

# Elijah the Prophet

by Tim Kelley

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Being that we're only a few short weeks from Passover, it's appropriate that we turn our minds to some of the important themes of this very important season. For all of us with a Judeo – Christian background, Passover looks back at the Exodus from Egypt, a monumental event in the lives of our forefathers. Those of us with Christian backgrounds will also focus on another ancient event – the death and resurrection of Messiah Yeshua. The Jewish people on the other hand, will look forward to another event, the coming of The Messiah, the gathering of the exiles, and the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel.

As we've noted in past studies on this topic, the Passover was a one-time event. It happened over 3500 years ago, and each year since, the people of YHVH have observed a *zekar*, a remembrance of the original Passover. YHVH gave instructions for the proper observance of the original Passover, and He gave us guidelines as to how to observe it since. Within those guidelines, traditions developed that helped the believer gain from Passover what they believed YHVH wanted them to gain. For instance, the Jewish people developed the *sedar* – a set order for the evening that included a meal and discussion of the Passover event – based on the instructions found in the Tnakh. Christians (those who observed Passover instead of Easter) built traditions based on what's been called the *New Testament* or *Christian Passover*. This usually included a sermon along with the drinking of a thimble full of wine and the eating of a piece of broken matzah, much like the Catholic *Eucharist*.

In either case, Jewish or Christian, tradition is a large part of their Passover observance. In this study, I want to talk about one such tradition and expand on it a little in order to provide a deeper understanding of a very important Biblical character, one who plays a large part in the understanding of a *coming*, or a *returning* Messiah. That person is Elijah the Prophet. Elijah is very important to the Jewish people because they know that, based on scripture, one like Elijah would precede the coming of the Messiah. On the other hand, the Christians believe that this *Elijah figure* has already come in the person of John the Baptist.

In this study, we'll take a look at the person of Elijah - who he was and what he did, as well as prophecies about him. Then we'll compare him to John the Baptist, and finally, we'll look at the Jewish *sedar* and why Elijah is part of it.

## Who Is Elijah? -

Elijah's name (*Eliyahu* in Hebrew) means "*Yahvey is my God*". The Jewish people refer to him as *Eliyahu Ha-Navi* – *Elijah the Prophet*. In the New Testament, he's called Elias because of the Greek requirement to end a male proper name with the sound "*us*" or "*uz*". He's introduced in the book of 1 Kings as *Elijah the Tishbite*. When we first see him, he's proclaiming to Ahab, the King of Israel, that *by his* (Elijah's) *word*, there would be no rain.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Kings 17:1** Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

We know very little about Elijah. Unlike other prophets, we are provided no genealogy or background . . . he just appears. Though there's speculation that he descended from the tribe of Dan or Benjamin, it's quite possible that he wasn't an Israelite at all, but rather a sojourner. In the above passage we see the phrase "*of Tishbe in Gilead*". Gilead is in the mountainous area east of the Jordan River in what's today called Jordan, and within that region, there's no place called Tishbe. Instead, the word Tishbe is spelled the same way as the Hebrew word *toshav*,

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which means sojourner. A *toshav* is a *ger* (stranger) who turns to the God of Israel – a proselyte you might say. Thus Elijah may have been a non-Israelite believer in the God of Abraham, just as Caleb was.

After his unusual entry into the historical record of the northern tribes, Elijah spends the early part of the drought along a brook somewhere east of the Jordan River where he is fed by ravens who brought him bread and meat each morning and evening. Soon the brook ran dry and he relocated to a city roughly 100 miles north of the Sea of Galilee where he lodged with a woman who, when he met her, was preparing what she had considered to be her last meal. In preparation for that meal it's mentioned twice that the woman was gathering sticks. The second mention is quite specific –

<sup>KJV</sup> **1 Kings 17:12** And she said, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering **two sticks**, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die.

Two sticks. Not hardly enough to cook bread over, but never-the-less, she thought she could do it with two. This may only be a coincidence, but the only other place in scripture where two sticks is mentioned is in Ezekiel 37, the prophecy of the Two Sticks of Israel. Going on, we see that the duration of the drought, the flour and oil never ran out – The woman, her son, and Elijah were miraculously sustained. Then the son got sick and died. What happened? Was it the food? - the same food that was being provided by God? 'Seems strange, but for whatever reason, Elijah's miracle of restoring life to the child is what finally convinced the woman that Elijah was indeed a man of God -

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Kings 17:23-24** And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives." <sup>24</sup> And the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

So with his confidence bolstered, Elijah returns to Ahab, defeats the prophets of Baal, then runs ahead of Ahab's chariot from Carmel to Jezreel – a distance of about 20 miles. But Elijah's confidence didn't last long, for when Ahab announced to his wife what Elijah had done to her pagan prophets, she threatened his life and Elijah fled to Judah, praying for God to take his life. Instead of taking his life, God had pity on Elijah, sent angels to feed him, and then without any additional food, sent him on a forty day trip to Mount Sinai. At the mountain, YHVH showed Elijah great thunder, earthquakes, fire, and wind, but at the end, He spoke to Elijah as a still, small voice, a message to him that God could manifest Himself as he pleased.

His time on Mt. Sinai must have been a turning point in Elijah's life. He learned that it doesn't take great miracles to hear from God, and apparently his faith soared. As time went on, King Ahab coveted the vineyard of Nabal and allowed his wife Jezebel to take it by force. YHVH sent Elijah to Ahab's home to condemn him for the murder of Nabal, prophesying that both Ahab and Jezebel would soon die. Later, Elijah challenges Ahab's son Ahaziah who sends two groups of soldiers to bring him back to Samaria, but Elijah calls down fire from heaven to consume them.

Thus Elijah ends his ministry on a high note, being carried off in a flaming chariot as Elisha, his student, carries on the work of prophesying to Israel.

Of all the events of his life, Elijah is best known for his encounter with the Prophets of Baal. At that time in Israel's history, practically all the non-Jewish Israelites had compromised their allegiance to YHVH, mixing the worship of Him with the worship of the pagan gods. So Elijah confronts them -

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<sup>KJV</sup> **1 Kings 18:21** And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

This is an interesting question. Why couldn't they make up their minds who they were going to serve? Why couldn't they say we're going to follow the god who we know is God, the one who redeemed us and saved us from our enemies, and stop this foolishness? This was the message Elijah was trying to convey. If we understand the Hebrew of this passage, which most assuredly the Israelites would have, we see that Elijah carefully chose his words. The Hebrew word for *halt* in this passage is *pesach* . . . *Passover* ( פּוֹסַח – Strong's 6452), which up to this time had only been used 4 times in the scriptures, 3 times in reference to the Passover, and one time to describe Jonathan's lame son Miphibosheth. The word means *to be limp*. For Israel, it was a state of mind – mixed, neither hot nor cold – sort of neutral. They didn't really have an opinion – they thought they could have it both ways. You can see it in their response, or rather, their lack of response – “*And the people answered him not a word.*”

This pretty much sums up Elijah's ministry. He was a man who was willing to speak out against the sins of his people and stand up to the corrupt leaders of his day. Now let's take a look at what the Jewish people thought about Elijah. After all, their understanding of his role in end-time messianic affairs had much to do with their acceptance or rejection of Yeshua.

### Jewish Understanding –

The Jewish understanding of Elijah's role in end-time affairs stems primarily from one prophecy –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Malachi 4:5** Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

Actually, this is only part of a prophecy given in response to the carelessness in worship and the lack of love for their neighbor that was a part of the Jewish culture in the days of Nehemiah. The prophecy actually begins with God saying that He is going to send a messenger to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Malachi 3:1** "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord (adon) whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD (YHVH) of hosts.

The messenger spoken of here is understood to be either Elijah the prophet or Messiah himself, but the text seems to imply that the *messenger* actually is Elijah since he is preparing the way for the *adon* (the lord). Then we have to ask who is the *he* in verses 2 & 3 –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Malachi 3:3** He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, And purge them as gold and silver, That they may offer to the LORD An offering in righteousness.

This word refiner in this passage is an interesting word. The Hebrew is *tsaraph* ( צָרַף – Strong's 6884) and it means “*to smelt, refine, test*”. What's interesting is that after Elijah called for a drought in Israel, and after the brook dried up, he traveled well over 100 miles to the city of Tsarephath ( צַרְפַּת – Strong's 6886) – a name that means *refinery*. Could this be another indication of the identity of the *messenger* in this passage?

Continuing with the prophecy, we see the role of Elijah when he comes -

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**Malachi 4:5-6** <sup>5</sup> Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: <sup>6</sup> And he shall (re)turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers,

Elijah's job is to return the heart of the fathers (the love of YHVH expressed by the father's – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to the children of Israel so that the children will have the heart of the fathers. This is how the Jewish people understood the role of Elijah, after all, isn't that what happened on Mt. Carmel? The people, though for a fleeting moment, were on fire for God.

Returning the children's hearts to The Fathers is an idiomatic expression for turning the people to the Torah, as was clearly stated in the previous verse –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Malachi 4:4** "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

You'll remember, Elijah had spent time at Horeb (Mt. Sinai) himself and probably discussed the Torah with YHVH in order to gain a better understanding. Thus, the first century Jewish people believed Elijah would come to restore the true understanding of the Torah in preparation for the coming Messiah.

The Jews also thought of Elijah as the *Friend of the Bridegroom*, the one who announces the arrival of the groom. This, of course, is based on the traditional Jewish wedding practice and the Malachi prophecy that Elijah would precede the arrival of The Messiah.<sup>1</sup>

Another tradition is that when Elijah arrived, he would inform all the Israelites of their exact genealogical lineage, including which tribe they descended from. Genealogy was very important to the Hebrew people because it determined inheritance and roles. We can see evidence of this throughout the scripture, including the genealogy of Messiah Yeshua.

The Jewish belief that Elijah would come before the Messiah was so ingrained in their minds that when Yeshua came without *their understanding* of Elijah's role coming to pass, they subsequently dismissed Him as a Messianic candidate. Without a preceding Elijah, Yeshua had to be an imposter. Here's a quote from the a book by Justin Martyr (approx. 100 CE), a man considered to be an early church father. In this quote, the author is describing his discussion with a Jewish Rabbi who makes it clear that the Jews would not accept a Messiah without an Elijah –

"(the rabbi says) . . . but if the Messiah has been born and exists anywhere, He is not known, nor is He conscious of His own existence, nor has He any power until Elias comes to anoint Him and to make Him manifest to all. But you [Christians] have believed this foolish rumor, and you have invented for yourselves a Christ for whom you blindly give up your lives." <sup>2</sup>

This passage illustrates the thinking of the Jewish people in the years before and shortly after the advent of The Messiah. If Yeshua wanted for at least some of the Jewish people in His day to believe that He was indeed the Messiah, then it would stand to reason that he would see to it that some of their expectations were met. Thus, we should be able to find passages within the New Testament that indicate that some of these Jewish expectations did indeed come to pass . . . and of course, we do. John the Baptist was the first century fulfillment of the Elijah ministry. Let's look at some of the passages that show how his ministry was a fulfillment of their expectations.

### John the Baptist, a Type of Elijah -

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<sup>1</sup> In the ancient Jewish wedding, the friend of the groom, what we would call the *best man*, would go before the groom and announce his arrival to *fetch* his bride.

<sup>2</sup> The Dialogue with Trypho the Jew – Chapter 8, vs. 4 - <http://www.bombaxo.com/trypho.html>

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Just prior to his conception, the angel Gabriel prophesied about the work that John the Baptist would do –

**Luke 1:13-17** But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah. . . your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. <sup>15</sup> . . . and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. <sup>16</sup> And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, <sup>17</sup> and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children . . . to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

So right from the beginning we know that John's role was to be a fulfillment of the Malachi prophecy. Shortly into his ministry, John fulfilled one the most important Jewish expectations, the anointing of the Messiah.

It always puzzled me what Yeshua meant when He said –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 3:15** But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

This, of course, was said just prior to His baptism. John did not consider himself worthy to baptize the Son of God, but Yeshua said it needed to be done to fulfill righteousness. What does that mean? The Greek word for righteousness is *dikaioisune* {dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay}. The primary Strong's definition is –

"in a broad sense: state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God"

In other words, Yeshua could have been saying that He needed to be baptized by John in order to fulfill what he ought to be. If you recall, the Jews in the first century did not believe that The Messiah could start His ministry until he was anointed by Elijah. Let's look at that passage again from Justin Martyr's book -

" . . . but if the Messiah has been born and exists anywhere, He is not known, nor is He conscious of His own existence, nor has He any power until Elias comes to anoint Him and to make Him manifest to all.

The Jews believed that, like Elijah who was commissioned to anoint the next King of Israel, the next king of Judah, and his successor Elisha, the coming Elijah would do the same. Though it might be considered that Yeshua was John's successor, it's abundantly clear Yeshua was not yet ready to be anointed King of all Israel. Yet the Jews believed the coming Elijah would anoint the coming Messiah, so where do we see any indication that Yeshua was anointed by John? It's nowhere in the text, but it's implied by the fact that John did indeed baptize Yeshua in the Jordan River. Look at this quote from the Jewish Encyclopedia –

According to rabbinical teachings, which dominated even during the existence of the Temple (Pes. viii. 8), Baptism, next to circumcision and sacrifice, was an absolutely necessary condition to be fulfilled by a proselyte to Judaism . . . The next ceremony, adopted shortly after the others, was the imposition of hands, which, it is known, was the usage of the Jews at the ordination of a rabbi. Anointing with oil, which at first also accompanied the act of Baptism, and was analogous to the anointment of priests among the Jews, was not a necessary condition.<sup>3</sup>

So it's likely that after His baptism, Yeshua was anointed by John as was the custom of the day. Thus Yeshua fulfilled the expectations of the Jewish believers.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2456-baptism> 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph

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John also spoke of himself as the *Friend of the Bridegroom*. In Jewish end-time eschatology, Moses is considered to be the *Friend of the Bride* and Elijah is the *Friend of the Bridegroom*. These are both taken from the ancient Hebrew wedding culture and Yeshua speaks of these wedding characters also. Jewish eschatology also indicates that the Wedding of the Messiah would take place during the fall festival season and that the wedding supper would take place at Sukkot – the Feast of Tabernacles. The only time you would find the two “friends” and the Bridegroom together would be at the wedding supper, yet some of Yeshua’s disciples saw a vision of it during their travels with Him –

**ESV Matthew 17:1** And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. <sup>3</sup> And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him.

Being that they were Jews, the disciples recognized this as a prophet event - framed in the Festival of Sukkot - and thus offered to build each of them a sukkah. When the vision was over and they were headed down the mountain, one of them asked –

**Matthew 17:10** . . . "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"

Yeshua’s answer was that the scribes are correct! Elijah must come, and had come in the person of John the Baptist.

John never claimed to be Elijah, but he came close. In the later part of his ministry, John had been involved in a discussion with his disciples and certain Jew over his (John’s) opinion of Yeshua who seemingly was beginning to baptize more people than John had. It seems this certain Jew was wanting to stir up a little jealousy, but John, knowing his role, answered them saying –

**John 3:27-30** . . . "A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. <sup>28</sup> You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' <sup>29</sup> The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. <sup>30</sup> He must increase, but I must decrease."

John clearly understood that his role was to prepare the bride, and now Yeshua was interacting with the bride; and just as Elijah stepped back once Elisha was anointed, it was his time to step back also.

So here are just a few examples of how John the Baptist filled the role of Elijah. There are many more.

### **Jewish Tradition -**

Let’s now look at how the person of Elijah became associated with the Passover season.

One thing is very obvious. As we’ve studied in the past, if Yeshua was indeed born during the fall festival season, then John, the first century Elijah, being that he was six month’s older, would have been born during Passover. Thus 30 years later, during the Passover, John would have started his ministry.

We’ve also seen the connection of the term *pesach* to the Mount Carmel incident . . . another Passover connection.

Finally, there’s the Passover Seder itself. On the Seder table there are four cups of wine, each of which pertain to the four “I will’s” of Exodus 6. In addition, there’s the cup for Elijah. According to tradition, no one should drink from that cup because it’s Elijah’s cup. After the meal, the children gather at the open door of the house to see if Elijah’s coming.

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Unfortunately, the Cup of Elijah has no Biblical basis – at least not in Judaism. To explain what I mean, let me quote from a short article entitled “Cup of Elijah – Passover Tradition” by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf –

“Elijah the Prophet occupies a fascinating place in Jewish historical consciousness. Our tradition teaches that as history approaches the climactic era of universal peace and brotherhood, it will be Elijah the Prophet who announces the heralding of the messianic era. Additionally, when the Talmud is unable to definitively resolve certain questions of law or practice, it often states that the question have to wait for Elijah. With the advent of the final era, one of Elijah's roles will be to resolve all those lingering scholarly quandaries.

There is an opinion in the Talmud which states that five cups of wine, not four, are to be drunk at the Seder. In practice we follow the majority opinion and drink only four cups. In deference to the minority opinion, however, we pour the Fifth Cup of wine even though no one drinks from it. This Fifth Cup of wine bears the name of Elijah because it is he who will eventually resolve this question, as well as many others”.<sup>4</sup>

This is the opinion of just one Jewish Rabbi, but it's shared by many others including teachers on Chabad.org, a Hasidic Jewish site.<sup>5</sup> It's unfortunate that this beautiful tradition comes to us simply as a result of a Talmudic argument because it could be so much more, for we see that Elijah did come at Passover, and if the type fits the anti-type, he will come again at a future Passover and usher in the greatest time of redemption the world has ever seen.

I hope this study gives us a little more insight into the person of Elijah and the role he plays in Passover season.

Shalom Aleichem

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mt.net/~watcher/elijahpassover.html>

<sup>5</sup> See “The Silent Cup – What is Elijah's Cup all About?” by Israel Rubin - [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/117141/jewish/The-Silent-Cup.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/117141/jewish/The-Silent-Cup.htm)