

# EXPLORING ELIJAH, THE “FIRE PROPHET”

**Yamoah, James, PhD.**

Boateng, Samuel Stevens, PhD.

John, Avorgah

Ghana Christian University College, Accra, Ghana

**jimmyamoah@yahoo.com**

**dr.ssboateng@vvu.edu.gh**

---

## Abstract

If there is any individual in the Bible whose life is associated with unusual fire, or a divine form of fire, it is no doubt than a prophet by name Elijah (Heb. אֵלִיָּהוּ). The occurrence of “fire from the Lord” in his ministry makes him one who qualifies to be called the “Fire Prophet.” This presentation will consider the exegesis of the texts that reveal Elijah as a man of God whose ministry was associated with divine fire. This is to open the student of the Bible up to a variety of ways by which understanding of basic Hebrew can be a tool for deeper studies of the Old Testament part of the Holy Bible, and enhancement of issues of scriptures in general. Specifically, the discussion will show how a grasp of the Hebrew text is brought to bear in exegesis of a word, verse, chapter, and even a whole book, and how the revelations from the texts can be applied to life situations at all times.

## Introduction

Prophet Elijah was hitherto unknown until he suddenly emerged to confront King Ahab of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. His ministry occurred during the reigns of the wicked King Ahab, and his immediate successor and son, Ahaziah. He emerged from an otherwise obscure background, since his hometown, Tishbe, in the Transjordan region of Gilead, was insignificant compared to the prominent towns in the commonwealth tribes of Israel. This was the area beyond the River Jordan where two tribes, Reuben, Simeon, and half of the tribe of Manasseh had requested from Moses before the Israelites crossed to conquer the other parts of the Promised Land, west of the Jordan (Num 32).

Elijah is characteristically described in 2 Kings 1:8 by King Ahaziah in the following words: אִישׁ בְּעַל שֵׁער וְאַזְזֹר עֹר אֲזֹר בְּמַחְנִיו ; “...A man with a waist cloth of hair and a leather skin that is wrapped around his waist,” because the king was able to identify him with such an appearance. Douglas, and Tenney (1963:113) observed Elijah to be an aggressive opponent to the worship of Baal (Heb. *ba'al*, *lord*, *possessor*, *husband*). His exit from the ministry was very spectacular and unprecedented.

The subsequent discussions focus on the chapters of the two books of Kings which are specifically dedicated to the ministry of Elijah. The objective is to show the prophet's unmatched concern for Israel, his commitment to their worship of the true God, Yahweh, and his zeal in fighting the people who were enemies of Israel's religion.

### **Unveiling Elijah: Chapter by chapter exegesis**

**1 Kings 17:1-24:** This is a passage that reveals that He rules in the affairs of humanity (Dan 4:34-35), and that God uses human instruments to demonstrate his power. God's power over the universe was displayed when He shut the heavens by His word through the prophet, Elijah, such that it did not give its rain (17:1). The prophet emerged from nowhere with authority:

He speaks...without the need for divine warrant or authentication. He establishes no credentials for himself, there are no miraculous birth narratives, no battles won, no patriarchal heritage: he is simply the man who speaks....Remarkably, Elijah does not add that rain will return by the word of YHWH, but that it will return by the word of Elijah... (Glover 2006:452).

Though the prophet did not make his reason for "shutting the heavens to hold the rains" clear immediately, he did not hide it at the second encounter with King Ahab, "...You have abandoned the LORD's command and have followed the Baals" (1 Kgs 18:18). Indeed, God used Elijah to prove to the earthly king that He was in charge of His creation. On top of Elijah's display, God demonstrated His power over creation when He commanded the ravens to supply food to the prophet (17:4). Yet still, He showed His power to provide in the midst of scarcity when He directed Elijah to the house of a poor heathen widow who had already lost all hope for survival because there was very little in her house to depend on (17:8-9).

But God fed both Elijah and the household of the widow throughout the period of the famine. Unfortunately, the only son of the widow fell sick and died. The widow's first reaction was to think that Elijah had caused this tragedy as punishment for her sins, מַה־לִּי וְלָךְ אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים, "what do you have against me, man of God" (vs. 18). According to Gaebelien (1998:140), the woman felt that some forgotten sin on her part occasioned her son's death. It was a common assumption in many cultures in the Old Testament (OT) period that suffering and sin are connected. It is along this line that Job's friends deduced that he might have sinned to incur his suffering (Job 8:4; 11:6).

Even in the New Testament (NT), the disciples of the Lord concluded that a man who was born blind was the result of sin (John 9:1-3). Carson (1993:358) noted:

The modern sufferer's question: 'What have I done to deserve this?' expresses the same ideas as the widow's words in v 18. We need to remember that the book of Job overturns the thinking of Job's friends, that Jesus rejected the logic of his disciples, and that the widow in our present story was mistaken. The Bible does not assume an inevitable cause-and-effect connection between sin and suffering (or between righteousness and blessing), but leaves room for suffering which is undeserved and, from the human point of view, unexplained.

Faced with such a challenging situation, Elijah took the child to his closet to engage in restorative prayer. Although the prophet's reason for going into his closet demonstrates his need for privacy, the reason behind the stretching of himself on the boy is not clear; "perhaps he was simply trying to share the warmth of his body with the boy to encourage his return to life" (Bruce 1979:414). Bruce further notes that the prophet's action which was later imitated by his disciple, Elisha (2 Kgs 4:34), "shows his complete identification with the calamity..." (1979:414). In a response which was very positive and indicative of unadulterated faith, the child was revived to life. Here too, God crowned the revelation of His power by demonstrating it over a death situation in response to Elijah's act of faith (17:17-23).

The result of such dealings of God with humanity is seen in the widow's testimony: **בְּפִיךָ אֱמֶת** **וְדְבַר־יְהוָה** **עַתָּה זֶה יֵדַעְתִּי כִּי אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה**: "Now, I know this that you are a man of God, and the word of the LORD in thy mouth is true" (17:24). Such a confession, coming from one who would not be so much regarded in Jewish culture because of her poor background, the fact that she was a heathen (from Sidon), and above all, a woman, shows the extent to which God can reach out to everybody irrespective of one's sex, race, socio-economic, and educational background, etc. (Acts 10:34-35).

**1 Kings 18:1-46:** This passage shows the kind of position taken by Prophet Elijah against the negative practices that were introduced by Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of Israel. The king married Jezebel, the daughter of Eth'baal, king of the Sidonians and a worshipper of Ba'al. His marriage to this idol worshipper was seen as an alliance, 'aimed at securing the kingdom of Israel from the north against Damascus and the Assyrians' (Rusak 2008:31-33). In accordance with the wife's beliefs, the king built a house of worship for Ba'al and also erected an Asherah pole in the capital of Israel, Samaria (1 Kgs 16:31-32).

Jezebel was mentioned as a strong defender of the worship of Baal, the Sidonian god, which had been brought to Israel:

From extra-biblical sources, there is substantial evidence that Ba'al was worshiped in Israel at the time of 1 Kings....The word Ba'al means "master, husband, or owner," and it is a title of divinity found in all Semitic languages....The worship of Ba'al in Syria, Phoenicia, and northern Israel was inextricably connected to the geographic and economic situation of the region and especially the adequacy of the rains. Not all years experienced adequate rainfall, and some drought periods could be catastrophic, especially if two or more dry years followed consecutively. Therefore, each year there was a concern about rainfall, and this induced people to follow rites to ensure the coming of the rains. The basis of the Ba'al cult was the fact that food giving was considered to be in the domain of Ba'al (Rusak 2008:31-33).

In her zeal to establish the worship of Ba'al in Israel, Jezebel turned against all the true worshippers of God, killing some of the prophets in the process. The rest of God's prophets went into hiding for fear of death.

But Prophet Elijah stood up to face the challenge and demonstrated unparalleled zeal and preparedness to face the situation for the sake of the Name of God. He acted appropriately as the Commander-in-Chief of God's army on earth. He did not make an appeal or request to the king;

he issued specific instructions and the king obeyed his command: “Now therefore send, and assemble to me all Israel...and all the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and all the four hundred prophets of the Ashera...So Ahab sent unto all...and assembled the prophets together...”

Yes, that was how Elijah understood his position, not only as God’s spokesperson but the chief crusader against the vices of his generation in the land. As such, he posted a contest at Mount Carmel between him alone as God’s true prophet and the many prophets of Baal, and Asherah, a goddess that was also worshiped in Israel. His confidence was in **יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת** used in his statement in 1 Kings 18:15, which is rightly translated as “LORD Almighty.” Gaebelein (p. 142-143) commented thus: “Theologically it signifies that the Lord stands as a mighty ruler at the head of a vast retinue of heavenly powers that are ready to act as his command.”

No particular reason was assigned by Elijah for proposing Mount Carmel as the venue. But looking at the vast options that existed, he might have chosen such a distant location for very important reasons best known to him alone. Some scholars believe the choice was strategic because the mountain was sacred to God. As typified by Rusak (p. 45-46):

The holiness of Mount Carmel was established as early as the days of Thutmose III. The Egyptians called it Rosh Kedesh, “Holy Headland”....Roman inscriptions suggest that...Mount Carmel was a holy place of worship for Jezebel and the Ba’al priests that she likely brought from Phoenicia. According to Biblical sources, however, there was also an altar to YHWH on Mount Carmel that had been destroyed at some previous date. Therefore, it was a sacred place to YHWH too...

At the gathering, contrary to the expectation that the prophet would speak harshly to the Israelites, the man-of God was well composed and circumspect. In the words of Carson (p. 359), “Elijah did not accuse the people of outright apostasy but of hesitating between two opinions. This suggests they had been trying to worship both Baal and Yahweh to secure the maximum advantages of both!” However, he once again stamped his authority on the covenant community as God’s true representative: **אֲנִי נֹתָרְתִּי נְבִיא לַיהוָה לְבַדִּי** ; “...I am the only remaining prophet of the LORD...” To convince the Israelites that he was not projecting any new ‘god’ but the true God and demonstrate His absolute power over all gods, the prophet did not prepare a new altar.

Rather, he repaired an old altar of the LORD which had probably been abandoned using twelve stones to signify God was still in charge of the United Kingdom despite the schism. Adeyemo (2006:438) made an interesting note thus:

To allow God to show his power, he asked that water be poured on the sacrifice and the altar (18:33-35). The odd against Elijah was that he was only one against 450 prophets of Baal backed by a very powerful ruler before an altar that was soaked with water. The only point in his favour was that the God of Israel had sent him and that he had trusted and followed obediently.

Elijah finally won the contest because God answered his prayers and accepted his sacrifice. The people’s heart did not only turn to God, but also supported the prophet to slaughter all the false prophets of Baalism.

One major lesson stands out of this contest: God is the only true deity to be worshipped by everyone throughout all ages. The contest clearly shows that God never fails those who faithfully stand for His cause. He showed this by honoring the prayer of Elijah against the chanting and false

spiritual practices of the prophets of Baal (37-39). Again, the passage shows that God performs miracles when necessary in order for His glory to be seen by all. In fact, God's answer to Elijah's prayer for rain in a period of severe drought and famine is a testimony to this case (vs. 41-45). Olley considered the response of the people in following Elijah's orders to kill the prophets of Baal as demonstrating, at least at this time, their recognition of his status (1998:36). Additionally, Elijah's killing of the prophets of Baal shows the extent of the prophet's hatred for any form of false worship and his zeal for the worship of the true God. This notwithstanding, the prophet's action may create a certain impression; that is, whether God approved the killing of the prophets of Baal.

Consequently, Adeyemo mentioned that the passage above and others in the books of Kings and elsewhere raise the question of whether it is right to kill for religious purposes. His point of argument is that since God is the Author and Sustainer of life to whom all life will also return; He reserves the right to determine what to do with life in general. In other words:

He brings to life and he takes life. While he has given humanity authority over everything else he created (Gen 9:3), he has reserved the right to give and take life as his private prerogative, and his alone. Consequently, he alone has the authority to take life, even for religious purposes as we see in the OT. Therefore, when a human being takes life, as Elijah, Jehu and others later in the Bible did, it should be only at his explicit direction (p. 438).

**1 Kings 19:1-21:** God is present with his people even when they think they are going through challenging situations alone. In Epp-Tiessen (2006:33) observation, the event shows 'how the mighty Elijah succumbed to human weakness and how the remarkable grace of God renewed this once fearless prophet and restored him to his ministry.' After accomplishing a great feat for God at Mount Carmel, Elijah came under threat from 'Mrs. Jezebel Ahab.' She threatened to do to Elijah as he had done to the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah. The prophet had to run away for fear of being caught and tortured by the wicked queen and had to find a refuge somewhere in the wilderness. Leaving his servant in a safe place in Beersheba, the man of God directed his attention to the desert, not sure of exactly where he was going. When he became exhausted he found solace under a tree without expecting any consolation from anybody. In his hopelessness, he prayed that God should call him to eternal rest. But God was very mindful of his firebrand prophet and still had some assignment for him. The appearance of God's angel to Elijah is a testimony to His continued presence with His devotees (see also Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5).

The angelic visitation also reveals how God cares for the daily physical needs of his servants. This is demonstrated by the provision of food and drink to the prophet (vs. 5-8). The double visits by the angel with food strengthened the prophet to continue his flight to Mount Horeb. Only God knew what was in store for the prophet, though some see Elijah's visit in the light of what Moses also did during the exodus. For example, Tonstad (2005:257) noted:

Most interpreters agree that Elijah retraces the steps of Moses. He, too, goes to Horeb, "the mountain of God" (1 Kgs 19:8; Exod 3:1). He, too, enters a cave as part of the theophany (1 Kgs 19:9; Exod 33:22). In terms of setting, the narrative is at pains to place Elijah in the topographical context where Moses received his great revelation (1 Kgs 19:8-9; Exod 33:18-23). The God who "passes by" in the case of Elijah is the same God who favoured Moses by "passing by" at his request (1 Kgs

19:11; Exod 33:18-23; 34:6-13). On the whole, Moses' personal and solitary encounter with God contributes as much to the setting of the Elijah narrative at Horeb as Israel's prior Sinai experience (Exod 19:16-25).

Surprisingly, God decided to meet Elijah not in a spectacular way as had previously happened through earthquake, whirlwind, lightening and smoke. He did not speak through the great wind as He did with Job (vs. 11; cf. Job 38:1) or the earthquake as with the Israelites (vs. 11; cf. Exod 19:16-19) or the fire as with Moses (vs. 12; cf. Exod 3:1-5). But this time, God did speak in a very low voice, **קוֹל דְּמַמָּה דַּקָּה** (vs. 12-13). Clearly, there are some lessons to be learned here: "These events provide a vivid demonstration that God is not always at work in ways which are visible and dramatic. He may choose to be present silently" (Carson 360). But when He chooses to speak, it can be done even through an animal (Num 22:26-30).

When queried as to his presence at the mountain, the prophet took off at top gear and vomited his disappointment and frustration in spite of his zeal, and unveiled his fear in the process, necessitating an appeal for early exit from this physical life. It might be conjectured that people who feel they have not been appreciated after great sacrifices sometimes behave this way: dejection and frustration set in. In Elijah's case, the depression and discouragement seemed to have stemmed from his skewed perspective. He both underrated his position as God's special envoy invested with divine power not only to oppose but to also overpower the enemies of Yahweh.

Either the prophet forgot that persecution was part of the occupational hazards of the ministry or he felt that the extent of it was too heavy to bear at that point. Moreover, he might have forgotten that endurance was one of the important keys for a successful walk with God. His flight for a safe haven was a demonstration of someone who had broken down and given up. Furthermore, the prophet lost touch with his confidence and trust in God's abiding presence and assurance of divine protection, a trait that his servant Elisha later demonstrated when surrounded by his greatest enemies (2 Kgs 6:15-18; cf. 32-7:2).

On a positive note, however, Elijah's flight to the mountain and demonstration of depression can be understood as part of a strategic maneuver in ministry. His flight was in fact an occasion for an encounter that would evaluate the work done so far. He was given a mark of 'incomplete'. That is, when he taught that it was over for him, the LORD saw that as being far from right. It was thus an opportunity for refueling and revitalization by God in order for the prophet to complete his crusade. There were further engagements in the pipeline to complete the revolution against Baalism. So, he had to receive instructions on what next step he should take and who to engage.

One of the steps would be a face-to-face engagement with King Ahab that would spell out the fate of not only the king but his entire family. Another would be an extension of divine judgment on the king's successor, King Ahaziah. To ensure a successful crusade that he had championed, the firebrand prophet was to recruit three other personalities by way of anointing them into strategic positions: Hazael, as king of Aram (Syria); Jehu, as king of Israel; and Elisha, son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah as his (Elijah's) successor. Their anointing which was to take place separately and at different occasions would follow in the proportion of 1:1-2, respectively. Thereafter, the prophet would qualify for an unprecedented 'fire ride' and be ushered into Abraham's bosom.

Therefore, the prophet descended the mountain and executed these divine assignments not only by himself but also through delegation of authority. The third among those God instructed his servant to commission was a young man, Elisha. He was probably from a wealthy family because they owned a field that needed twelve yoke of oxen to plough it. Adeyemo (p. 439) described Elisha's background thus: "Anyone who needed *twelve yoke of oxen* to plough his land must have had a very large farm (19:19). It seems that he also had laborers or neighbors working for him, driving the other eleven pairs of oxen while he himself drove the twelfth pair." Additional clue to the family's wealth is the fact that the young Elisha was able to afford an ox for celebration.

After Elijah had cast his mantle on him, the young man immediately left his work to follow the prophet, only to ask permission moments later to return home and bid his family good-bye. Prophet Elijah's reply, מָה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ ; "What have I done to you?" according to Adeyemo, might indicate that he also wondered why Elisha, who has just begun to run after him, would want to go back. What had he done within that short period of relationship to make Elisha want to return home? (19:20). Elisha's next action was to burn the ploughing equipment and use it for firewood for a farewell party. This action was "to prevent any thought of ever returning to his occupation. His slaughtering of his oxen and giving the meat to the people meant that they ate, blessed him, and wished him well in his new work for the Lord (19:21) (p. 440)."

**1 Kings 21:1-29:** This passage tells of how the "Fire Prophet" confronted Ahab, the king of Israel, and Jezebel, his Sidonian wife, who used mischievous means to acquire a property belonging to Naboth and his family. The king had developed unholy appetite for the vine plantation that was close to his palace and belonging to this man. When the king was refused a negotiation over the vine farm, his countenance changed to the displeasure of his wife. Naboth's refusal was probably based on genuine grounds: "Apart from the fact that a vineyard represented an enormous investment of time and effort, selling his land would have gone against the grain of OT law. In Israelite society a family and its inherited plot of land were meant to be inseparable" (Carson 357-364).

However, King Ahab's lack of appreciation for such a social-cultural and traditional value and subsequent show of drop in countenance before his power-drunk wife was enough to sign Naboth's death warrant for her to execute. Because of her Sidonian roots, Jezebel would not budge until her husband's wishes were met. Adeyemo (p. 441) commented: "She was...probably from a culture where all the land belonged to the king and was only leased to the people. She either did not know or refused to accept the law of Israel that clearly stated that the kings 'must not consider himself better than his brothers' (Deut 17:18-20). So when she heard Ahab's story, she took action (21:6-7)." Therefore, she went into action that unveiled one of her wicked schemes. She master-minded the killing of Naboth based on false accusation, took over his vineyard, and handed it to her husband (21:8-10).

What Ahab considered as a secret agenda neatly executed by his wife, Jezebel, appeared so open to God. So both 'King and Mrs. Ahab' were never to go scot-free for as long as the "Fire prophet" was still alive. Consequently, God stepped in to let everyone know that he abhors sin in any form and was ready to deal with it in whichever form it took. He used Elijah to confront Ahab, rebuked the king accordingly, and declared punishment for his house. The decreed punishment was very grievous for both king and wife. Though God's punishment for Ahab's house had to be postponed

as a result of the king's demonstration of remorse (vs. 20-22; cf. 27-29), he still suffered for his wickedness and disobedience later at a battlefield.

But his callous wife was to die shamefully in accordance with the Word of God by the prophet Elijah: הַכְּלָבִים יֹאכְלוּ אֶת-אִיזָבֵל בְּחֹל יִזְרְעָל: "The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (1 Kgs 21:15; cf. 2 Kgs 9:30-37). Scripture testifies of the King Ahab's wickedness in the following words:

רַק לֹא-הָיָה כְּאַחָאָב אֲשֶׁר הִתְמַכֵּר לַעֲשׂוֹת הָרָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר-הִסְתָּה אִתּוֹ אִיזָבֵל אִשְׁתּוֹ: that is, "And there was no one like Ahab, who committed himself to do wickedness before The LORD, whom Jezebel his wife influenced."

**2 Kings 1:1-18:** This chapter shows God's readiness to let humanity know how much He cares and is prepared to meet our needs when He is acknowledged. The events of this passage have lessons for all people, but especially those in authority, who do not rely on God. King Ahaziah of Israel, Ahab's son and successor, failed to recognize that God is the One who enthrones and dethrones leaders. He also failed to realize that God is the giver and taker of life. Thus God is the only One who should be consulted in all matters of life. Rather, he sent to inquire from a worldly god, בַּעַל זְבוּב; Baal-Zebub, at Ekron. Bruce (p. 419) opined that the name Baal-Zebub, which means 'lord of the flies,' may be a parody on Baal-zebul – 'Baal the prince,' or 'lord of the high place,' a title of Canaanite Baal. For a king of Israel to consult any other 'god' apart from Yahweh was a great affront to the status of Israel's God.

So, the action of the king brought him face to face with God's disapproval shown through Elijah, the prophet. His messengers were intercepted by the prophet and were turned back with a rebuke to the king and a message that God had decided to cut his life short for failing to acknowledge Him. In anger, the king sent two sets of army to arrest the man of God but they met their untimely death. The prophet demonstrated his position as the 'Fire prophet' when he called down fire from heaven that consumed them. It is not easy for one to understand the prophet's action, whether it was to reveal God's power or an act of self-defense. Accordingly, Carson (p. 363) observed:

The horrific fate of the two captains and their companies in vs. 9-12 is difficult to explain. Perhaps Elijah's life was in danger from Ahaziah as it had been earlier from Ahab and Jezebel. (The angel's words to Elijah in vs. 15 - '*do not be afraid of him*' - give some support to this view.) Or perhaps Ahaziah had to learn that a man of God, like God himself, was not to be ordered around.

Certainly, there was need for the king and the army commanders to know that the man of God could not be ordered about just like that. They should not have forgotten that he was not only God's spokesperson and the chief crusader against the vices of his generation but also the Commander-in-chief of God's army on earth. It might also be that Elijah noticed sarcasm in the tone with which the commander summoned him. It could be deduced from Elijah's reply, then, that he wanted the commander to know that he really was a man of God: אִם-אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אָנִי; "If I am a man of God..." The incident is also a revelation that people who fail to respect true ministers of God would not go unpunished. The commander of the third batch therefore demonstrated humility and acknowledged the man of God and consequently saved his head. In the view of Gaebel (p. 173), 'the third captain was, apparently, of finer spiritual fiber than the



preceding two and the king himself. He struck the fine balance of doing his duty, but not without recourse to God as the higher power' (cf. Matt 22:21; 1 Pet 2:17).

**2 Kings 2:1-15:** The passage here tells of the last part of the ministry of Prophet Elijah. The passage shows that God will ensure that the work of His kingdom continues. Elijah, knowing that his ministry had come to an end and that God would take him up, decided to visit all those who were being trained to continue the prophetic ministry. Elisha, his servant was with him throughout the journey from Gilgal through Bethel, Jericho, and across the Jordan. In all these places, the passage shows a genuine concern of Elijah for fellow ministers as he visited them to probably encourage them to continue the good work of the kingdom. The passage reveals the determination of the young servant of Elijah, Elisha, in continuing his walk with his master till the end. Elisha never gave up in the journeys of his master to all the places where the trainee prophets were and even to the region beyond the River Jordan.

Even at the point of being taken to heaven, there was a demonstration of God's power as Elijah parted the Jordan and passed through with his servant on dry ground:

וַיִּכָּה אֶת-הַמַּיִם וַיַּחצוּ הַנָּהָר וַהֲנָה וַיַּעֲבְרוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם בַּחֲרֹבָה:

“...And (he) struck the waters, and they were divided here and there, so the two of them went over on dry ground” (vs. 8). This miracle clearly parallels the parting of the Red Sea and Jordan for the Israelites and symbolizes the unchanging power of God in all circumstances. Probably, as a gesture for obedience and most importantly to ensure continuity of ministry, Elijah asked his servant what he would desire from him or whatever he might need. This also reveals the readiness of Elijah to help Elisha with whatever the latter might need to continue his ministry as a prophet.

In response, Elisha requested for a double portion of the master's spiritual strength or gift: אֵלַי: ; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלִישָׁע וַיְהִי-נָא פִי-שְׁנַיִם בְּרוּחְךָ “And Elisha said, Please, let a double portion of your spirit come upon me”. The word “spirit” (Heb. רוּחַ) which is used here is what is commonly equated to ‘God’s anointing on a person’. It is usually a measure of a divine presence in someone’s life. Though many people commonly associate such a divine presence with pouring of oil on a person, this is not wholly true, as there was no oil involved in the Elijah-Elisha interaction. Generally, then, a person’s spiritual strength is determined by God’s spirit in the person (or anything associated with the person), and received through any medium that God decides, but not necessarily anointing oil. God has used other media (besides the anointing oil) like Moses’ staff and Elijah’s mantle in the OT and Paul’s handkerchiefs and aprons in the NT.

Furthermore, the request of a double portion such as spelt out in Deuteronomy 21:17 undoubtedly shows Elisha’s claim to the first-born’s right. Such request was a demonstration of faith in God and a readiness to walk in the steps of his master and even work harder. It also indicates that Elisha was asking for the status as rightful heir to the prophetic leader’s role (Hobbs 1985:21), and will additionally mark Elisha as firstborn or leader among the prophets that Elijah was leaving behind (Bruce 420). According to Gaebelein (p. 176), Elisha asked for the firstborn’s “double portion” for especially granted spiritual power far beyond his own capabilities to meet the responsibilities of the awesome task that lay before him. He wished, virtually, that Elijah’s mighty prowess might continue to live through him. That is, his expectation was to continue to perform the mighty works of his master so that there could be continuity of the revolution and spiritual reforms that his boss had began.

Interestingly, from Elijah's answer, it is apparent that to receive divine power and demonstrate it or not does not lie within the decision of any person. As one who had been in charge of such immense power and demonstrated it whenever there was the need, one would conclude that he could easily pass it on to whoever he wished and whenever. But that was far from the truth. It was the prerogative of God. So Elijah expertly dropped the truth: **הַקָּשִׁיתָ לְשֹׂאֵל** ; “You have asked a hard (or difficult) thing...” (vs. 10). This shows that he was just a custodian and a steward of God's power. But at least, he could still advise him to be empowered by God. Therefore, he did not end with that answer but added, **לְשֹׂאֵל אִם-תֵּרְאֶה אֹתִי לִקְחַת מֵאַחֶיךָ יְהִי-לְךָ כֵּן וְאַם-אֵין לֹא יִהְיֶה** ; that is, “...Yet if you see me when I am being taken from you, it will be yours, otherwise not” (vs. 10).

Elijah intimated that his prospective successor could experience the desired supernatural blessings probably on two conditions. First, when he remains spiritually alert (or sensitive); that is, he should remain opened to the spiritual field. This finds support from Adeyemo when he wrote that ‘a man of God must be able to see the whole picture, both physically and spiritually, if he is to benefit from heavenly gifts’ (p. 444). Such is the guidance and advise that Eli, the High Priest gave Samuel before the boy could respond to the spiritual voice of God. Scripture revealed concerning the young Samuel that hitherto, ‘the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him’ (1 Sam 2:7-10).

Second, Elisha could experience the supernatural blessings probably when his master was completely off the scene. This is to teach that a servant could only aspire to perform better than the boss when the latter has left the scene. May be, possessing such inordinate ambition would be tantamount to arrogance and might lead to a fall. For with what mind would a servant wish to compete and outdo the boss, if it was not for bragging? The Lord Jesus himself said that a disciple (or student or servant) cannot be greater than the master (Matt 10:24-25; cf. John 13:16). The Lord himself established this point: “...Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). In effect, the Lord said that the disciples would perform better after He had left the scene. This means that Elisha's wish could become effective upon the departure of Elijah.

Indeed, Elisha's faith paid off in the end; his request was granted by God. As Elijah was being carried up by the flaming chariots, scripture records the following:

**וַיֵּלֶךְ רָאָה וְהוּא מִצַּעַק אָבִיו אֲבִי רֶכֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל וּפָרָשָׁי** ; “And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and their horsemen” (vs. 12). This was not just an ordinary cry; it was a desperate one that elicited further action: “He perceived Elijah to be the true might and protection of God's people. He tore his clothes as a sign of mourning at the people's loss” (Carson 364).

### **הִנֵּה אֵלֶיךָ אֶת-הָאֵשׁ הַנְּבִיא ; Behold Elijah! The “Fire Prophet”**

No doubt, Elijah was a prophet of “fire”. On several occasions, this uncompromising prophet was engaged with “fire from God”: he challenged the prophets of Baal to a “fire contest” and won; he experienced God's presence at Mount Carmel in the form of “fire” (though God did not speak through it); twice, he called “fire” from heaven to consume the officers of King Ahaziah's armies,

and finally he was taken up to heaven in רֶכֶב־אֵשׁ ; “a chariot of fire,” וְסוּסֵי־אֵשׁ “and horses of fire.”

In evaluating the ministry of Prophet Elijah, it is important to consider him in the light of the bigger picture. If one is looking for somebody in the land of Israel who demonstrated passion for God's house, there is no doubt that Elijah's name will pop up. His zeal for ensuring covenant faithfulness on the part of the Hebrew nation was unparalleled. Olley (p. 47) commented that his driving passion is consistent with the whole of the Former Prophets: the worship and service of YHWH alone, with opposition to worship of other gods and to unjust practices. Some scholars have even drawn some parallels between him and Moses. For example, Tonstad (p. 257) posited that there are numerous allusions in the text to show that the theophany given to Israel at the time of the Exodus is in view when Elijah arrived at Horeb (Exod 19, 16-18) and that the story alludes to Moses on a personal level. Interestingly, while Moses' ministry was launched with a fire encounter, Elijah climaxed his ministry with a triumphant ride in chariots of fire. Like Moses, God answered Elijah by fire (Exod 19:18-19; cf. 1 Kgs 18: 37-38).

Additionally, Elijah, as in the case of Moses, engaged a great contest with forces of apostasy. He did not refrain from leveling monumental challenges, confident that Yahweh would fulfill his expectation. As Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Sinai (or Horeb), the prophet through whom Israel was brought into covenant relationship with God, so Elijah was the prophet through whom the covenant community were brought back to faithfulness required by the covenant. Tonstad (p. 263) again made the following comments:

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear as conversational partners of Jesus in what is construed as a preparation for the latter's death (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36)...The joint appearance of Moses and Elijah has the implication that they are characters of an exceptional order and that they are two of a kind...it suggests that to the New Testament writers Moses and Elijah transmit their legacy on the same wavelength.

Elijah is one of the OT figures most mentioned in the NT where he is referred to as Elias (Matt 11:14; cf. Luke 1:17). While those who believe in reincarnation might identify John the Baptist as an incarnate of Prophet Elijah, Bible believers should rather understand the former as ministering in the spirit and power of the latter. The explanation for Elijah's confidence lay in the fact that, like Moses, he was a man of prevailing, powerful prayer (1 Kgs 18:36-37, 42) (DeVries 1985:210). In fact, Elder James classified Elijah as a righteous man and used his prayer as a standard for an all-time effectual and fervent prayer, though he was a man of passion just like any person (Jam 5:16-18). From Halley's assessment, “His rare, sudden and brief appearances, his undaunted courage and fiery zeal, the brilliance of his triumphs, the pathos of his despondency, the glory of his departure, and the calm beauty of his reappearance at the Mt. of Transfiguration, make him one of the grandest characters Israel ever produced” (1962:198).

## Conclusion

The discussion has revealed Elijah as one of the fearless and greatest prophets in Israel. This is seen in the fact that he continued in his call as a prophet to deal with sin till the time God whisked him up to heaven. No single person, in my evaluation, apart from the Lord Jesus Christ himself

demonstrated such zeal for Israel's God, and faced such a great opposition, yet championed a revolution that yielded results as Elijah did in Israel. His determination to stamp his authority on the Northern Kingdom of Israel as God's ambassador was unmatched.

Elijah's ability to carry the whole land on his spiritual shoulders was enough pointer to the measure of anointing he possessed. No wonder, the crusade he championed had to be continued by three great personalities with his anointing apportioned into three. Indeed, believers have a lot to learn from this man who defied death and whose spirit crossed into the NT to testify of the coming of the Messiah (Mal 4:5; cf. Matt 11:14; Luke 1:17; 9:30). Ministers of God in particular should accept the challenge offered by Elijah to press on and never give up even in difficult times till they bring their services to a glorious end. Elijah truly was the "Fire Prophet."

### References

- Adeyemo T 2006. *African Bible Commentary*. Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers.
- Bruce F F 1979. *New International Bible Commentary, (Based on the NIV)*. (revised edition). Grand Rapids: Michigan, Zondervan.
- Carson D A 1993. *New Bible Commentary*. (21<sup>st</sup> century edition). Leicester, England. Inter-Varsity Press.
- DeVries S J 1985. *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Kings*. Waco. Texas; Word Books, Publisher.
- Douglas J D and Tenney M C 1963. *New International Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Epp-Tiessen D 2006. The Renewal of Elijah: 1 Kings 19. *Direction* 35, 1:33-43.
- Gaebelein F E 1992. *Expositor's Bible Commentary (with the New International Version): Deuteronomy – 2 Samuel* (vol 3). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1998 *Expositor's Bible Commentary (with the New International Version): 1 Kings - Job*. (vol 4). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Glover N 2006. Elijah versus the narrative of Elijah: The contest between the Prophet and the Word. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30, 4:449-462.
- Guerra A J 2002. *Family Matters: The Role of Christianity in the formation of the Western Family*. St. Paul, Minnesota; Paragon House.
- Halley H H 1962. *Halley's Bible Handbook: An Abbreviated Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Hobbs T K 1985. *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Kings*. Waco. Texas: Word Books, Publisher.
- Holladay W L 1988. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Eerdmans Pub. Company.
- Matthews V H 2006. *Manners and Customs in the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to Daily Life in Bible Times*. 3rd edition. Peabody, Massachusetts; Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.
- Oley J W 1998. YHWH and His Zealous Prophet: The presentation of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 80:25-51.
- Rusak T 2008. The Clash of Cults on Mount Carmel: Do Archeological records and Historical documents support the biblical episode of Elijah and the Ba'al Priests? *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 22, 1:29-46.
- Staurt D 1985. *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Kings*. Waco, Texas; Word Books, Publisher.
- Tonstad S 2005. The Limits of Power: Revisiting Elijah at Horeb. *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 19, 2:253-266.