thereby assuring their salvation.