And God Said, "You Are Fired"

Elijah and Elisha

Editors
Mishael M. Caspi and John T. Greene

BIBAL PRESS
NORTH RICHLAND HILLS, TEXAS
Contributors

Michael M. Caspi
Tova Forti
John T. Greene
Gilas Hamel
Rachel S. Hareloch
Martin O’Kane
Stefan Schorch
Yael Shemesh
Max Stern

Bates College
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel
Michigan State University, East Lansing
University of California at Santa Cruz
University of Illinois, Chicago
University of Wales, Lampeter, UK
Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel, Brelefeld, Germany
Bar Ilan University Ramat Gan, Israel
College of Judea and Samaria
Stefan Schorch

Elijah and Elijah-Tradition in Maccabees

Abstract

Within the First and Second books of Maccabees, Elijah is mentioned only once, in 1 Macc 2:58. Although this is the only explicit reference to that famous figure, a further passage seems worthy to be discussed if we search for Elijah traditions preserved by these two books: 2 Macc 1:20–23. The paper will ask whether this passage should be seen within the context of the Elijah tradition and will analyze the picture of Elijah emerging from the two books mentioned.

Within the first and second books of Maccabees, there is only one explicit mentioning of Elijah, contained in 1 Maccabees. Although 1 Maccabees has been transmitted in the Christian Bible only, it is originally a Hebrew text, composed most probably around 120 BCE in Jerusalem. The Hebrew original, still known to Jerome, got lost. The book of 1 Maccabees reflects clear pro-Hasmonean tendencies.

The reference to Elijah as transmitted in 1 Maccabees consists of one sentence only (1 Macc 2:58):

Πλησ ἐν τῷ ζηλῶσαν ζηλὸν νόμον ἀνελήμφθη εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν

Elijah, because of great zeal for the law, was taken up into heaven.
Although thus short, this saying seems to present a very complex picture of Elijah: Elijah is praised for his zeal, which was focused on the law, and his ascent to heaven appears as the reward for this zeal. The image of Elijah presented in this saying, therefore, connects at least three different elements quite prominent in Jewish tradition:

1. Zeal
2. The Law
3. Ascent to heaven

In the following, I will first focus on these three elements, afterwards move to an analysis of the literary context of the verse under discussion, and finally discuss the relation between the traditions on Elijah and on Phinehas.

1. Elijah’s Zeal

Elijah’s zeal is the first of the three elements appearing in the verse under discussion. Although not preserved, the Hebrew Vorlage of the Greek formula ἐν τῷ ζῆλῳ καὶ τῷ γῆλον “because of great zeal” may be reconstructed with a high degree of certainty as בקֶנֵא יִזְלָאָה. The motif of Elijah’s zeal goes back to the Hebrew bible: In 1 Kgs 19:10 and 14, Elijah is complaining before God at Horeb:

יִזְלָאָה יִקְנֵא לִלְדוֹת אֲלֵיה עַבְדֵּךְ בָּרְעָר בְּרֵיתִךְ מִנֵּי שָׁפָרֲאֵל אֲחֵרַמְמְבִיתִךְ הָרֶשׁ אֲרָבַנְבִיתֵךְ הָרֶשׁ בְּרוֹעֵר אֵין לְבָדָר וּבֶשֶׁא אֲרָבַנְבִיתֵךְ לִלְדוֹת

I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.

According to the narrative framework of the biblical account in 1 Kgs 18–19, the phrase בקֶנֵא יִזְלָאָה, “I have been
very zealous,” most probably refers to Elijah’s killing the prophets of Baal at Nahal Kishon. In other words, “being zealous” seems to be a euphemism for carrying out acts of physical violence against supporters of non-Jahwistic cults in favor of the God of Israel.

The motif of Elijah’s zeal is not known from any other Jewish source of the second century BCE. It appears, however, in the “Vitae Prophetarum” (“Lives of the Prophets”), a composition that most probably originates in the first century CE. There, Elijah is called “zealous” (καλόντις), obviously employing this designation in a very positive and approving way.

As to rabbinical literature, the motif of Elijah’s zeal appears in a number of texts, especially in the Mehilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Shir ha-Shirim Rabba, Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer and Yalkut Shimoni. It is notable, however, that, in all these references, a positive undertone is very rare, and, among the texts that understand Elijah’s zeal as physical violence, only one reference in Yalkut Shimoni sees it in a positive light:

Moses removed the worshippers of idolatry, as it is written (Exod 32:27): “Put your sword on your side, each of you!” and Elijah removed the worshippers of idolatry, seized the prophets of Ba‘al and slaughtered them.

Moses had been zealous (Exod 32:26): “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me!,” and Elijah had been zealous, as it is written (1 Kgs 18:30): “Then Elijah said to all the people: Come closer to me.”

As clearly appears from the quotation, the context of this reference to Elijah’s zeal is a comparison between Elijah and Moses, postulating almost equality between the two: Elijah had been zealous as Moses had been, and, therefore,
his zeal is as justified as Moses’ zeal is. The comparison between Moses and Elijah as well as the claim that Elijah is something like a new Moses is a prominent line of rabbinic thinking, but, as far as I am aware, only here extends to the motif of zeal, attributing a positive flavor to Elijah’s zeal.

Contrary to the tendency inherent in the passage from the Yalkut quoted above, the majority of rabbinic references to Elijah’s zeal express disapproval:  

אֶלְיוֹנִי חֲזַק וְסָר וֹלָה מְצָר הָיוּ בֹּצָר שֲנַנְמֵר קָנָה
כָּסָרַיִל אַלּוּד הַמְּצָר הָיוּ בֹּצָר שֲנַנְמֵר קָנָה
(מֶלֶבֶנָא א’)
יִם כָּוֹה נְאַמֶּר שַעֲרְאָר ה’ אַלּוּד שָׁב הָרִבְרֵך
מֶרֶבֶךְ לָמַּכֶּס שָׁנָר הָיוּ בֹּצָר שֲנַנְמֵר
נְתָנָה לוֹ מְשַׁמָּה לְמָלֵךְ נַחֲלָלָא מַהַּ אֲלַמָּשׁ בֹּא שְׁמַמ
תְּמַשְּׁמָה לְנַבְּאָה הַחְתִיקָה שְׁאָלַת הָלָמָד
לָמַּר לְנַבְּאָה הַחְתִיקָה לְאָל שְׁאָל שְׁאָלַת הָלָמָד

Elijah expressed the glory of the father (= God), but not of the son (= Israel), as it is written (1 Kgs 19:10): “I have been very zealous for the Lord etc.,” and what is written there (1 Kgs 19:15f): “Then the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus etc., Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.”—The expression “as prophet in your place” can only be understood as “I do not like your prophecy.”

The reason given in this saying for disapproving Elijah’s zeal is that Elijah is too inhuman a prophet, focusing solely on the demands of God while neglecting the needs of men. That’s why, according to the rabbis, Elijah’s prophetic power should be transferred to Elisha.

A number of rabbinical texts identify Elijah with Phinehas son of Eleazar, who, according to Num 25, in his zeal killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman at Shittim. In these references, both Phinehas’s zeal in Shittim and Elijah’s zeal at Nahal Kishon are condemned, attributed to the same person Phinehas-Elijah, e.g.:  

100
Elijah and Elijah-Tradition in Maccabees

And he (= God) said to him (1 Kgs 19:9): “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered: “I have been very zealous.” Then he said to him: “You are always zealous. You have been zealous in Shittim because of a forbidden sexual relation, and here you are zealous because Israel does not circumcise.”

In light of the material presented above, it seems that the saying of 1 Maccabees to be analyzed here is the oldest evidence for the existence of a tradition focused on the motif of the zealous Elijah. Both 1 Maccabees and the earlier tradition of the Vitae Prophetarum employ it in a positive way, while this feature was removed in the later tradition of the Vitae Prophetarum.15

Within rabbinic literature, remnants of this approving tradition with regard to Elijah’s zeal still may be recognized. The majority of rabbinic sources, however, clearly condemn it.16

Josephus’s portrait of Elijah seems to show that the removal of the zeal elements from the Elijah tradition already happened in the first century CE. “The key feature in Josephus’ remolding of the character of Elijah is his elimination of the features of a Zealot.”17 As with regard to rabbinic literature, this negative attitude towards zeal seems to be a critical reaction to the movement of the Zealots.18

2. Elijah and the Law

The second traditional element which can be separated in the saying from 1 Maccabees to be analyzed here is the law as the focus of Elijah’s zeal. It seems that, in comparison to the zeal motif, this element is much less frequent within the context of postbiblical Elijah traditions.
Nevertheless, as the motif of Elijah's zeal, Elijah's commitment to the law seems to have a clear anchor in the biblical text, since the final section of the Dodekapropheton, Mal 3:22–24, draws a close connection between Moses, the Law, and Elijah:

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

According to this passage, the prophet Elijah, after his eschatological returning to earth, will reinstall the observance of the Law of Moses. Although Elijah's commitment to the law as expressed in 1 Maccabees, seems to have some points of contact with the passage from Malachi, both are very different insofar as the Elijah verse from 1 Maccabees entirely lacks the eschatological background of the prophetic text.

Apart from 1 Maccabees, the motif of the historical, not the eschatological, Elijah committing himself to the observance of the law appears in some manuscripts of the Vitae Prophetae: In continuation of Elijah's designation as "zealous" (ζηλωτής), quoted above, he is called a "guardian of the divine commandments" (φύλακας τῶν θεοῦ ἐντολῶν). Further Elijah traditions seem to have common elements with the tradition of Elijah's commitment to the law, but are not identical. This seems especially true for the
claim referred to above that Elijah was very similar to Moses. Additionally, Elijah appears as a teacher of the oral Torah in some rabbinical texts. Both of these traditions, however, lack the point of Elijah fighting for the general observance of the law, which seems so prominent in the quotations from 1 Maccabees and the Vitae Prophetarum. On account of this observation, one may conclude that Elijah’s commitment to the law has been part of the imagery of Elijah in Late Second Temple Judaism, but seems to have disappeared afterwards. Additionally, this motif seems to always have been connected with the zeal motif.

3. Elijah’s Ascent to Heaven

The motif of Elijah’s ascent to heaven is of course the most famous feature of Elijah traditions. As compared with both the biblical text to which this motif goes back and the many postbiblical Jewish texts in which the motif reappears, the verse from 1 Maccabees names only the fact itself, that Elijah was taken up into heaven, but is free of any additional details, as e.g., the whirlwind or the chariot with horses of fire, by which Elijah was taken to heaven, according to 2 Kgs 2:11:

יְהִי הַשָּׁמֶשׁ חַלְּכֵּל וְהָרַגְתֶּהוּ רַבָּבָה
אשׁ וּמְסֹמֵף אֶל הָאָרֶץ גָּזַע חַלְּכֹת
בּסָכוּרָה לְשֵׁמֶשׁ

As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.

Although the absence of details in 1 Maccabees seems to follow the poetic structure of the passage in which the verse to be discussed here appears (see below), it certainly indicates an abstraction and avoids any speculation about exactly how Elijah’s ascent to heaven happened. That the absence of the concrete circumstances under which Elijah disappeared from earth is not just due to the poetic structure of the
passage seems to be corroborated by the observation that 1 Maccabees generally avoids metaphysical speculation. It is interesting to note that the same tendency appears in Josephus's account of Elijah.21

In the following, I’d like to analyze the literary context of the saying to be discussed here.

4. Elijah within the Context of the “Testament of Mattathias”

The context of this verse on Elijah in 1 Maccabees is the so-called “Testament of Mattathias,” containing the last words of Mattathias, father of Judas Maccabeus, directed to his sons.22 This testament extends over verses 2:49–68, containing in verses 52–60 a list of glorious men from the history of ancient Israel who are supposed to serve as examples for the sons. All of these examples are well known from the Hebrew Bible. One of these examples is Elijah:

(51) Remember the deeds of the ancestors, which they did in their generations; and you will receive great honor and an everlasting name.

(52) Abraham, when tested, was he not found faithful, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?

(53) Joseph in the time of his distress kept the commandment, and became lord of Egypt.

(54) Phinehas our ancestor, because he was deeply zealous, received the covenant of everlasting priesthood.

(55) Joshua, because he fulfilled the command, became a judge in Israel.

(56) Caleb, because he testified in the assembly, received an inheritance in the land.

(57) David, because he was merciful, inherited the throne of the kingdom forever.
Elijah and Elijah-Tradition in Maccabees

(58) Elijah, because he was deeply zealous for the law, was taken up into heaven.

(59) Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael believed and were saved from the flame.

(60) Daniel, because of his innocence, was delivered from the mouth of the lions.

(61) And so observe, from generation to generation, that none of those who put their trust in him will lack strength.

One verse is devoted to each example. In the Greek text, obviously following the Hebrew original, every single verse has the same structure: The name of the respective figure appears at the first position of the verse, followed by a formula introduced with the preposition ἐν “in,” corresponding to בְּ in the Hebrew Vorlage: ἐν πεπρωμένῳ “in testing” (Abraham), ἐν καιρῷ στενοχωρίᾳ αὐτοῦ “in the time of his distress” (Joseph), ἐν τῷ ζηλωσάντα ζηλωμενῷ “in being zealous” (Phinehas), ἐν τῷ πληρώσανεν λόγον “in fulfilling the command” (Joshua), etc. Only one sentence deviates from this structure, verse 59, where a participle follows the name: Ἀνανίας Λαζάρους Μωσέως προσεύχοντας—“Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael believing...” The following verse, however, which closes this passage, immediately returns to the usual structure: Δανιήλ ἐν τῇ ἁγιότητι αὐτοῦ—“Daniel in his innocence.”

As regards the phrase following the preposition, it is interesting to observe clear differences: In verses 52 and 53, a noun follows, referring to difficult situations in the life of Abraham and Joseph—Abraham’s testing and Joseph’s distress.

In verses 54 to 58, however, an infinitive phrase follows, referring to remarkable deeds of the respective biblical figures: ἐν τῷ ζηλώσαν ψυχήν “in being zealous” (Phinehas), ἐν τῷ πληρώσαν λόγον “in fulfilling the command” (Joshua), ἐν τῷ μαρτυροῦσαν “in testifying” (Caleb). The only exception is the verse devoted to David: ἐν τῷ ἐλέει αὐτοῦ, usually translated as “in his mercy.” Within the Septuagint, however, ἐλεος
is the usual Greek equivalent to Hebrew דוד, and, therefore, we may suppose that the Hebrew Vorlage of the present Greek passage was דוד בן-דרי, meaning “David in his piousness.” 

Maybe, the author had in his mind David’s “acts of piousness,” again expressing an activity. A second possibility, expressing exactly this meaning, is that the Hebrew Vorlage contained דוד בּוֹד כָּתוֹן “David in his acts of piousness.” In favor of this suggestion is that in the Septuagint of 2 Chr 32:32 and Neh 13:14 ἰλασσόν (singular) indeed corresponds to בּוֹד כָּתוֹן in the Masoretic Text. In the following and last verse of this passage, devoted to Elijah, the text returns to an infinitive phrase: ἐν τῷ Ἰλασσόντε, ἰλασμόν νόμου—“in being very zealous with regard to the law.”

The two last examples are both taken from the book of Daniel and do not refer to remarkable deeds, as the preceding five examples do, but to remarkable attitudes—belief and innocent uprightness in difficult situations. This forms a parallel to the two opening verses 52 and 53, praising Abraham’s faith and Joseph’s keeping the divine commandment and hereby creating a frame, although the structure of the opening and the closing verses is different.

As to the saying on Elijah, it is the final verse of the passage enclosed by this frame, most obviously paralleling the opening verse, devoted to Phinehas. This parallel is remarkable, since Phinehas and Elijah are identified one with the other in a number of Jewish sources. Therefore, the analysis of the Elijah traditions in 1 Maccabees should include the relation between the image of Elijah and the image of Phinehas.

5. Elijah and Phinehas

Apart from the observation that the verses on Phinehas and Elijah are parallels due to the literary structure of the Testament of Mattathias, both biblical figures, Phinehas and
Elijah and Elijah-Tradition in Maccabees

Elijah, are praised with the same formula: \( \epsilon \nu \ \zeta \eta \lambda \sigma \omega \alpha \zeta \eta \lambda \nu \)—“in being very zealous.” Most obviously, therefore, Phinehas and Elijah are intentionally paralleled on the levels of both form and content.

The identification of Phinehas and Elijah is known from rabbinical sources, one of which has been quoted already:26

\[
\text{וַאֲמַרְתָּ לְמִדְּהוּ לֹא פֹּדַה אָלֻיהָהוּ, וַאֲמַרְתָּ לָהּ בָּשָׂם על}
\text{לַשְׁדִּים אָהֳלֶהֶם בְּשַׂם בֵּית הַנּוֹחָה.}
\text{נִילַי עָרֵיהֶם, לֹא בָא מְכָנָה, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל וַעֲשָׂרָה וַעָשָׂרָה}
\text{בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְּכָּה.}
\]

And he (= God) said to him (1 Kgs 19:9): “What are you doing here, Elijah? He answered: I have been very zealous.” Then he said to him: You are always zealous. You have been zealous in Shittim because of a forbidden sexual relation, and here you are zealous because Israel does not circumcise.

The oldest clear attestation for the identification of these two biblical figures, however, comes from the first century CE and is therefore much earlier than the rabbinic texts. It is contained in Pseudo-Philos Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum.26

Although the Testament of Mattathias does not seem to attest the complete identification of Phinehas and Elijah, it nevertheless shows that these two figures have been seen in a very close relationship as early as in the late second century BCE. Being therefore an early document for the formative phase of a new tradition—the identification of Phinehas and Elijah—the separation between the common and the distinctive elements of the images of Phinehas and Elijah may help to determine how this new tradition developed.

The most important common element is the zeal motif. In the case of Elijah, the zeal focuses on the general observation of the law. While the parallel saying on Phinehas misses the latter element, it nevertheless appears with regard to Phinehas in another mentioning of this figure in 1 Macc 2:26:
Stefan Schorch

Thus he (= Mattathias) burned with zeal for the law (καὶ ἐξήλωσεν τῷ νόμῳ), just as Phinehas did against Zimri son of Salu.

This verse not only shows that the observance of the law has been seen as the focus of Phinehas’s zeal as it has been the case with regard to Elijah, but it additionally demonstrates that the zeal for the law, even reappearing in 2:27, has been an ideal of 1 Maccabees. Therefore, the figures of both Phinehas and Elijah appear to have been important points of departure for the creation of Hasmonean identity. Moreover, according to the Testament of Mattathias, the only point of contact between Phinehas and Elijah is their zeal for the law. Therefore, it must have been the Hasmoneans who initially identified Phinehas and Elija.27

In difference to Elijah, however, Phinehas is called “our father” (ὁ πατὴρ ἡμῶν) by Mattathias. This shows that the Hasmoneans regarded Phinehas as their ancestor. Thanks to this ancestor, the Hasmoneans could legitimize their priesthood as being based on an everlasting covenant, as the continuation of the verse on Phinehas indeed tells: “(He) received the covenant of everlasting priesthood.”

However, Phinehas not only has been the ancestor of the Hasmonean priests, but the personification of their political ideals as well—zeal for the law. At this point, Elijah could be compared to him. Thus, the figure of Elijah has been incorporated into the Phinehas tradition, and not the reverse way.

To the broad stream of Elijah traditions during the second temple period, this integration obviously meant a clear restriction: Focusing on Elijah’s commitment to the observation of the law, it deprived him of his supranatural power as well as of his messianic potency, both of which are anchored in the biblical text and have been very prominent in other sources from the second temple period.28 As has been discussed above, even Elijah’s ascent to heaven
appears without any speculations and has been provided Elijah’s zeal as its ratio.

As to the integration of the Elijah tradition into the Phinehas tradition, one may ask why at all it happened, since it does not seem to have added any new element to the Phinehas tradition that has been important to the Hasmonean identity and the justification of their political activity. The most probable reason is that the integration followed an attempt to restrict the Elijah tradition and to intentionally remove from it all messianic and supranatural undertones as part of an attempt to gain more support for the political ideology of the Hasmoneans.

While the Hasmoneans claimed Elijah as a forerunner of their own political ideology, they tried to take him at the same time out of the hands of Jewish groups concurring with this ideology. As is apparent from sources from the first century CE onwards, the reception of Elijah which had been started by the Hasmoneans became less and less attractive and even seems to have been opposed.

Notes
1 Rappaport, The First Book of Maccabees, 9f; Schunck, 1. “Makkabäerbuch,” 289.
4 Compare the Hebrew translation of Rappaport, The First Book of Maccabees, 136.
5 From a pragmalinguistic perspective, this is a “euphemism of pretension,” cf. Schorch, Euphemismen, 4–17.
7 Schwemer, “Vitae Prophetarum,” 647 note 12b (comp. Hengel, Die Zeiten, 168 note 5) and similarly 645 note 9e.
8 This is suggested by the continuation of the passage, see below, note 19.
Stefan Schorch

9 Meh. Y. Pisha, 1; Cant. Rab. 1; Pirqa R. El. 28; Midr. Zut. 8; Midr. Ag. Bamidbar, 28; Yal. Josua, 15 and 1 Kings, 209.
10 Yal. 1 Kings, 209.
13 For further inquiries into this identification, see Thon, Pinhas, 12–14.
16 A different attitude may be recognized in the legends current among the Haside Ashkenaz, in which the motif of Elijah fighting for his people was very popular, comp. Galley, Elija, 30–32.
18 See Hengel, Die Zeloten, 181.
19 Schwemer, “Vitae Prophetarum,” 647 note 12b (comp. Hengel, Die Zeloten, 168 note 5). The fact that in this passage the term ἔντολα, “commandments” appears instead of νόμος “law” is of minor importance only and does not change the general picture.
20 See above, note 11.
23 See Keil, Commentar über die Bücher der Makkabäer, 67.
24 Most probably, the Hebrew Vorlage of the Greek ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ αὐτοῦ was יִתְנָה (comp. 2 Sam 15:11).
26 LAB 48,4; see Dietzfelbinger, “Pseudo-Philo,” 230f and comp. Öhler, Elija, 26.
27 That the identification of the two “zealots,” Phinehas and Elijah, already happened in the time of the Hasmonaean has already been suggested by Öhler, Elija, 25 as opposed to an earlier suggestion made by Hengel that the identification of Phinehas and Elijah emerged only during the first century CE: “Da das früheste schriftliche Zeugnis über eine Identifizierung gegen 100 n. Chr. vorliegt, ist die Entstehung dieser Vorstellung im Laufe des 1. Jh. n. Chr. wahrscheinlicher als zu
Elijah and Elijah-Tradition in Maccabees

einem wesentlich früheren Zeitpunkt.” (Hengel, Die Zeloten, 172). However, the “Testament of Mattathias” proofs, according to our analysis, that this tradition dates earlier.

28 See the account of Öhler, Elia, 2–22, dealing especially with the Septuagint, the book of Ben Sira and texts from Qumran.

Bibliography


Stefan Schorch
