TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of 1 Kings 17 for teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig in: history, language, structure, interpretation, and Christ.

How to read this section. Where scholars disagree, the major views held by orthodox Christian interpreters are set side by side and labeled. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible (WEB), which renders God's personal name as *Yahweh* (many English Bibles print "the LORD"). Hebrew words are given in Hebrew script with a simple transliteration. Verse numbers in 1 Kings 17 are the same in Hebrew and English.

1. Historical and Cultural Background

AHAB AND THE HOUSE OF OMRI

Omri founded a dynasty and built Samaria as Israel's capital (16:23-24). His son Ahab reigned twenty-two years (16:29), about 874-853 BC on Edwin Thiele's widely used chronology *(scholars' dates differ by a few years)*. Outside the Bible, the Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III (British Museum, ME 118884) names *Ahab the Israelite* among the kings who fought Assyria at Qarqar in 853 BC and credits him with 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers. The Mesha Stele (Louvre AO 5066; ninth century BC, exact date debated) names Omri as the king of Israel who oppressed Moab and mentions "his son" without a name. Neither inscription mentions Elijah or a drought.

JEZEBEL AND PHOENICIA

Ahab married "Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians..." (16:31). *Sidonians* can stand for Phoenicians more broadly, though context decides: Solomon tells Hiram, king of Tyre, that no one cuts timber "like the Sidonians" (1 Kings 5:6). Josephus, drawing on the Phoenician historian Menander of Ephesus, calls Ethbaal (Ithobalus) a king of Tyre and a priest of Astarte who seized the throne (*Against Apion* 1.123; *Antiquities* 8.317). With the marriage, Phoenician Baal worship came into Israel's capital. Ahab "raised up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria." (16:32)

BAAL, THE STORM GOD

1 Kings does not describe Baal's mythology. Texts from ancient Ugarit (Ras Shamra, Syria; excavated from 1929, from about the 14th-13th centuries BC) portray Baal as a storm god, *the rider of the clouds*, whose rain made the land fertile. In the tablets about Baal and Mot (Death), Baal goes down to the underworld with his clouds and rain, and the furrows of the fields are parched until he returns *(one widely held reading; how far the myth reflects a yearly seasonal cycle is debated)*.[1] Ugarit is earlier and farther north than Ahab's Israel. Which Baal Jezebel served is debated (often proposed: Melqart of Tyre, or Baal Shamem, "lord of heaven"). Against this background, a drought declared in Yahweh's name, food supplied in Baal's homeland, and a child restored from death read as a direct challenge. *(A widely held interpretation; see section 2.)*

DROUGHT IN THE LAND

Israel's harvest depended on "the early rain and the latter rain" (Deuteronomy 11:14), and on dew in the dry summer. The Law warned that serving other gods would bring a shut sky (Deuteronomy 11:16-17), and Solomon prayed about that very situation (1 Kings 8:35-36). Josephus quotes Menander for a lack of rain lasting about a year under Ethbaal of Tyre, ended after the king's supplications (*Antiquities* 8.324), and identifies it with Elijah's drought. That is a late, secondhand report of a one-year drought, so it is suggestive, not confirmation. 1 Kings speaks of "the third year" (18:1), the New Testament of three years and six months (Luke 4:25; James 5:17); see section 5.

CHERITH AND ZAREPHATH

The brook Cherith was "before the Jordan" (17:3), usually taken to mean east of it, near Elijah's home region of Gilead. Its site is unknown; a later tradition placed it in the Wadi Qelt, west of the Jordan. Zarephath (Greek *Sarepta*, Luke 4:26) was a Phoenician town on the coast between Tyre and Sidon, at modern Sarafand in Lebanon. James B. Pritchard's excavations there (1969-1974) uncovered pottery kilns and a small Phoenician shrine.

2. Literary Structure

THREE SCENES, ONE WORD

The Elijah stories (1 Kings 17 to 2 Kings 2) are built around the word of Yahweh. Chapter 17 moves through three scenes, each larger than the last, framed by Elijah's word in 17:1 and the widow's confession in 17:24:

A	17:1	The word announced: no dew or rain except by Elijah's word
1	17:2-7	Word, obedience, provision: ravens feed one man
2	17:8-16	Word, obedience, provision: meal and oil feed a household
3	17:17-23	**Death, prayer, life: the widow's son restored**
A′	17:24	The word confirmed: Yahweh's word in Elijah's mouth is truth

The refrain "Yahweh's word..." (17:2, 5, 8, 16, 24) runs through every scene. Many interpreters also read the chapter as a deliberate polemic against Baal: Yahweh withholds rain, gives grain and oil (compare Hosea 2:8), works in Baal's own territory, and gives life back from death, the very powers claimed for Baal (Leah Bronner, 1968). *(A widely held interpretation.)*

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTER 17

16:29-34	Ahab, Jezebel, and Baal (the setting)
17:1	Elijah's oath before Ahab
17:2-7	The brook Cherith and the ravens
17:8-12	The widow at the gate
17:13-16	The jar of meal and the jar of oil
17:17-18	The son's death and the mother's grief
17:19-23	Elijah's prayer; the child revived
17:24	"Now I know..."

3. Commentary

16:29-34, THE SETTING. Ahab is judged worse than all before him (16:30, 33). Marrying Jezebel and serving Baal is set beside "the sins of Jeroboam" as something worse (16:31). The note on Jericho (16:34) shows Joshua's word fulfilled (Joshua 6:26), just before a chapter about the reliability of Yahweh's word. *(A common observation.)*

17:1, THE OATH. Elijah appears with no introduction beyond his origin. The phrase *mittōšābê gil'ād* (מִתֹּשָׁבֵי גִלְעָד) can be read "of the settlers of Gilead" (WEB) or, with different vowels, *from Tishbe in Gilead* (the Greek Old Testament); Tishbe's site is uncertain. His oath names the living God and his own place as a servant "before whom I stand". Elijah's "but according to my word" is not a boast. James says Elijah "prayed earnestly that it might not rain" (James 5:17).

17:2-7, THE BROOK. Yahweh says, "hide yourself" (17:3), which protected Elijah from Ahab's search (compare 18:10). Some also see the word of God withdrawn from Israel *(an interpretation)*. "I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." (17:4) Elijah obeys exactly: "So he went and did according to Yahweh's word..." (17:5). Bread and meat morning and evening (17:6) may recall the manna and quail in the wilderness (Exodus 16:8, 12). *(An interpretation.)* Then "the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land." (17:7) The prophet shares the judgment he announced.

17:8-12, THE WIDOW AT THE GATE. God sends Elijah to Zarephath, "which belongs to Sidon" (17:9), the homeland of Jezebel's father. "I have commanded a widow there to sustain you." (17:9) The verb is the same one used of the ravens in 17:4. Widows were among the most vulnerable people in the ancient world, and God's law commanded care for them (Deuteronomy 24:19). Her oath, "As Yahweh your God lives..." (17:12), calls Elijah's God "your God". Her words are stark: "that we may eat it, and die." (17:12)

17:13-16, THE PROMISE. "Don't be afraid." Elijah's request to be fed first rests entirely on Yahweh's word: the jar of meal "will not run out" and the jar of oil "will not fail" until rain returns (17:14). She obeys, "and she, he, and her household ate many days." (17:15) The fulfillment repeats the promise almost word for word, "according to Yahweh's word, which he spoke by Elijah." (17:16) The text gives no mechanism and doesn't describe the jar's level.

17:17-18, DEATH IN THE HOUSE. The widow's son becomes sick until "there was no breath left in him" (17:17). *Nĕšāmâ*, "breath," is the word used in Genesis 2:7 for the breath of life. The mother cries, "What have I to do with you, you man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to memory, and to kill my son!" (17:18) Her words suggest she fears the holy man's presence has brought her sin to God's notice. The narrator never says her sin caused the death, and the restoration confirms Yahweh's word without explaining why the child fell ill.

17:19-21, THE PRAYER. Elijah takes the boy "out of her bosom" to the upper room where he stayed and lays him on his own

bed (17:19). He prays twice. The first prayer is a hard question: "Yahweh my God, have you also brought evil on the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" (17:20) The verb *hărēʿôtā* means "you have brought harm," calamity, not moral wrong. He stretches himself on the child three times (17:21), which the text doesn't explain. Compare Elisha (2 Kings 4:34) and Paul (Acts 20:10). Then he asks, "Yahweh my God, please let this child's soul come into him again." (17:21)

17:22-24, LIFE AND THE WORD. "Yahweh listened to the voice of Elijah..." (17:22): the power is God's, not the prophet's technique. Elijah's words are simple: "Behold, your son lives." (17:23) The widow's confession closes the chapter and its frame: "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that Yahweh's word in your mouth is truth." (17:24) In canonical order this is the first raising of the dead recorded in Scripture. Hebrews 11:35 likely has this scene and 2 Kings 4 in view *(a common reading)*: "Women received their dead by resurrection."

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
אֵלִיָּהוּ	*ʾēliyyāhû*	Elijah, "my God is Yah(weh)" (17:1). His name states the chapter's claim.
חַי־יְהוָה	*ḥay-YHWH*	"as Yahweh lives," an oath (17:1, 12). The living God against a god said to die and return.
טַל וּמָטָר	*ṭal ûmāṭār*	"dew nor rain" (17:1): both sources of water for crops withheld
הָעֹרְבִים	*hāʿōrĕbîm*	"the ravens" (17:4, 6). On the reading "Arabs," see section 5.
לְכַלְכְּלֶךָ	*lĕkalkelkā*	"to feed you, sustain you" (17:4); the same verb is used of the widow in 17:9, in its pause form לְכַלְכֶּלְךָ (*lĕkalkĕlekā*)
אִשָּׁה אַלְמָנָה	*ʾiššâ ʾalmānâ*	"a widow" (17:9-10), one of the people the law singled out for protection
כַּד הַקֶּמַח	*kad haqqemaḥ*	"the jar of meal" (17:12, 14, 16); with the oil, the grain and oil of Deuteronomy 11:14
נְשָׁמָה	*nĕšāmâ*	"breath" (17:17), as in "the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7)
נֶפֶשׁ	*nepeš*	"soul, life" (17:21-22): the child's life returned
וַיִּתְמֹדֵד	*wayyitmōdēd*	"he stretched himself" (17:21), a rare verb form, literally "he measured himself"
אֱמֶת	*ʾĕmet*	"truth" (17:24), from the root *ʾmn*, "to be firm": Yahweh's word holds

5. Interpretive Questions

RAVENS, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

The Hebrew consonants for "ravens" (*ʿrbym*) could be vowelled as "Arabs," and a few interpreters, ancient and modern, have proposed Arabs, traders, or people of a place called Oreb. The Hebrew text as vowelled, the ancient translations, and the chapter's theme of miraculous provision all point to birds, and this guide reads it that way. Ravens were unclean for Israel to eat (Leviticus 11:15), which makes God's choice of messenger striking.

***THE THIRD YEAR*, OR THREE YEARS AND SIX MONTHS?**

1 Kings 18:1 dates God's word to Elijah "in the third year"; Jesus and James speak of three years and six months (Luke 4:25; James 5:17). Evangelical interpreters have proposed that "the third year" counts from Elijah's move to Zarephath, or from his stay at the brook, rather than from the drought's start; or that the dry season before 17:1 belongs to the total. No proposal is settled. Note that 18:1 dates a word from God, not the full length of the drought, so the two need not conflict.

WAS THE BOY TRULY DEAD?

The text says "there was no breath left in him" (17:17); the mother says Elijah came "to kill my son" (17:18); Elijah speaks of "killing her son" (17:20); and the child's soul "came into him again" (17:22). A few interpreters have suggested deep unconsciousness. Most read a real death and restoration, as the language and Hebrews 11:35 suggest, and this guide follows that reading. Either way, the boy lived because "Yahweh listened to the voice of Elijah..." (17:22), not because of a technique.

6. Cross-References

- **Deuteronomy 11:13-17; 1 Kings 8:35-36**: rain as covenant blessing; a shut sky as warning.
- **Hosea 2:8**: "For she didn't know that I gave her the grain, the new wine, and the oil..." (WEB)
- **Jeremiah 14:22**: "Are there any among the vanities of the nations that can cause rain?" (WEB)
- **2 Kings 4:8-37**: Elisha and the Shunammite's son.
- **Luke 4:25-26**: Jesus points to the widow of Zarephath.
- **Luke 7:11-17**: Jesus raises a widow's son at Nain.
- **James 5:17-18**: Elijah was "a man with a nature like ours"; he prayed, and it didn't rain.
- **Lamentations 3:22-23**: "They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." (WEB)

7. How 1 Kings 17 Points to Christ

Grace beyond Israel. Here the New Testament itself draws the connection. In Nazareth Jesus said, "Elijah was sent to none of them, except to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow." (Luke 4:26, WEB) God's mercy to a Gentile widow anticipated the gospel going to the nations.

A widow's son given back. (A widely noted echo; Luke doesn't cite 1 Kings here.) At Nain Jesus raised a widow's only son, and Luke's words "he gave him to his mother" (Luke 7:15) match the Greek Old Testament of 1 Kings 17:23. The crowd said, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" (Luke 7:16, WEB) Elijah prayed for the boy's life; Jesus commanded, and the dead man sat up.

Bread in a time of famine. (A gospel parallel.) God fed Elijah and a widow's household day after day. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Give us today our daily bread." (Matthew 6:11, WEB) and said, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35, WEB)

Life that does not die again. (A theological reflection.) The widow's son was restored to mortal life. Jesus rose never to die again: "Christ, being raised from the dead, dies no more." (Romans 6:9, WEB) He is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25, WEB).

Elijah and the one who was to come. Malachi promised, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet..." (Malachi 4:5, WEB), and Jesus identified John the Baptist as that Elijah (Matthew 11:14), the forerunner who prepared the way for Him. *(The New Testament's own link.)*

8. For Further Study

COMMENTARIES (ACCESSIBLE) - DALE RALPH DAVIS, *1 KINGS: THE WISDOM AND THE FOLLY*, FOCUS ON THE BIBLE (CHRISTIAN FOCUS, 2002). - PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, *1 KINGS*, REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY (P&R, 2011). - DONALD J. WISEMAN, *1 AND 2 KINGS*, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES 9 (IVP, 1993). - AUGUST H. KONKEL, *1 & 2 KINGS*, NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY (ZONDERVAN, 2006).

COMMENTARIES (ADVANCED) - PAUL R. HOUSE, *1, 2 KINGS*, NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY 8 (BROADMAN & HOLMAN, 1995). - IAIN W. PROVAN, *1 AND 2 KINGS*, NEW INTERNATIONAL BIBLICAL COMMENTARY (HENDRICKSON, 1995). - SIMON J. DEVRIES, *1 KINGS*, WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 12 (WORD, 1985; 2ND ED. THOMAS NELSON, 2003).

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NOTES

1. The Baal Cycle, KTU 1.1-1.6 (Baal and Mot: 1.5-1.6; clouds and rain, 1.5 V 6-8; parched furrows, 1.6 IV). Translation of all six tablets: Mark S. Smith, "The Baal Cycle," in Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Scholars Press, 1997), 81-180. Commentary: Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1, KTU 1.1-1.2 (Brill, 1994); Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, vol. 2, KTU 1.3-1.4 (Brill, 2009).

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