

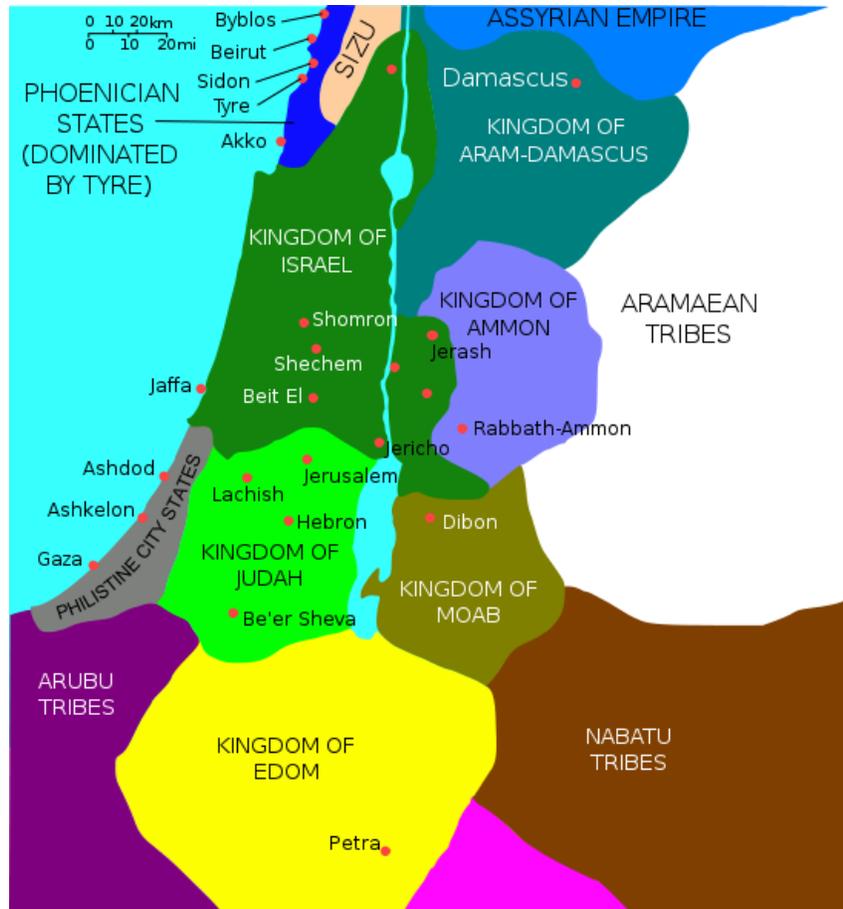
## Biblical narratives and historical background of Elijah

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Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah>

By the 9th century BCE, the Kingdom of Israel, once united under King Solomon, was divided into the

northern Kingdom of Israel and southern Kingdom of Judah, which retained the historic seat of government and focus of the Israelite religion at the Temple in Jerusalem. Omri, King of Israel, continued policies dating from the reign of Jeroboam, contrary to the laws of Moses, that were intended to reorient religious focus away from Jerusalem: encouraging the building of local temple altars for sacrifices, appointing priests from outside the family of the Levites, and allowing or encouraging temples dedicated to the Canaanite god, Baal. Omri achieved domestic security with a marriage alliance between his son Ahab and princess Jezebel, a priestess of Baal and the daughter of the king of Sidon in Phoenicia. These solutions brought security and economic prosperity to Israel for a time,[9] but did not bring peace with the Israelite prophets, who were interested in a strict deuteronomic interpretation of Mosaic law.



*Map of Israel in the time of Elijah. Dark Green is the Kingdom of Israel. Light Green is the Kingdom of Judah.*

As King, Ahab exacerbated these tensions. Ahab allowed the worship of a foreign god within the palace, building a temple for Baal and allowing Jezebel to bring a large entourage of priests and prophets of Baal and Asherah into the country. It is in this context that Elijah is introduced in 1 Kings 17:1 as Elijah "The Tishbite." He warns Ahab that there will be years of catastrophic drought so severe that not even dew will fall, because Ahab and his queen stand at the end of a line of kings of Israel who are said to have "done evil in the sight of the Lord."

## **Biblical narratives and historical background of Elijah**

### **1st and 2nd Kings**

Elijah appears on the scene with no fanfare. Nothing is known of his origins or background. His name, Elijah, "Yahweh is God," may be a name applied to him because of his challenge to Baal worship. Even the title of "the Tishbite" is problematic, as there is no reference from the period to a town or village of Tishbe.

Elijah's challenge, characteristic of his behaviour in other episodes of his story as told in the Bible, is bold and direct. Baal was the local nature deity responsible for rain, thunder, lightning, and dew. Elijah not only challenges Baal on behalf of the God of Israel, he challenges Jezebel, her priests, Ahab, and the people of Israel.

### **Widow of Zarephath**

After Elijah's confrontation with Ahab, God tells him to flee out of Israel, to a hiding place by the brook Cherith, east of the Jordan, where he will be fed by ravens. When the brook dries up, God sends him to a widow living in the town of Zarephatho in Phoenicia. When Elijah finds her and asks to be fed, she says that she does not have sufficient food to keep her and her own son alive. Elijah tells her that God will not allow her supply of flour or oil to run out, saying, "Don't be afraid..this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land,'" illustrating that the demand of the covenant is not given without the promise of the covenant. She feeds him the last of their food, and Elijah's promise miraculously comes true; thus, by an act of faith the woman received the promised blessing. God gave her "manna" from heaven even while he was withholding food from his unfaithful people in the promised land. Some time later, the widow's son dies, and the widow cried, "Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" Moved by a faith like that of Abraham (Romans 4:17, Hebrews 11:19), Elijah prays that God might restore her son so that the veracity and trustworthiness of God's word might be demonstrated. 1 Kings 17:22 relates how God "heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived." This is the first instance of raising the dead recorded in Scripture. This non-Israelite widow was granted the best covenant blessing in the person of her son, the only hope for a widow in ancient society. The widow cried, "...the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth." She made a confession that the LORD's own people in Israel had failed to make.

After more than three years of drought and famine, God tells Elijah to return to Ahab and announce the end of the drought: not occasioned by repentance in Israel but by the command of the LORD, who had determined to reveal himself again to his people. While on his way, Elijah meets Obadiah, the head of Ahab's household, who had hidden a hundred prophets of the God of Israel when Ahab and Jezebel had been killing them. Elijah sends Obadiah back to Ahab to announce his return to Israel.

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### Challenge to Baal

When Ahab confronts Elijah, he refers to him as the "troubler of Israel." Elijah responds by throwing the charge back at Ahab, saying that it is Ahab who has troubled Israel by allowing the worship of false gods. Elijah then berates both the people of Israel and Ahab for their acquiescence in Baal worship. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). And the people were silent. The Hebrew for this word, "go limping" or "waver", is the same as that used for "danced" in verse 26, where the prophets of Baal frantically dance. Elijah speaks with sharp irony: in the religious ambivalence of Israel, she is engaging in a wild and futile religious "dance".

At this point Elijah proposes a direct test of the powers of Baal and the God of Israel. The people of Israel, 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of Asherah are summoned to Mount Carmel. Two altars are built, one for Baal and one for the God of Israel. Wood is laid on the altars. Two oxen are slaughtered and cut into pieces; the pieces are laid on the wood. Elijah then invites the priests of Baal to pray for fire to light the sacrifice. They pray from morning to noon without success. Elijah ridicules their efforts. They respond by cutting themselves and adding their own blood to the sacrifice (such mutilation of the body was strictly forbidden in the Mosaic law). They continue praying until evening without success.

Elijah now orders that the altar of the God of Israel be drenched with water (twelve barrels of water). He asks God to accept the sacrifice. Fire falls from the sky, igniting the sacrifice. Elijah seizes the moment and orders the death of the prophets of Baal. Elijah prays earnestly for rain to fall again on the land. Then the rains begin, signaling the end of the famine.

### Mt. Horeb

Jezebel, enraged that Elijah had ordered the deaths of her priests, threatens to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-13). This was Elijah's first encounter with Jezebel, and not the last. Later Elijah would prophesy about Jezebel's death, because of her sin. Later, Elijah flees to Beersheba in Judah, continues alone into the wilderness, and finally sits down under a juniper tree. He falls asleep under the tree; an angel touches him and tells him to wake and eat. When he wakes he finds a bit of bread and a jar of water. He eats, drinks, and goes back to sleep. The angel comes a second time and tells him to eat and drink because he has a long journey ahead of him.

Elijah travels, for forty days and forty nights, to Mount Horeb and seeks shelter in a cave. God again speaks to Elijah (1 Kings 19:9): "What doest thou here, Elijah?". Elijah did not give a direct answer to the LORD's question but evades and equivocates, implying that the work the LORD had begun centuries earlier had now come to nothing, and that his own work was fruitless. Unlike Moses, who tried to defend Israel when they sinned with the golden calf, Elijah bitterly complains over the Israelites' unfaithfulness and says he is the "only one left". Up until this time Elijah has only the word of God to guide him, but now he is told to go outside the cave and "stand before the Lord." A terrible wind passes, but God is not in the wind. A great earthquake shakes the mountain, but God is not in the earthquake.

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Then a fire passes the mountain, but God is not in the fire. Then a "still small voice" comes to Elijah and asks again, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" Elijah again evades the question and his lament is unrevised, showing that he did not understand the importance of the divine revelation he had just witnessed. God then sends him out again, this time to Damascus to anoint Hazael as king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his replacement.

### **The Cave of Elijah, Mount Carmel, Israel.**

Elijah encounters Ahab again in 1 Kings 21, after Ahab has acquired possession of a vineyard by murder. Ahab desires to have the vineyard of Naboth of Jezreel. He offers a better vineyard or a fair price for the land. But Naboth tells Ahab that God has told him not to part with the land. Ahab accepts this answer with sullen bad grace. Jezebel, however, plots a method for acquiring the land. She sends letters, in Ahab's name, to the elders and nobles who lived near Naboth. They are to arrange a feast and invite Naboth. At the feast, false charges of cursing God and Ahab are to be made against him. The plot is carried out and Naboth is stoned to death. When word comes that Naboth is dead, Jezebel tells Ahab to take possession of the vineyard.

God again speaks to Elijah and sends him to confront Ahab with a question and a prophecy: "Have you killed and also taken possession?" and, "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick up your own blood" (1 Kings 21:19)." Ahab begins the confrontation by calling Elijah his enemy. Elijah responds by throwing the charge back at him, telling him that he has made himself the enemy of God by his own actions. Elijah then goes beyond the prophecy he was given and tells Ahab that his entire kingdom will reject his authority; that Jezebel will be eaten by dogs within Jezreel; and that his family will be consumed by dogs as well (if they die in a city) or by birds (if they die in the country). When Ahab hears this he repents to such a degree that God relents in punishing Ahab but will punish Jezebel and their son--Ahaziah.

### **Ahaziah**

Elijah continues now from Ahab to an encounter with Ahaziah. The scene opens with Ahaziah seriously injured in a fall. He sends to the priests of Baalzebub in Ekron, outside the kingdom of Israel, to know if he will recover. Elijah intercepts his messengers and sends them back to Ahaziah with a message. In typical Elijah fashion, the message begins with a blunt, impertinent question: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are sending to inquire of Baalzebub, the god of Ekron?"(2 Kings 1:6). Ahaziah asks the messengers to describe the person who gave them this message. They tell him he wore a hairy coat with a leather belt and he instantly recognizes the description as Elijah the Tishbite.

Ahaziah sends out three groups of soldiers to arrest Elijah. The first two are destroyed by fire which Elijah calls down from heaven. The leader of the third group asks for mercy for himself and his men. Elijah agrees to accompany this third group to Ahaziah, where he gives his prophecy in person.

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### **Departure**

The biblical story of Elijah's departure is unique. Elijah, in company with Elisha (Eliseus), approaches the Jordan. He rolls up his mantle and strikes the water (2 Kings 2:8). The water immediately divides and Elijah and Elisha cross on dry land. Suddenly, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear and Elijah is lifted up to heaven in a whirlwind. As Elijah is lifted up, his mantle falls to the ground and Elisha picks it up.

### **2nd Chronicles**

Elijah is mentioned once more in 2 Chronicles 21. A letter is sent under the prophet's name to Jehoram. It tells him that he has led the people of Judah astray in the same way that Israel was led astray. The prophet ends the letter with a prediction of a painful death. This letter is a puzzle to readers for several reasons. First, it concerns a king of the southern kingdom, while Elijah concerned himself with the kingdom of Israel. Second, the message begins with "Thus says YHVH, God of your father David..." rather than the more usual "...in the name of YHVH the God of Israel." Also, this letter seems to come after Elijah's ascension into the whirlwind. But this is not surprising, as the books of 1 and 2 Kings are told largely out of order, to depict one individual or event at a time. Jacob Myers suggests a number of possible reasons for this letter, among them that it may be an example of a better known prophet's name being substituted for that of a lesser known prophet. VanSeters, however, rejects the letter as having any connection with the Elijah tradition.

### **Malachi**

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse."

— Malachi 3:3-4

The final mention of Elijah in the Hebrew Bible is in the Book of Malachi, where it is written, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD." That day is described as the burning of a great furnace, "... so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." (Malachi 3:19) Traditionally, in both Judaism and Christianity, this is taken to mean the return of Elijah will precede the Messiah.