Did Elijah *Really* Ascend into Heaven in a Whirlwind?

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The story of Elijah's ascension to heaven is a beloved staple of Sunday School lessons and sermons. Unfortunately, the average churchgoer may not be getting the full story, and worse yet, not even a story that is faithful to the Scriptures. This is not merely an issue of Bible scholars debating fine points of Hebrew grammar and arcane details of the text; rather, it is an issue with profound theological ramifications.

The Problem of Elijah's Letter

Nearly everything we know about Elijah comes from the books of 1 and 2 Kings. The account of his ministry begins in 1 Kings 17 and concludes with the story of his heavenly ascension in 2 Kings 2. There is, however, one brief reference to the prophet in 2 Chronicles 21:12–15, which mentions a letter he sent to King Jehoram of Judah in which he confronted him about the sin of murdering his brothers upon the death of his father, King Jehoshaphat.[2] The passage is problematic because the Chronicler has Elijah sending the letter subsequent to the close of his earthly ministry and his heavenly ascent.

Bible chronology is notoriously difficult, but the date of Elijah's translation seems clear. The author of 2 Kings places his translation immediately after the death of King Ahaziah of Israel and the succession of his brother, King Jehoram (2 Kgs 1:17). This event happened in the year 852 B.C., and it corresponds to the eighteenth year of King Jehoshaphat in Judah (2 Kgs 3:1) and the second year of his son's co-reign with him (2 Kgs 1:17). Jehoshaphat did not die until four years later, in 848 B.C. It is at this point that Jehoram succeeded him to the throne as sole regent and murdered his brothers in order to secure that throne for himself (2 Kgs 8:16). Hence, the earliest possible point at which Elijah could have sent the letter of rebuke is four years subsequent to his translation (i.e., 848 B.C.).

Second Chronicles 21:15 reports Elijah's prophecy that King Jehoram of Judah would pay for his murderous sin with a disease in his bowels that would gradually result in death. Second Chronicles 21:18–19 then reports the fulfillment of this prophecy by recording that Jehoram contracted a disease that progressed for two years and eventuated in his demise. Though the text does not explicitly state so, the implication is that Elijah wrote the letter just prior to the commencement of Jehoram's two-year disease in his sixth year, which corresponds to the year 843 B.C. At any rate, he certainly could not have written the prophetic letter any later than that. In summary, as the following chart illustrates

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[2] The focus of Elijah's ministry is primarily on the Northern Kingdom and ridding it of idolatry. By contrast, the focus of Chronicles is on the Davidic dynasty and Temple-based worship. This accounts for the absence of Elijah from Chronicles, except for the isolated incident when he confronted a Judean king with family ties to King Ahab.

the *terminus a quo* for the letter is 848 B.C., and the *terminus ad quem* is 843 B.C, meaning that Elijah sent this letter somewhere between four and nine years after his translation.[3]

Table 1. The Date of Elijah's Letter to King Jehoram of Judah

Date	Jehoshaphat		Jehoram: Judah		Jehoram: Israel	Elijah	References
B.C.	*Co-Reign*	*Sole Reign*	*Co-Reign*	*Sole Reign*	*Reign*		
Summer 853	19	17	1				
Summer 852	20	18	2		accession	translation	2 Kgs 1:17; 3:1
Fall 852	21	19	3		1		
Fall 851	22	20	4		2		
Fall 850	23	21	5		3		
Fall 849	24	22	6		4		
Fall 848	25	23	7	1 fratricide	5	Elijah's letter sent during this time frame 2 Chr 21:12–15	2 Kgs 8:16–17a 2 Chr 21:1, 4–5a
Fall 847				2	6		
Fall 846				3	7		
Fall 845				4	8		
Fall 844				5	9		
Fall 843				6	10		
Fall 842				7	11		
Fall 841				8	12		2 Kgs 8:17b, 25 2 Chr 21:5b, 18–20

[3] The dates of reigns and co-reigns represented in this chart are based on the calculations of Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1984), 96–101. In general, there is widespread agreement among conservative scholars about this chronology, with room for minor variances of a year or so either way. Such variations in no way eliminate the chronological difficulty involved with Elijah's letter. Other scholars who concur with this chronology include Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 245–51, 261; K. A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, "Chronology of the Old Testament," *New Bible Dictionary,* ed. D. R. W. Wood, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 190, 193; Eugene H. Merrill, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2015), 444–445; Martin J. Selman, *2 Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 11 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 452, 455; and John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 3:341.

At this time both Judah and Israel utilized non-accession year reckoning, but Judah counted regnal years from the fall (Tishri), whereas Israel counted regnal years from the spring (Nisan). Hence, Jehoram of Judah entered the second year of his co-reign in the fall of 853 (just a couple months after it began), and correspondingly he entered the third year of his co-reign in the fall of 852 while Jehoram of Israel was still in his first year. Second Kings 9:29 utilizes accession-year reckoning and therefore counts Jehoram of Israel's twelfth year as his eleventh year.

Untenable Solutions to the Problem

Bible commentators acknowledge the problem, and they offer several possible solutions to the apparent discrepancy, but none of them is tenable.[4] A proposal common among older commentators is represented by the Catholic scholar Estius (A.D. 1542–1613). He agrees that the letter was written subsequent to Elijah's translation, but he suggests that Elijah simply wrote the letter from his new home in heaven and had it delivered from there, presumably by an angel.[5] The problem with his suggestion is that the letter is introduced into the narrative in a matter-of-fact manner with no suggestion that there was anything miraculous or supernatural about its arrival. Furthermore, Elijah's sending a letter from the beyond would violate the biblical principle that those in the afterlife no longer have knowledge of or participation in the current events of this temporal world (Eccl 9:5–6; cf. Lk 16:27–31).[6]

Scholars such as C. F. Keil, J. Barton Payne, and Charles Ryrie[7] are open to an alternate suggestion: that Elijah wrote the letter years in advance while still on earth and then entrusted it to the care of another (probably Elisha) to deliver at the appropriate time, since Elijah would be gone by then.[8] Of course, there is not the slightest hint of any of this in the text, and that alone makes it a weak proposal, but there are additional reasons to reject this theory. For example, if Elijah had known in

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[4] Critical scholars simply dismiss the letter as a fraud or an invention of the biblical narrator. Paul J. Achtemeier, "Elijah," *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 258; Allen C. Myers, "Elijah," *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 326; Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, AYB 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 121–22. This article will focus upon the proposals of those who believe the text and take it seriously, but for a helpful response to the critics see Selman, 455.

[5] Willem Hessels van Est, *Annotationes in Præcipua ac Difficiliora Sacræ Scripturæ Loca*, 5th ed. (Paris, 1684), 164. Few modern scholars are attracted to this solution, but an exception is J. Gordon McConville, who proposes it as a possibility. *I & II Chronicles*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 199.

[6] Joseph Benson observes, "We find the prophets were sent to those of their own time, and not to those who should come after (there being a succession of prophets raised up for every age)." *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments,* Kindle ed. (Omaha: Patristic, 2019), 2788. Of course, it is possible that this was an exception to the general rule, similar to Samuel's encounter with Saul after his death (1 Sm 28:12–15). But in the case of Samuel, the text is abundantly clear that something exceptional and supernatural had happened; there is no such indication in the case of Elijah's letter.

[7] Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, "1 and 2 Chronicles," trans. Andrew Harper, in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1866–91; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 3:645; J. Barton Payne, "1, 2 Chronicles," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 4:506–7; and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Note on 2 Chr 21:12 in *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 705–6. See also M. G. Easton, "Elijah," *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 223; F. K. Farr, "Elijah," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,* ed. James Orr, et al. (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 932; and B. L. Smith, "Elijah," *New Bible Dictionary,* 311.

[8] In *Lange's Commentary* Otto Zöckler offers a variant of this view. He suggests that Elijah merely uttered the prophecy verbally to Elisha before his translation, and then some years later Elisha reduced the prophecy to writing and sent it to the king. His rationale for this approach is that "it avoids the inherently improbable supposition, that Elijah wrote with his own hand a letter, which he knew could only be delivered in the course of at least five or six years after his ascension to God." The problem is that the text specifically identifies a "writing" (מִכְתָּב) as coming from the prophet, not merely a "prophecy." The implication is that Elijah is the author of the letter, not merely the inspiration or source for its content. John Peter Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 1 & 2 Chronicles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 228.

advance about Jehoram's murderous intent, would there not have been a moral obligation to warn Jehoram's brothers, so that they might flee to safety? Then, if in the sovereignty of God, Jehoram succeeded in carrying out the bloody deed, at least there would be no blood on Elijah's hands. Also, when the Hebrew text says that King Jehoram received a letter from Elijah (2 Chr 21:12), the prepositional phrase "from Elijah" appears to be identifying him—not merely as the author of the letter—but rather as the source who sent the document: it "came from Elijah."[9] Finally, the precise wording of the letter itself suggests that it was a current production of the prophet and not something that had been written entirely in the past. This is because the letter conveys two distinct tenses: the past tense describes the sinful deeds of the king, and the future tense is utilized to predict the resulting consequences of his sin.[10] Thus the author of the letter situates himself chronologically in the middle, precisely between the past acts that had already occurred and the future consequences yet to come. Had the letter been written as a prophecy of events yet to unfold, one might have expected instead that the entire letter would convey a future orientation, or perhaps employ the "prophetic perfect" throughout.[11]

Perhaps the solution most favored by modern conservative scholars is that the story of Elijah's translation to heaven is chronologically misplaced in 2 Kings, such that it actually occurred around 2 Kings 8:16,[12] even though the event is recorded six chapters earlier. In *The Pulpit Commentary* Barker

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[9] The Hebrew reads וַיָּבֹא אֵלָיו מִכְתָּב מֵאֵלִיָּהוּ הַנָּבִיא. There is some ambiguity in the text about the role of the prepositional phrase "from Elijah." Does it modify the noun *letter:* there came "a letter from Elijah"? Or does it modify the verb *came:* a letter "came from Elijah"? The former option could identify Elijah as the *author* without offering any clues as to the *sender* of the letter. By contrast, the latter option identifies Elijah explicitly as the *sender* of the letter and also implicitly as its prophetic author. It is this latter option that is reflected in most of the major modern translations (e.g., ASV, ESV, HCSB, NASB95, NKJV, and NRSV). Jamieson, however, holds to the former option, stating, "The preposition מ connects with מִכְתָּב, a writing, more readily than with the verb בּא, and refers to Elijah as its author, so that it may have been composed years before it reached the hands of the wicked monarch whom it was designed to reprove." Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Joshua–Esther* (London: William Collins, Sons, & Company, n.d.), 2:545.

[10] The leading translations are unanimous in recognizing the switch from a past perspective to a future perspective in these verses: ASV, ESV, HSCB, KJV, NASB95, NET, NIV84, NKJV, NLT, and RSV. The past is narrated through the following sequence of actions and tenses: "Because you have not walked [perfect] . . . but you have walked [waw-consecutive imperfect] . . . and you have caused whoredom [waw-consecutive imperfect] . . . and also your brothers you have killed [perfect]." The future consequences are conveyed through the following: "Yahweh is about to smite [participle, *futurum instans*] . . . and you will have a great illness [verbless clause] . . . until your bowels come out [imperfect] day by day." For the various grammatical forms utilized in these verses, see Ronald J. Williams, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax,* 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 74–75, 88, 119, 209. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Greek and Hebrew texts in this article are my own.

[11] In modern English, we might express a consistent future orientation along these lines: "You will commit this sin, and you will suffer this consequence." Representing the certitude of a prophetic perfect, we might say something like, "You have committed this sin, and you have suffered this consequence."

[12] This is when Jehoram succeeded his father Jehoshaphat to the throne and murdered his brothers; hence, the condemnatory letter from Elijah must have been sent sometime around 2 Kings 8:16 (848 B.C.), and correspondingly the theory supposes that his ascension to heaven would have taken place subsequent to that, rather than in 852 B.C. as the narrative's placement in 2 Kings 2 would suggest.

By contrast, some commentators acknowledge that the translation of Elijah must have occurred sometime before the reign of Jehoram began, so they suggest that the fratricide could have taken place during the earlier part of his co-reign (852 B.C.), just prior to Elijah's ascent, rather than in 848 B.C. at the beginning of his sole reign. Raymond B. Dillard, *2*

confidently affirms that the letter reached Jehoram "before the chronologically misplaced translation of Elijah as given in 2 Kings 2."[13] Likewise, Matthew Henry states, "It is certain that the history is put out of its proper place."[14] Despite the account's placement in 2 Kings 2, Eugene Merrill insists that "there is no certain way to date Elijah's translation," and therefore "perhaps it did not take place until 848."[15] Gleason Archer, who also subscribes to this theory, offers a rationale for the supposed displacement by explaining that the biblical author of Kings occasionally "carries a theme through in

Chronicles, WBC 15 (Dallas: Word, 1987), 167; Easton, 223; Andrew E. Hill, *1 & 2 Chronicles,* NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 515; John MacArthur, Note on 2 Chr 21:12-15 in *The MacArthur Study Bible: NKJV* (Nashville: Word, 1997), 619; C. I. Scofield, et al., eds., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 513n1; Selman, 455; B. L. Smith, 311; and J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles,* NAC 9 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 299.

The problem with this suggestion is that the narrative in 2 Kings 8:16–17, taken together with its parallel account in 2 Chronicles 21:1–5, makes it clear that the fratricide took place subsequent to Jehoshaphat's death. 2 Chronicles 21:4 explicitly states that it happened "when Jehoram had ascended to the kingdom of his father" (וַיָּקָם יְהוֹרָם עַל־מַמְלֶכֶת אָבִיו), and 2 Chronicles 21:1 defines this phrase as meaning that Jehoshaphat had died and Jehoram was now reigning "in his stead" (תַּחְתָּיו). It is hard to see a co-reign described in this terminology.

Perhaps one could argue that the paragraph consisting of 2 Chronicles 21:1–4 belongs to the official narrative of Jehoshaphat's reign. Even though his death is reported in v. 1, therefore, verses 2–4 do not progress forward but rather backward in time to explain parenthetically that *prior* to his death he had gifted his sons with cities (vv. 2–3) *and* Jehoram slew his brothers while co-reigning (v. 4). Thus, the official narrative of Jehoram's sole reign does not begin until v. 5, subsequent to the fratricide. Even if this were the correct way to read 2 Chronicles 21:1–4, it nonetheless remains a fact that the letter from Elijah does not arrive until 2 Chronicles 21:12, well into the official narrative of Jehoram's sole reign. Besides, even those who suggest that the fratricide took place during the co-reign do not identify v. 4 with the closing narrative of Jehoshaphat's reign, but rather with the opening narrative of Jehoram's sole reign (e.g., Dillard, 162; Hill, 508; Selman, 450; Thompson, 296). It is for this reason that many scholars feel compelled to suggest that the account of Elijah's translation *must* be chronologically misplaced in 2 Kings 2, for it would seem that the only other alternative is to concede that the letter came after his translation.

The issue is somewhat further complicated by the fact that 2 Kings 8:16 would seem to contradict the chronology that virtually all scholars accept. That is, based on 2 Kings 1:17 scholars are in agreement that Jehoram of Judah began to co-reign with Jehoshaphat about a year *before* Jehoram of Israel became king in 852 B.C. Yet 2 Kings 8:16 seems to suggest that he began to co-reign with his father in the *fifth year* of Jehoram of Israel (848 B.C.). Most scholars find a resolution to the problem by observing the double reference to "Jehoshaphat, King of Judah" in the verse, which looks suspiciously like a case of dittography by a copyist. Remove the first reference to Jehoshaphat, and the verse is a straightforward statement that he began his sole reign in the fifth year of Jehoram of Israel, with no reference to his co-reign at all (cf. Thiele, 100; RSV, NRSV, NLT, HCSB, NET, and GNB). A handful of ancient manuscripts and versions omit the extra reference to Jehoshaphat, but the textual justification for the omission is slim. G. Rawlinson, "2 Kings," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 5:168. The phrase is retained by the ASV, NIV84, NASB95, and ESV. The NKJV retains the phrase but interprets it to mean that Jehoshaphat had been reigning prior to Jehoram's accession, and not that he continued to reign contemporaneously with Jehoram.

[13] Philip C. Barker, "2 Chronicles," in *The Pulpit Commentary*, 6:254.

[14] *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 598.

[15] Eugene H. Merrill, "2 Chronicles," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1985) 1:636; and in *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles,* 444–45. Likewise, Dillard suggests that the events following the translation narrative may be "dischronologized, i.e., not to be read as chronologically subsequent to Elijah's assumption in 2 Kgs 2," (*2 Chronicles,* 168). The *EHVSB* remarks, "In 2 Kings Elijah's ascent to heaven is recorded before the reign of Jehoram, indicating that the events in these books are not always recorded in chronological order." The Wartburg Project, Note on 2 Chr 21:12, *Holy Bible: Evangelical Heritage Version Study Bible* (Midland, MI: Northwestern, 2019).

a proleptic way when he is describing the exploits of Elijah, not desiring to leave off that theme until he is through with it. So it was with the story of Elijah's departure to heaven."[16]

There are several flaws with this proposal. First, the books of Kings generally present the history in chronological sequence. Certainly, it is difficult for the author to narrate the history in a direct linear sequence because the kings of the north and south lived contemporaneously and their reigns overlapped. The literary technique that he adopts to navigate the challenge is to switch back and forth between the accounts of the northern kings and the southern kings. Each time he makes the shift, he must go either backward or forward in time to resume the narrative where he had previously left off. But within the confines of an individual pericope devoted to north or south the author follows chronological sequence. Hence, the sequence of his presentation in this era is as follows: Ahab of Israel (1 Kgs 16:29–22:40), Jehoshaphat of Judah (1 Kgs 22:41–50), Ahaziah and Jehoram of Israel (1 Kgs 22:51–2 Kgs 8:15), and finally Jehoram of Judah (2 Kgs 8:16–24).

Utilizing this scheme, then, the author formally records Jehoshaphat's reign and death in 1 Kings 22. Yet subsequently Jehoshaphat reappears in 2 King 3. His reappearance does not represent a true chronological misplacement, however, nor is the previous record of his death proleptic. Rather, in 2 Kings 3 Jehoram of Israel is the primary character whose reign is being narrated, and Jehoshaphat (a southern king) is merely interweaved into the formal account of the northern king's reign as a secondary character when their lives intersect (in this case, they unite as allies in battle). Thus, the biblical author successfully navigates the challenge without resorting to actual chronological misplacements, though on the surface that may be the artificial impression created by his narratorial technique.

Now unlike Jehoshaphat, who is a southern king, Elijah is a prophet of the north. His activities are entirely within context when he is introduced into the narrative involving a northern king. There is no need to switch back and forth between accounts involving a northern king and Elijah as there is to switch between a northern king and a southern king. Hence, the activities of Elijah are introduced at the time and place within the narrative that they actually occurred. In this case, his translation is

[16] Gleason L. Archer Jr., *New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 226–227. It is not clear why Archer thinks that the biblical author is unwilling to break up the accounts of Elijah's exploits in order to put them into proper chronological sequence. After all, the sequence of events in 1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2 is as follows: Elijah's confrontations with Ahab over Baal worship (17:1–19:21); Ahab and war with the Syrians (20:1–43); Ahab, Naboth's vineyard, and Elijah's rebuke (21:1–29); Ahab and war with the Syrians (22:1-40); the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah (22:41-50); Elijah's confrontation with Ahaziah over Baal worship (1 Kgs 22:51–2 Kgs 1:18); the translation of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1-18). It is apparent that the author does not seem preoccupied with completing the whole story of Elijah within a single section of narrative, so there is no reason that he should feel compelled to relate the account of his translation proleptically. Furthermore, there is no direct connection between the account of his translation and his prior confrontation with King Ahaziah, so there is no story or thematic element that the author must feel compelled to carry over and complete in the following chapter. Moreover, if the author were willing to abandon chronological sequence for the sake of thematic unity, why not join together the accounts of Elijah's confrontations with Ahab and Ahaziah over Baal worship? Certainly, Elijah's zeal to rid the nation of Baal is a common thematic element that should have been told in a single section if that were the author's goal.

The LXX transposes chapters 20 and 21 of 1 Kings, thus putting the two accounts of Ahab's conflicts with the Syrians together as a single unit and preceding it with the story of Naboth's vineyard. Still, this arrangement does not alter the fact that the biblical author is perfectly willing to interrupt the narrative of Elijah's exploits with intervening accounts of battles with Syria and the reign of Jehoshaphat in Judah.

recorded in the middle of a single pericope—presented in chronological sequence— about the reigns of two northern kings; the chronological sequence maintained within this single section of narrative gives the clear impression that the translation took place right at the transition from one reign to the next.

Moreover, subsequent to the record of his translation, Elijah never again appeared on the scene. Rather, Elisha immediately rose to the fore, and the reader encounters him frequently and dominantly in the remaining chapters of this section. Indeed, as soon as the following chapter the king's servant characterizes Elisha as the one "who had poured water on the hands of Elijah" (2 Kgs 3:11).[17] The use of the past tense ("had poured"/"used to pour") suggests that Elisha is no longer "playing second fiddle" to Elijah, but rather that Elijah is gone and Elisha is now the dominant prophet in Israel.[18]

Finally, the biblical author creates an *inclusio* by framing the story of Elijah's ascension on both ends with a reference to Jehoram's succession to the throne (2 Kgs 1:17, 3:1). This is a literary technique that enables the author to "pause" the linear progression of the action (going neither backward nor forward in time) to relate an event that occurred simultaneously with Jehoram's royal accession. In other words, the author first tells the reader that Jehoram had just ascended to the throne. Then he pauses the story of Jehoram to explain that at this same time Elijah's translation took place. Then he "un-pauses" the story of Jehoram, repeating the prior reference to his royal accession and continuing forward with the narrative of his reign. Thus, the *inclusio* functions to alert the reader to the precise timing of Elijah's translation.[19]

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[17] פֹּה אֱלִישָׁע בֶּן־שָׁפָט אֲשֶׁר־יָצַק מַיִם עַל־יְדֵי אֵלִיָּהוּ

[18] Keil recognizes the significance of the past tense here (Qal perfect 3MS of יָצַק), but he tries to downplay its importance by explaining that "the only conclusion to be drawn from that is, that in the camp, or near it, was Elisha, Elijah's servant, not that Elijah was no longer upon earth. The perfect אֲשֶׁר יָצַק seems indeed to imply this; but it is questionable if we may so press the perfect, i.e., whether the speaker made use of it, or whether it was employed only by the later historian," 3:643. His suggestion that those exact words were not uttered by the speaker in the story but rather represent editorial work by the biblical narrator is unconvincing. Modern translations are unanimous in recognizing the past tense here and in assigning these words to the king's servant (ASV, ESV, HSCB, NASB95, NET, NIV84, NKJV, NLT, NRSV).

In a similar fashion, some modern scholars suggest that perhaps Elisha had begun his own independent ministry prior to Elijah's translation, such that their ministries overlapped, and he was simply the closer of the two prophets on this occasion (Dillard, 168; Hill, 515; McConville, 199; Selman, 455). The problem with the suggestion is twofold. First, Elijah is not merely absent from this particular episode, but rather he is absent from all of 2 Kings 3–8; after 2 Kings 2, he *never* appears on the scene. Second, the translation narrative conveys that as late as the day of the translation itself, he was still functioning in a subordinate role, for Elijah is still his authority ("head," 2 Kgs 2:3,5), and he calls Elijah "my father" (v. 12). The suggestion, therefore, that he was subordinate to Elijah while nonetheless consistently functioning independently of Elijah throughout all of 2 Kings 3–8 strains the text, for in these chapters we see the portrait of a prophet who performs twice the miracles of Elijah with a double portion of his spirit.

[19] In summary, some scholars attempt to move the fratricide and letter *back* to the time of Jehoram's co-regency, just prior to Elijah's departure in 2 Kings 2 (852 B.C.); this approach accounts for Elijah's absence from 2 Kings 3–8, but it contradicts the assertion of 2 Chronicles 21 that these events did not transpire until his sole reign. Others attempt to move Elijah's translation *up* to the beginning of Jehoram's sole reign, just subsequent to the fratricide and letter (848 B.C.); this approach accords with the data of 2 Chronicles 21, but it requires that 2 Kings 2 be chronologically displaced and offers no rationale for the absence of Elijah from 2 Kings 3–8, not to mention the prominent independent ministry of Elisha in those chapters (especially 3:11).

Yet another proposed solution assumes the existence of a copyist error in 2 Chronicles 21:12. Joseph Benson explains, "The difficulty has arisen by the inaccuracy of transcribers of the Scriptures, and that it should be, and was at first written Elisha, and not Elijah."[20] Likewise, Whiston confidently affirms, "The name of Elijah has very anciently crept into the text instead of Elisha, by the copiers."[21] The problem with this theory is that there is absolutely no textual or versional evidence to support the claim.[22] No doubt, this is why Whiston insists that it happened "very anciently," but emending the biblical text on a whim is neither a helpful nor a realistic solution. Furthermore, since Elijah is never mentioned elsewhere in the books of Chronicles, there is no reason that a scribe should have expected to encounter the name of Elijah in this passage any more than Elisha; hence, there is no rationale to explain how the supposed error arose.

Finally, there is the suggestion of James G. Murphy that the author of the letter is a different and lesser-known prophet by the same name.[23] Of course, there is no biblical evidence for another Elijah who functioned as a prophet at that time. Moreover, Chronicles refers to the author of the writing as "Elijah, the prophet," and the designation "the prophet" signals that the biblical author is speaking of the well-known prophet by that name, not some unknown seer.

John Lightfoot and Matthew Poole offer another version of this approach.[24] They argue that the writer of the letter is not actually Elijah, but rather Elisha or some other prophet whom the biblical author purposely calls "Elijah" to indicate that he is operating in the "power and spirit" of Elijah, much like John the Baptist. But there is no other instance in the Old Testament where a prophet is called "Elijah" in such a manner, and if there were many such prophets in Israel's history, then it makes John the Baptist far less compelling.

A Workable Solution

Often the simplest explanation is the best. A simple observation is that the word translated as "heaven" (שָׁמַיִם) commonly refers to the sky or atmosphere. It frequently refers to the "third heaven," where God dwells, but in the context of 2 Kings 2:1,11 it is perfectly natural to read this as a reference

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[20] *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments,* 2789.

[21] Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 252, note a.

[22] T. Whitelaw observes, "Besides being in the text, the word occurs in all existing Hebrew manuscripts and in all the Oriental versions." *The Pulpit Commentary*, 6:260. Likewise, Merrill affirms, "There is no question as to the integrity of the Masoretic Text as the absence of variant readings well attests," *Commentary on 1 & 2 Chronicles*, 444. See also Jamieson, 2:545.

[23] He makes the following arguments in favor of his position: "This prophet was distinct, as Cajetan concluded, from the Tishbite in time, place, and circumstance. He lived in the reign of Jehoram; the Tishbite was translated in the lifetime of his father (2 Kings 3:11). He acted in Judah; the Tishbite had his sphere of action in the northern kingdom. He wrote a prophecy; the Tishbite was engaged in speaking and acting. His description as 'the prophet' is quite common, and his name is the same in letters as Elihu, and therefore not unusual. A writing from a prophet is nothing strange (1 Chron. 28:19; Jer. 36)." James G. Murphy, *The Books of Chronicles*, Handbooks for Bible Classes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 126–127.

[24] John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), 12:19–20. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 1:844.

to the place where birds fly and clouds float.[25] Furthermore, in neither instance is the word "heaven" preceded by the preposition "to"; rather, the noun is in the accusative and functions in a directive manner.[26] In other words, the Hebrew merely conveys the notion of ascending in the direction of heaven, or "skyward." It does not actually affirm that he went "to heaven."[27] As an illustration of biblical usage, one will observe that the exact same three key words in 2 Kings 2:1,11 are used in Psalm 107:25–26: "whirlwind/stormy wind" (סְעָרָה),[28] "ascend" (עָלָה), and "heaven" (שָׁמַיִם). Like Elijah, the psalm says that the sailors on their ships "ascend heavenward" by means of a "stormy wind" that raises up the waves. Therefore, rather than re-arranging the chronology, emending the text, inventing new prophets, or assuming actions not actually stated, it is much simpler to understand that God lifted up Elijah with a whirlwind toward the sky and then transported him to some other unknown geographic location (probably in or near Israel), where he lived out the rest of his life in quiet retirement, save for the one exceptional instance when he broke his silence with a letter.[29]

There are several indicators within the story of Elijah that function as converging lines of evidence for this straightforward reading of 2 Kings 2. First, Elijah had a history of hiding in undisclosed locations where nobody could find him for extended periods of time. One thinks of his hiding at the brook Cherith (1 Kgs 17:2–6). Later, when Obadiah encountered Elijah he said, "As Yahweh your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you, and when they would say 'He is not here,' he would make the kingdom or the nation swear that they had not found you" (1 Kgs 18:10). Subsequently, he went alone into the southern wilderness and Mount Sinai (1 Kgs 19:3–8). Thus, to "vanish" Elijah did not have to leave this world; he knew how to hide.

Second, Elijah had a reputation for being transported suddenly and supernaturally to other geographic locations by the Holy Spirit. Obadiah referenced this when he said to Elijah, "Yet now you say, 'Go tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah!"' And as soon as I am gone from you, the Spirit of Yahweh will carry you somewhere I do not know, so when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me" (1 Kgs 18:11–12). This mode of transportation was not unique to Elijah. Ezekiel was transported this way (Ez 3:12,14) as well as Philip (Acts 8:39–40).

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[25] Some scholars who believe in Elijah's bodily assumption to heaven nonetheless concede that here in 2 Kings 2 the term *heaven* refers merely to the sky. G. Rawlinson, 5:21; Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 257–59. This leaves one to wonder about the basis of their belief in Elijah's heavenly assumption, since this is the only passage in the entire Bible that describes his removal, and it mentions only the sky—not heaven.

[26] Williams, 20. Keil, 3:206. This construction is common with the word *heaven*. Alternatively, House translates the phrase as a construct: "the storm of the heavens," 257.

[27] The LXX says that the Lord brought him up "as it were, into heaven" (ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν), indicating that the translators did not believe he actually went to heaven.

[28] The Hebrew term translated as "whirlwind" means "storm, tempest, gale, i.e., a naturally occurring weather storm with a focus on rapid movement of air blowing (or swirling) in the storm, but may include rain and lightning, often with a focus on destructive force." James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), s.v. סְעָרָה

[29] Compare Roy E. Knuteson, "Elijah's Little-Known Letter in 2 Chronicles 21:12–15," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 23–32. He aptly remarks (30) that the text "does not demand an entrance into the celestial heaven by means of a whirlwind. Consistent with the rest of the story, 2 Kings 2:1,11 simply means he was taken *upward in the direction of heaven*. . . . Unlike Jesus, he did not pass "through the heavens" (Heb 4:14) in his brief ride through the atmosphere above."

Third, there were fifty eyewitnesses of this event among the sons of the prophets. They all knew in advance that Elijah's public ministry was coming to a close that day (2 Kgs 2:3–7), so they fully understood what was about to happen. When the event transpired, these fifty men were unanimous in their assessment and interpretation of what they had just witnessed. They believed that the Holy Spirit had merely lifted Elijah up from the earth and then dropped him off on some mountain or in some valley (2 Kgs 2:16);[30] none believed that he had entered the afterlife by bodily assumption. They were so convinced of this that they wanted to go look for him. If they were mistaken in their understanding, Elisha never corrected them. He only insisted that it would be a waste of time to seek for him because they would not find him (2 Kgs 2:16–18).

Despite these indicators within the text, however, most scholars read the account of Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2 as an event that parallels Enoch's translation in Genesis 5. Yet a careful reading of the text reveals that the author of Kings is describing a different kind of event. Genesis 5:24 characterizes Enoch's removal in absolute and existential terms: it says simply that "he was not," or literally "there was non-existence of him" (וְאֵינֶנּוּ). The absolute and unqualified nature of the statement conveys that he no longer existed *anywhere* in the world.[31] There is no comparable statement made about Elijah; rather, the text says only that he was "not found" by the sons of the prophets (וְלֹא מְצָאֻהוּ, 2 Kgs 2:17) and he was "not seen" again by Elisha (וְלֹ֥ רְאָ֖הוּ עֽוֹד, 2 Kgs 2:12), but it never says in absolute terms that "he was not." A true parallel would require an explicit negation of his existence in this world, as with Enoch.

It is true that both Enoch and Elisha are said to be "taken" (לָקַח), but not in the same way. Once again, the taking of Enoch is stated in absolute terms. Genesis 5:24 says merely that "God took him" (לָקַח אֹתוֹ אֱלֹהִים). There is no prepositional phrase to limit or define that from which God took him. The implication of this unqualified statement is that God took him from our entire realm, for Moses is here offering the explanation for Enoch's "non-existence" in this world. By contrast, the "taking" of Elijah is always stated in a restricted and qualified manner. That is, his taking is defined solely in terms of his relationship to Elisha. In fact, no fewer than four times does the text speak of God taking Elijah, and in all four instances it is Elisha from whom he is taken. Twice the text explicitly

[30] The form of the Hebrew grammar that they used indicates that they truly believed that Elijah had been transported to another location, and thus they were not merely "hoping against hope." They use the word פֶּן followed by a perfect verb. Gesenius explains that the word is normally followed by the imperfect, but in the rare exception, as here, it conveys "a vivid presentment of the time when the fear is realized." Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch and Arthur Ernest Cowley, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 318 (§ 107 q, n. 3). Similarly, Ewald's grammar explains that פֶּן is used "with the perfect to indicate fear for an action which may almost certainly be expected to have actually been accomplished already." Heinrich Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), 227. Of its 133 occurrences in the OT, there is only one other passage where the term is utilized with a perfect rather than an imperfect verb: 2 Samuel 20:6, where David expresses his fear that Sheba has likely already had enough time to capture fortified cities due to Amasa's delay. Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, "פֶּן־," *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 814–815. Victor P. Hamilton, "1780 פֶּן," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 2:726–727.

[31] Clearly, Enoch did not cease to exist altogether, for Hebrews 11:5 speaks of his "translation" (μετάθεσις), which means that he was either transported to another location or underwent some kind of transformation. Hence, the meaning of Genesis 5:24 is that he no longer existed in our realm. Compare Psalm 39:13, where the psalmist uses the same terminology to express the idea of departing this world by means of death, and hence he would exist no more in this world.

affirms that he would be taken "away from" Elisha (מֵעִמָּךְ in 2 Kgs 2:9, and מֵאִתָּךְ in 2 Kgs 2:10). An additional two times the text affirms that God would take him specifically from his position of *authority* over Elisha ("Today Yahweh is taking away your master from over your head," 2 Kgs 2:3, 5).[32] Thus, rather than stating that Elijah left this world, the Bible more modestly claims that God took him away from the limelight and allowed Elisha to rise to the fore. It is his leadership and mentorship of Elisha from which God took him; the text explicitly states that, and nothing more. In summary, the biblical author seems to go out of his way to describe the translation of Elijah in very restricted and qualified terms, whereas Moses describes the translation of Enoch in absolute terms.[33]

The Extra-Biblical Data

The suggestion that Elijah did not leave this world in the whirlwind is not a new one. On the contrary, this seems to have been a common interpretation among ancient Jews and early Christians. The Jewish apocryphal book of Sirach (c. 200–175 B.C.) says only that Elijah was "taken up" (48:9)[34] and that he was "covered/hidden" in the whirlwind (48:12);[35] it does not affirm that he went to heaven. More explicitly, Josephus says that at the time of King Ahaziah's death "Elijah vanished from among men, and until this day no one knows of his death."[36] Additionally, some copies of Josephus explain that Elijah was subsequently able to send the letter to King Jehoram precisely because "he was yet upon the earth."[37] Likewise, *Seder Olam Rabbah* (c. A.D. 160) says, "In the second year of Ahaziah Elijah was hidden, and he will not be seen again until King Messiah comes . . . . And there came to him [Jehoram] a writing from Elijah . . . after Elijah had been hidden for seven years."[38] The *Talmud* quotes Rabbi Yosei as asserting that "Elijah never actually ascended to heaven on high."[39] These Jewish sources agree that Elijah disappeared from among men, but they seem rather ambivalent about

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[32] הַיּוֹם יְהוָה לֹקֵחַ אֶת־אֲדֹנֶיךָ מֵעַל רֹאשֶׁךָ

[33] In Genesis 5:24 the LXX offers a very loose and interpretational translation of the Hebrew: καὶ εὐηρέστησεν Ενωχ τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐχ ηὑρίσκετο, ὅτι μετέθηκεν αὐτὸν ὁ θεός. This translation deviates from the MT in three key ways: (1) it says that Enoch "pleased" God, rather than "walked" with God; (2) it says that he "was not being found," rather than "he was not"; and (3) it says that God "translated" him rather than "took" him. Certainly, its overall interpretation of what happened to Enoch is accurate, for Hebrews 11:5 quotes from the LXX, but its choice of wording blurs the sharp distinctions between Enoch and Elijah that are more evident in the MT.

[34] The LXX adds that he was taken up in both "a whirlwind of fire and a chariot of fiery horses." The Syriac adds that he was taken "heavenward," presumably on the basis of 2 Kings 2:2, 11.

[35] Admittedly, however, the original Hebrew version of this verse is badly preserved at the end. Based upon some partial manuscript evidence, Smend and Charles reconstruct the text to read that he was "hidden in heavenly chambers," whereas the LXX, KJV, and Peters have the text as "he was hidden in a whirlwind." Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Apocrypha of the Old Testament: Apparatuses* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 1:500–501.

[36] Ἠλίας ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἠφανίσθη καὶ οὐδεὶς ἔγνω μέχρι τῆς σήμερον αὐτοῦ τὴν τελευτήν. *Antiquities of the Jews*, IX.2.2§28.

[37] William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 252, note a.

[38] ובשנה השנית לאחזיה נגנז אליהו ולא נראה עד שיבא מלך המשיח ... ויבא אליו מכתב מאליהו ... כבר היה לאליהו זי שנים משנגנז: Accessed September 8, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/Seder_Olam_Rabbah.17?vhe=Seder_Olam,_Warsaw_1904&lang=he.

[39] Sukkah 5a, *The William Davidson Talmud*; accessed October 3, 2020, www.sefaria.org/Sukkah.5a.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

the matter of *where* he went; they do not insist upon a bodily assumption to heaven. Furthermore, both Josephus and *Seder Olam* agree that his translation occurred at the end of Ahaziah's reign (852 B.C.), thus indicating that they do not believe the event is "chronologically misplaced" in 2 Kings. Finally, it is noteworthy that none seems puzzled or troubled by Elijah's sending a letter some years later, as if the account introduces some kind of apparent discrepancy into the narrative that needs to be resolved.

Moving to early Christian sources, Ephraem Syrus (A.D. 306–373) says the whirlwind "lifted up Elijah on high; however, to what place it transported him or when it set him down, Scripture has not said. What is certain is that some years after his seizure, the letter of Elijah was brought to Jehoram, King of Judah, with threatenings and full of terror."[40] Others stress the wording of the LXX (ὡς εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν). For example, Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) draws a contrast between Christ and Elijah: "This one, 'as if into Heaven' (4 Kg. 2:11), but Christ directly into Heaven."[41] Chrysostom (347–407) says, "Elias was taken up, as though to heaven; for he was a servant. But Jesus was taken up to heaven; for He was the Lord."[42] Likewise, Theodoret (393–458) says, "Although the great Elijah ascended, it was not into Heaven—but as if into Heaven."[43] More emphatically, Photios (c. 810–893) explains, "Elijah, as a slave, was taken to the aerial heights, but not into Heaven, but *as it were into Heaven* (4 Kg. 2:11). The Lord, as the Ruler of all, ascended not *as it were into Heaven*, but truly into Heaven did He ascend."[44]

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[40] The translation is my own, based on the Latin: "Eliam, in sublime extulit: quonam vero transtulerit aut ubi demiserit, Scriptura reticuit. Quod indubitale est, post aliquot ab hoc raptu annos Eliae literae ad Joramum regem Juda allatae fuerunt minarum, ac terroris plenae." Severus, *Sancti Patris Nostri Ephraem Syri Opera Omnia Quæ Exstant, Græce, Syriace, Latine Commentary of the Monk*, ed. and trans. Joseph Simonius Assemani, Petrus Benedictus, and Stefanus Evodius Assemani, (Rome: Typographia Pontificia Vaticana, 1737), 4:520. Severus wrote his *Commentary of the Monk* in A.D. 861, and this edition contains the original Syriac quotation of Ephraem as well as the Latin translation in parallel columns. Part of this statement is also quoted in John Peter Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 15; and Keil, 3:209n5.

Elsewhere, however, Ephraem Syrus seems to contradict himself when he says, "For Him Elijah longed, and when Him on earth he saw not, he, through faith most throughly cleansed, mounted up in heaven to see Him. Moses saw Him and Elijah; the meek man from the depth ascended, the zealous from on high descended, and in the midst beheld the Son." "Nineteen Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh," in *Gregory the Great (Part II), Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. J. B. Morris and A. Edward Johnston, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. 13 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1898), 224.

[41] Cyril of Jerusalem, "The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem," in *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. R. W. Church and Edwin Hamilton Gifford, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, vol. 7 (New York: Christian Literature, 1894), 101.

[42] "Christ's Ascension Man's Exaltation," in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, trans. and ed. M. F. Toal, vol. 2 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 438. The original Greek citation is provided by Johann Caspar Suicer, *Thesaurus Ecclesiasticus* (Amsterdam: 1682), 1:1317.

[43] Quoted in Peter Mikhalev, "Did Enoch and Elijah (Elias) Ascend into Heaven?," trans. Jesse Dominick; accessed September 12, 2020, www.orthochristian.com/105525.html. The Greek is cited in Suicer, 1:1317; he provides similar Greek quotations from Theophylact and Œcumenius.

[44] Ibid.

Ramifications

Getting the story right matters because the account of Elijah's translation has important theological ramifications. For example, if he actually went to heaven on that occasion, what happened to his body?[45] There are only two options. First, he could have entered heaven yet in his mortal and fallen body. Few theologians accept this option,[46] however, because of the principle that without holiness "no one shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). Furthermore, the saints in heaven have been "perfected" (Heb 12:23). The other option is that he was glorified and his body enjoyed the transformation from mortality to immortality.[47] In other words, he experienced the reality of resurrection, much the same way as living believers will be transformed instantly at the Rapture (1 Cor 15:51–55).[48] The problem here is that the NT emphatically states that Jesus was the first to enjoy that transformation into a glorified resurrection body. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 Paul writes, "But now Christ has been raised from the dead as the firstfruits of those who have slept. . . . But every man in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; then they who belong to Christ at his coming." To give this honor to Elijah is to rob Christ of his glory as "the firstborn from the dead" and his preeminence in all things (Col 1:18).

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[45] One may be tempted to ask the same question about Enoch, but unlike the narrative on Elijah, Genesis 5:24 says nothing about his going to heaven; it says only that God took him. Also, Genesis says nothing about God taking him bodily. That may be a legitimate implication of the statement in Hebrews 11:5 that he did not "see death." However, one could interpret this expression to mean only that he did not experience death in the usual fashion. That is, usually one's soul departs his body as a consequence of the body's breaking down due to disease, injury, or old age and decay. In the case of Enoch, however, he may have simply walked right out of a perfectly healthy and functioning body without experiencing the normal bodily breakdown. At any rate, there is not enough biblical data about where and how he was taken to reach theological conclusions.

[46] Perhaps Heinrich Ewald intends to represent the exceptional view when he states that Elijah's "mysterious life" continued in heaven uninterrupted by death so that someday he could return from there to earth ("als ein durch keinen Tod unterbrochenes geheimnissvolles Leben im Himmel fortsezend, daher auch als stets bereit vondort auf die Erde zurückzukehren.") *Geschichte des Volkes Israel bis Christus*, (Göttingen, 1847), 3:258.

[47] A small minority of scholars represent a third option: that he did not ascend to heaven bodily, but rather he died on that occasion and ascended spiritually. Consequently, Geisler says of Elijah at the transfiguration that he had been "dead for centuries," so he appeared on the mount in a "spiritual, disembodied form," while Packer says that he appeared there in a temporary "re-embodied" form. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2005), 250, 294-95. J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), 255. Of course, the text says nothing about his death on this occasion, but this view does avoid the theological difficulty.

[48] Matthew Henry asserts, "He would shortly take him from the world, not by death, but translate him body and soul to heaven, as Enoch was, only causing him to undergo such a change as would be necessary to the qualifying of him to be an inhabitant in that world of spirits, and such as those shall undergo who will be found alive at Christ's coming," 521. Likewise, Charles Simeon says, "The honour conferred on him was not that he alone should have a glorified body, but that he should possess it now, whilst others must wait for it till the resurrection of the just." *Horae Homileticae: Judges to 2 Kings* (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1836), 3:458. More recently Carl F. Henry asserts that his earthly body was "transformed without any physical disintegration." *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 4:611. See also Guy P. Duffield and Nathaniel M. Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (Los Angeles: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983), 541; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1025.

For the dispensationalist who interprets the book of Revelation in a literal and futurist manner,[49] the suggestion that Elijah has already received his resurrection body introduces another problem. Dispensationalists believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:7–12 who will be killed by the Antichrist and subsequently resurrected. But if Elijah is already in his glorified and immortal body, how can he die in the tribulation period?[50]

Apart from the issue of his body, however, the concept of a heavenly ascension in the OT era raises theological questions in itself. For example, how does one square this concept with Jesus' explicit statement to Nicodemus that "no one has ascended to heaven except he who descended: the Son of Man" (Jn 3:13)?[51] This in turn introduces the related question of where the souls of the saints went upon death during the OT era. On this topic there is no widespread agreement. Many believe that they went to heaven just as saved souls do today,[52] but there is an alternate belief that they went to a

[49] In support of this approach to Revelation, see the excellent article by Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue," *JBTW* 2/1 (2021): 33–52.

[50] Wishing to avoid the theological dilemma, Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604) stated, "From the Old Testament we learn that Elias was rapt up to heaven. But the upper ethereal heaven is one, another the lower aerial heaven. The aerial is closer to the earth; so we speak of the birds of heaven, because we see them fly in this aerial heaven. Elias was raised up to this heaven that he might swiftly be brought to some hidden region of the earth, where, in great peace of body and soul, he would live till the end of the world, when he would return to pay the debt of nature. For he but postponed death; he did not escape it. But Our Redeemer, as He did not postpone it, but rose above it, and rising from the dead defeated it, ascending into heaven proclaimed the glory of His Resurrection." "Homily 29: Explanations and Reflections on the Ascension (Mark 16:14-20)," May 24, AD 591 in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, 2:428. To this day many within the Eastern Orthodox tradition hold that Elijah yet lives in his natural body—not in heaven—but somewhere in the sky or outer space, if not on earth. Hence, he neither died on earth nor went to heaven.

[51] The usual explanation is that technically many people had indeed ascended to heaven, but Christ's meaning is that none who had been there was able fully to process and comprehend the spiritual realities they experienced there such that they could then return to earth and explain those truths to others. For example, Edwin A. Blum states, "No one has ever gone into heaven and then come back to earth, able to give clear teaching about divine matters." "John," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary,* 2:281. Likewise, H. R. Reynolds says, "Enoch, Elijah, may have been translated that they should not see death, but they are not so lifted into the abode of God that they might come thence charged with heavenly truth, and able to explain the 'how' of Divine grace." *The Gospel of John,* The Pulpit Commentary, 1:119.

This interpretation of the text, however, is not without difficulty. After Christ's resurrection the Apostle John, who had seen heaven in visionary form, gave perfectly clear teaching on the heavenly realities in the book of Revelation. Likewise, in the OT era Isaiah saw a vison of Christ upon his heavenly throne (Isa. 6), and he had no problem conveying to his contemporaries what he had experienced. If those who had experienced heaven in visionary form could convey their experiences to an earthly audience, why not those who had experienced it in person?

[52] This is probably the interpretation most preferred by conservatives. According to this view, in the few instances where the righteous speak of descending to Sheol, they are either speaking figuratively (e.g., Jon 2:2) or merely expressing fear of a premature or "bad death" (e.g., Is 38:10). Shaul Bar, "Grave Matters: Sheol in the Hebrew Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43:3 (2015), 145–153. Chad Brand, "Sheol," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary,* ed. Chad Brand, et al., (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1482–84. Kyle Dunham, "Did OT Believers Go to Sheol?," www.dbts.edu/2019/05/01/did-ot-believers-go-to-sheol. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) 170–191. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove,: InterVarsity, 2002), 79–82. Among others, Alexander and Ryrie point to the story of Elijah's heavenly ascent as proof that OT saints went to heaven rather than Sheol, but this argument assumes *a priori* that the term "heaven" in the narrative refers to God's abode rather than the sky. T. Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life After Death," *Themelios* 11/2 (Jan. 1986), 44; Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 607.

The opposite view, commonly held by critical scholars, is that all people—righteous and unrighteous alike—shared a common fate in the murky, shadowy underworld that is Sheol. Supposedly, any notions of distinct destinies or a

place of paradise located in the heart of the earth.[53] It is beyond the scope of this article to argue the merits of this alternate view,[54] but it is worth making one vital observation. For any pastor who subscribes to the alternate theory, one can only imagine the confusion that results in the pews when one Sunday he preaches that OT saints did not go to heaven when they left this world, and the next Sunday he preaches that Elijah went to heaven. This is why systematic theology matters! Without synthesizing the biblical data into a coherent whole, one will contradict himself from one Sunday's exposition of a given text to the next Sunday's exposition of a different text.

The problems are compounded when one reaches unwarranted theological conclusions based on the supposition of Elijah's heavenly ascent. For example, a common assertion is that his ascension

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subsequent resurrection are later developments influenced by Persian, Greek, or Roman thought. J. Harold Ellens, "Afterlife and Underworld in the Bible," in *Heaven, Hell, and the Afterlife*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 1–5. Joachim Jeremias, s.v. "ᾅδης" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittle, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:146–47.

R. Laird Harris argues that the concept of Sheol is not helpful in determining the destiny of the saved in the afterlife because it *always* refers to the grave in which the bodies of the saved and unsaved alike are buried. "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society 4* (1956): 129–35. See also Eriks Galenieks, *The Nature, Function, and Purpose of the Term Sheol in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings* (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2005), 621. It is this interpretation that lies behind the NIV's frequent translation of Sheol as "grave." R. Laird Harris, "The Translation of Sheol," in *The Making of the NIV*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 56–69.

[53] If this perspective is correct, then presumably this is where Enoch was taken. Even if he went there in his mortal body, it would not pose the theological difficulty one encounters in suggesting that either he or Elijah went into the immediate presence of God in heaven while yet in their depraved state.

[54] Briefly stated, key arguments in favor of the idea include the following. (1) The implication that Christ himself was in Hades, rather than heaven, during the time of his death (Acts 2:31). (2) Christ's statement that he would be in the heart of the earth while dead for three days (Mt 12:40). (3) In the OT all who die—saved and unsaved alike—are consistently said to "go down" to Sheol, to the "lowest parts of the earth," or to the "depths of the earth"; they never go up toward heaven. Conversely, when Samuel returned from the dead he came "up" out of the earth rather than down from heaven (1 Sm 28:13–15). In this regard, sheol is the cosmological opposite of heaven (Ps 139:8). (4) Peter's usage of the term *Tartarus* in 2 Peter 2:4, which suggests that Hades is compartmentalized. (Pseudo-Apollodorus refers to Tartarus as a very dark place "in Hades": τόπος δὲ οὗτος ἐρεβώδης ἐστὶν ἐν Ἅιδου. *Library and Epitome (Greek),* ed. James George Frazer [Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, 1921], 1:4.) (5) The explicit statement of Christ to Nicodemus that no man had ascended to heaven (Jn 3:13).

A major problem with this interpretation is that the OT consistently portrays Sheol as a dark and dismal place; there is no reference to comfort or Abraham's bosom. Admittedly, however, most of the references to Sheol are associated with the unrighteous for whom indeed it is a dreary place. Furthermore, Alexander suggests that the hope of the OT saints was not found in the mysterious intermediate state, about which they could know little. Even if it were comfortable for the righteous, it nonetheless was a place of disembodied spirits tucked away in the heart of the earth. Hence, the righteous looked past the intermediate state and found their only hope in resurrection, full restoration, and the immediate presence of God (Ps 49:14–15). By contrast, for the unrighteous the awful realities of Sheol will simply give way to more of the same in eternity, and this accounts for the typical OT portrayal of Sheol as dreary and hopeless (41–46).

This compartmentalized view of Hades was prevalent among the ancient Jews (1 Enoch 22; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IX.18.3§14) as well as the early Church Fathers. For example, Hippolytus of Rome gives a rather extended description of the two compartments in Hades ("Against Plato, On the Cause of the Universe," 1). In the modern era, advocates of this view include Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 36–47; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 3:313–28; and Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 381–82. Other scholars who are less committed to this view but who are open to the possibility include Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 2:1370; and I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 637.

prefigures or typifies Christ's own glorious ascension to heaven.[55] Apart from the obvious fact that Christ did not ascend in a whirlwind, Lange's commentary offers an insightful assessment of this theological assumption:

> The Scriptures speak with very different, and in fact very definite, expressions of the departure of Christ, not as a removal or translation, but as an ascent into heaven and a reception there, an entrance into the glory, which he had before the foundations of the earth were laid (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–11; 2:33 *sq*.; 7:55; John 17:5, 24). Christ actually tasted death, but he arose from the dead and was elevated, as victor over sin and death, to the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Hebr. 8:1). . . . In the case of Christ, the Ascension forms an integral and essential moment in His work of salvation.

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[55] Matthew Henry states, "He looked forward to the evangelical dispensation, and, in the translation of Elijah, gave a type and figure of the ascension of Christ and the opening of the kingdom of heaven to all believers" (522). Similarly, Keil affirms that Elijah was "taken to heaven as the forerunner of Christ (Mal 3:23, 24; Mt 11:10, 11) without tasting of death, to predict the ascension of our Lord, and to set it forth in Old Testament mode," 3:209. J. Orr calls the event "a striking Old Testament anticipation of the ascension of Christ," *The Pulpit Commentary,* 5:38.

With an increased interest in premodern figural interpretations of the OT, this is still a common assertion. C. F. Moore affirms that "both the ascensions of Enoch and Elijah ultimately testify (*testis*) and herald (*praenuntius*)" Christ's own ascension. "No One Has Ascended into Heaven Except the One Who Descends: The Climax of Ascension in Scripture." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (2022): 5. Patrick Schreiner says of the narrative, "It is an ascent, witnessing, and succession story. . . . Readers should lay this story on Acts 1:9–11." *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 28–29. Cf. Mitchell L. Chase, *40 Questions About Typology and Allegory,* Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 228; Justin Alexandru Mihoc, "The Ascension of Jesus Christ: A Critical and Exegetical Study of the Ascension in Luke-Acts and in the Jewish and Christian Contexts*"* (Master's thesis, Durham University, 2010), 18–21, 106.

In this regard, Elijah is commonly seen as filling a dual typological role. That is, on the one hand the Elijah-Elisha cycle is seen to prefigure the ministries of John the Baptist and his greater successor, the Christ. Yet on the other hand, the OT narrative is seen simultaneously to typify the ministry of Christ and his succession by the Church. E.g. Raymond B. Dillard, *Faith in the Face of Apostasy: The Gospel according to Elijah & Elisha*, ed. Tremper Longman III and J. Alan Groves, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 9–12, 84–86. See also James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 134–140.

Steven Edward Harris acknowledges the points of contact between the prophetic ministry of Elijah and that of Christ, but he suggests that with the NT allusions to the OT narrative the intent of the author is not to invite comparison so much as to highlight the differences. For example, unlike Elijah the Church does not outdo Christ's miraculous work but rather testifies to it. Furthermore, the Church does not operate independent of the ascended Christ, but rather through his power and in union with him. "Greater Resurrections and a Greater Ascension: Figural Interpretation of Elijah and Jesus," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 13 (2019): 21–35. Similarly, Allen C. Myers remarks, "Christ's ascension produced a community of witnesses (rather than a successor)" (326–327. Benedict Pictet conceded that Elijah was "carried up by the power of another; Christ ascended by his own power. . . . The *cloud* which received the Saviour, and carried him up to heaven, was not intended as a vehicle, like the chariot of Elijah." *Christian Theology*, trans. Frederick Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board, n.d.), 265–266. Darrell L. Bock argues that "Luke's typology is one of 'times' not 'persons.' There is allusion to Elijah's ministry in Luke, but it serves to cast Jesus' ministry in relief against the background of the great prophet of old. The time of salvation has come, and it is a time which demands response." He further suggests that "Jesus' refusal to bring down fire from heaven (9:51–56) severs the connection, while the parallel of being 'taken up to heaven' (Lk 9:51) only reflects that Jesus is specially blessed in his reception. None of these allusions require the conclusion that Jesus is identified as the 'new Elijah.'" "Elijah and Elisha," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 205. Finally, as already observed the Church Fathers commonly viewed the analogy of Elijah as a vehicle of contrast: Christ ascended to heaven, having conquered death, whereas Elijah merely ascended to the sky, yet in his mortal body. Thus, the connections between Elijah and Christ are more complex and nuanced than a simple formula that equates the supposed bodily assumptions of Enoch and Elijah to the ascension of the resurrected Christ.

> There begins His kingly function, and that redemptive work which lasts into eternity (Hebr. 4:14; 5:9, 10; 9:12). In the case of Elijah, on the contrary, his entire work ceases upon his translation. It is not the entrance into a broader, higher activity in heaven, but the end, even though a glorious end, of his work, and on this account it cannot pass for a type of the Ascension of Christ.[56]

In a similar fashion, some view the narrative as a type of our own heavenly ascension at the Rapture.[57] There are no intertextual connections, however, between the OT account and the key NT passages that describe the Rapture (1 Cor 15:51–54, 1 Thes 4:13–18). The OT narrative lays stress upon the whirlwind, the fiery chariot and horses, and the successor who is "left behind" to carry on the work. None of this has a parallel in the NT passages. Likewise, apart from our ascent,[58] the NT portrayal of the Rapture includes the following elements: (1) Christ's descent from heaven, (2) the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, (3) resurrection and transformation, and (4) a grand reunion with Christ and all the saints in the sky. Of course, a type need not correspond to the antitype in every aspect, but not one of these elements is represented in the OT account. In particular, the omission of any reference in the OT narrative to glorification and a reunion in the sky would make the account almost entirely miss the point of the Rapture, rather than illustrating it. Certainly, the story illustrates God's ability to transport people supernaturally, but it is not likely that it was intended by God to function as a prophetic portrayal of the Church's Rapture.[59]

Not only does a proper reading of the story avoid theological problems, but it also lends theological clarity. For example, many believe that the other witness who will accompany Elijah during the tribulation period is Enoch because these two men were supposedly the only ones who experienced a bodily assumption to heaven. But if, in fact, Elijah did not ascend to heaven in that

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[56] John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: 2 Kings*, 19.

[57] W. A. Criswell states of Elijah's ascent, "This is a type of, and an illustration of, that final and ultimate rapture of the people of Christ into the presence of the Lord, when this mortal shall have put on immortality." https://wacriswell.com/sermons/1961/the-rapture-of-elijah. Likewise, Thomas D. Ice insists that "Enoch and Elijah stand as types of the rapture of the church." "The Rapture in History and Prophecy" (2009), 4; https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/35. Cf. Ephraem Syrus, who claims that Elijah was taken up "in the twinkling of an eye." *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, trans. C. W. Mitchell (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), 1:xlvi. He further identifies Elijah as "a type of the living, that fly to meet Him at His coming" (A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 13:224).

[58] Modern scholars commonly refer to the "rapture" of Elijah, using terminology familiar to us from the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Here Paul uses the term ἁρπάζω, and elsewhere the NT uses this term to describe Philip's sudden and rapid departure from the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:39) and Paul's transport to paradise (2 Cor 12:4). In the OT, the LXX utilizes the term thirty-five times, but it is not the term employed by the LXX in 2 Kings 2. There the LXX uses the terms ἀνάγω (2:1) and ἀναλαμβάνω (2:11). In the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*, Nicodemus illustrates the distinction when he observes that Elijah was not "raptured" (ἁρπάζω) and dropped off on some mountain, but rather he was "received up" (ἀναλαμβάνω) into heaven. "Gospel of Nicodemus/Acts of Pilate," 15:1, *Greek Apocryphal Gospels, Fragments and Agrapha: Texts and Transcriptions*, ed. Rick Brannan (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013). In the case of Elijah, they knew in advance that he would be departing that day, and the event unfolded slowly enough that eyewitnesses could observe it; hence, Elijah's ascent was not the same kind of ascent connoted by the term "rapture."

[59] The post-tribulational view of the Rapture is that the saints return back to earth after their skyward ascent, rather than progressing onward to heaven, as in the pre-tribulational view. If, therefore, Elijah did not actually ascend to heaven, the event would better illustrate a post-tribulational Rapture than the pre-tribulation view held by Ice and Criswell.

whirlwind, then the supposed connection between the two men does not exist.[60] This opens the door to consider the other possibility that has often been suggested: that Moses is the other witness.[61] Apart from the fact that the miracles attributed to the two witnesses in Revelation 11:5–6 are reminiscent of those performed by Moses and Elijah in the OT, there are other obvious connections between the two men that are commonly observed. For example, they appeared together on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:3–4). Also, they are both mentioned in the concluding verses of the OT in anticipation of the Messiah's coming (Mal 4:4–6).[62]

In addition to these common observations, the account of Elijah's translation offers a further connection between the prophet and Moses: their earthly ministries both came to an end in a similar manner. Moses was last seen ascending (עָלָה) Mount Nebo, after which he died and was buried at an unknown and undisclosed location (Dt 34:1–7). Similarly, Elijah was last seen ascending (עָלָה) in a whirlwind, and subsequently he apparently died and was buried at an unknown location.[63]

Finally, apart from the theological ramifications, there are hermeneutical lessons to be learned. A key rule of Bible interpretation is that "when the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense."

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[60] Additionally, Enoch was not an Israelite like Elijah, so he would seem somewhat out of place ministering at the Jewish temple.

[61] Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, eds., *John's Gospel, Hebrews–Revelation*, The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2005), 376; Nelson Price, "Elijah," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 480; MacArthur, Note on Rev 11:5; McCune, 341, 377; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 88. Some scholars do not believe that the literal prophets are in view, but that nonetheless the two witnesses are symbolically represented by Moses and Elijah. John D. Barry, et al., Note on Rev 11:5–6, in *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012, 2016); W. A. Criswell, Note on Rev 11:3-10, in *The Criswell Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979), 1492; Note on Rev 11:4, in *Evangelical Heritage Version Study Bible*; A. Boyd Luter, "Revelation," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 2031; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, ONTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 186; Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, NAC 39 (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 245; J Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 617. Scofield, 1362, n. 4. D. C. Allison Jr., who also believes that Moses and Elijah are in view in this passage, observes that there was a "Jewish expectation of the eschatological return of Moses himself—an expectation attested in *Lives of the Prophets: Jeremiah* 14; *Fragmentary Targum* on Ex. 12:42; and *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:17." "Moses," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 779.

[62] For an extensive list of parallels between the ministry of Elijah and that of Moses, see Jerome T. Walsh, "Elijah (Person)," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* , ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 464–465.

[63] Ancient Jewish tradition also makes this connection between Moses and Elijah. For example, in *Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus says that Elijah "vanished" in the whirlwind (IX.2.2§28), and similarly he says that Moses "vanished" in a cloud (IV.8.48§323,326). (Here Josephus uses the Greek word ἀφανίζω to represent the Hebrew word עָלָה. Though the Hebrew term usually means "to ascend, to go up," it can also mean simply "to go away, to disappear from view.") Likewise, the *Talmud* says, "Moses and Elijah never actually ascended to heaven on high, as it is stated: 'The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, and the earth He gave to the children of man'" (ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום שנאמר השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם), Sukkah 5a, *William Davidson Talmud*.

Modern scholars also perceive this as a legitimate connection. Walsh says, "Elijah's mysterious disappearance in Transjordan and the disciples' inability to recover his body parallel the death and divinely-hidden burial of Moses (Deut 34:1–6)" (465). Likewise, B. L. Smith states, "Not only has the death of Moses an air of mystery attaching to it (Dt. 34:6) but his successor secured the allegiance of Israel by participating in the same spirit as Moses and demonstrated his fitness for office by a miraculous river crossing (Dt. 34:9; Jos. 4:14). The translation narrative (2 Ki. 2) reproduces this pattern fairly precisely. . . . Little wonder that in Jewish Haggadic thought Elijah was viewed as the counterpart to Moses" (313). See also Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 443.

Yet, in the case of Elijah's translation and subsequent letter it appears that Bible scholars often do reach a conclusion other than the most simple and straightforward one. One wonders if this is because they read the narrative through the lens of a beloved Sunday School version of the story. Similarly, artwork commonly portrays Elijah ascending to heaven in a fiery chariot, and scholars often affirm this portrayal to be accurate, even though the only role assigned by the text to the chariot is that of separating Elijah and Elisha (2 Kgs 2:11).[64] That even the most educated and seasoned Bible scholars can be influenced by tradition and approach the text with *a priori* conclusions should serve as a cautionary tale to all Bible interpreters.

[64] For example, Gleason Archer affirms, "Elijah was taken up into heaven by the celestial chariot of fire" (227). In fairness, however, one might observe that occasionally OT theophanies portray God as riding the storm in his chariot (Ps 18:7-14, 104:3; Is 66:15), so these scholars merge the storm and chariot into a single image of divine transportation. For more on this and the significance of the chariot in the narrative, see Randall Bailey, "Elijah and Elisha: The Chariots and Horses of Israel in the Context of ANE Chariot Warfare," *ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΚΑ: Spiritually Appraising Matters of the Spirit* 2/1 (2014), 18–39.