

Journeying with Elijah: The Tishbite and His Call

Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall certainly be neither dew nor rain during these years, except by my word” (1 Kings 17:1).

As we approach the heart of Elijah’s story, we see his struggles triumphs, and divine calling unfold. But our first glimpse of him in 1 Kings 17:1 offers no grand announcement or elaborate introduction. Elijah simply steps onto the scene and delivers God’s stark message to King Ahab: *a drought is coming*. Unlike other prophets, who are introduced with “The word of the Lord came to so and so,” Elijah simply bursts forth and blurts out what he came to say. He is as a man driven by an inner, divine impulse—a man who embodies the very power of the Spirit.

Elijah’s origins are mysterious. He’s called “the Tishbite,” and scholars believe this points to a small, almost forgotten town called Tishbe in Upper Galilee. Tishbe’s exact location is uncertain. Some scholars suggest that it is not a place but a group or social class. Elijah was possibly a displaced person, perhaps a settler driven there by conflicts or invasions. In any case, God called Elijah, a man from an unassuming place, into a momentous calling.

We do know that Elijah settled in Gilead, which lay east of the Jordan, between the Yarmuk River to the north and an indistinct southern boundary near the Dead Sea. The Jabbok River bisected Gilead, making the land lush and fertile. The tribe of Manasseh gradually settled the dense forests in the region’s northern half. The tribe of Gad occupied the central lands around the Jabbok, and the Reubenites held the southern territory.

Scripture does not detail the region’s history in Elijah’s day, but as a settler and a prophet, he would have been impacted by the ongoing struggle to control this rich, strategic region. Depending upon his own tribal affiliation (or lack thereof), Gilead’s division among three Israelite tribes would also impact Elijah. Although the tribes were united under the banner of Israel, territorial or leadership disputes could erupt at any time.¹ Whether Elijah chose to settle in a politically unstable region or felt that he had no other options, he called Gilead home.

Long before Elijah’s time, Israel’s patriarchs and prophets walked Gilead’s rugged paths and encountered God. Gilead became a place of divine revelation and significant covenantal history, with Jacob’s divine encounters being part of this legacy. In this area, Jacob wrestled with the angel and solidified his place in Israel’s story (Genesis 32:24–30). Gilead was also the place

from which Jephthah, a judge of Israel, hailed (Judges 11:1–11). As was true of Jacob, Jephthah's story of redemption and leadership would become an important part of Israel's collective memory.

It may be that these historical and spiritual associations influenced Elijah's choice to settle in Gilead. For a prophet called to confront the idolatry and spiritual waywardness of Israel, living there could have easily evoked the sense of divine presence and purpose that marked his predecessors' lives. As Elijah wrestled with his call, Gilead's history of covenant faithfulness may have strengthened and affirmed his sense of God's enduring promises and transformative power. This sense of the place would seem perfectly aligned with Elijah's mission to call Israel back to faithfulness.

Such resonances would feed Elijah's deep sense of connection to his people's covenant history and remind him of the long line of faithful servants who had preceded him in God's service. As he navigated the turbulence of his times, such links to the past could only have helped Elijah to stand firm in an uncertain present.

Standing Firm and Being Spiritually Formed

Against the backdrop of shifting political allegiances and other external tensions, Elijah had to learn to stand firm. As a solitary but intense figure walking Gilead's paths, his heart must have burned with passion for Yahweh and His people, the local Baal worship tearing at his soul. For a man so devoted to Yahweh, the relentless assault on the sacred covenant would have been a source of perpetual grief.

In the quiet moments when dark shadows of demonic deception danced around Elijah's fellow Israelites, an agony of questions would have gnawed at his spirit: How could his people forsake the God who had led them through the wilderness, parted the seas, and rained down manna from heaven? What drove them to bow before lifeless idols and abandon the path of righteousness? How could they succumb to the fleeting pleasures of false gods?

Like Elijah, we face struggles, hardships, hard questions, and the need to exchange the familiar for the unfamiliar. Elijah's life mirrors God's call to His people to trust and obey, even when the path is uncertain, as it was for Abraham and his successors. We are all on a journey of spiritual formation, being shaped and molded by God's Spirit. It's not only about learning more or doing more; it is a matter of becoming more like Christ in our inner lives. It's about deepening our relationship with God, often through the trials and challenges we face. Like Elijah, we are learning to trust God completely, rely on His guidance, and stand firm in our calling, no matter the odds.

This is the stuff of spiritual formation, which is God’s ongoing work in shaping our character, attitudes, and actions. It includes practices such as prayer, Scripture meditation, and obedience to God’s leading. All of it transforms us and helps us to grow in our capacity to love God and others, so that in our moments of faith and challenge, we draw closer to God and fulfill our divine purpose.

This is part of God’s unfolding intent for *your* life. Embrace it, trusting that through every challenge, you are being formed and shaped by God’s own hand to become who you are meant to be in Christ, through His Spirit.

Prophetic Legitimacy and the Divine Council

In the realm of prophetic ministry, legitimacy is paramount. From the first mention of Elijah in Scripture, he is identified as a prophet. All prophets faced difficulty and opposition, and all of them made predictions. But were these the marks of a true prophet under the Mosaic economy? Were accurate predictions the main indicator of a prophet’s authenticity? We know that Balaam delivered four accurate prophecies. Yet he was a false prophet (Numbers 23:9–10, 21–24; 24:5–9, 17). Elijah, a God-appointed prophet, accurately declared before Ahab, Jezebel, and 850 false prophets that he would control the rain. It took three and a half years, but his prophecy proved valid.

True prophets foretell events to come, but the prophetic isn’t merely about the foretelling of events or demonstration of supernatural power. True prophetic legitimacy stems from a deeper, more profound connection with the divine. Jeremiah 23:18 captures this essential connection perfectly, asking, “For who has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word? Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it?” This passage highlights the critical difference between true prophets and false ones—the former stand in the divine council, seeing and hearing the word of Yahweh.

Elijah and the Council

When we consider Elijah, we see legitimacy anchored in this divine reality. Although there is no scriptural record of how he might have been initiated into the divine council, his declaration before King Ahab offers insight. Standing in the wicked king’s court and in the presence of his queen, Jezebel, and the court prophets of Baal and Asherah, Elijah asserted that he stood in the presence of Yahweh. This is not a rhetorical statement but a veiled reference to his place in the heavenly council. To Ahab and those around him, Elijah may have appeared as a lone, eccentric

man, yet Elijah knew that God, His throne, and all the attendants surrounding His throne backed his proclamation.

Elijah's confidence in this invisible reality would be further illustrated in his final moments on earth. As he prepared to depart by whirlwind, his soon-to-be successor, Elisha, asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Elijah's response was telling. He said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so" (2 Kings 2:10 LSB). The emphasis is not on seeing Elijah, but on perceiving the divine chariot and the heavenly hosts—a moment that would signify the tearing open of the veil between the earthly and the heavenly. Thus, Elisha would be inducted into the heavenly council, to see and hear the word of Yahweh.

Council Prophets Counter False Prophets and Magical Thinking

Being inducted into the heavenly council legitimizes a prophet's claim as a true messenger of God. Foresight and predictions are insufficient in verifying a prophet's authenticity. The role of a prophet encompasses a broader spectrum of divine insights and guidance, and entrance into the heavenly council is requisite. The prophet Jeremiah made the ultimate criteria plain:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise the word of the LORD, "It shall be well with you," and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, "No calamity shall come upon you."

For who has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word?

Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? (Jeremiah 23:16–18)

When Jeremiah uttered these words, he alone declared the dangers and duplicity of false prophets, including those who assured King Zedekiah of peace where there was no peace. Their lies comforted the king but deluded him. The king favored the court prophets who not only misled him but also actively opposed Jeremiah—even having him thrown into a pit in the palace and branding him as the false prophet.

Jeremiah upheld the true prophetic legitimacy that is rooted in the divine encounter of standing in the council of the Lord, seeing and hearing His word, and faithfully proclaiming it to His people. It is apparent that the source informing Jeremiah's prophetic words was not the source on which the Zedekiah's court prophets relied. Jeremiah was the lone voice of truth in a chorus of

deceit. In much the way that Elijah challenged Ahaziah's confidence in Baal's prophets, Jeremiah cautioned the king not to trust those who bore false witness. Jeremiah was not afraid to oppose imposters. At great risk to himself, he said what he knew was true: that all of Judah would be divinely judged and taken captive to Babylon for seventy years.

The contrast Jeremiah drew between true prophecy and false promises marked a critical moment in Judah's history. The dark clouds of exile were already rolling in, yet the court prophets continued spouting falsehoods. Even while Babylon's armies laid siege to Jerusalem, the court prophets predicted peace. Their magical thinking embraced unrealistic expectations and beliefs not based in reality. It thrived on the people's desire for comfort and was fed by cognitive biases that deluded them into believing that (1) their thoughts alone could influence the world, and (2) the fact of their thoughts being formed was a sign that they reflected reality.ⁱⁱ So they blatantly ignored God's warnings and persisted in their rebellion.

When God speaks, He does not indulge our desires for comfort through magical thinking. Instead, He often challenges us, as when He made Samuel's ears tingle with a hard truth about the impending judgment on Eli's house (1 Samuel 3:11–14). When God's people find themselves in compromising situations, God's words aim to awaken and recalibrate their cognition, not reinforce their complacency.

Understanding the Council of the Lord

The truth of standing in God's council has often been ignored and misinterpreted. Yet, from Moses to Malachi, it was the qualifying factor for true prophetic ministry. *Council* and *counsel* are very different words. *Counsel* refers to advice or guidance and is often used regarding the work that lawyers do. *Council* refers to an assembly of people who meet to make decisions. In a governmental or organizational context, a council typically involves deliberation and decision-making among the members.

The word *council* is crucial to our discussion. It implies not just hearing God's word as advice but standing in His presence, being part of the deliberative process by which God's will is revealed and decisions are made. The verse highlights the exclusive privilege of truly knowing and understanding God's will. This is what separates true prophets from the false ones who claim to speak for God. Imposters are not part of God's council. They claim to have divine insight without having the authentic, profound experience of God's revelatory presence.

Confusing *council* with *counsel* means missing the depth of the relationship and authority that the true prophetic implies and reduces it to the receiving of advice. Similarly, *the council of the Lord* is not just any meeting place in which deliberations on the affairs of both heaven and earth take place. It is depicted as a dynamic gathering of divinely appointed angelic agents to which are added humans who are divinely chosen to participate. God Himself presides over this divine assembly, which is vividly portrayed in the creation narrative in Genesis, the heavenly visions seen by Isaiah in the temple, and the divine councils discussed in 1 Kings and Ezekiel.

The council highlights God's relational nature. The gathering isn't only about His commands. True prophets like Elijah actually *stood* in the council, not as passive recipients of God's plans but as active participants in divine conversations. Isaiah stood there by ecstatic vision (Isaiah 6:1–13). Moses participated from the foot of Mount Horeb/Sinai in Exodus 3, and from the top of Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:3–6). Ezekiel's experience in the council occurred at the River Chebar (Ezekiel 1:26–28).

These interactions accentuate God's very personal, self-revealing interaction with His creation and particularly His prophets in the Mosaic economy. This involved much more than transmitting information; it transformed the prophet, who then embodied God's word and brought the divine will into the earthly arena. This transformative aspect of ancient prophecy distinguished true prophets from false ones, as they conveyed not only foresight but the heart and judgment of God in order to align the people's hearts with His will.

In Jeremiah 23:16–18, the Lord called to account the prophets who spoke of peace where no peace existed. They were not authentic prophets. They had not experienced the divine council or encountered the Preexistent Christ (the Word of Yahweh in John 1:1 and the "Angel of Yahweh" in Exodus 3:2). God's ancient prophets had ongoing encounters with the One who would later be known as Jesus. Skeptics might question how Old Testament figures could have seen Him before His birth in Bethlehem. However, in the mystery of God's eternal nature, Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

The Council Today

Under the Mosaic economy, standing in the divine council was a privilege that allowed prophets to see and hear the Lord directly, ensuring the divine inspiration of their communications. The advent of New Testament realities expanded the landscape of divine communication through the Person and Work of the Incarnate Son, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This shift

democratized the experience of divine communication, making it accessible to all believers, not just a select few. Scholars such as Roger Stronstad articulate this concept as the “prophethood of all believers.” It suggests that although not all are called to be prophets in the formal sense that Ephesians 4 describes, every believer has the capacity to hear and discern the will of God.

The apostle Paul said that every follower of Christ has been called into “the fellowship of [God’s] Son” (1 Cor. 1:9 NKJV). By the indwelling Spirit, we participate with the Son in the endless communion that is the love of God the Father. Communing with the triune God from the inside out empowers us to live in a type of continual divine council, where we can receive guidance, wisdom, and insight directly from the Spirit. This transformative process reflects our communal and personal responsibility to discern God’s voice and actively participate in faith in the testimony of Jesus, the Spirit of Prophecy Himself (Revelation 19:10).

If we can embrace this broader understanding of prophetic function, we can discover what T. Austin Sparks said many decades ago: “The prophetic function, going far beyond mere events, happenings and dates, is the ministry of spiritual interpretation. That phrase will cover the whole ground of that with which we are now concerned. Prophecy is spiritual interpretation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sparks speaks of interpreting everything from a spiritual perspective, thereby unveiling the spiritual implications of past, present, and future events, and presenting them to the people of God. The essence of prophetic function and expression is in understanding the spiritual meaning and significance behind the events we perceive.

Elijah’s Decree: The Withholding of Rain and Dew

At the very outset of his first task, Elijah had to delineate the cause of a coming catastrophic event. So, he told 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” (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah’s appearance seemed sudden, but his message was not out of the blue; it was straight from the following Torah text:^{iv}

It shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, then I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.” Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the LORD’s anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the

land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you (Deuteronomy 11:13–17 NKJV).

I highly doubt that Elijah had a priestly copy of the Torah. Yet, as a faithful Hebrew, he knew what it said. James adds piece of the story, writing “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and *he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months*. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit” (James 5:16–18 NKJV).

Notice the portion of text that I italicized. James is telling us that prior to this critical moment in King Ahab’s court, Elijah had already shut up the heavens by effectual, fervent prayer. James’ assertion is intriguing, especially because the Old Testament doesn’t specifically mention the event prior to 1 Kings 17.

There are, however, factors to consider about James’ statement.

- Although the Old Testament does not explicitly record Elijah’s prayer to shut up the heavens prior to 1 Kings 17, it is possible that such an event was part of the oral tradition that preserved and transmitted stories and teachings within Jewish communities throughout Israelite history.^v
- James, as a Jewish leader writing to a Jewish audience, may have drawn upon the oral tradition that was widely known and accepted among his audience.
- The oral tradition encompassed a “range of methods for the spoken transmission and preservation in memory of non-written verbal information; or a particular case of information so transmitted.”^{vi}
- We cannot, however, discount the possibility that James was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and may have been granted insight into events in Elijah’s life that were not explicitly recorded in the Old Testament. The Bible itself acknowledges that not all of Elijah’s deeds are recorded (1 Kings 21:25). It is therefore possible that James’ assertion about Elijah’s prayer reflects a broader understanding of the prophet’s character and ministry. Elijah’s role as a prophet of God who performed miracles and demonstrated great faith would have been well-known among Jewish communities.

- James may also have drawn upon this broader understanding of Elijah's character to make his point about the effectiveness of prayer.
- James' statement might also carry a deeper spiritual meaning than a strictly literal one. He could be using Elijah as an example of the power of prayer and the effectiveness of the prayers of righteous individuals, rather than providing a historical account of specific events in Elijah's life.

My personal sense is that James was somehow privy to the fact that prior to his public appearance, Elijah had established a place of intercession in regard to rain. Thus, he had already obtained the witness from the Lord that there would be no rain until he (Elijah) delivered the word of reversal that Yahweh entrusted to him.

Speech-Act Theory

Apart from inspired speech, genuine history-making, life-altering words are not spoken. Such words are sacred "speech-acts" described in "speech-act theory,"^{vii} which involves the three aspects of speech described below in relation to the Elijah narrative:

- The locutionary act: Elijah speaks the words, stating that there will be no rain except by his word. His statement is clear and has a specific meaning.
- The illocutionary act: This is where the power lies. Elijah isn't making a weather forecast; he's delivering a divine decree. Because he is speaking on God's behalf, his words carry the weight of divine authority. His prophetic pronouncement is therefore an act of divine intervention in the natural order.
- The perlocutionary act: The drought that follows is not coincidental; it directly results from Elijah's prophetic declaration. His words effect a significant change, both in the land and in the people's hearts.

Now consider the following scene in relation to speech-act theory: Elijah, the prophet of God, stands before King Ahab and declares, "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" (1 Kings 17:1). This encounter with Ahab demonstrates language that accomplishes more than communication; it becomes a vehicle for divine action. Elijah's words shaped history in accordance with God's will. Mind you, only the experiential knowing of the Spirit could empower Elijah to call something that

was not as though it was (Romans 4:17). He had already cultivated a maturity where listening and discernment were concerned, and it did not happen overnight. He had prayed long and hard and in a sustained manner, for how long we do not know. This happened *before* 1 Kings 17:1, and it birthed in him the confidence to come out of hiding, stand in the king's court, and make his bold assertion.

While James' mention of Elijah's prayer raises questions about the Old Testament's omission of this event, the broader context of oral tradition, inspired interpretation, contextual understanding, and spiritual insight help us to find resolution. James likely aimed to stress the significance and effectiveness of fervent, persistent prayer. The idea is that we do not always come to understanding in an instant. Consider Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. God instructed him to throw down his rod, which transformed into a snake. Then God told him to pick up the rod again (Exodus 4:1–5).

We perhaps take much for granted when we read this passage. Do we honestly believe that Moses was instantly convinced of the outcome after just one attempt? Knowing human nature, that is not likely! There are new things that we as human beings must learn, and there are tasks we must practice until we're confident they will yield the desired results. Being human means grappling with doubts and fears—even for those who have practiced in the presence of the Angel of Yahweh!

We can't know how long Elijah prayed and interceded until he felt confident enough to publicly declare his commission to shut off the rain and eventually restore it. Stories like his remind us that faith and conviction rarely manifest as instantaneous certainties. Most often, they grow through persistent practice and prayer. I say this in hopes of dispelling the myth that we get “downloads” from God. Machines get downloads, and we are not machines.

You are not a machine but a human being who has to slow down to the speed of life for an honest, self-aware, and God-aware person. That means accepting that God made you to be human. It means realizing that, like me and everybody since Adam, you are in some ways a mess, and hard as you try to do good, everything you do is touched by your flaws and weaknesses.

This is our reality as human beings. It takes faith and patience to inherit the promises of God (Hebrews 6:12). The call to maturity is not a download. It is a gradual walk through the training of your spiritual senses to discern good and evil. That takes time—lots and lots of time.

Consider Elijah. He “was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months” (James 5:17 NKJV). There were times in his hiding and obscurity when he had to “pray through,” as the saints of former generations would describe it. He had to pray through his doubts, fears, anxieties, uncertainties, and the negative slant he had developed through whatever hardships he endured before settling in Gilead. He had to learn how to cling to the flickering flame of faith within him. He learned to utter prayers of intercession for himself and his wayward brethren. He practiced beseeching Yahweh to turn their hearts back to him.

Gilead, where Elijah settled, was no Garden of Eden. It was a land of turmoil and discontentment. Elijah found himself drawn into its chaos as a reluctant witness to simmering tensions that threatened to boil over. Amid the shifting alliances of rival factions, Elijah learned to stand as a beacon of hope. Yet, all the while, his internal struggles mirrored the unrest surrounding him. He wrestled with doubts, fears, and the weight of his own inadequacies. Still, he clung to the promise of Yahweh’s faithfulness, trusting that even in his darkest hour, the light of divine providence would guide him.

As he declared his God-appointed authority over the weather, Elijah did not know all that lay ahead. But keep reading! Our journey with the Tishbite continues as some of his greatest, most difficult, and most telling experiences unfold.

Soul-Searching Questions

- How do you maintain faith and hope during periods of uncertainty and turmoil? Reflecting on your times of wrestling with doubts and inadequacies, how might you cultivate a posture of trust and reliance on God’s faithfulness, as Elijah did?
- Describe your practice of “praying through” your doubts, fears, and anxieties when circumstances seem overwhelming. What specific strategies help you cling to the flame of faith when it seems to flicker within you?
- Which Scriptures, prayers, or spiritual practices can you draw upon to anchor your soul, restore your hope, and remind you of God’s unwavering presence with you?

ⁱ. Joseph Coleson, “Joshua,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2012), 28–29.

ⁱⁱ. “Magical thinking: the belief that events or the behavior of others can be influenced by one’s thoughts, wishes, or rituals. Magical thinking is typical of children up to 4 or 5 years of age, after which reality thinking begins to predominate.” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “magical thinking,” accessed May 22, 2024, <https://dictionary.apa.org/magical-thinking>.

ⁱⁱⁱ. T. Austin Sparks, “Prophetic Ministry: Chapter 1—What Prophetic Ministry Is,” Austin-Sparks.net, accessed May 22, 2024, <https://www.austin-sparks.net/english/books/001003.html>.

^{iv}. The Torah was part of the written commandment and was probably committed to memory by Hebrew children. It was certainly widespread among the faithful as the oral tradition.

^v. T. M. Derico, “Oral Tradition,” in Barry et al.

^{vi}. Ibid.

^{vii}. “Speech Acts,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2021, accessed May 22, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/>.

Chapter 4