# "Arise and Eat": 1 Kings 19:3-8 and Elijah's Death, Resurrection And Bread from Heaven<sup>1</sup>

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The Elijah narratives in 1 and 2 Kings are textually complex and the compositional history of 1 Kings 17-19 in particular is hotly contested within historical critical scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In this article I focus on a few specific verses, namely 1 Kings 19:3-8. In this passage we find Elijah fleeing into the wilderness, petitioning the Lord, begging for death, and then falling asleep. An angel appears to Elijah, touches him, and commands him to arise and eat the bread and drink the water which has mysteriously appeared. After the angel repeats the command, Elijah eats and drinks and continues on a forty day journey to Horeb where he has an encounter with God. I propose that this passage is suggestive of a death and resurrection scene, where Elijah's falling asleep may be a reference to death, and his arising akin to resurrection, after which he is fed with the mystical angelic bread and drink.<sup>3</sup>

The passage under discussion reads as follows:

Frightened, [Elijah] fled at once for his life. He came to Beer-sheba, which is in Judah, and left his servant there; he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. "Enough!" he cried. "Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Frances Flannery, "Go Back by the Way You Came': An Internal Textual Critique of Elijah's Violence in 1 Kings 18-19," in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritchel Ames, 161-173 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 163; and Jyrki Keinänen, *Traditions in Collision: A Literary and Redaction-Critical Study on the Elijah Narratives 1 Kings 17-19* (Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 1-12. Though see, Douglas Lawrie, "Telling Of(f) Prophets: Narrative Strategy in 1 Kings 18:1-19:18," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 23, no. 2 (1997): 163-180; Denise Dick Herr, "Variations of a Pattern: 1 Kings 19," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 2 (1985): 292-294; Robert L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101, no. 3 (1982): 333-350; and R.A. Carlson, "Élie à L'Horeb," *Vetus Testamentum* 19, no. 4 (1969): 416-439.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I will be using the words "mystical" and "mysticism" in the ways April D. DeConick uses them in her programmatic essay, "What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April D. DeConick, 1-24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006).

than my fathers." He lay down and fell asleep under a broom bush. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." He looked about; and there, beside his head, was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water! He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you." He arose and ate and drank; and with the strength from that meal he walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God at Horeb (1 Kings 19:3-8).

In the broader context of this passage Elijah has just killed the prophets of Ba'al (18:40). In response to his attack, Jezebel sends a messenger to give Elijah what amounts to a death threat. Elijah's response to this turn of events is to flee into the wilderness seeking refuge.

The plain-sense reading of this passage, and, indeed, the standard interpretation, is simply that Elijah is depicted falling asleep due to exhaustion. Then, strengthened miraculously by nourishment from an angel, Elijah proceeds to Horeb for his Moses-like theophanic encounter with God. In this article, I would like to entertain a slightly different reading of the text. I suggest that Elijah does not merely take a snooze due to his exhaustion, but rather that Elijah actually dies a physical death in the wilderness, and then is raised from the dead by the angel of the Lord, and is fed with mystical food, heavenly bread, which strengthens him for his journey to the Mountain of God. This reading also provides us with a different take on the conclusion of the Elijah narratives. When we read that the prophet is taken to heaven on a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11), there is no need for Elijah's physical death. The prophet has already died and been raised, and now Elijah dramatically ascends to the heavenly abode of God.

## *The Sleep of Death*

Since this reading of the passage goes against the standard interpretation, we may ask ourselves what grounds we have for understanding Elijah's falling asleep as death. Why even consider the possibility that this instance of "falling asleep" signifies death? Of course, it is evident that one of the Greek phrases the Septuagint uses here for Elijah's falling asleep, *ekoimēthē*, is used later in the New Testament as a euphemism for dying. We see this, for example, in 1 Corinthians where those who have fallen asleep is a reference to those who have died. Thus when we read *koimōntai* in 1 Corinthians 11:30, *ekoimēthēsan* in 15:6, *koimēthentes* in 15:18, and *kekoimēmenōn* in 15:20, all refer to those who have physically died. In and of itself, however, this New Testament use of the phrase is inadequate for making a case that death is implied in the Elijah passage presently under discussion. Both verbs for falling asleep/lying down (*ekoimēthē* and *hupnōsen*) employed in the Greek text of 1 Kings have overlapping spheres of meaning.

There are many places as well where the equivalent Hebrew phrase for falling asleep also refers to death. This Hebrew usage is discussed less frequently in the literature. In our present passage, the Hebrew word the Septuagint translates as *hupnōsen* is *yiyšan*. We find forms of this same verb being used euphemistically for death in a number of places. Psalm 13:4 makes it clear that death is indicated when it employs the phrase, *'išan hamāwet*, "sleep of death." But even in other passages, like *miyšēnê 'admat-'āpār* "those who sleep in the dust of the earth" in Daniel 12:2,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> All English translations for the Hebrew Bible are taken from the NJPS unless otherwise mentioned.

wĕyāšĕnû šĕnat-'ôlām "and then sleep an endless sleep" in Jeremiah 51:39, and yāšanĕtî "I would be asleep" in Job 3:13, are all instances where "sleep" unambiguously identifies death.

Hendrik Jagersma has made a persuasive case for reading sleep euphemistically as death in Elijah's sarcastic remark to the prophets of Ba'al in the chapter which precedes the one at hand. In 1 Kings 18:27, we read Elijah's comment that perhaps Ba'al, their god,  $y\bar{a}s\bar{e}n$  "is asleep." Based on the ritual described in the passage, comparative Ugaritic literature, and the other Hebrew parallels I have just mentioned where sleep is a euphemism for death, Jagersma argues that Elijah is mocking the prophets with the insulting suggestion that perhaps their god is dead. Interestingly, the Hebrew verb the Septuagint translates with *ekoimēthē* is *škb*, here *wayiškab*. One usage of *škb* is to refer, not only to lying down, but to dying. Thus we see that even in Hebrew, falling asleep can be used to identify physical death and not merely sleep. But, again, this linguistic observation does not help us solve the interpretation of Elijah's falling asleep.

#### Death and Resurrection

In order to proceed, we must ask ourselves, why would Elijah die in this passage? Why might we consider that his falling asleep in fact indicates physical death? A preliminary answer might be that death is precisely what Elijah asked of God in his prayer. God allowing Elijah to die in the desert could be interpreted as a response to Elijah's prayer. 1 Kings 19:4 tells us that Elijah "prayed that he might die. 'Enough!' he cried, 'Now, O Lord, take my life...." It is then that Elijah lies down and falls asleep. When we follow the narrative, we see that the next action that takes place is that an angel appears and touches Elijah. Previously, a messenger (*ml'k*) had been sent by Jezebel to spell out Elijah's doom in the form of his impending death. Now we see another messenger (*ml'k*), this time from God, and, in this reading, the messenger brings the opposite message to Elijah—not death, but life, and Elijah is hence brought back to life.

Earlier, in the previous chapter, Elijah had told king Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink" (1 Kings 18:41). Now, the angel says to Elijah, "Arise and eat" (1 Kings 19:5), and Elijah arises, and he eats and he drinks. If we take the opportunity to turn to the reception history of the Elijah narratives, we might note that Epiphanius links the verse from Ephesians, "Therefore it is said, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light'" (5:14) with Elijah.

Epiphanius furthermore makes a link between this arising from the dead with the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of John, as well as with the raising of the synagogue ruler's daughter in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> H. Jagersma, "yšn in 1. Könige xviii 27," Vetus Testamentum 25, no. 3 (1975): 674-676. See also the comments in Alan J. Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death—The Real Struggle in 1 Kings 17-19," in From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis, ed. Alan J. Hauser, 9-89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 44. On the Ugaritic background to the idea of Ba'al's death (sleep of death) and the necessity to resurrect (awaken) Ba'al, as the background for understanding this passage, see, e.g., Keinänen, Traditions in Collision, 101-106; and Leah Bronner, The Stories of Elijah and Elisha: As Polemics Against Baal Worship (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 111-119.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In Hebrew, 'alēh 'ĕkōl ûštēh.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See the text and comments in *The Books of Elijah Parts 1-2*, collected and trans. by Michael E. Stone and John Strugnell (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 76-79.

Luke's Gospel, who Jesus identifies as asleep (*katheudei*). Epiphanius certainly hit upon some interesting parallels with Luke and John. But it is also intriguing that in the Gospel of Mark, the synagogue ruler's daughter is not only described as asleep (*katheudei*), but Jesus' words to her include the Aramaic word *koum* (arise) left untranslated in the Greek with a simple explanatory gloss. In the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 19:5 and 7, the word is the same, *qûm* in both.

Likewise, in the account of Lazarus' death and resurrection, in John 11, we again find the description of Lazarus as having fallen asleep, *kekoimētai* (11:11), and then Jesus says that Lazarus will arise or resurrect, *anastēsetai*. John's Gospel here uses the same verb the Septuagint employs to translate *qûm* when the angel commands Elijah: *anastēthi*, and then, *anasta*. Of course, this is the verbal form the New Testament employs for resurrection, *anastasis*.

#### *Elijah in the Wilderness*

The narratives in 1 Kings chapters 17-19 are replete with verbs indicating dying and killing, and these words are contrasted with the sustaining of life. <sup>10</sup> God is depicted as the giver and sustainer of life. We see this particularly in the nourishment given to Elijah after he awakens. After he arises, he is fed with a cake and water provided by an angel. The emphasis that this is the angel of the Lord clarifies for the reader that this is no ordinary messenger, unlike the messenger Jezebel who was sent to Elijah. Such clarification might be necessary for the reader, since both the Hebrew and Greek words for angel and messenger are the same, and Elijah had just been visited by a human messenger sent with a message of impending death. The cake of bread provided in the desert, and mysterious water, should call to mind when Moses and the Israelites were fed with Manna and water in their desert wandering after the exodus.

The parallels between this passage in 1 Kings and the wilderness narratives in the Pentateuch concerning Moses and the Israelites are striking. As Moses and the Israelites travel forty years in the wilderness, so Elijah travels for forty days in the wilderness. Just as the Israelites drank water in the desert which the Lord provided through Moses, so Elijah drinks the water in the desert which the Lord provides through an angel. The Israelites fed on the manna in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For anyone reading the Syriac text, the fact that the Gospel of Mark includes the Aramaic phrase in the Greek text would be lost on the reader, since Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, includes the phrase also in Luke, as a natural Syriac translation of the Greek. Thus, in 1 Kings 19:5 and 7 we find the word: *qwm*. In Mark 5:41, we find the same word: *qwmy*. But we also have this word in Luke's account (8:54): *qwmy*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Peter Leithart sees this lying down and arising again as symbolic of death and resurrection. See Peter J. Leithart, *I* & 2 Kings, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2006), 141. That this passage is at least symbolic of death and resurrection was noticed over three decades ago in Hugh C. White, "The Initiation Legend of Ishmael," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87, no. 3 (1975): 305, where White persuasively makes numerous links between the Elijah story and Genesis narratives concerning Hagar and Ishmael.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Lawrie, "Telling Of(f) Prophets," 175. On 176 n. 27, Lawrie writes that, "The narrative itself [17-19] makes much use of *verbs* of killing and sustaining. The contrast between killing and sustaining is indeed a 'theme' that fits into the rhetoric of the narrative."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See the comments in Keinänen, *Traditions in Collision*, 149-155; and Russell Gregory, "Irony and the Unmasking of Elijah," in *From Carmel to Horeb*, ed. Hauser, 144-146.

wilderness, mystical bread which, in its rendering of Psalm 77:25 the Septuagint renders as "bread of angels" (*arton angelōn*). 12

Deuteronomy 18:15-19 points to a prophet like Moses which the Lord will raise up. There is a sense in which Elijah is a prophet like Moses, as the many parallels between him and Moses (and the wilderness accounts in general) make clear. Moses himself, in Exodus 32:31, asks that his life be taken away from him, just as Elijah does here in 1 Kings 19. Moses parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21) so Elijah parted the Jordan river (2 Kings 2:8). As Moses was responsible for feeding the hungry Israelites in the wilderness with water from the rock and calling down Manna from heaven (Exodus 16:4-18), so Elijah was responsible with the provision and multiplication of food and drink when these staples were running out for the widow and her son (1 Kings 17:10-16). Both Moses and Elijah survive for forty days without eating or drinking (Deuteronomy 9:9 and 1 Kings 19:8). Moreover, both Moses and Elijah encounter God at Horeb. Horeb.

Perhaps the expectation of a new Moses-like figure partly accounts for Second Temple and later Jewish expectation of new manna, new heavenly bread. Texts including *2 Baruch* (29:3-8), *Midrash Rabbah* on Ecclesiastes 1:9, and *Mekilta* on Exodus 16:25, all point to a future manna in the eschatological messianic age. In the words of *Genesis Rabbah* (82:8), this would be "bread of the age to come." Elijah's association with the messianic age in Jewish tradition is clear, not only from the reference to Elijah's return on the Day of the Lord in Malachi 3:23, but also the cup of wine set aside for Elijah in some Jewish traditions of the Passover Seder. In all of these and other traditions, Elijah is seen as the herald of the Messiah. <sup>17</sup> The differences between Elijah and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> This is Psalm 78:25 following the Hebrew text. The Hebrew text reads, *leḥ em 'abîrîm* "bread of mighty ones." NJPS translates this as "a hero's meal."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Of course these parallels were not lost on early Jewish interpreters, as evidenced in the ninth century *Pesikta Rabbati*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Lawrie, "Telling Of(f) Prophets," 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See the comments in James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 532, where he brings up these parallels and adds: "Elijah is a classically northern (Israelite) sort of prophet. A Moses-like worker of miracles....He can also make it rain or make it stop (1 Kings 17:1) and bring a dead boy back to life (17:17-24); he is fed by the ravens (17:6) or by angels (19:5)." On that page, and the following (532), Kugel claims that these sorts of miracles are trademarks of northern prophets. Thus Elisha also performs some of them, as does Jesus, another northerner, a Galilean prophet.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 231 claims that the depiction of Elijah's trek to the Mountain of God "draws heavily upon the wilderness traditions." On the many parallels between Moses and Elijah journeying to Horeb, see Robert E. Coote, "Yahweh Recalls Elijah," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson, 115-120 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1981).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Malachi 3:23 in the Hebrew Masoretic Text (3:22 in the Greek Septuagint) is 4:5 in the Latin Vulgate, which most Christian English translations of the Old Testament follow. Incidentally, another connection between Moses and Elijah is that both are mentioned together in the same context in this passage from Malachi (3:22-23 in MT; 3:22 and 24 in LXX; and 4:4-5 in the Vulgate). See Maurice Gilbert, "Why Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration?" *Rivista Biblica* 57, no. 2 (2009): 218. On Elijah as herald of the Messiah in Jewish liturgical

Moses, however, are sufficient to see how Elijah is not entirely a new Moses, but the bread he consumes does appear to resemble the Manna which Jewish mystical traditions associate with heavenly food, angelic bread.

### Bread from Heaven

The description of the bread in 1 Kings 19:6 presents it as a "cake," (*enkruphias* in the Septuagint; '\$\bar{u}gat\$ in the Masoretic Text) which is how the Manna is described as being eaten in Numbers 11:8 (*enkruphias* in the Septuagint; '\$\bar{u}gôt\$ in the Masoretic Text). It is the eating of this Manna-like cake, and the drinking of this water, that empowers Elijah to make the forty day trek to Horeb, the Mountain of God, and encounter the Lord in the cave. \(^{18}\) In 1 Kings 19:6, the cake is described as \(^{res}\) \(\bar{a}\)pîm ("baked on live coals," or "baked on hot stones" as the NJPS renders it). It is interesting to note that the only other time we find this expression, "live coal," used in this form is in Isaiah's vision of the heavenly temple. \(^{19}\) In both instances, it requires an angel to provide the object for the prophet. In 1 Kings the angel of the Lord brings the cake on hot coals to Elijah, whereas in Isaiah 6 one of the seraphim brings the hot coal to purify Isaiah's mouth.

There is another more proximate parallel with these events. Earlier in the Elijah narratives, in 1 Kings 17, God sends Elijah to the widow and her son. Elijah asks the widow for bread. She explains that she does not have sufficient flour. He instructs her to make a small cake (*enkruphian mikron* in the Septuagint; 'ūgāh qĕṭ anāh in the Masoretic Text). When she obediently does what Elijah asked her, the flour and oil are miraculously multiplied for the remainder of the drought. Immediately following this scene, we find a description of Elijah raising the dead son. He prays to God, and God responds by returning life to the son (1 Kings 17:17-24).<sup>20</sup>

#### Conclusion

As I conclude, I want to give a brief overview of the broader context to the Elijah narratives. When we begin the Elijah narratives, we see God feeding Elijah in the desert with bread from a raven and water from a stream. When the lack of sustenance threatens life, as with the widow

traditions, see, e.g., Aharon Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 132-135.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Douglas Lawrie seems to take this provision of food as natural food: "This time no superhuman power possesses Elijah to enable him to undertake the journey; ordinary food has to do the trick." See Lawrie, "Telling Of(f) Prophets," 173. I think the context makes clear that such food, as provided by the angel of the Lord, is not natural but mystical. See, e.g., Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 452 n. 6. Indeed, Jyrki Keinänen calls the food, "heavenly sustenance," in Keinänen, *Traditions in Collision*, 158 n. 8. Marvin Sweeney links the cake Elijah eats with the unleavened bread the Israelites consume in the exodus. See, Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 231.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> *riş pāh*. See Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 141 n. 1. The Hebrew word employed here is simply a stone, one used for paving, used elsewhere (e.g., Ezekiel 40:17 and Esther 1:6). It is used for heated stone or coal only in Isaiah 6 and 1 Kings 19. See the comments in Cogan, *1 Kings*, 451-452 n. 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> I am aware that there is some debate as to whether or not the son is depicted as actually dying. See, e.g., Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 256 n. 20.

and her son, God miraculously provides the food which is lacking, staving off death. From the provision of food, to Elijah's raising the dead son back to life, to the slaughter of the prophets of God, and Elijah's slaughter of the prophets of Ba'al, to Elijah's own petition to die, we see that life and death, and God's power over both, provide an overarching theme for these chapters. When we reach 1 Kings 19:3-8, we notice that Elijah is prepared by his initial death and resurrection, and heavenly feeding, for his mystical experience at the Mountain of God. After arising, his mystical transformation begins by feeding on the bread of angels. The forty day journey he undertakes is not simply a penitential fast which further prepares him for his encounter with God, but it is also a journey his heavenly sustenance prepared him to take. Eating the heavenly bread of the flaming coal, provided by the angel of the Lord, has prepared Elijah for his theophany. Elijah's later ascension is thus merely the mystical extension of his wilderness transformation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> The idea of feeding on heavenly food is widespread in Jewish literature. Andrea Lieber has written a fascinating discussion of this motif within early Jewish and Christian traditions. See Andrea Lieber, "Jewish and Christian Heavenly Meal Traditions," in *Paradise Now*, ed. DeConick, 313-339. Significantly, on page 337 she points out that, "The eschatological banquet in rabbinic literature, where humans feast like angels, is consistently linked to exegesis of Exod 24:11." This is in itself interesting because in Exodus 24, the Israelites are at the foot of the Mountain of God, Horeb/Sinai, just as Elijah is about to make a journey there. Moreover, Lieber cites rabbinic literature showing how, in such interpretive traditions (like *Genesis Rabbah* 2:2), angels, and eventually humans as well, feast upon the Shekhinah, a heavenly meal wherein they feast upon the divine presence itself: "It is indeed characteristic of the angelic beings that they are privileged to feast on the divine presence, and it is characteristic of the human condition to toil for food. Yet in the messianic age, the righteous too will enjoy a heavenly meal..." (338).