

# Drought

DROUGHT and famine were a constant problem in Israel, going back to the time of Abram; it happened not long after he had moved into the land.

*Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land (Genesis 12:10).*



It happened again in the time of Abraham's son, Isaac. In the time of his grandson Jacob (also known as Israel) there was a major famine, when seven years of plenty were followed by seven years of famine. It was this which caused Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to seek for food, and which resulted in them staying in Egypt for some 400 years.

*The sons of Israel went to buy grain among those who journeyed, for the famine was in the land of Canaan (Genesis 42:5).*

Later, during the time of the Judges, it was famine which caused a man called Elimelech to go to Moab.

*Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah,*

*went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons (Ruth 1:1).*

It was a sad story at first. Elimelech and his two sons all died in Moab. However, one of the sons was married to a Moabite girl called Ruth. Once the famine was over, she returned with her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem.

Ruth later married a man called Boaz, and became part of the ancestry of the Lord Jesus. The hand of God can be clearly seen at work here.

## A Warning

It was a principle which the Lord God set out as instruction for His people of Israel, right from the time of Moses.

*But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:... The LORD will strike you with consumption, with fever, with inflammation, with severe burning fever, with the sword, with scorching, and with mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish (Deuteronomy 28:15, 22).*

If Israel did not do as the Lord God wished, then punishment by drought and famine were to be part of what they should expect. It is not surprising then to find that in the time of Ahab the Lord God saw fit to enforce this warning. Ahab worshipped false gods and led Israel in doing the same, with particular influence from his wicked wife, Jezebel. God wanted to tell Ahab that his wrongdoing would be punished, bringing problems for the whole nation.

*Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1).*

This was slightly different from what had happened previously, when God had either specified the length of the famine, or had sent a famine without specifying when it would end. Now the length of famine appeared to be in the control of Elijah.

## **Enter Elijah**

The announcement of famine introduced the enigmatic prophet Elijah. We are told

very little about him, except that he was from Tishbe, in Gilead. A footnote in the English Standard Version of the Bible suggests that 'of Tishbe' could be rendered as 'of the settlers'. There is no consensus about where Tishbe was, and we know little else about Elijah's background.

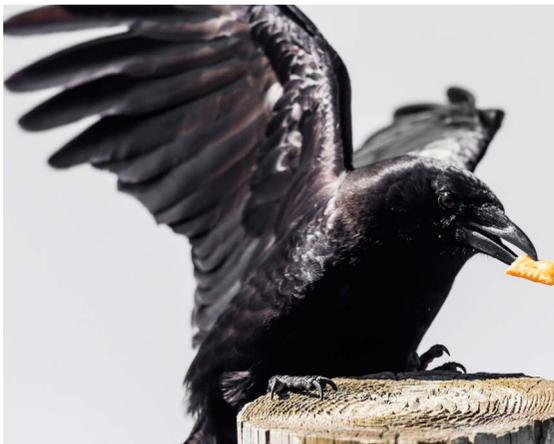
We are not told of his parents, whether he was ever married, or had children. It seems that he lived a very solitary life, appearing when there was work for him to do, and disappearing just as suddenly. The one feature of his life which we are told is his manner of dress, though this comes much later:

*Then he said to them, "What kind of man was it who came up to meet you and told you these words?" So they answered him, "A hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite" (2 Kings 1:7-8).*

He was easily identified by what he wore, a man with an austere demeanour and distinctive clothing. Later, in the time of the Lord Jesus, John the Baptist seems to have adopted a similar style.

The Bible record does not specify where Elijah appeared and spoke to Ahab, but it is likely that Ahab was in the vicinity of his palace in Samaria at the time. Once he had delivered his uncompromising message, Elijah departed. A man like Ahab would hardly welcome such a message, and might react violently. A woman like Jezebel would be equally dangerous, though it is not said whether she was present or not.

Having delivered the message from God, Elijah was instructed by Him to depart, travelling eastward to the brook Cherith, which flows into the River Jordan on its eastern bank. Elijah was told:



twice a day the ravens brought him 'bread and meat', sufficient to sustain him.

We are not told where the ravens obtained the food, but each day it came. It would have been a test of Elijah's faith. Would he

*You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there (1 Kings 17:4).*

## Living By the Brook

This would pose a problem for Elijah. Drinking water from the brook would be fine, but the raven was an unclean bird under the Law of Moses. It was quite specific.

*And these you shall regard as an abomination among the birds; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: the eagle, the vulture, the buzzard... every raven after its kind (Leviticus 11:13, 15).*

Elijah, being a godly man, and therefore determined to keep the law, would not wish to eat anything which was either unclean itself, or unclean because it had been in contact with an unclean animal. However the Lord God was quite specific, Elijah was to receive his food from the ravens, and he seems to have accepted that, and

wonder whether the ravens would arrive for his next meal? Or might they miss just this one time? It is a powerful illustration of the truth of the Lord's prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Elijah did not even have a whole day's food at one time, but the Lord God sent it to him meal by meal, morning and evening, and it did not fail.

It was only when the water from the brook dried up, that Elijah had to move on. The record does not say how long that took. Fed by the dew and rain, the smaller brooks would not last that long under drought conditions. But the Cherith had provided a safe haven for Elijah, and he was not found, in spite of Ahab's diligent searching. God protected His prophet. It was eventually time to move on, and Elijah was sent north-west, into Sidon, to be safe for another period.

**Mark Sheppard**