

ELIJAH'S LONG JOURNEY

1 Kings 19:1-3

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Elijah quit. There's no other way of saying it. In sheer frustration and pain, he gave up on the people of God in both Israel and Judah. He determined to go to the only place he felt that he could safely go, yet where God had unquestionably been: Mt. Horeb (Sinai). He was going to God with a plea which through desperation was almost a demand: "Let me out of this life!"

In Israel, he was a wanted man, already condemned to die by Ahab's heathen wife, Jezebel. Elijah could not feel secure in Judah because even though King Jehoshaphat loved God, he was gullible and could be manipulated by King Ahab, as Ahab could be manipulated by his wife Jezebel. Elijah knew that if he sought refuge in Judah, Jehoshaphat or others in his family might turn him over to the judicial system in the north, over which Jezebel exercised complete control. Elijah forsook his nation and went to God with his request to be allowed to leave this earth, which request was granted by an almost equally frustrated Creator.

The following are some of the places near or through which Elijah would have had to pass on his way from Jezreel to his intended destination, Mt. Sinai, together with some thoughts which those places might have provoked in his weary mind:

MT. GILBOA

Mt. Gilboa rose just to the southeast of Jezreel. Elijah would have seen it as he fled from Jezebel in Jezreel, and he would have remembered Israel's first king, Saul. After being forsaken by God, that weak-hearted king was slain on that mountain, taking with him his son Jonathan, a man with a heart like David's. Righteous Jonathan had to suffer death because others, higher than he in the kingdom, failed to obey God. It must have seemed to Elijah that all the upright had now perished from the land because all those who were now in authority were weak in spirit.

IBLEAM

One of the first that which Elijah would have passed through, assuming he was traveling along or near the highway to the south, was Ibleam, a city of Manasseh. The Canaanites were never driven out of this city (Jud. 1:27-28). Jezebel was a Canaanite and would have seen nothing wrong with that.

DOTHAN

A Little farther along the highway southward, Elijah would have passed near Dothan, where young Joseph was sold into slavery by his treacherous brothers. He would have felt a kinship with Joseph that nothing but suffering for righteousness can create. Why hadn't Elijah's fellow Israelites, his "brothers" in the Lord, come to his aid against that heathen woman, Jezebel?

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TIRZAH

Depending on which fork in the road Elijah chose, he could have passed through the city of Tirzah, first capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Here, King Jeroboam took counsel concerning his fears that the people in the ten northern tribes would kill him and return to Judah's King Rehoboam if they continued to go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Jeroboam was advised to invent a new religion for God's people and to renounce the Law of Moses. Tirzah, then, had served as the nest for Israel's apostate faith.

SHECHEM

Elijah would have passed through Shechem, the city where Simeon and Levi deceived and murdered an entire city of people who were in the process of taking Jehovah as their God. The city was named for the man who molested Dinah but then repented for doing so. It had been chosen by God as a Levitical City of Refuge, but it no longer afforded anyone, especially Elijah, any refuge at all. Joseph's bones were buried in Shechem. It must have seemed good to Elijah to think that Joseph had finished his work and was resting now where *"the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary be at rest"* (Job 3:17). Elijah would gladly have traded places with Joseph's bones. Shechem was also the city where Rehoboam, Solomon's son by an Ammonite princess, spoke harshly to his countrymen and provoked the ten northern tribes forever to reject the house of David, and then to reject both God and His Law.

SHILOH

This was the first place in the Land of Promise that the tabernacle of God's presence was pitched on a permanent basis. Here, Joshua and Eleazar cast lots before the Lord to see what part of Canaan each tribe would inhabit. Little Samuel grew up here, witnessing the wretchedness of Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Here the word of the Lord came to that young boy, bringing a pronouncement of terrifying judgment upon Eli, his sons, and upon all of Eli's descendants. From here, Hophni and Phinehas carried the ark into battle against the Philistines, who then captured the ark, killed those two priests, and wasted the Israelite army. By these things, God signified that He had rejected Ephraim as head of the tribes of Israel and had rejected Eli and his descendants as his priests. Shiloh was truly a God-forsaken place. His holy presence was no longer there.

BETHEL

Just a little farther down the road was the center of the new religion of the northern kingdom: Bethel, "the king's chapel". If there is one place along the road which Elijah would have tried to avoid, it would have been here, where the rejection of Jerusalem as the only acceptable place of worship found its most flagrant expression. In Bethel was one of the two golden calves erected for Israel at Jeroboam's command.

- "BETHEL" CONTINUES -

Bethel was one of the first places where, long ago, the newly-arrived Abram worshiped Jehovah in Canaan's land. It was the place where troubled Jacob found rest on his way to safe refuge from Esau in his uncle Laban's house. "*I am the God of Bethel*", said the Lord to Jacob twenty years later when Jacob was returning home (Gen. 31:13). Now Jeroboam's priests in this place would quote those very words as evidence that Bethel was a divine location. Later, when Jacob was made fearful of reprisal for his sons' slaughter of the Canaanites in Shechem, Jehovah spoke to him and called him back to Bethel to build "an altar unto God" (Gen. 35:1). Jeroboam's priests would have contended that God still spoke to men and blessed them for coming to worship at Bethel, as He had commanded Jacob and Abraham and blessed them. Elijah knew it was a lie, because God had spoken to him, but he could not persuade his fellow Israelites to believe him.

How long it had been since Samuel the prophet had brought righteous judgment to this place in his yearly judicial circuit! And how long would it be before God would send another man to condemn the idolatrous worship in this place, as He had sent a man to condemn King Jeroboam when he first erected his altar here? One thing was for certain, Elijah no longer had a heart for it. God could send somebody else.

JUDAH'S BORDER AND RAMAH

Somewhere between Bethel and Ramah, Elijah passed by the hill where Deborah once sat as Israel's judge. All Israel used to come to her to hear the word of the Lord concerning their troubles. No such judge was even welcome in Israel now. In Ramah, Elijah had crossed the border and had entered into Benjamin's territory within the little nation of Judah, but with gullible Jehoshaphat on the throne, there was small comfort for Elijah in that.

Ramah was the city where angry and anxious elders of Israel demanded that Samuel give them a king, and where God responded by telling Samuel, "*They have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.*" Years afterward, Samuel repaired to Ramah, after announcing to King Saul God's decision to replace him and after secretly anointing young David. Here, the fugitive David sought and found the old prophet and told him all the things that Saul had done to him. Here, the Spirit of the Lord protected Samuel and David when King Saul came. Overcome by the Spirit, Saul fell down and prophesied all night long, and David made his escape. Elijah wanted no such protection. He wanted only to be out of the battle altogether.

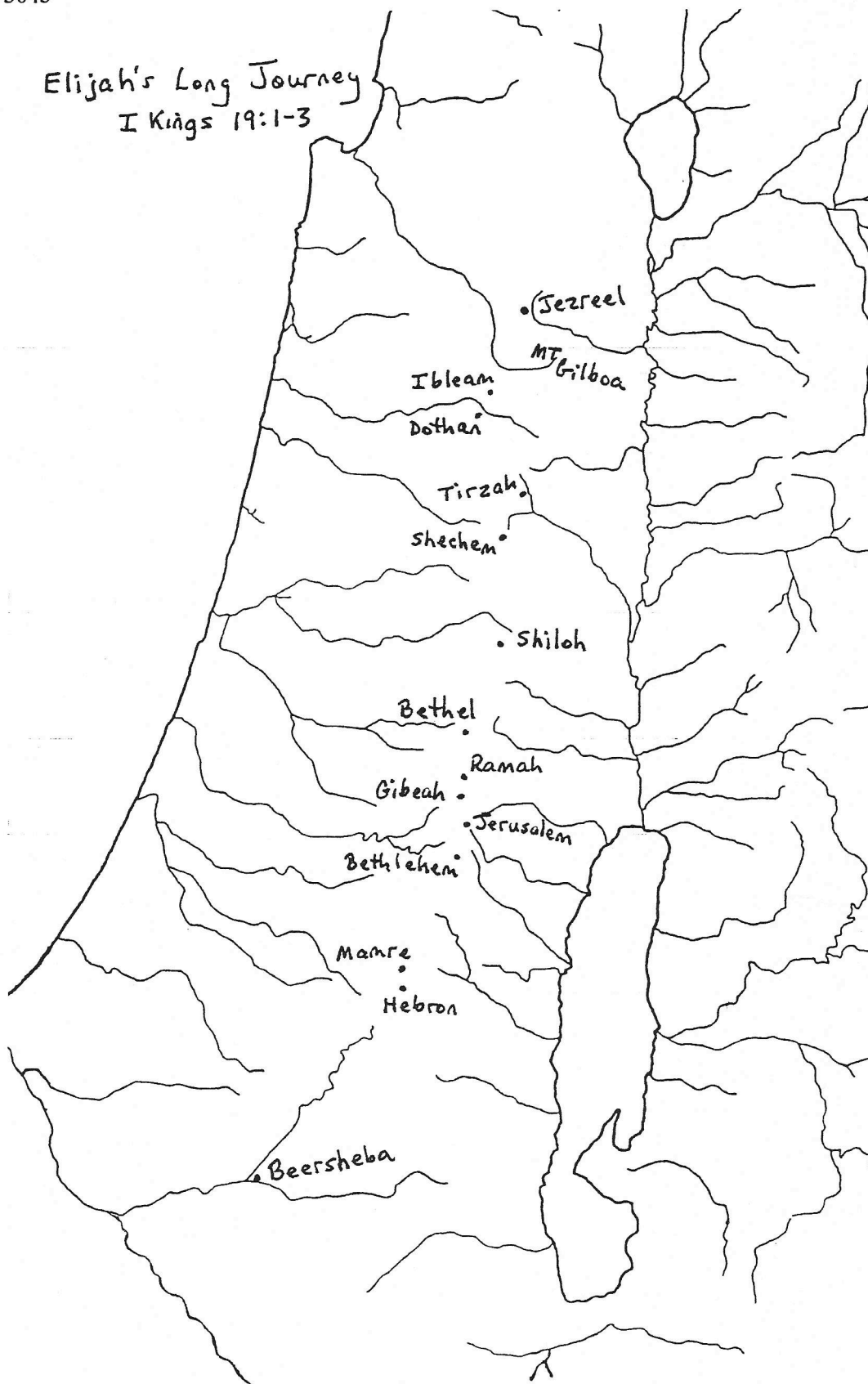
MIZPEH

With Bethel and Gilgal, Mizpeh had been the third link in Samuel's yearly judicial circuit. Here, Samuel prayed and God gave to the beleaguered Israelites a stunning victory over the Philistines. Later, Samuel gathered all Israel here to select the king which they had demanded from the Lord.

GIBEAH

This city was the scene of one of the most repulsive events in all of Israel's history. Here an innocent Levite took shelter for the night, but the men of the city, after first demanding that the Levite himself be turned over to their lust, took his wife instead and brutally molested her all night, resulting in her death. The tribe of Benjamin was reduced to a mere six hundred men as a result. King Saul had reigned over Israel from here, adding just another sad story to the long list of failures along Elijah's route.

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JERUSALEM

"The city of the great king", the one place chosen by God for Israel's sacrifices for sin and thanksgiving. All its glory notwithstanding, it was for Elijah the greatest symbol of everything that was wrong on earth. It was set apart by God, and then thoroughly corrupted by His own people. It was sanctified by the Spirit of holiness and profaned by the spirit of compromise. The same vexing pattern of unfaithfulness which began in the garden of God now marred the story of this holy city.

BETHLEHEM

Where was David now, when Elijah could have used a king with a backbone and wisdom? He was where Elijah longed to be, and where Elijah would plead with God to take him.

HEBRON

This Levitical city of refuge still had Levites in it. They were in it when David ruled for seven years over Judah before becoming king over the whole of Israel. But they had also been there when Absalom used it as a launching pad in his successful attempt to dethrone his father. What good had they done their king then? And what good could they do Elijah now?

Caleb's heroism in conquering Canaan had won him the privilege of being given this area for an inheritance. And near here, in the plains of Mamre, were the bones of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. What would they think, if they could see now their descendants and their ways? Elijah pressed on toward the desert south land.

BEERSHEBA

Here, Abraham long ago planted a grove, built an altar, and worshiped God. Now, throughout Israel, and even in Judah, the false prophets looked to Abraham as the example for the correct form of worship rather than to Moses and the Law. A rallying cry for these misguided teachers would be, *"The manner of Beersheba liveth!"* How right they were! How woefully right they were. Here at Beersheba, an exhausted Elijah prayed to die. *"I am no better than my fathers,"* he said. Then, lying down on the earth, he fell into a deep sleep. He had brought no provision for the journey, an indication of the desperate nature of his flight from Jezebel.

An angel prepared him a meal and woke him. But after eating, his weary body was still too weak to travel, and he lay down once more. Again the angel woke him and encouraged him to eat, saying, *"This journey is too difficult for you."* Revived then by the angel's meal and the grace of God, Elijah went forty days and nights on its strength. At last, he found himself on the mountain where Moses saw the burning bush. There he made his petition to God, and there the word of God came to him.