

# Traveling with Elijah

Seven lessons from the life of Elijah



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Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

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# Lesson One:

## **The Suffering Servant**

1 Kings 16:29-17:24

### **1. Biblical text**

#### **Ahab Reigns in Israel**

29 In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. 30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. 31 And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. 32 He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. 33 And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. 34 In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.

#### **Elijah Predicts a Drought**

17 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." 2 And the word of the Lord came to him: 3 "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." 5 So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. 6 And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. 7 And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

#### **The Widow of Zarephath**

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, 9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow

there to feed you." 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." 11 And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 And she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." 13 And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'"

15 And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

## **Elijah Raises the Widow's Son**

17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 And she said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!"

19 And he said to her, "Give me your son." And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. 20 And he cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?" 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." 22 And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23 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." 24 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."

## 2. Meaning of the story

### 2.1 Poor Rich People (1 Kings 16:29-17:1)

The Northern Kingdom of Israel with Samaria as its capitol, was going through great times under King Ahab (ruled 874-853 BC). Much construction work was done under his regime, showing that the economy of the country was booming. (See 1 Kings 16:34, 22:39)



[Picture 1, piece of ivory]

Archaeologists have found pieces of ivory in the ruins of Samaria [picture 1], proving trade relations with Egypt. Archaeologists also believe the hall of columns in Hazor was built by Ahab.

King Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of the King of Sidon, Ethbaal. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Ethbaal ruled for 32 years over Sidon and Tyrus. (1 Kings 11:1-2). This marriage, of Ahab with Jezebel, created a strong alliance with this powerful neighbor on the northern border. [Picture 2] Ahab gave his daughter Athaliah in marriage to the crown prince

of Judah, Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram, thus cementing bilateral ties with that country in the south. (See II Chronicles 18:1-2) The kings of Moab, to the east, paid enormous tribute to King Ahab so that Israel had enough money to strengthen its army. In the year 853 BC, Israel and Aram fought Assyria. According to Assyrian annals, Ahab was able to contribute 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers to this coalition.

Under King Ahab the people of God enjoyed peace, safety and wealth. But the religious life of the nation was dramatically bad. The nation disobeyed God. "Ahab [...] did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him." Ahab followed in the sinful footsteps of his forefathers (see 1 Kings 12:28-33,



[Picture 2, map of Israel and neighbours]

13:33-34, 14:8-10, 15:26,33-34, 16:19,25-26). In addition to this, he also began to worship Baal in the temple that he had built for him in the capitol city of Samaria. Josephus says that Ahab worshipped the Baal from Tyrus, called Melkart. This was a fertility god. His female counterpart, also worshipped all over the Middle East, was Asherah.



[Pictures 3, Asherah]

This mother goddess was worshipped for her fruitfulness. [Picture 3] Some commentators think Ahab may have introduced the worship of Baal only to please the local Canaanite population. They think so, because He gave his own children decent religious names – Athaliah (Jahweh made me strong), Ahaziah (Jahweh is the owner), and Joram (Jahweh is the High One)



### QUESTION:

- Why did God punish the Israelites with hunger and thirst? (See, for instance, Hosea 2:7-12, II Chronicles 7:13-14, Deuteronomy 28:36-45, Hebrews 12:5-6)

## ***2.2 On the Run (1 Kings 17:2-7)***

Elijah became the victim of his own prophesy. He suffered the effects of the drought, like all other people. He was also forced to escape from the persecution by King Ahab. The servant of God has no easy life. Just as, throughout the centuries, Christians have suffered the same problems as all of mankind, and on top of this, even persecution at times.

Elijah found refuge in the wilderness around the Cherith Ravine, east of the Jordan river. God cared for him in a miraculous way. Consider this strange fact: Though God did send meat through a daily miracle, He did not provide water when the brook dried up.



### QUESTIONS:

- How come that a faithful servant of God suffers under God's direct wrath?
- What do you think Elijah thought and felt when he saw the brook dry up gradually?
- Have you had comparable experiences in regard to God's help and provision for you? Or the lack of it?

### ***2.3 Poor Rich Widow (1 Kings 17:8-16)***

Elijah was told to go to Zarephath, a village in the area where Queen Jezebel came from and where her father Ethbaal was still ruling. (See 1 Kings 16:31) That was certainly a strange place to escape to! Even stranger was God's command to go to a heathen widow and board with her. Was she a worshipper of the Baal? This is very likely.

Phoenicia was not a modern welfare state, so a widow would have difficulty enough feeding herself, and even more so in a time of drought. But God told Elijah: "I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." Obediently he went to Zarephath, to find a widow who happened to do exactly what God had predicted. As a result of her obedience she was about to experience God's providence in a miraculous way.



### QUESTIONS:

- Why does God send Elijah to this poor widow? (See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Philippians 4:10-20, Luke 4:24-26)
- Does Elijah not expect too much from this widow?
- What do we learn from the widow about how to deal with our money and possessions? (Matthew 6:19-34)

### ***2.4 The Prayer of Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24)***

Again the faith of Elijah and the widow is being tested. The son of the poor woman dies. He was her only hope in life, so her world seemed to collapse. God had so wonderfully supplied in all her and her son's needs through the prophet, so the death of her son is the more inexplicable. In anger she cries: "Elijah, what do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"



## QUESTIONS:

- What does the reaction of the widow, after her son died, tell us about her spiritual life?
- How did Elijah react to the death of the boy?
- What can we, personally, learn from these early years in the ministry of Elijah? (See James 5:17)
- What do we learn about God from these stories?

