

1 KINGS 17

17:1

Elijah the prophet is introduced. The information we are given about Elijah's past and origins is contained entirely in verse 1: "Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead." Gilead is located in the mountains east of the River Jordan and west of the An-Nafud Desert. The land was allocated in the time of Joshua to the tribes of Gad and Rueben. That the phrasing "of the inhabitants of Gilead" was used rather than just "of Gilead" or "Gileadite" could be a clue as to his origins. Elijah may have been from the Tishbe in Galilee but resided in Gilead. In fact, the Hebrew word translated as "the inhabitants of" could also be translated as "sojourner," which is how it is used to describe Abraham in Genesis 23:4. The word has the same letters as "Tishbite," opening two other ways to translate the phrase: "Elijah from Tishbe, who was one of the settlers in Gilead" or "Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbe in Gilead." It is also possible Elijah was not an Israelite but a convert from somewhere outside of Israel.

17:2-7

"Before Jordan" could imply east or west. Most scholars settle on east, but Cherith was definitely a tributary to the Jordan River and was most likely a wadi, or seasonal water source common in the Holy Land. However, the description implies a spring since the water didn't run out until deeper into the drought. The word *cherith* comes from a root meaning "cut," apt because the water cuts through the mountain. The name also implies Elijah's cutting himself off from Israel. In the area of Cherith, although most likely not the same location, is the amazing St. George Monastery built into the side of a cliff during the Crusades. Elijah's actions here were a major influence on the later monastic lifestyle.

Some people question the word “ravens,” wondering if it actually referred to a group of people whose tribe name sounded like the Hebrew word for “raven.” The Biblical text is describing a miracle and showing Elijah’s isolation in the process. Both would be undercut if these ravens were people.

17:8–16

Zarephath is on the coast of the Mediterranean in modern-day Lebanon between Sidon and Tyre, and In Elijah’s day it belonged to Sidon, which was Jezebel’s hometown. The word probably comes from the root *tsarap*, which means “to smelt or refine,” possibly because of a smelting trade prevalent in the town. This refiner’s fire could be symbolic of what the Lord was doing with Israel through the famine and foreshadows Elijah’s actions in the next chapter.

The widow’s status as either an Israelite or Canaanite does not come up, but because Jesus said, “Many widows were in Israel. . . . But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta” (Luke 4:25–26), it seems highly likely she was not an Israelite. It is possible Elijah recognized her as a widow because she was wearing widow clothing and the age of her child implied that she was recently widowed.

“Cake” in King James English did not imply something sweet, and the Hebrew word used refers specifically to a flat bread made quickly in a fire, usually by heating a stone with flames and placing a thin layer of dough on it. This causes the dough to cook quickly from the dual heat of the fire and the heat stored in the stone. The bread is similar to Passover matzah, except that matzah is not allowed to rise at all. These cakes can also be cooked in the ashes of a fire (see 1 Kings 19:6).

17:17–18

Any number of illnesses are associated with the malnourishment resulting from a famine or from an inability to refresh water supply. “No breath left in him” might be a hint that the son’s illness was of a respiratory nature. However, the Hebrew word for “breath” is the same for “spirit” and “soul,” which might therefore mean the son had actually died.

“What have I to do with thee?” or “What do you have against me?” The widow’s mention of remembering sin could mean that she had been burdened by some sin in her past and felt that her son’s illness was her penance. Or she might have been expressing that the job of a prophet is to go around calling people to repentance, and she felt that Elijah was slacking in his job by staying with her. The idea that therefore Elijah was “slaying” her son follows from both since he could represent God’s judgment in the

first example and since for the second, death is often the result of a people not listening to a prophet, and Elijah was preventing the people from listening.

17:19–23

The English word “loft” gives us the impression of some kind of dusty attic partially open to the lower floor. While that is a possibility, it’s more likely that Elijah was sleeping on the roof of the widow’s home. Flat-roofed structures were typical in the area, and even when there is not a drought, it does not often rain in the Holy Land, making sleeping outside on a roof quite pleasant. The Hebrew word translated here as “loft” also implies a going up or skyward, almost like taking the child up to a Canaanite “high place.” The Canaanite high places were tops of hills or mountains where the Canaanites would worship Baal or other gods, sometimes in rituals that included human sacrifice. But in typical Elijah fashion the lofty abode is quite a bit lower and more humble than a center of Baal worship. The story is also the reverse image of a sacrifice, where instead of taking a living animal or human to be killed, the dying or dead child is taken up to be healed or resurrected.

In fact, the sacrifice theme fits in well with the overall temple theme in this section. There is the possible heat from a smelter’s furnace like the altar and incense, bread like the shewbread, oil for the menorah (which like in the miracle of Hannukah did not run out), and Elijah’s action of stretching himself three times for the ritual to show deep sincerity to God so as to invoke God’s attention.

The King James Version switches to using “soul” where before “breath” was used. The emphasis on breath and soul reminds us of Genesis 2:7, when God gave Adam the “breath of life.” Parallel to the temple imagery, the widow with her sin represents Eve with her transgression. Instead of the lush Garden of Eden the setting is a famine ravaged city, and instead of the word of God creating life, the word of Elijah causes a famine.

17:24

It is interesting that the widow’s testimony of Elijah’s connection to God didn’t come when Elijah provided her with food through the drought, especially considering she was resigned to death when Elijah first approached her in verse 12. Rather, her testimony came at this point when her son was healed. She again used the phrase “man of God,” implying that when she used it previously in verse 18 it was likely sarcastic. The widow’s faith seems to have come through this refiner’s fire. Perhaps her newfound testimony could be compared to that of Sariah, who first complained that Lehi was a visionary man (that is, crazy) but then later when her sons were saved knew that Lehi was a visionary man (that is, a man of God who received trustworthy revelations).

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