

The Figure of Elijah in 2nd Temple Judaism and the New Testament

God honors the prophet Elijah as one of only two people who “ascend” to heaven without experiencing death (the other being Enoch). Elijah’s exit from the world led to speculation over his role at the restoration of Israel. Jewish writers as diverse as the prophet Malachi (~5th c. BCE), many of the apocalyptic authors of the Intertestamental period (4th c. BCE – 1st c. CE), and the Rabbis who compiled their teachings after the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE) all reference Elijah’s presence at the culmination of history. The New Testament acknowledges these contemporary ideas about Elijah and appropriates them into Christian theology.

Monarchy	Post-Exilic Period	Intertestamental Period	New Testament
<p>1 & 2 Kings –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elijah is an anointed prophet tasked with speaking the God’s oracles Elijah “ascends” <i>alah</i> to heaven in a “fiery chariot” <i>raqeb ish</i> - (2 Kings 2:11) Prophetic ministry carried on by his disciple Elisha Parallels to Moses’ death (place, lack of body) 	<p style="text-align: center;">BABYLONIAN EXILE</p> <p>New Questions –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why did God punish ALL his people? Why hasn’t nation been totally restored? Are we still in exile? What does it mean to be Jewish? How should God’s people live surrounded by foreigners? <p>Consequences –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critique of post-exilic institutions (<i>Malachi, Ezra</i>) Focus on hallmarks of Jewish faith – circumcision, Sabbath, and food laws New festival established celebrating Jewish identity – Purim (from <i>Esther</i>) <p>Malachi (~500 BCE) –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “<i>Messenger</i>” coming before and LORD will appear at Temple suddenly – 3:1 “Prophet Elijah” will come before “day of the Lord” – 4:5 	<p>Restoration of Israel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Different viewpoints arise as to the best way to (re)establish Temple, restore the Land, and liberate Israel from oppressors Apocalyptic genre becomes a common way to express these hopes using symbolism understood by insiders OT figures’ roles further explained or expanded within new conceptions of apocalyptic fulfillment Multiple ideas about how restoration occurs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Qumran Community (Essenes): “Teacher of Righteousness” & “Messiah” as forerunners “Son of Man” will judge other nations - <i>1 Enoch</i> “Messiah” will purge Jerusalem – <i>Psalms of Solomon</i> <p>Elijah in Period Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elijah & Enoch kill “son of lawlessness” & inaugurate millennial kingdom – <i>Apocalypse of Elijah</i> (1st c CE) Altar stones from the Temple are put aside “until a prophet appears” – <i>1 Maccabees</i> (2nd c BCE) Elijah is “a prophet like fire” who will “calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury” – <i>Sirach</i> (2nd c BCE) Elijah, Enoch, & Moses shall return at the end of the world – <i>4th Ezra</i> (1st c CE) Elijah will settle all theological disputes and resurrect the dead – <i>Mishnah</i> (1st c BCE - 2nd c CE) 	<p>Elijah is the 4th most cited OT figure in the NT - 29 times. All but 2 of these are in the gospels. Three major emphases revolve around the figure of Elijah:</p> <p>Transfiguration -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elijah & Moses appear with Jesus in the Synoptic gospels – reinforces theme of Jesus’ ministry as the inauguration of a new world Presence of both figures built on earlier traditions of two witnesses <p>“One Like Elijah” -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Synoptic gospels identify John the Baptist as this figure though in the 4th Gospel, this is disputed Popular opinion linked Jesus to Elijah due to similarity of ministries and miracles performed At Jesus’ quotation of Ps. 22 on the cross, bystanders believe he is calling for Elijah, who had gained the tradition of helper of oppressed <p>Apocalyptic Witnesses –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Revelation</i> references two witnesses who come before the judgment Descriptions of their powers reference Elijah & Moses’ acts – drought (Elijah) & plagues (Moses) The witnesses are killed then resurrected by God after 3 ½ days and ascend to heaven on a cloud