

ELIJAH

Elijah was the great ninth-century B.C. prophet during the reigns of **King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and King Ahaziah of Israel**. His story is found in the Old Testament books of I and II Kings. Elijah proclaimed that Yahweh was the one true God, and he called the people to repent of their worship of false gods, their abandonment of the covenant and their sinning against the commandments.

The time came when Elijah's mission had come to an end and the prophetic office would be handed onto Elisha, his disciple. Even the various guild prophets of Bethel and Jericho said to Elisha, "*Do you know that the Lord will take your master from over you today?*" Anticipating Elijah's departure, Elisha asked for a "*double portion of [his] spirit*." Then "***as they walked on conversing, a flaming chariot and flaming horses came between them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind***." Elisha then picked up Elijah's mantle (his sign of office as a prophet), and began his mission as the prophet of Yahweh. Even the guild prophets proclaimed, "The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha" (Confer 2 Kgs 2).

Where did Elijah go? First we must remember what our Lord said, "No one has gone up to heaven except the One who came down from there the Son of Man" (Jn 3:13). Christ descended from heaven in the Incarnation. Through His saving action, He opened the gates of heaven which had been closed due to the original sin of Adam and Eve. At the appointed time, He ascended into heaven: The Letter to the Hebrews teaches, "For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one; He entered heaven itself that He might appear before God now on our behalf" (9:24).

If the gates of heaven were closed at the time of Elijah (again due to the original sin of Adam and Eve), and if "no one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man," where then did Elijah go? Granted, Elijah may have been taken to Sheol, "the land of the dead," where the souls of the just awaited the Messiah to open the gates of heaven. Underscoring this point, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "In His human soul united to His divine person, the dead Christ went down to the realm of the dead. He opened heaven's gates for the just who had gone before him" (#638).

Or, did Elijah go somewhere else? St. Paul mentioned *three* heavens: "I know a man in Christ, who, 14 years ago whether he was in or outside his body I cannot say, only God can say a man who was snatched up to the third heaven. I know that this man whether in or outside his body I do not know, God knows was snatched up to paradise to hear words which cannot be uttered, words which no man may speak" (2 Cor 12:2-3).

From sacred Scripture, the three heavens would be delineated as follows: the first heaven is the earth's atmosphere. The Hebrew word *shamayim* may be translated as "heaven," but more appropriately refers to the sky. Another Hebrew word for this first heaven is *shachaq*, which is more accurately translated in English as "clouds" or "sky."

The second heaven is "outer space," where one finds the stars and the planets.

The third heaven, as described by St. Paul, is paradise, where God resides and the heavenly sanctuary exists.

From these delineations, and given that the gates of heaven were closed, Elijah may have somehow been taken up in the first heaven. Here again sacred Scripture gives some clues. While Elijah prophesied during the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah, Elisha prophesied during the subsequent reign of Ahaziah's brother, Joram, who ruled Israel for twelve years (2 Kgs 1:17, 3:1). In the fifth year of Joram's reign, Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, became King of Judah (2 Kgs 8:16). Jehoram "received a letter from the prophet Elijah" (2 Chr 21:12). How could he receive a letter from Elijah if Elijah had been taken into Paradise? In the letter, Elijah recounted the past sinfulness of Jehoram and then prophesied the diseases he and his family would suffer. Please note that some Scripture scholars posit that the letter may have been composed by Elijah during his lifetime and then sent later with some editing done to fit the situation.

Another clue comes from the Deacon Philip in the eighth chapter of Acts of the Apostles. Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch whom he encountered on the road heading south of Jerusalem to Gaza. After

doing so, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away and the eunuch saw him no more. Philip found himself at Azotus next, and he went about announcing the good news in all the towns until he reached Caesarea" (Acts 8:39-40). (Azotus was one of the five principal cities of the Philistines, 18 miles northeast of Gaza and three miles inland from the Mediterranean.) An interesting note is that fire and wind are manifestations of the Spirit remember the fiery chariot and the whirlwind. So just as Philip was transported through the first heaven by the Spirit to another place, perhaps Elijah was too. For instance, Elijah may have been taken to another distant place, perhaps back to Mount Carmel (where he could have written the letter to Jehoram), where he died, went to Sheol (the land of the dead) and awaited the Messiah. So the mystery is whether Elijah was transported through "the third heaven" to live for a while in another place or whether he was taken to Sheol directly.

The next part of the mystery is whether Elijah died or not. We firmly believe death is the end of earthly life, death is a consequence of original sin and death is transformed by Christ who rose body and soul from the dead (CCC #1007-1009). If Elijah had not died but went to Sheol on the fiery chariot, we would have to conclude there was an "assumption" like that of our Blessed Mother. This position would be wrong since our Blessed Mothers assumption is predicated on the fact that by a special favor of God, she was immaculately conceived without the stain of original sin and shared from the first moment of her life in the saving events of our Lords life. Therefore, the promise of everlasting life with a glorified existence of body and soul in paradise was granted to our Blessed Mother at the end of her life. Granted, Almighty God may have granted some special favor to Elijah. Yet, one would have to conclude that even if Elijah were taken body and soul into Sheol on the fiery chariot, he must have suffered some kind of death and the body undergone some kind of change short of the benefits promised to all of us through the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord.

What then about the prophecies? Through the prophet Malachi, the Lord said, "Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day " (Mal 3:23) The Book of Sirach also attests: "You [Elijah] are destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the Lord " (Sir 48:10). For this reason, many of the scribes and common people popularly believed that Elijah did not die; rather he was waiting until God would send him back to prepare for the day of the Lord, the time when the Messiah would establish the Kingdom. For this reason, the Gospels mention how the scribes and others wonder if Jesus Himself is "Elijah who is to come": Herod was perplexed because some said Elijah has appeared (see Lk 9:7-10), and when Jesus asked the apostles, Who do the crowds say that I am? they replied, Some say Elijah " (Lk 9:18-22).

This position is later addressed by Jesus Himself. In the Gospel of St. Matthew, Jesus identified the "Elijah who is to come." First, He stated, "All of the prophets as well as the law spoke prophetically until John. If you are prepared to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who was certain to come. Heed carefully what you hear!" (Mt 11:13-15). The disciples ask our Lord, "Why do the scribes claim that Elijah must come first?" Jesus replied, Elijah is indeed coming, and he will restore everything. I assure you, though, that Elijah has already come, but they did not recognize him and they did as they pleased with him. The Son of Man will suffer at their hands in the same way. The disciples then realized that he had been speaking to them about John the Baptizer" (Mt 17:10-13). Jesus then teaches that the prophecy is fulfilled not in Elijah of the ninth century B.C. returning (or being reincarnated), but St. John the Baptist standing in the stead of that great prophet.

Therefore, we are still left with some mystery surrounding Elijah. We may conclude several points: Elijah was taken up by a fiery chariot in a whirlwind. His office of prophet was passed onto the disciple Elisha. Having undergone some kind of death, he too awaited in Sheol for the Messiah, who would conquer sin and death, and open the gates of heaven. In the Transfiguration scene of our Lord in the 17th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Elijah and Moses appeared with Jesus; together they awaited the fulfillment of the prophecies and their deliverance from Sheol. Then, at the appointed time, Christ who had suffered on the cross descended into Sheol and brought those holy awaiting souls to paradise (CCC #633).

The Author

100 Father William Saunders is pastor of Our Lady of Hope parish in Potomac Falls, Virginia. He is dean of the
101 Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College. The above article is a "Straight Answers" column
102 he wrote for the *Arlington Catholic Herald*. Father Saunders is the author of *Straight Answers*, a book
103 based on 100 of his columns, and *Straight Answers II*.
104 [https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-](https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/elijah.html#:~:text=His%20story%20is%20found%20in,their%20sinning%20against%20the%20commandments.)
105 [contributions/elijah.html#:~:text=His%20story%20is%20found%20in,their%20sinning%20against%20the](https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/elijah.html#:~:text=His%20story%20is%20found%20in,their%20sinning%20against%20the%20commandments.)
106 [%20commandments.](https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/elijah.html#:~:text=His%20story%20is%20found%20in,their%20sinning%20against%20the%20commandments.)
107