

## Enoch and Elijah: Where Are They Now?

By Jim Punton and Anthony Buzzard

Hebrews 11:5: “By faith Enoch was **taken away** so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.” Other heroes of faith are then listed in this hall of fame. Then the writer says: “All these *died* in faith, not having received the promises. They saw the promises from afar and welcomed them. They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims in the land” (Heb. 11:13). “What more shall I say?...Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David and Samuel **and the prophets**...**All** these, though well attested through their faith, **did not obtain the promise**” (Heb. 11:32, 39).

The writer to the Hebrews allows for no exceptions when it comes to the question of death. Enoch died, and the prophets died. Elijah, of course, was a celebrated prophet.

There is no hint here that either Enoch or Elijah was taken to be with God in heaven and given immortality before Jesus. They were removed, certainly, but the text does not say “taken up to the throne of God.” In fact their colleagues went looking for them, expecting to find them in a different location on earth. On the basis of these facts we conclude:

1. By the end of the first century no human being other than Christ himself had been resurrected from death into immortality. Peter said (about 31 AD), “David has not ascended into heaven” (Acts 2:29, 34). Paul said that Christ was “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20) and “afterwards, *at his coming again*, those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:23). Jesus was the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). Between Christ’s resurrection and Christ’s return, these dead are “asleep in Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:14). Since “the fathers fell asleep” (2 Pet. 3:4) none who trusted God before or after Christ has been awakened. None has been removed to heaven. No one but Christ has ascended to heaven.

2. Those who have “fallen asleep” trusting in Christ “have already perished,” says Paul (1 Cor. 15:18), unless there is a coming resurrection. If there is no resurrection, there is no life beyond death. Paul places no hope in the dead being now immortal nor even alive. No one yet has immortality. Immortality is a gift beyond death, to be given only to those who have God’s Holy Spirit, and to be given when Christ returns. If he doesn’t return, if there’s no resurrection, then the dead are already perished. **BUT** Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! Immortality awaits our awakening at Christ’s return (1 Cor. 15:51-54; 1 Thess. 4:13-17; John 5:29).

3. This is not contradicted by 1 Peter 3:18-19. Christ was “put to death”; but he was raised again or “made alive” (v. 18). Having then also “gone”<sup>[1]</sup> or ascended to God, he made by this his proclamation of triumph over the demonic, the “spirits in prison” (v. 19). Carefully read, this passage says nothing of an alleged “life” of Jesus while he was dead. It does not speak of activity between his death and resurrection. It affirms his resurrection — he was dead and then “made alive” by resurrection. Then followed his ascension. In that risen condition he made a proclamation of the defeat of evil to fallen spirits (angelic beings, v. 19). The robbing or “harrowing” of Hades (by which Christ supposedly set free the Old Testament believers and took

them off to heaven) is fantasy. And it is based on misinterpreting the above and Ephesians 4:8. The “captivity he took captive” probably refers again to the “principalities and powers” (Eph. 1:21, 22; Col. 2:15).

4. The “sleep” of death itself need hold no fears. At the resurrection the period of death will seem to have been as momentary as any undisturbed sleep now. And, to the Lord, all our time is present. Tyndale says this: “I think the souls departed in the faith of Christ...to be in no worse case than the soul of Christ was from the time that he delivered his spirit into the hands of his Father until the resurrection of his body in glory and immortality” (1534).

5. The early church firmly held that resurrection at Christ’s return was our hope of God’s Kingdom. Till then, the whole person who died remains in sleep. Justin Martyr (who died in 165 AD) says: “I choose to follow not men or men’s teachings, but God and the doctrines delivered by Him. For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians but...who say that their souls when they die are taken to heaven, do not imagine that they are Christians...Christians who are right-minded on all points are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 80).

Elijah and Enoch are not, as we saw in Hebrews 11, exceptions. They too died (Heb. 11:13, 39), although they had previously experienced a miraculous “transference” by divine intervention.

## Elijah

The year in which Elijah was lifted up and carried off in a whirlwind was 852 BC. This was the year when Jehoram (son of Ahab) began to reign over the northern territory of Israel (2 Kings 1:17; 3:1). Elijah was removed and Elisha succeeded him as God’s prophet to Israel (2 Kings 2:1, 11).

But in the southern territory of Judah another Jehoram (son of Jehoshaphat) had been reigning alongside his father from 853 BC and became sole king of Judah in 848 BC (2 Kings 8:16).

So from the time of Elijah’s disappearance in 852, till 841 BC, there was a Jehoram in Judah and a Jehoram in Israel. They were brothers-in-law.

Jehoram of Judah turned to idolatry (2 Chron. 21:11). In 842 BC, the year before he died of dysentery, and ten years after Elijah had gone, Jehoram of Judah received a letter *from Elijah* (2 Chron. 21:12-15). Elijah was still alive, still on earth, still active for God *ten years after* he was removed from Israel.

In 852 Elijah had been caught up “into the heavens,” into the sky, in a whirlwind. The other prophets were afraid that he might have been dropped on some mountain or in some valley (2 Kings 2:16); they obviously hadn’t thought that Elijah would be carried beyond the skies. Fifty athletes searched for him for three days but “did not find him” (2 Kings 2:17). Clearly they expected him to have been transferred from one location on earth to another on earth. And so it was. But God did not reveal where. Yet, from that unknown place, Elijah continued his watchful and prayerful concern for Israel and Judah. He broke his silence after ten years when he wrote his letter to Jehoram of Judah. We are told no more, and don’t know when or where he died. But

we do know that immortality awaits him when he is awakened by Christ at the last day (1 Cor. 15:51-56). Three of Jesus' disciples were allowed a glimpse of that future Kingdom and saw Elijah alive by resurrection there. But this was a *vision* (Matt. 17:9), the future being seen in advance. Like Moses, Elijah now *awaits* the resurrection. There is no contradiction of John 3:13 in what the Bible tells us of Elijah.

Those who insist that the whirlwind took him "to heaven," to immortality, into God's presence (despite Heb. 11:13, 39) have real difficulty with Elijah's letter to Jehoram. They have to suggest (a) that 2 Chronicles 21:12-15 is a corrupted text (though there's no evidence for this); or (b) that Elijah foresaw Jehoram's idolatry and, writing the letter before he was removed, left it with someone with instructions to send it ten years later; or (c) that he came back from heaven in order to write to Jehoram. But the straightforward explanation rings most true. And John was not opposing the Old Testament Scriptures when he wrote John 3:13.

What evidence is there that the Hebrews ever thought Elijah had ascended to God? His fellow prophets didn't think of this. Nor in the rest of the Old Testament is it suggested. Josephus (writing about the same time as John) says, "Elijah *disappeared* from men and no one knows to this day of his end" (*Antiq.* ix. 2:2).

As for his being transported in the whirlwind, we may have a parallel in the account of Philip in Acts 8:39. It seems to be a similar phenomenon. But while Elijah was not found (2 Kings 2:17), Philip was found (Acts 8:40).

## Summary

On this understanding, Elijah did not ascend into heaven and gain immortality. He was carried by God's Spirit to an undisclosed location where he lived on, serving his Lord; ten years passed before he spoke out his challenge to Jehoram of Judah. He eventually died in faith, as did all the prophets (Heb. 11:32, 39, 40) and he sleeps now till Christ returns.

## What Then of Enoch?

Isn't the Bible clear that he was transfigured and transferred to God's presence in heaven? Genesis 5:24 says: "He [was] not, for God took him." The Hebrew text has no main verb. We'll come back to the phrase. The other verb "took" is from a common Hebrew verb *laqah*, meaning "take, take away, remove, carry off." Its usage covers the "taking away" of purchases from a market, of a woman from her father's house through marriage, of life by violence.

It is a feature of *laqah* that "when *nephesh*, 'life, person,' is the object in every instance in the OT the meaning is 'to take away life, to kill.'"<sup>[2]</sup> Elijah, for example, uses it to refer to his opponents' plans for him: "They seek my life [*nephesh*] to *take it away*" (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The psalmist says, "They plotted to *take away* my life [*nephesh*]" (Ps. 31:13). Ezekiel has, "If the sword should come to *take away* a life [*nephesh*] from among them, he is *taken away* in his iniquity" (Ezek. 33:6). Most interestingly we have in Proverbs, "The reward of the just will be a tree of life, but the lives [*nephesh*] of the unjust will be *taken away*. The man who is just on the earth will receive what he deserves; how much more the unjust and the sinner" (Prov. 11:30, 31).<sup>[3]</sup>

Jonah actually prays to God, “O Lord, *take away* my life [*nephesh*]” (Jonah 4:3) and Elijah earlier had prayed, “O Lord, *take away* my life [*nephesh*]; I am no better than my fathers before me” (1 Kings 19:4).

As in the last two examples, God may be the one who “takes away” being (*nephesh*). So the phrase “God *took* him” (Gen. 5:24) is not unique. Hosea speaks for God: “In my anger I gave you a king; in my wrath I have *taken* him *away*” (Hos. 13:11). But it needn’t mean “destroyed.” The Psalmist can say: “With your counsel you will guide me, and with glory then *take* me *away*” (Ps. 73:24), and “God will ransom my being [*nephesh*] from the power of Sheol [the Unseen world of the dead], for he will *take* me *away*” (Ps. 49:15).

The phrase “God took him” would not then be a surprising one to the Hebrews. It would not of itself suggest a unique experience for Enoch. They would read it as implying an ending of life by intervention of God such as that prayed for by Elijah and Jonah. More than the phrase itself would be required to indicate that Enoch bypassed death, or that he was removed into God’s presence in heaven. The Old Testament gives us no further information beyond saying that “all the days of Enoch were 365 years” (Gen. 5:23). But we should note that the phrase “he was not” would itself be taken to mean “he died” (cf. Job 7:21; 8:22; Ps. 39:13; 103:16; Prov. 12:7). Hebrews 11:13 says that Enoch (v. 5) died along with all the rest of the heroes of faith.

## The Septuagint

The Greek-speaking community of expatriate Jews in Alexandria required the Old Testament to be translated into Greek. This was completed between 250 BC and 170 BC and is known as the Septuagint (LXX). It was important to the early church and frequently quoted. It renders Genesis 5:24: “He *was not found* because God *transferred* him.” “He was not” has become “he was not found” (perhaps influenced by the Elijah story). “God took him” has become “God transferred him.” This translation goes beyond the Hebrew original “God took him,” but needn’t mean more.

The Greek word rendered “transferred” is from *metatihemi* which means “place or position differently, change the position of, relocate, resite, transfer.”<sup>[4]</sup>

a. It appears in the LXX of the Old Testament as follows: “Cursed is the one who *transfers* his neighbor’s landmarks” (Deut. 27:17). “Ahab...sold himself to what was evil in God’s sight as Jezebel, his wife, *transferred* him” (i.e. changed the position he took, 1 Kings 21:25; 20:25, LXX). “The mountains are *transferred* into the depths of the seas” (Ps. 45:3). “Do not *transfer* the eternal landmarks” (Prov. 23:10). “I will proceed to *transfer* this people and I will *transfer* them” (Isa. 29:14). “Lebanon will be *transferred* as the mountains of Carmel” (Isa. 29:17). “The rulers of Judah have become like those *transferring* landmarks” (Hos. 5:10). Here we see the main use as *repositioning* landmarks (Deut. 27:17; Prov. 23:10; Hos. 5:10); *resiting* mountains moved from one place to another (Ps. 45:3; Isa. 29:17); displacing people and *relocating* them (Isa. 29:14; and the *transferring* of allegiance from Yahweh to Baal, effected in Ahab by Jezebel (1 Kings 21:25).

b. It appears in the New Testament as follows: “Jacob died, he and our fathers, and they were *transferred* to Shechem” (Acts 7:16). “I’m astonished that you are *transferring* so quickly to

another gospel” (Gal. 1:6). “The priestly office being *transferred*, a transfer of law of necessity also occurs” (Heb. 7:12). “By faith Enoch was *transferred*...God *transferred* him” (Heb. 11:5). “Persons *transferring* the grace of God...” (Jude 4). The noun (*metathesis*) occurs at Hebrews 7:12; 11:5; 12:27.

Usage of the verb in the LXX and New Testament strongly suggests that we understand it in Genesis 5:24 (LXX) as God’s transferring Enoch from one location or site to another. (It is not a word for transfiguration or transformation and does not speak of being taken *up* to immortality.) Elijah was transferred alive from one place in Palestine to another. Was Enoch similarly transferred? Or is the reference to the transferring of the dead Enoch for a secret burial like that of Moses (Deut. 34:5, 6; Jude 9)?<sup>[5]</sup> Or is it something else?

## Josephus

The Jewish historian, Josephus, says: “As for Elijah and for Enoch (who was before the flood) it is written in the sacred books that they disappeared” (*Antiq.* IX. 2.2). He gives no hint that he thought Enoch had ascended immortal to heaven. But he does indicate mystery in his “disappearance” and links it with that of Elijah.

### Writings Between the Old Testament and New Testament

a. About 180 BC we find in the *Book of Sirach*, or *Ecclesiasticus*: “Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken away. He was an example of repentance to all generations” (4:4). A Hebrew version of this passage says, “He was a sign of knowledge to all generations” (Cairo Genizah B text). The whole verse is missing from the Syriac version and from the Masada scroll. Whatever the reading should be, it does not advance our search, beyond showing profound regard for Enoch.

b. About 100 BC we find a substantial legend surrounding Enoch. The *Book of Jubilees* (4:16-26) suggests that he was the first to learn writing and to write prophetically, that he devised the astronomical signs and constructed the first calendar, that he was foremost in knowledge and wisdom. In his sleep he was taken on a tour of the earth and the heavens; he met the fallen angels who had had sexual relations with women and fathered the nephilim (Gen. 6:1-4; Jude 6: 1 Pet. 3:19). God finally carried him off to the Garden of Eden where he remains, recording the wickedness of mankind in preparation for the final judgment. *Jubilees* is a fictional work which carries us well outside the Bible. But it allows us to see one view, which may have become widely held. But that view puts Enoch in Eden, not heaven.

c. An important collection of five writings, mostly from the second century BC, is known as *Ethiopic* or *1 Enoch*. The section “The Watchers” (1:36) quotes the same prophecy of Enoch’s as Jude does (Jude 14, 15; Enoch 1:9). Another section, “The Giants,” was replaced by “The Similitudes” (37-71) which was probably written at least as late as 100 AD. It is not found at Qumran. In “Similitudes,” the legend of Enoch is further developed. Enoch is identified with “the Son of man” (Enoch 71:14) and reference made to his “sitting on the throne of glory” (45:3; 61:8; 69:2).

It has been improbably suggested that this work may pre-date Jesus and that Jesus is referring to Enoch in John 3:13: “No man has gone up into heaven except the one who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [Enoch] who is in heaven.” Is there a comparison of Enoch and of the Messiah, both as “Son of Man”? Are we to see both as ascending to heaven, both as making proclamation to the imprisoned angels? Intriguing though this is, it is unconvincing. John 3:13 probably refers to Jesus entering, during his life, into the secrets of God through his intimate relation to God.

d. In *Slavonic or 2 Enoch*, a later Christian work which may include Jewish material, we find Enoch petitioning God on behalf of the fallen angels and reporting back to them God’s negative response. He then returns to earth for 30 days and is taken permanently to Eden (2 Enoch 68:1-3).

## Summary

We have strayed some way from the Biblical data in order to explore material that may have been available to the early Christian community. To recap: Genesis 5:24 simply says, “He [was] not, because God took him.” The Hebrew does not imply anything unique by “took.” The LXX makes this “God transferred him,” a Greek word that suggests change of location. Josephus says he “disappeared,” echoing the LXX “he was not found” for the Hebrew “he not.” If the Old Testament and Josephus were our only sources, there would be no grounds for assuming anything different to have happened to Enoch than happened to Elijah. But we have inter-testamental Jewish writings which have Enoch transferred to the Garden of Eden — not to heaven. And we have one work, later than John’s gospel, which has Enoch in heaven as the Son of Man.

## New Testament

Genesis 5:24 is quoted in the New Testament, in its LXX form: “He was not found, because God *transferred* him” (Heb. 11:5). The writer prefaces the quotation with “Enoch was by faith transferred, in order not to see death” (Heb. 11:5). This well-known chapter tells us what was accomplished by means of faith; and Enoch “by faith was transferred.” We are not told what this involved. If it meant relocation, we do not know the whereabouts. We are not told that he ascended “to heaven.” The mystery remains.

The purpose of his being “transferred” was “not to see death.” This very phrase occurs in Luke 2:26 where Simeon saw the infant Messiah as God had promised. He was ready then to “see death,” to be “released in shalom” (v. 29). To “see death” is the opposite of to “see life.” “The one who does not obey the Son shall not *see life*” (John 3:36). “See” as “experience” is used with “decay” (Acts 2:27, 31) and “grief” (Rev. 18:7), as well as with “life” and “death.” It occurs with a different verb in John 8:51 where the Greek has, “If anyone keeps my word, he will in no way see death eternally” (cf. the next verse where Jesus talks of us “tasting” death eternally: John 8:52; Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27; Heb. 2:9).

In what sense did Enoch not “see” or “experience” death? Was it a deferment like Simeon’s (Luke 2:26)? Was it the means of his avoiding the “eternal death” (John 8:51, 52), the “second

death” (Rev. 20:14)? Which “death” did he not “see”? If “the first,” for how long did he “not see” it? One suggestion is that both Enoch and Elijah were faced with violent death from which God rescued them: “In Hebrews 11:5 it is said ‘By faith Enoch was translated’ (that is, transferred from one place to another) ‘that he should not see death’ (that is, a martyr’s death) at the hands of the ungodly world, no doubt for his prophecy of a coming judgment upon them (Jude 14, 15). In the same way Elijah was no doubt translated (that is, transferred), certainly not to the planets, that he might not meet with a martyr’s death at the hands of Jezebel.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Did Enoch die? The writer to the Hebrews states clearly that he did. Having listed many who trusted God, including Enoch, he says, “these *all died* in faith” (11:13). Besides, “All these...received not the promise” (11:13, 39). Enoch has not yet received it. Nor will he till the resurrection. Paul does not except Enoch (or Elijah) from death. He says, “Death passed upon all men” (Rom. 5:12). Whatever in reality happened to Enoch, whatever Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5 mean, ascent into heaven to receive immortality before the resurrection is not claimed for Enoch or Elijah in the Old Testament or New Testament.

## Conclusion

Enoch and Elijah, having “died in faith,” are asleep. With all who “sleep in Christ,” they have no awareness of the passage of time as they “await” his coming. Yet his return will bring their awakening to life and immortality at the first resurrection (Dan. 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:13-15; 1 Cor. 15:20, 51-54; John 5:25, 28; Rev. 20:1-6). Jesus will come back and reign for 1000 years in a renewed earth with all the saints of all the ages. Following the progressive eradication of all that is evil, a further renewal will bring “heaven” to this planet (Rev. 21:1-4). “Even so, come Lord Jesus.” ✧

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[1] That “having gone” (v. 19) refers to his ascension is clear from its reappearance in verse 22 (cf. Acts 1:10, 11; John 14:2, 3, 12, 28; 16:7, 28).

[2] Robert Bratcher in *Bible Translator* 34, no. 3, July 1983, p. 337.

[3] The Greek (LXX) has: “the lives of the unjust are taken away.” The OT “*a wise man takes away lives*” should probably read “*violence takes away lives*.”

[4] *Methistemi* is a different verb occurring in the NT at Luke 16:4; Acts 13:22; 19:26; 1 Cor. 13:2; Col. 1:13.

[5] The Hebrew here (Deut. 34:6) has been taken as: “he buried him” (RSV); “he buried himself” (Rashi. Ibn Ezra); “he was buried” (JB); “buried him” (GNB); perhaps it’s simply “someone buried him”; the LXX has “they buried him.”

[6] George Waller, *A Biblical Concordance on the Soul, the Intermediate State and the Resurrection*, 1906.

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