

Elijah - “Back-Slidden Or Burned Out?”



THE WORLD OF ELIJAH:



Elijah's early years (widow, famine)



Elijah's flight from Jezebel

1. **(Background)** In biblical times, our modern date stamps (e.g. BC, AD, BCE, CE) did not exist. Dates were relative to the year of a particular king's reign. For example, *“In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years.”* (1 Kings 16:29) In the above verse, the king of the southern kingdom is used as a reference point for the first year of Ahab. All of our dates are imposed back on the events of the Bible using fixed dates that we are sure of. However, even the methods used to calculate the 1st year of a king's reign varied from culture to culture
2. **(Background)** The two books of 1 & 2 Kings (as well as 1 & 2 Chronicles) record the rise and fall of the monarchy in Israel. Understanding what happened in the early chapters of 1 Kings is *vital* to interpreting the events and personalities of this section of history (see chart above for “big picture”).
3. **(Q1)** The author's record of Hiel's rebuilding the city of Jericho *“...at the cost of...”* his two sons is very likely a statement about child sacrifice which was prominent in the pagan, polytheistic religions of Canaan. This statement, coupled with the descriptions of Ahab and Jezebel must be understood as the author informing his listeners/readers just how deplorable the spiritual climate of Israel had become.

4. **(Q2)** This is the first of 69 references to Elijah in our Old Testament, and out of 98 in our Bible. His appearance in the biblical account is abrupt and unannounced, much like his ministry. He is a *major* player in the Story of God:
 - Elijah is the last name mentioned in the Old Testament portion of The Story.
 - His name appears 29 times in our New Testament; seven of them by Jesus
 - There are no references to Elijah's *words* in the NT, compared to 22 for the words of Isaiah.
 - The two references to Elijah *speaking* in our NT are in the context of his prayer life (Rom 11:2; Jms 5:17)
5. **Q3a)** Elijah's challenge to the Jews about "limping" between two opinions/commitments is a wordplay on the unique way the prophets of Baal "limped" around the altar during their ritual (1 Kg 18:21 & 26). He is accusing them of becoming Canaanized; becoming like the culture they were supposed to be "different" (i.e. holy) from.
6. **(Q3c-d)** A "day's journey" (walking) in biblical times was around 20 miles. Elijah's run to Jezreel was comparable to a 25K marathon! His walk to Beersheba was a 5-day trek, or longer if it included a sabbath. Also, the topography of the middle portion of area where he was walking was hilly, not flat. NOTE: The idea here in these portions is to make every effort to imagine this happening to you! The emotional onslaught from the brutal and noisy encounter with the prophets of Baal and Asheroth, followed by the physical exhaustion of climbing and running would have put Elijah in a *very* precarious place emotionally and spiritually. All of this is the prelude to the radical depression and despondency that invaded Elijah's thinking as he went into the Judean wilderness and on to Mt. Horeb. We must understand that *this* is the "context" of Elijah's encounter with Yahweh. John Piper has this to say about the relationship between our spiritual health and our physical state:

"For me, adequate sleep is not matter of staying healthy, it is a matter of staying in the ministry. It is irrational that my future should look bleaker when I get four or five hours of sleep several nights in a row. But that is irrelevant. Those are the facts and I must live within the limits of facts. I commend sufficient sleep to you, for the sake of your proper assessment of God and His promises." **John Piper in "Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity"**
7. **(Q3e)** It's very possible that this 8-10 hour walk was *full* of inner dialogue (and *outer*?). Elijah's solitude at a time of great fatigue and vulnerability became fertile soil for Satan to plant virile seeds of despondency and despair.
8. **(Q5)** The fact that it is *God* (via an angelic servant) who initiates eating and only interrupts Elijah's sleep to further feed him (twice!), and the fact that the narrative tells us there were *two* periods of sleeping and eating in a row, indicates extreme fatigue, but also that rest and refreshment were the primary needs *before* the spiritual could be addressed in a way that would "stick."
9. **(Q5)** There is a slight "Mosaic" parallel in this section of the narrative: Like Moses, Elijah leaves a palatial city, sojourns in the wilderness, and ends up meeting Yahweh on Mt. Sinai ("Horeb" is Sinai).
10. **(Q8)** The way Yahweh addresses Elijah is quite different from His "typical" MO. He spoke out of the midst of fire and wind to Ezekiel (Ezek 1:4ff), and out of fire and thunder to Moses (Deut 5).



“Stumbling Stones”

1. **(Intro matters)** As you lead your group through this chapter, don't lose sight of the modern parallels here. It would be tempting to see this merely as a "primitive" story about superstitious and ignorant people. The permanent truth here is that we are reading about a group of people who have totally surrendered themselves to the values and worldview of their culture, and the while maintaining their religious identity (in this case, "Jew," in our case, "Christian").

2. **(Q1)** “Samaria” during the time of Elijah is a *city*, the capital city of the northern kingdom called “Israel” (the southern kingdom was called “Judah”). By the time of Jesus, the *city* of Samaria no longer exists, but the large geographical region between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south was known as “Samaria.” The people who lived there were known as Samaritans. The city of Samaria was destroyed in 722 BC when the Assyrians conquered Israel (i.e. northern kingdom), and carried off the ten tribes, replacing them with pagans from other conquered areas. This is recorded in 2 Kings 17. Only Judah remained after this happened.
3. **(Q3)** On the various portions of this question it would be easy to minimize or neglect altogether the tremendously “human” factors that the text omits. This story is really about *Yahweh*, *not Elijah*. But, we need to keep repositioning *ourselves* into this narrative, not merely reading it as a familiar “Bible story.” It’s vital that we try to put ourselves into this whole narrative, even if it’s in a more “modern” fashion. What would be going on in *my* life, if I were Elijah?



“Going Deeper”

1. **(Q3a)** “Which modern scenario do you think most approximates Elijah’s experience that day and why:
 - football game
 - political debate
 - battle in Iraq
2. **(Q3e)** “Considering the cumulative affect of everything up to this point, do you think this was a good or bad time for Elijah to be alone?” Explain. (**NOTE:** It’s at this point that Elijah wants to die! Prov 18:1 is an excellent verse here).
3. **(Q5)** “Have group members share here ((**NOTE:** You’re looking for *physical*, not “spiritual” needs here! Elijah was suicidal, *not* because he’d lost faith, but because he’d lost perspective due to the comprehensive fatigue—both body and soul—that had crept up on him).

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