No character in the Hebrew Bible shows greater durability than Elijah. He is well remembered in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for his wondrous deeds, his opposition to Baalism, his translation to heaven, and his role as the herald of the coming day of Yahweh.1 Yet, for all his staying power, his origins and those of the stories about him have eluded scholars. While the origins of the individual himself, if there ever was such a person, remain elusive, I hope to show in this essay how recent text-critical and composition-critical2 research has refined our understanding of the origins and development of the stories about Elijah in the Hebrew Bible.

1 The miracle stories, opposition to Baalism, and translation to heaven are in the narratives in Kings. Elijah is named as the herald of the day of Yahweh in Mal 3:23 (NRSV 4:5). For an overview of the Wirkungsgeschichte of Elijah in early Judaism and beyond see Rainer Albertz, Elia. Ein Feuriger Kämpfer für Gott (Biblische Gestalten 13; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012), 168–223. Albertz points out (p. 17) that Elijah is mentioned by name in the NT more frequently than any other Hebrew Bible prophet. The Qur’an mentions Elijah in two passages: 6:85 and 37:123–32.

2 I use the term "composition-critical" in lieu of the more common term “redaction-critical.” John Van Seters (The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the ‘Editor’ in Biblical Criticism [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006]) contends that the model of the redactor or editor as typically employed by biblical scholars is anachronistic. Part of my contention in this essay is that the reconstruction of multiple dtr redactional layers within the Elijah stories as well as the attribution of them as a whole to a distinct dtr redactor is erroneous. On the other hand, there is evidence within these stories of separate compositional hands transforming what they inherited largely through augmentation, and the stories themselves were added to the book of Kings in waves at a post-dtr stage. The problem with the notion of redactors and redaction is therefore at least partly terminological. For the use of ‘dtr’ and ‘Dtr’ see n. 5.
Stories about Elijah in the Hebrew Bible are limited to six chapters of the book of Kings: 1 Kgs 17–19; 21; 2 Kgs 1–2. Elijah intrudes abruptly into the account of the reign of King Ahab of Israel in 1 Kgs 17:1. He steps onto the stage without introduction and proclaims a drought: “There will be no dew or rain during these years except at my command.” He hides in the Wadi Cherith (location unknown) and is fed by ravens until the wadi runs dry (17:1–7). Then he goes north to the Phoenician town of Zarephath (Sarepta) where he meets a widow who is about to prepare a last meal for her son and herself before they starve to death. Elijah bids her do as she has planned but to feed him first. She does, and he declares that her oil and meal will not run out so long as the drought lasts (17:8–16). Later, when the widow’s son dies, Elijah brings him back to life (17:17–24).

In 1 Kgs 18, Elijah challenges Ahab’s 450 prophets of Baal to a contest somewhere on the Carmel range to prove whether Baal or Yahweh controls the forces of nature by sending “fire” (lightning) from heaven to consume a bull prepared for sacrifice upon an altar. The Baal prophets go first. In a parody of their ritual activities, they are described as limping (dancing) around the altar they have prepared and cutting themselves to make their own blood flow. A politically incorrect Elijah ridicules them, telling them to call louder, suggesting that Baal is occupied with very human activities—relieving himself, traveling, or sleeping. With sunset approaching, Elijah claims his turn. He prepares his bull, douses it with water to show that there is “nothing up his sleeve,” and offers a simple prayer to Yahweh, which is answered with fire. He then slaughters the Baal prophets and waits for Yahweh to send rain to end the drought.

In 1 Kgs 19, Elijah is impelled by threats from Jezebel to flee Israel. He goes in the footsteps of Moses to the mountain of god, Horeb, where he experiences earthquake, wind, and fire. But Yahweh is absent from these phenomena, appearing instead in a hushed whisper (קֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה), which tells Elijah to go back the way he came and to anoint Elisha as his successor, Hazael as king of Aram, and Jehu as king of Israel. He designates Elisha by throwing his cloak over him as the chapter closes.

The tales about nameless men of god in 1 Kgs 20 and 22 go together as indicated by the LXX, which has them together (21, 20, 22 vis-à-vis MT), and they do not involve Elijah. The next story about him concerns Naboth’s vineyard in

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3 Reading “Elijah of Tishbe” (ὁ ἐκ Θεσβων = הַמִּתִּשְׁבִּי) with LXXL at the beginning of 17:1. The other major witnesses expand, in part trying to dull the abruptness of Elijah’s appearance.