

Elijah

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Of all the Biblical personalities, it is Elijah whose return is awaited by those puzzled by some hard question. As the Mishnah says,¹ “The surplus of [money collected to pay for the burial of] one dead person must be left until Elijah comes.” Whence this appeal? As with David and Goliath, or Solomon judging the mothers, the Elijah of 1 Kings 17-19 may be a popular figure, brought into Kings to oppose the Baal worship introduced by Jezebel, but recognizably a local magician, working at the personal rather than the dynastic level.

The Exploits of Elijah

Labeled A, B, C, etc, for the stylistic table below

(A) **1 Kings 17:1-7**. Elijah is identified as a Tishbite of Transjordan Gilead. He defies Ahab by predicting that there will be no rain “except by my word.” He himself takes refuge by the brook Cherith, where he is miraculously fed by ravens with “bread and meat,” evoking the manna and quails of Exodus).

(B) **1 Kings 17:8-16**. The brook dries up. The Lord sends him to Zarephath, near Sidon. He is fed by a poor widow. He gives her an inexhaustible cruse of oil and jar of meal, which did not fail while the drought lasted. She is enabled to feed herself and her son, and also Elijah. This motif is common in folklore.

(C) **1 Kings 17:17-24**. The widow’s son dies, and is brought back to life by Elijah, who lies prone on the son’s body and prays that “the soul of the child come into him again.” The child revives. A summons to a departed soul figures in many traditions, including that of classical China, and recurs when Jesus revives the daughter of Jairus.

(D) **1 Kings 18:1-16**. Elijah goes to see Ahab. We are here definitely within an elite narrative: the evils done by Ahab, under Jezebel’s influence.

(E) **1 Kings 18:17-29**. The sacrifices to Baal are not accepted, despite the frenzied dancing of the priests of Baal (reminiscent of the dancing of David before the Ark).

¹Shekalim 2:5 (tr Danby); cf Baba Metzia 1:8, and 3:4-5; and earlier, Malachi 4.5.

(F) **1 Kings 18:30-40**. Elijah builds an altar of twelve stones (invoking the Twelve Tribes, as in Joshua 4:3-20). His sacrifice is accepted (consumed by fire, with explicit reference to Gen 32:28, “Israel shall be thy name”). The priests of Baal are killed.

(G) **1 Kings 18:31-41**. A cloud gradually appears, and a downpour ensues. Ahab, led by Elijah on foot, enters Jezreel. The drought is over.

(H) **1 Kings 19:1-8**. Jezebel vows to kill Elijah. He journeys to Horeb and hides. “Horeb, the mountain of God” duplicates Exodus 3:1; that phrase occurs nowhere else. Kings is here writing a new Exodus narrative. Chronicles (which omits folkish Elijah, save for a back reference in 2 Chr 21:12) will later do the same, only more drastically.

(I) **1 Kings 19:9-18**. God in a “still small voice” commissions Elijah to anoint two future kings (thus eventually replacing Ahab) and to choose Elisha as his successor. The enmity between Yahweh and Baal worship will continue into future reigns.

(J) **1 Kings 19:19-21**. Elisha follows Elijah; he will continue the story.

Stylometrics

Are these stories stylistically close? Here are the BIRD² results:

<i>Elijah</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>J</i>
	125	199	174	328	356	248	129	175	250	96
<i>A</i>	~	0.63	0.60	0.72	0.51	0.73	0.67	0.59	0.77	0.70
<i>B</i>	0.63	~	0.85	0.48	0.57	0.81	0.40	0.67	0.36	0.66
<i>C</i>	0.60	0.85	~	0.59	0.65	0.50	0.62	0.63	0.76	0.59
<i>D</i>	0.72	0.48	0.59	~	0.70	0.80	0.62	0.59	0.29	0.52
<i>E</i>	0.51	0.57	0.65	0.70	~	0.46	0.55	0.58	0.69	0.74
<i>F</i>	0.73	0.81	0.50	0.80	0.46	~	0.58	0.69	0.70	0.58
<i>G</i>	0.67	0.40	0.62	0.62	0.55	0.58	~	0.47	0.58	0.49
<i>H</i>	0.59	0.67	0.63	0.59	0.58	0.69	0.47	~	0.62	0.53
<i>I</i>	0.77	0.36	0.76	0.29	0.69	0.70	0.58	0.62	~	0.46
<i>J</i>	0.70	0.66	0.59	0.52	0.74	0.58	0.49	0.53	0.46	~

²See Brooks **Hebrew**. BIRD results are D (difference) numbers. **Low** values (0.50 or less) imply narrative continuity, or an author thinking of another piece. **Normal** values (0.51 to 0.75) might be separate chapters in the same work, but that level of similarity is easily reached by a second author. **High** values (0.76 to 0.99) imply increasing doubt about same author or source, and **Extreme** values (**1.00** or above) are prohibitive for such a conclusion.

Consecutive Segments. The introduction (**A**) is Normal with what follows; simply an introduction. Between **B** and **D** there is a "gap," a less consistent piece (**C**); we note that this healing miracle has nothing to do with the Drought narrative, and may have been little changed from a popular tale of Elijah. Next come three closely-linked pairs: **E-F** (the contest on Mount Carmel), **G-H** (the storm ending the drought), and **I-J** (the story will continue with later kings; Elisha will take over the role of prophet).

Remote Segments. G and I, the first segments of the last two narrative pairs, pick up on B, the beginning of the first such segment, touching base with the drought story. J is in touch with both parts of that pair, **B** and **D** (but *not* interruptive **C**). **J**, concluding the story, "looks back" to **G**, the rain which ended the drought. **I** picks up on B, but is even closer (D= 0.29) to D, the other member of that first narrative pair.

The Still Small Voice. That translation has been challenged, and the passage has been amended to make it more consistent with the rest of the story. As it stands, it denies that God speaks through storms. This piece, and specifically 19:11b-13a, portrays Elijah as *a victim of the storm*, not as the master of both drought and storm. Like **C**, the healing miracle, it may be a less rewritten survival of popular tradition.

This can be tested. If we repeat the previous chart, removing the "small voice" passage from I (and leaving Ir, "the remnant of I"), we get:

<i>Elijah</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>J</i>
	125	199	174	328	356	248	129	175	177	96
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<i>C</i>	0.60	0.85	~	0.59	0.65	0.50	0.62	0.63	0.72	0.59
<i>D</i>	0.72	0.48	0.59	~	0.70	0.80	0.62	0.59	0.35	0.52
<i>E</i>	0.51	0.57	0.65	0.70	~	0.46	0.55	0.58	0.75	0.74
<i>F</i>	0.73	0.81	0.50	0.80	0.46	~	0.58	0.69	0.72	0.58
<i>G</i>	0.67	0.40	0.62	0.62	0.55	0.58	~	0.47	0.67	0.49
<i>H</i>	0.59	0.67	0.63	0.59	0.58	0.69	0.47	~	0.55	0.53
<i>Ir</i>	0.69	0.55	0.72	0.35	0.75	0.72	0.67	0.55	~	0.44
<i>J</i>	0.70	0.66	0.59	0.52	0.74	0.58	0.49	0.53	0.44	~

The last narrative pair is slightly closer (D = 0.44, not 0.46), and the contact with B vanishes; having only contact with D, the *conclusion* of that first pair. As far as they go, these slight changes seem to reflect slightly better the degree to which the Kings writer has retold the previous popular stories.

The other relatively unaltered segment was (C), the healing. If that too is omitted:

<i>Elijah</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>J</i>
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... we have a very straightforward story: a stylistically distinct introduction, and then the story proper, following in closely similar pairs of segments. A model narrative.

Such, then, was the way of the Kings writer with this pre-existing popular material, adapting most of it (but not quite all) to his new theological purpose.

CONCLUSION

It has been suggested that the Elijah stories existed, as a group, before being incorporated into the national narrative of Kings. The present results suggest instead that popular material about a local figure, comparable to Balaam, was worked up by the author of Kings, to create some sort of opposition to Baal worship, and to legitimize the merely political revolution of Jehu. Since the basic historical events – the succession of northern rulers – was given, and since the time from Jezebel's innovations to her downfall under Jehu was too long to be filled by a single opposition figure, it was necessary to continue the story of that opposition by inventing a successor figure, Elisha.

The stylometric results here reported, like most such results, cannot be said to be decisive. But they are suggestive. What they offer is a finer-grained account of what in the Elijah material was already there, and what was new invention. Whether they were in the form of a cycle of popular stories, or were originality unconnected events, does not at once appear. My final suggestion would be that they were separate, like the various exploits of David or Samson, before being linked and supplemented for the purpose of the writer of Kings.

HANDOUT: STYLOMETRICS TABLES

1. Are these stories stylistically close? Here are the BIRD³ results:

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2. With some small adjustments, we get:

<i>Elijah</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>J</i>
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3. Omitting the seemingly aberrant C, we have the following picture . . .

<i>Elijah</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>Ir</i>	<i>J</i>
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. . . where the elite narrative shows significantly greater continuity. The Kings version is then an elite narrative, based on, but only at one point preserving the original character of, excerpts from a popular tradition.