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The Prophet Elijah in Art: Explorations and Appropriations

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Abstract

The drama, intensity and sense of mystery, key elements in the brief narrative of Elijah in the Book of Kings, held enormous appeal but also presented a formidable challenge to artists in every age. The prophet’s dramatic departure to heaven in his chariot of fire means that, not having died a natural death, he is still alive and is likely to appear at any time and in any place. Equally cherished by all three faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the details of his life have been explored, enhanced, celebrated and appropriated in stunning works of art, ranging from frescoes, stained-glass, painting, icons, altar-pieces to spectacularly illuminated manuscripts. This article begins with a general overview of the uniqueness of the prophet’s iconographic tradition, before focusing on the important patronage of the influential Carmelite Order in the Catholic Church which claimed Elijah as their founder, the centrality of the Eijah icon for Orthodox Christians and concludes with some important references to artworks in Judaism and Islam, all evidence of his universal appeal.

1. Elijah: A Prophet for Three Faiths

No other narrative in the Hebrew Bible can have given rise to such a wide range and diversity of traditions as the dramatic story of the prophet Elijah from the Books of Kings.¹ What is so unique about the reception history of Elijah is the way faith traditions have explored and appropriated various episodes of the prophet’s life along quite different and often unexpected lines, focusing on, and then expanding, specific details of the original narrative. Imaginative interpretations of the Elijah story were facilitated particularly by the assertion that the prophet did not die at the end of his earthly life (nor indeed are we told anything about his origins) since this allowed him to appear, again and again, in a variety of contexts and for quite different reasons: in Mal. 4:5 (= 3:23 Hebrew), God will send him ‘before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord’; in Matt. 16:13–14 he is identified both with John the Baptist and Jesus, while in

¹ Outside the English-speaking world, Elijah is better known as *Elias* or a variant of this name. Following the ancient versions (*Elias* in the Septuagint, New Testament and Vulgate), he is known as *Elias* in Spanish, *Elia* in Italian and German and *Elie* in French. In iconography, both in the East and West, he invariably goes by the title *Elias*. In Islamic tradition, he is known as *Ilyas*.

Matt. 17:1–8 he re-appears dramatically alongside Moses in the transfiguration. In later Christian tradition, the Elijah narrative prefigures several of the miracle stories of Jesus; for example, the raising of the widow's son anticipates three of his miracles: the raising to life of the widow's son at Naim (Luke 7:11–17), Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:21–43) and Lazarus (John 11:38–53). His ascent by chariot to heaven (2 Kgs. 2:11) is taken to prefigure the ascension of Jesus and the bodily assumption of the Virgin. Significantly, Elijah is the only Old Testament personality that became a popular Christian saint; he is an esteemed figure in both Western and Eastern Churches, the cherished founder of the Order of Carmelites and the father of monasticism.² Equally important and popular in Jewish and Islamic tradition, Elijah is perceived as being omnipresent, a welcome and authoritative figure transcending all barriers of time and place. In Judaism, it will be Elijah who announces the heralding of the messianic era: where the Talmud is unable at present to resolve certain questions of law or practice, the question will have to wait for Elijah, when, in the final era, he will resolve all those lingering quandaries. Until then, the cup of wine is reserved for him at each Seder meal. In Islam, Elijah's (Ilyas) dramatic defeat of the prophets of Baal is mentioned only briefly in the Qur'an (6:85; 37:123) but his character and reputation have been imaginatively enhanced in Islamic folklore through the centuries.

Within Christianity the figure of Elijah is important in both the Western and Eastern Orthodox traditions, but different episodes from his life are selected and highlighted by each tradition as examples of piety for their faithful. Thus, Elijah can become a model of prayer and asceticism, symbolise the correct relationship of the believer to God or take on any number of other roles, depending on the time and place in which his patronage is invoked. An often overlooked but particularly important aspect of the Elijah tradition is the prophet's identification as founder and leader of the order of Carmelites, one of the oldest and most prestigious religious orders in the Catholic Church and a patron over many centuries of painting and music in which the unique qualities of their illustrious founder were explored and celebrated. Given the range and diversity of traditions associated with Elijah, it is not surprising, then, that he should feature predominantly, and in many different guises, not only in the visual culture of Christianity, West and East, but also to a lesser extent in the iconographies of Judaism and Islam, reflecting the privileged position he is given in all three faiths.

² See McMahon, Pater et Dux, 283–299.

2. Elijah: Tradition and Iconography

The influence of the Elijah narrative on all the arts, and not just the visual arts, is indeed enormous and many surveys, encyclopaedia articles, as well as studies of specific artworks, have already been undertaken.³ Patterns of iconography depicting the prophet Elijah are as rich and diverse as the complex web of literary and popular legends that have grown up around him over the centuries as artists sought to expand and interpret each and every detail of the complex events of his life. Some events had obvious dramatic appeal, such as the contest with the Baals (1 Kgs. 18:20–40) or Elijah’s ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs. 2:9–12) and these clearly evoked imaginative and colourful artistic responses. But the biblical narrative also describes the prophet’s personal and intimate experiences of the divine, sometimes in coded and ambiguous language – experiences central to the Elijah narrative but challenging to the artist when attempting to express them visually. There are three notable instances where Elijah encounters the divine: God commands the ravens to feed him in the Wadi Cherith (1 Kgs. 17:1–5); the angel brings him bread and water in the desert (1 Kgs. 19:4–9); and Elijah’s intense awareness of the divine presence as he stands at the mouth of the cave (1 Kgs. 19:11–18). In all three cases, the biblical author attempts to get across how the invisible world of the divine impacts the visible and tangible world of Elijah. In their paintings, artists have approached these stories from different angles; some reflect the theological traditions current in their time, while others have been inspired by the subjects to offer more personal and subjective interpretations. (For the purposes of this article, my main focus on the artworks I discuss is on the way they present distinctive interpretations of the text, rather than on a chronological art-historical description of the development of iconography traditions associated with Elijah)⁴.

One of the earliest depictions of the prophet can be found in a fresco of the synagogue at Dura-Europos (ca. 245 CE) in which a flame consumes the offering on Elijah’s altar while the priests of Baal display their deep dismay and desperation.⁵ In early Christian times, his ascension could be assimilated into the popular image of the Greek sun-god Helios (Roman Apollo) driving his fiery chariot with horses through the sky from east to west, accounting for the movement of the sun through the sky (Attic vase, ca. 430 BCE, British Museum; relief from Temple of Athena at Troy, 300–280 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin). This may have been the primary influence for the choice of motif on the elaborate early

³ O’Kane, 2007, 2018, 2019; Soltes, 2013; Senkevitch, 2014; Organisty, 2016; Casciello, 2018.

⁴ A detailed art-historical discussion of several of the artworks I discuss can be found in *Oxford Art Online* (<https://www.oxfordartonline.com/>).

⁵ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Dura-Europos_synagogue_painting#/media/File:Elijah_challenging_the_prophets_of_Baal.jpg

Christian sarcophagus which shows the prophet standing in a chariot of fire, waving his cloak, while Elisha, his successor, standing below, looks on in admiration ('city gates' sarcophagus, late-fourth century CE, Louvre). On the door of the church of San Sabina, Rome, (fifth century CE), Elijah is raised up on a chariot of fire, his gaze turned towards the angel who bears him aloft, while a personified River Jordan reclines on a river-bank.

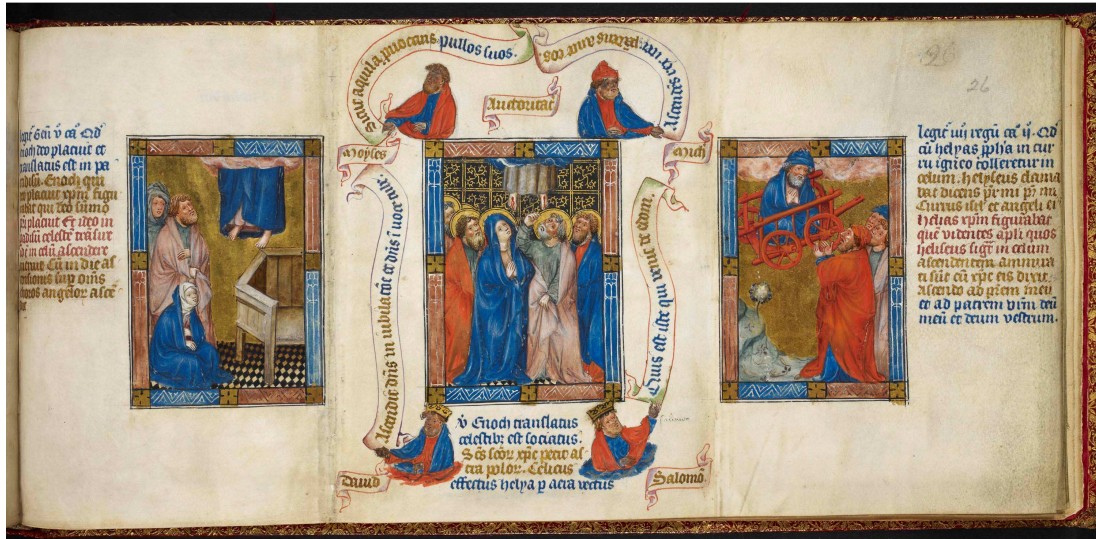


Figure 1: The Ascension of Elijah (Biblia pauperum, ca. 1405).

In later times, the episode was depicted along typographical lines, where Elijah and Enoch (Gen. 5:21–24) prefigure the ascension of Christ, in a tripartite arrangement reflecting the theological concept of 'Before the Law, Under Grace and Under the Law'. Typical examples of this arrangement are found on the *Klosterneuburg Altarpiece* (12th century, Nicholas of Verdun) and in the later medieval *Biblia pauperum* where the ascension of Elijah (Under the Law) is presented alongside the ascension of Enoch (Before the Law) and the ascension of Christ (Under Grace). A good example is that of the Master of the Hours of Margaret of Cleves, from a *Biblia pauperum*.

The ascension of Elijah was also clearly a subject that was expected to be included in some of the major artistic projects of the Italian Renaissance (for example, Giotto, Arena Chapel, Padua [1304] and Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel [1511]). Alongside, Elijah's ascent, the episode of the massacre of the priests of Baal was a particularly popular subject in early Byzantine and Russian art. Gradually, however, the episodes from the Elijah story that received most attention were those that were regarded as prefiguring the Eucharist. The depiction of these episodes was very popular during the periods of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In particular, artists frequently painted the scene at the Wadi Cherith, where the raven brings Elijah bread from God (1 Kgs. 17:5–6) and the later episode in which the angel brings him nourishing food and water in the desert (1 Kgs. 19:6–9); frequently, they combined motifs taken from both texts. The choice

of these episodes as popular subjects for artists and their patrons lay in the Eucharistic overtones they could convey: the raven bringing the heavenly bread (in the distinctive round shape of the Eucharistic host) is depicted on a famous fresco at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Lublin, Poland (1428) and occurs on the decoration of the monastery of Lavra, Mount Athos (1502). The angel bearing food and water, representing the bread and wine of the Eucharist, is the subject of some of the most illustrious masterpieces of Renaissance and Flemish art: the fresco in the Duomo at Orvieto (14th century), the panel on Bouts's *The Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* in the St. Pieterskerk in Leuven (1464–1468) and Tintoretto's painting in the Scuola di San Rocco, Venice (1577–1578).⁶ Of these last three paintings, it is the representation by Dieric Bouts of Elijah in the wilderness, nourished with food and water by an angel, on the side panel of *The Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* that best typifies how the episode was taken to prefigure the Eucharist in the Western church.



Figure 2: The Angel brings food to Elijah (Tintoretto, 1577–1578).

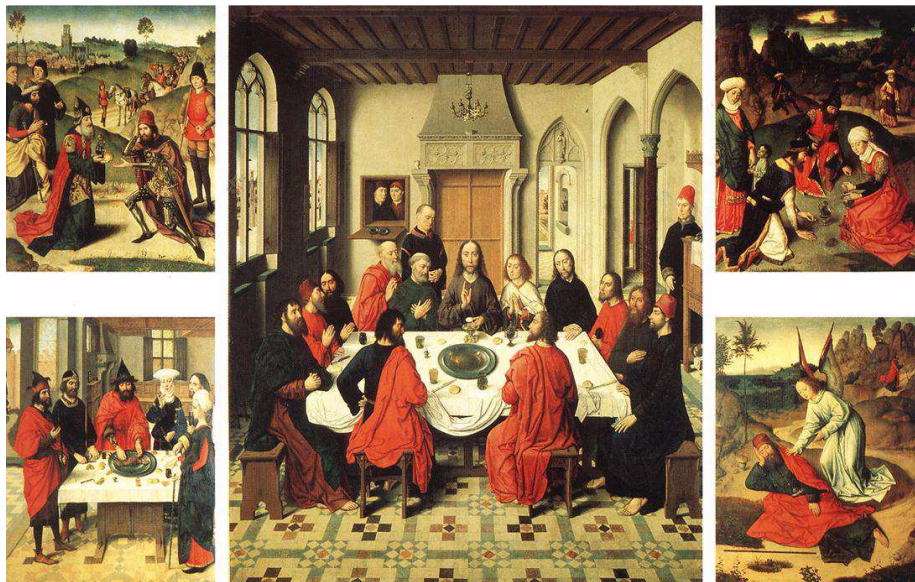


Figure 3: The Holy Sacrament Altarpiece (Bouts, 1464–1468).

Two professors of theology, Jan Varennecker and Aegidius Ballawel, were asked to provide the painter with precise instructions as to the subjects he should

⁶ For a brief review of Elijah iconography, see Murray, *Elijah*, 160–161; Duchet-Suchaux / Pastoureau, *Elijah*, 133–135.

represent to accompany the central large panel depicting Christ's institution of the Eucharist at the last supper. They selected four episodes from the Old Testament that, according to tradition, prefigured the Eucharist. Thus, on the four surrounding side panels, they instructed Bouts to paint the biblical episodes of the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–20), the gathering of the manna in the desert (Exodus 16), the feast of Passover (Exodus 12) and the feeding of Elijah by the angel in the desert (1 Kgs. 17:6–7, 19:4–8). Of these, only the latter, where the angel bends over the prophet with his enormous wings, is painted on the same large scale and with the same grandeur as the last supper in the central panel; it was clearly intended by the theologians that it should stand out to the viewer as the principal Old Testament precedent for the miracle being enacted by Christ. The biblical text states twice that 'the angel touched him' (1 Kgs. 19:5,7) and Bouts is at pains to show how the angel touches Elijah's mantle – which the prophet will later cast over Elisha (1 Kgs. 19:19).



Figure 4: Elijah in the Wilderness (Bouts, 1464–1468).

One of the more remarkable and original depictions of the Elijah narrative is to be found on the marble pavement of the Duomo in Siena.⁷ Described by the sixteenth-century biographer Giorgio Vasari as 'the most beautiful and magnificent pavement ever made',⁸ its construction and development took place over many centuries; its subject matter is particularly famous for the sheer number of scenes inspired by the Old and New Testaments, juxtaposed in such a way as to suggest many original and insightful readings of the biblical stories depicted.⁹ The most impressive images are generally agreed to be those by Domenico Beccafumi that depict episodes in the life of Elijah, stories from the life of Moses and the sacrifice of Isaac in close proximity. Beccafumi decorated the hexagon shape at the very centre of the cathedral directly under the dome with incidents in the life of Elijah taken from 1 Kgs. 18 (1486–1551) and the cycle was completed by Alessandro Franchi with additional scenes from 1 Kgs. 21:17–27 and 22:35–38 as well as from 2 Kgs. 2:11 (1838–1914).

⁷ See full information in Bruno, *The Marble Pavement*, 1993.

⁸ Vasari cited by Santi, *The Marble Pavement*, 5.

⁹ In his extensive hermeneutical study of the design pattern of the pavement, Ohly, *Schriften*, demonstrates how a vast, complex plan was creatively conceived and carried out through the centuries by the various artists involved in work on the floor.



Figure 5: The Ascension of Elijah (Franchi, ca. 1890).



Figure 6: Elijah and the Prophets of Baal (Domenico Beccafumi, ca. 1500).

Beccafumi's contribution to the hexagon consists of one of the most vivid portrayals ever made of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal: Elijah's monumental figure points admonishingly at the useless sacrifice of the priests of Baal and is balanced by the erring flocks of priests who do not hesitate to wound themselves in order to move their god to compassion.

Here, at the centre of the hexagon, Beccafumi makes the pact between Ahab and Elijah, represented as two towering figures, the central and focal point of the narrative, but he also creates imaginative links between the stories of Elijah and Moses by depicting episodes from the life of the lawgiver – whom he obviously felt offered a parallel to the Elijah narrative – on the marble floor between the Elijah hexagon and the high altar. In a long rectangular frieze along the upper side of the hexagon, Beccafumi illustrated Moses bringing forth water from the rock at Horeb (Ex. 17:1–7), an episode that further associated Moses's miraculous powers with Elijah's.

3. Elijah and Carmelite Iconography

One of the frequently unacknowledged influences in the rich reception history and iconography of Elijah is the role played by the Carmelite Order, one of the oldest and most prestigious in the Catholic Church. It is important, therefore, to include, if only briefly, some mention of the significance of the Carmelite contribution to the development of iconography associated with Elijah in western Europe. The Carmelite Order emerged and grew in Europe along with the Franciscans and Dominicans shortly after 1200 and its members were known as the Whitefriars. Its beginnings are lost in the mists of history but the earliest Carmelite writings (the *Rubrica Prima*) record that the order, then consisting merely of a band of mendicant monks, first came west when the Crusaders departed from the Holy Land in the 1230s. Jacques de Vitry, medieval bishop of Acres, de-

scribes their origins in terms of ‘a group of hermits living in simplicity and contemplation on Mount Carmel’.¹⁰ When they came to Europe and found the Franciscans and Dominicans already well established, they discovered that the lack of a charismatic founder such as a Francis or a Dominic was a serious handicap. While both the Franciscans and Dominicans could trace their roots to an authoritative and influential leader, the early band of Carmelite monks had never given much consideration to the details of their founding or the individual(s) who had founded them. They soon discovered that they too badly needed a founder, and Elijah, they concluded, was just the person to fill that role – someone who could command even more respect than Francis or Dominic ever could. As the Carmelite writer Patrick McMahon puts it, by choosing Elijah they were boastfully attributing to themselves a pedigree of unparalleled elegance among the religious families of the day.¹¹ It was unimportant to them who actually founded the order, but the choice of Elijah suited their purpose and mission and helped them focus on possibilities for the future rather than merely concentrating on the past. More than any other patron, it was the Carmelites who were the most active in visualizing the prophet Elijah both for their own friars and for the laity at large: the role and reputation of their leader, they believed, had to be promulgated as forcefully in the arts as in their doctrinal writings.¹²

At the end of the 12th century, about fifty years before the Carmelites made their appearance in Europe, a monastic scriptorium had produced the *Biblia Pauperum* that subsequently became so influential in Carmelite iconography. This book had illustrations from thirty-four episodes in the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Last Judgment. Each of the thirty-four episodes was accompanied by two episodes from the Old Testament which paralleled the life and mission of Jesus. Elijah, and/or his disciple Elisha, are the focus of eight of these parallels. The *Biblia Pauperum* was instrumental in inspiring a wide variety of images of biblical figures, including Elijah, in the visual arts in the Middle Ages and beyond, most notably in stained glass and church sculpture. It was the inspiration for many early images associated with Elijah and constituted the beginning of an iconographic tradition that was to be rapidly developed with great enthusiasm within the Carmelite Order. Elijah thus became a central figure, due to his visual representation, in medieval consciousness and his frequent appearance in monastic garb reinforced the legend that he was the institutor of monastic life.¹³

¹⁰ de Vitriaco, *Libri duo*, cited in Edden, *The Mantle of Elijah*, 68.

¹¹ McMahon, *Pater et Dux*, 285.

¹² The Carmelites also developed a rich musical tradition associated with Elijah. See Boyce, *The Feasts of Saints Elijah and Elisha*, 155–188.

¹³ McMahon, *Pater et Dux*, 293.

An abundance and diversity of visual images associated with Elijah flourished throughout Europe under Carmelite patronage. In addition to the 'portrait' style depiction of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, there are many Carmelite monasteries where the cloisters are decorated with scenes from the prophet's life. Best known among these are the frescoes in the Basilica of San Martino ai Monti in Rome (executed by Gaspare Dughet between 1640 and 1655), which depict the life of Elijah and present him as wearing the Carmelite habit, thus reminding the viewer that he was the first Carmelite, and Dughet's rare image of the emperor visiting a Carmelite priory in the Holy Land. Also well known is the depiction of some twenty scenes from the prophet's life in the Carmelite monastery in Barcelona. In the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine alle Tre Cannelle in Rome, the right side-altar has an altar painting of the prophet Elijah painted by Corrado Giaquinto (1703–1766). The reverse side shows *The Apparition of the Virgin to the Prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel* and bears witness to the importance of popular piety that linked the figure of Elijah with the iconography of the Virgin Mary, a practice encouraged by the Carmelites, to emphasise the prophet's virginity. Three of the most important artists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all of whom play a key role in the history of Western art, were closely associated with the Carmelites: Lorenzetti, Sassetta and Masaccio, the latter having, by far, the closest association of all.

Creighton Gilbert, a specialist in Carmelite iconography, has shown how the desire for religious authenticity, characteristic of late medieval and Renaissance monasticism, which entailed the reinterpretation of the origins of religious orders and appeals to ancient traditions, can be traced very clearly in paintings and frescoes commissioned by the Carmelites.¹⁴ Focussing on works of art created for Tuscan Carmelite communities over a hundred year period (1330–1430), Gilbert has demonstrated how the Carmelites, lacking any clearly defined historical founder, blended together their myths with contemporary events in their iconography, quite uniquely, for one purpose only: to persuade the viewer that their authentic founder really was Elijah, the biblical prophet. The chief subjects in the paintings of other religious orders were invariably the images and biographies of their founders (Ignatius, Dominic or Francis), since these were the most effective ways for these orders to approach their public visually; it was therefore equally, if not more, important for the Carmelites to identify themselves iconographically with Elijah.

One of the earliest Carmelite paintings in which Elijah features prominently is the great altarpiece of 1329, made up of many panels and painted for the Carmelite church in Siena by Pietro Lorenzetti.¹⁵ Elijah is dressed in a Carmelite

¹⁴ Gilbert, *Some Special Images*, 161–207.

¹⁵ Gilbert, *Some Special Images*, 166–167.



Figure 7: The Carmelite Altarpiece (Lorenzetti, 1329).

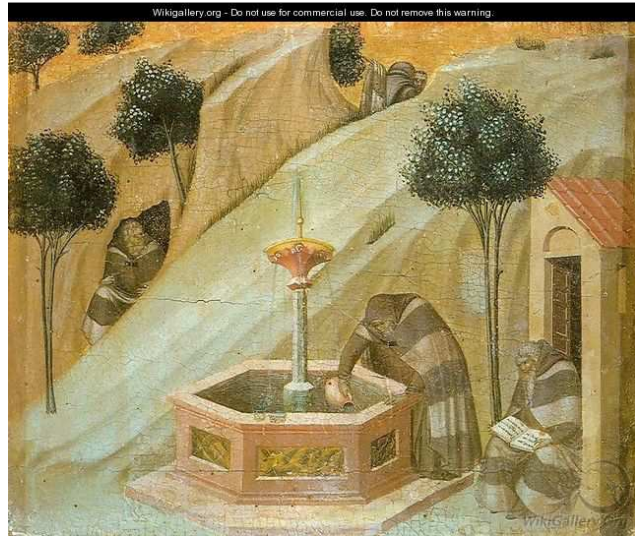


Figure 8: The Spring of Elijah on Mount Carmel (Lorenzetti, 1329).

robe and holds a long scroll; its text is taken from 1 Kgs. 18:19 in which the prophet calls on all Israel to gather at Mount Carmel. On this altarpiece, too, is depicted the story of Elijah's birth, an event not related in the biblical narrative but which becomes prominent in an apocryphal story of his birth widely circulated in Greek patristic writings of the 4th century. At the time of Elijah's birth, the legend goes, Sobach, the father of Elijah, saw men (or angels) wearing white, greeting the infant Elijah and offering him fire to eat. This story appealed to the Carmelites: these figures were taken allude to Elijah's future disciples, the Whitefriars. In Lorenzetti's panel, the figures are not shown but are relegated to the words of a scroll above Sobach's head. Another panel in the same altarpiece shows the disciples of Elijah living on Mount Carmel. It is intended as a visual expression of an important text found in the Constitutions of the Carmel Order, adopted in 1281:

Certain brothers, new in the Order, do not know how to reply ...to those who ask from whom, or how, our order took its origin. We wish to indicate to them how to reply, in these terms. We therefore affirm, to witness the truth, that beginning with the prophets Elijah and Elisha, pious dwellers on Mount Carmel, the holy fathers of both the Old and New Testament, deeply in love with their solitude of the mountain, unquestionably lived there, in a manner deserving praise, near the spring of Elijah, in holy penitence, continued uninterruptedly in holy succession.¹⁶

In the image on the panel, the spring of Elijah is very prominent, as well as the brothers at their tasks 'living in a manner deserving praise'. Rarely is it possible, argues Creighton, in studying religious iconography, to point to such a

¹⁶ Cited in Gilbert, *Some Special Images*, 169.

direct illustration of a text that itself articulated the patron's most emphatic beliefs and concerns. In Lorenzetti's panel, the monks wear striped Carmelite robes, the early habit adopted by the Carmelites and worn for a brief period in 1281.

The Carmelites were not the only order interested in iconography associated with Elijah. Within ten years of his death, many had begun to identify Francis of Assisi with Elijah. At his death, Francis was reported being seen ascending as a bright star into the heavens. Giotto interpreted this legend by painting Francis rising to heaven in a fiery chariot. This painting is part of the iconography commissioned for the basilica (1297–1300) erected over the saint's tomb in Assisi, giving a very definite sanction to the identification of Francis with Elijah.¹⁷

The appropriation of Elijah as the Carmelite founder, then, ensured a very rich and unique iconographical tradition in the Western church over and above the artistic traditions that associated him with the Eucharist, with the miracles of Christ or with his ascension. But there is yet another strand of tradition, separate and distinct from those discussed so far, in which Elijah is given a visual afterlife that, uniquely, lays emphasis on one important episode in the biblical narrative, seemingly overlooked in Western iconography. The biblical text in question is 1 Kgs. 19:8–13, Elijah's mystical experience of God on Mount Horeb. It is this mystical episode that lies at the very heart of the Orthodox Church's distinctive iconography of Elijah.



Figure 9: The Ascension of Elijah (Giotto, 1297–1300).

4. The Elijah icon

Elijah's mystical experience of the divine takes place following the dramatic theophany described in 1 Kgs. 19:11–12. Afterwards, 'Moses wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave.' (v. 13). Rashi, followed by other Jewish commentators,¹⁸ and Gregory of Nyssa¹⁹ see the cave as the very same cleft in the rock of Ex. 33:21–22 in which Moses hid as Yahweh passed by. The Jewish exegete Malbim, claims that it was during Elijah's

¹⁷ McMahon, *Pater et Dux*, 293.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, *The Book of Kings*, 198.

¹⁹ Simonopetritis, *A Synoptic View*, 122–123.

period in the cave that his mantle was invested with such miraculous powers.²⁰ The Orthodox ascetical tradition identifies the cave as the very same place where Moses received the commandments and notes that ‘the cave was not a place of retreat or repose but, as with Moses, the venue for a timeless moment of the most intimate encounter between Elijah and the Eternal’.²¹ In Orthodox liturgy and iconography, Elijah’s experience in the cave at Horeb anticipates the Gospel narrative of the transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8), where Elijah and Moses look directly on the glory of Christ.²² That Elijah is able to gaze directly on the full glory of Christ in the New Testament is the reason for the sustained interest in, and attention given to, his experience in the cave on Mount Horeb in 1 Kgs. 19. Indeed, Elijah is quite unique in Orthodox tradition in that he is the only Old Testament figure to receive any detailed individual treatment on icons. Not even Moses is granted that distinction.

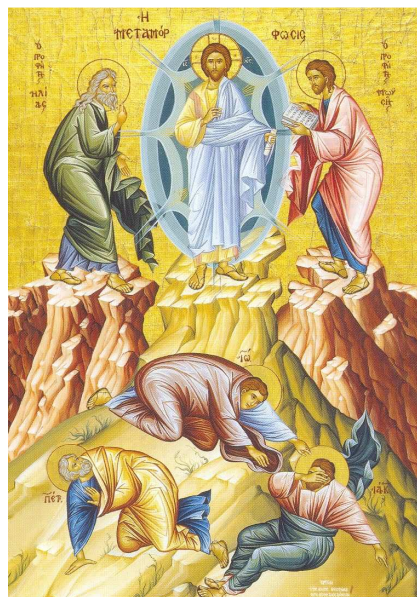


Figure 10: Icon of the Transfiguration (contemporary Greek icon).

In Orthodox tradition, the figure of Elijah must be portrayed according to a strict iconographical canon, as stipulated by Dionysius of Fournas:

Elijah should be presented as an old man with a white beard. There should be a cave with the prophet sitting inside it; he rests his chin on his hand and leans his elbow on his knee. Above the cave a raven watches him carrying bread in its beak.²³

Clearly, this iconography combines the episode of Elijah and the raven in 1 Kgs. 17:6–7 with Elijah in the cave on Horeb in 1 Kgs. 19:5–7, but the most distinctive and significant aspect of the iconography is not the obvious despondent pose of the prophet but rather the cave that is almost always associated with him. It is normally positioned at the very centre of the icon and encapsulates the prophet whose mantle touches its darkness on all sides.

The cave’s darkness contrasts to the blaze of colour of Elijah’s cloak, his chariot of fire and the other episodes of his life, generally depicted in the surrounding panels on a Greek icon. The darkness touches the figure of Elijah on all sides; in many icons, he is almost engulfed by it. Greek Orthodox writers

²⁰ Rosenberg, *The Book of Kings*, 203.

²¹ Simonopetritis, *A Synoptic View*, 123.

²² For a full discussion, see Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 37–60.

²³ Dionysius of Fournas, *The Painter’s Manual*, 24.

stress that the symbolism of the darkness reflects not so much the personal despair of Elijah but rather the notion of transcendence expressed through Gregory of Nyssa's theology of darkness.²⁴ In his *Life of Moses*, Gregory concludes that Moses's most intimate experience of God was not in the light of the burning bush but in his experience at the summit of Sinai in the cloud of darkness. On Ex. 20:18–21 (the text where, at Sinai, the people stand at a distance while Moses draws near to the thick darkness where God is present) Gregory comments:

Since Moses was alone, he approached the very darkness itself and entered the invisible things where he was no longer seen by those watching. After he entered the sanctuary of the mystical divine doctrine, there, while not being seen, he was in company with the Universal. He teaches through this that the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and – lifting up his own mind as to a mountain top to the invisible and incomprehensible – believe that the divine is here where the understanding does not reach.²⁵



Figure 11: Elijah at entrance to the cave (copy of early Byzantine icon).

Similarly, John Chrysostom notes that at the transfiguration, the eyes of the Apostles were *darkened* by excessive radiance. The image of the darkness is the capstone of Gregory's spiritual theology and essential to our understanding of icons of Elijah.

At the peak of the mountain where all light has gone, Moses finds himself in the darkness of the cloud (Ex. 24:18) and Elijah finds himself in the darkness of the cave (1 Kgs. 19:9). According to Gregory, this represents the culmination of their experience of the divine. Both Moses and Elijah penetrate through all that is visible to reach the invisible and become intensely aware of their inability to grasp the transcendent and ineffable. Like Moses's ascent to Sinai and Elijah's experience in the cave, from the point of view of the icon-maker, the ascent to the summit of the spiritual life for the viewer, too, ends not in light but in darkness. Thus the



Figure 12: The prophet Elijah surrounded by scenes from his life (Russia, 13th–14th century).

²⁴ Simonpetritis, *A Synoptic View*, 123.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 46.

icon of Elijah is a way of conveying to the viewer the importance of this central Orthodox spirituality.

5. Elijah in Jewish and Islamic iconography

In Jewish and Islamic iconography, Elijah is visualised in ways that reflect how the prophet is represented in the folklore of these two faiths. In the work of Marc Chagall, the image of Elijah, who is said to watch over the Jews in every generation, merges with his theme of the Wandering Jew. Rosen argues that, in the *White Crucifixion* (1938)²⁶, the figure of the beggar should be identified as the prophet. Chagall recalls celebrating the festival of Passover as a child when, opening the door for Elijah as part of the traditional meal, he wonders aloud if he will appear 'in the guise of a wretched old man, a hunch-backed beggar, with a pack on his back and a stick in his hand'.²⁷ According to Jewish tradition, Elijah will announce the coming of the Messiah. By showing Elijah in disguise, hastening away from the scene of the Crucifixion, Chagall makes clear that this Jesus is not the Messiah and that deliverance remains painfully postponed. In *Over Vitebsk* (1913–1914)²⁸, the Wandering Jew hovers over the Jewish village of Vitebsk as a protective force, reminiscent of Elijah who can appear at any time and in any guise. The Elijah narrative, mediated through both Jewish and Christian traditions, was an important source of inspiration for Chagall as is clear from the very many paintings, drawings and sketches he made of the various episodes in the prophet's life, culminating in his vast mosaic (1971, Nice), in which Elijah ascends to heaven on his chariot surrounded by the signs of the Zodiac, a composition that owes a great deal to the ancient classical world, specifically to the chariot of the sun god Helios. Chagall seems to have been inspired by the mosaic floors of fifth-century synagogues in Northern Israel (Bet Alfa, Zippori, Hamat Tiberias) where the figure of the sun-god Helios on his chariot is depicted in the centre of the zodiac, symbolizing the passage of time. Chagall thus brings together traditional aspects of the iconography of the scene, associates it with the story of classical sun-god, while also drawing attention to the influence of the Jewish milieu of these early synagogues.

Interest in exploring and appropriating Elijah's experience of the divine has not been restricted to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Islamic tradition, too, displays an enormous fascination with the prophet both in its literature and in its own distinctive iconography. Elijah (Ilyas) is mentioned only briefly in the Qur'an (6:85, 37:123–32) where he rebukes his people for failing to worshipping Baal and not the true God. However, his reputation is greatly enhanced in Islamic

²⁶ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pamelainob/5177863232/in/photostream/lightbox/>

²⁷ Rosen, *Imagining Jewish Art*, 45.

²⁸ <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/128282289360891851/>

tradition and folklore by close association with a mysterious figure whom Moses meets and journeys with at ‘the junction of the two seas’ (18:60–82). The mysterious servant is not named in the Qur’an but is identified by all commentators as Khidr (or al-Khadir, ‘the Green One’). Khidr is considered widely to be a prophet who lives well beyond the ordinary span of human life and is indeed associated with eternal life or what lies beyond or between the realms of life and death. Khidr’s association with perpetual life and the contrast generally made between Moses as the bringer of divine law and Khidr as possessor of an esoteric knowledge emanating from God’s presence made him the subject of much interpretation and elaboration in Islamic literature. In Sufism, he is considered the prophet of initiation into divine mysteries and a sound spiritual guide. Not surprisingly, given his attributes, Khidr very quickly became associated with Elijah and, indeed, in several instances, Khidr *becomes* Elijah; for example, medieval Sufis such as Ibn al-'Arabi assert that the composite figure of Elijah-Khidr initiated them into a direct perception of the divine. Right throughout the Levant, and especially in Islamic popular culture, the composite figure Elijah-Khidr is said to be able to inhabit the mosques of Medina, Mecca, Jerusalem, and Syria simultaneously. He is also free of time constraints, surfacing in sacred history (as retold in later tradition) any time from the days of Abraham to the then-current moment.

Elijah and Khidir appear together in illustrations from several Persian manuscripts, documenting the abundance of myths and legends that surround them, but one episode in particular, set in the pre-Islamic time of Alexander the Great, was especially popular and epitomizes many of the qualities ascribed to them.²⁹ When Alexander the Great (Eskandar) was informed that in the Land of Darkness, where the sun sets, there was a spring of the Fountain of Life, which bestowed immortality, he took the prophet Khidir as his guide (and in many variants of the story he is also accompanied by Elijah), giving him one of two rings that would light up when near water. Khidir and Elijah found the water and bathed in it, but Eskandar passed it by, unaware of, and uninterested in, its importance. The episode is widely illustrated in Islamic manuscripts and frequently appropriated to suit the objectives of the illustrator, as requested by the patron.



Figure 13: Alexander the Great at the Fountain of Life with the Prophets Khidir and Ilyas (re-painted 18th century.).

²⁹ Coomaraswamy, Khwājā Khadir, 22.

Miniatures from two of the most important compendiums of Islamic legends and folktales demonstrate the popularity of the episode. The dark, subdued colours of the image with the soldiers of Alexander carrying torches suggest the unenlightened darkness in which Alexander lives. Even when his horse stumbles on the fountain he seeks, he does not know it. The two prophets, Elijah and Khidr, sit at the mouth of a dark cave in a pose very similar to that found in Orthodox icons of Elijah and with much the same significance, since it indicates the sacred space in which they live. The illustration is remarkable in its metaphorical use of darkness as Alexander seeks the enlightenment he craves but fails to recognize it when he finds it.



Figure 14: Khidir and Elijah (Persian manuscript, 16th century).

In the the *Qisas al-anbiyā'* or Stories of the Prophets, an immensely popular compendium of legends, copied and illustrated several times, Alexander arrives at the Fountain of Life but ignores it. Khidir and Elijah, with their flaming haloes, having recognized it, face towards Mecca in prayer. The emphasis on Elijah's association with water and fountains in Islamic tradition echoes his powers over rain and fertility in the biblical story.

6. Conclusion

The ascension of Elijah remained a popular subject in 19th and 20th century art, for example, Salvador Dali's gouache (for the 1969 *Biblia Sacra* published by Rizzoli) and Philip Ratner's contemporary small-scale sculpture (Dennis and Phillip Ratner Museum, Bethesda, MD)³⁰ which depicts a surging diagonal chariot of flame driven by an ecstatic prophet. But iconography associated with Elijah went far beyond the religious sphere as the following two examples from Wales illustrate.

The first example is found in Cardiff Castle where, in the late-nineteenth century, the story of Elijah provided inspiration for secular decoration. The story of Elijah is depicted as part of a



Figure 15: Elijah in the Wilderness (Lonsdale, 1888).

³⁰ <http://www.ratnermuseum.org/index.php?page=bible-stories-3#>

stunning series of painted wall tiles adorning the roof garden of the castle (1888). The iconographical designs were arranged by William Burges who included captions in Hebrew for each episode and, in the example in Figure 16 he quotes verbatim the Hebrew text of 1 Kgs. 19:5 ('Then he lay down under a broom tree and fell asleep'). The jug of water and the bread miraculously brought by the angel are presented to the viewer in the foreground while the right wing of the angel mirrors the contours of Elijah's body, moments before he touches the mantle of the prophet. The colours and general style of the painting reflect the Orientalist tendencies of the time, ensuring that the biblical Elijah is depicted as an exotic figure inhabiting a world far removed from that of the viewer.

The second example is by the contemporary Welsh artist, Clive Hicks-Jenkins who was much inspired by the episode of Elijah fed by the ravens (1 Kgs. 17:1–7) and painted two different versions. His first encounter with the scene was when he saw it on a Renaissance altarpiece and 'as an unbeliever, was smitten with the beauty of the story'. In particular, he was completely taken by the notion of the raven as an emissary of God delivering sustenance to the prophet and,



Figure 16: The Prophet Fed by a Raven (Hicks-Jenkins, 2007).

as a response to the Renaissance panel, depicted the scene in contemporary terms. In this version, Hicks-Jenkins portrays the prophet in modern-day casual dress, drinking tea from an earthenware cup and eating rough bread.

He sets the scene against the backdrop of a Welsh hillside while a flaming red angelic raven not only brings him food but even appears to act, empathetically, as his companion. In his representations of animals in stories with a biblical background, the artist emphasises that the unusual behaviour of creatures is not simply due to an intervention from on high. Rather, he works from the perspective that the animals are acting from free will which, he argues, is even more compelling and miraculous an idea than having God make them behave against their natures. 'By such means' the artist states, 'I try to find my way into these familiar stories so that I can explore and depict them anew.'³¹ The artist's

³¹ Personal correspondence with the artist.

distinctive representation of Elijah and the raven adds something new, fresh, and vibrant to the story's traditional iconography: Hicks-Jenkins, with his keen sense of place, replaces the biblical Wadi Cherith with a green vibrant Welsh hillside while the dazzling colour of the raven, with wings almost on fire, invites the viewer to reflect on God's unusual emissary, chosen from the natural world. The painting evokes the Jewish-Christian interpretation of a prophet who never died and so is very likely to re-appear in any guise, any ethnicity, and in any place or age – here, in sombre mood on an obscure Welsh hillside.

To conclude, it is clear that episodes from the biblical story of Elijah have inspired some of the most creative and imaginative images in the entire repertoire of biblical art. The miraculous provision of food to Elijah by the raven and later by the angel have been developed and expanded into a rich iconography of the Eucharist as bread of life; the mysterious and hidden experience of Elijah in the cave served as the inspiration for the ever popular icon of Elijah in the Orthodox tradition while in Islamic miniature painting, Elijah with his flaming halo, is presented as the communicator of divine knowledge which he himself has obtained from God. Elijah and the dramatic events of his life have served as muse to artists over many centuries, and the images chosen for this short article can only serve as the smallest of representative samples, but they do illustrate the enduring appeal of a prophet who spans both the worlds of the human and the divine to three of the world's major faiths.

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