CHAPTER 6

Elijah

Summary: Having considered the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary within Carmel, we now turn to the Order’s other foundational figure, the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Like Mary, Elijah is considered Patron of the Carmelite Order, and whereas she is Mother and Sister, Elijah is revered as ‘Father of All Carmelites’. In this chapter we consider some of the reasons why this is so, and some of the implications for us as Carmelites today. Early Carmelites wove a mythology which spoke of Elijah as founding a ‘brotherhood of prophets’; this mythology still speaks to us Carmelites today because Elijah’s example has much to teach us about our own vocation as contemplatives and prophets.

Window of Elijah at the Carmelite-run National Shrine of St. Thérèse at Darien, Illinois, U.S.A.
Get prepared: Before reading this chapter, have to hand any materials you might need, such as writing materials; you might like to summarise each section in your own words, or to write down your reactions and thoughts on the blank page at the end of the chapter. Perhaps access to the internet or reference books would help you to follow up points that interest you. Since Elijah is a biblical figure, it would be helpful to read this chapter with a copy of the Bible to hand; any translation will do, though the New Revised Standard Version is widely recommended. Why not begin with the following prayer inspired by Elijah’s example:

O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel,
you alone are God.
Your servant Elijah lived in your presence,
and acted on your Word.
Help us to drink from the well of his wisdom.
Shelter us in Cherith, and lead us to Carmel,
 luring our hearts away from all false gods.
Open our eyes to the needs of those suffering.
Open our mouths to speak comfort and justice.
Open our hearts to your voice in the silence.
Send angels to strengthen us.
Send the rain of your grace to quench our thirst.
Let us break bread with the starving
 and bring life to places of death and despair.
Send us as prophets to herald your Gospel.
Allow us to rise to you in paradise.
Those who met your son Jesus saw in him
 the spirit of Elijah.
May Elijah lead us to your son.
We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

A man like us?
‘Elijah was a man just like us’; so says the letter of James (5:17). Anyone who reads the story of Elijah in the Old Testament’s two Books of the Kings may find that rather hard to understand, given the dramatic events of his life.

Elijah was the great prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the ninth century before Christ, during the reign of King Ahab. Ahab, influenced by his wife Jezebel, had introduced into Israel the worship of a false God, Baal. This idolatry brought with it the suffering and repression of the common people. In fighting against the worship of Baal, and the unjust actions of the king, Elijah – on a mission from God – called a drought to befall the nation, called down fire, rebelled against the authorities, and stood in the presence of God himself. Yet Elijah was also a man who ran away from his mission, terrified of Queen Jezebel’s retribution, who laid down wanting to die, and who hid in a
cave. Elijah was, like us, capable of extremes. As we might say nowadays, Elijah lived life ‘at the edge’.

So what is it about this great man of God that has drawn Carmelites to adopt him as one of our patrons? Why did the medieval friars feel able to enrol him as the first Carmelite? Was it significant that the first Carmelite hermits settled in the Wadi ‘ain es-Siah, a valley on Mount Carmel watered by the Fountain or Well of Elijah?

Did you know? Elijah is sometimes referred to by his Latin name Elias, and his disciple Elisha is likewise sometimes referred to as Eliseus.

A patron alongside Mary, the ‘Lady of the Place’

In the last chapter we read how the Carmelites had adopted Mary as Patron of their Order. When a group adopts a patron it is for a variety of reasons. In part, they want the protection of having that person ‘on the board’, someone who will give the group credibility and an identity. But we Carmelites wanted more than that when we chose to have Elijah as patron alongside Mary. We wanted to trace our origins way back to Old Testament times and to the great prophets of Israel. We are the only religious order in the Roman Catholic Church to claim such a strong relationship with a biblical figure who predates Christ himself, and the only group in the Western Church to keep his feast.

We have learned already that the Carmelite Order over the centuries has produced Constitutions that help its members to articulate its identity and mission in a particular time, and interpret the Rule of Saint Albert for the present age. The earliest surviving Carmelite Constitutions date from Many traditional depictions of Elijah – such as this window at St. Edward’s Church, Dringhouses, in the English city of York – show the prophet being fed by ravens during his time in the desert because God commanded them to do so (1 Kings 17:2-6).
1281, and in that text our predecessors in Carmel traced a line from themselves back to Elijah and his follower Elisha. In the introduction to the 1281 Constitutions, known as the Rubrica Prima, the medieval Carmelites explained that they were simply carrying on the tradition of the 'brotherhood' or 'company of prophets' (mentioned in 2 Kings 2) whose original leaders were Elijah and Elisha:

Since some young brothers in the Order do not know how to reply truthfully to those who wish to know how and where our Order originated, we want to provide them with a written account of how to respond to such demands. We say that, on the evidence of trustworthy witnesses, that from the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the holy fathers of both the Old and New Testaments have lived devotedly on Mount Carmel, true lovers of the solitude of that mountain for the contemplation of heavenly things. There, near the fountain of Saint Elijah, without any doubt, they lived praiseworthy lives, and their successors continuously thereafter.

Of course, historians tell us that it is extremely unlikely that there was a physical line of succession of men living on Mount Carmel from the time of Elijah down to the thirteenth-century. The Rubrica Prima and the Carmelite traditions that grew up about Elijah afterwards are myths. But myths are not to be dismissed lightly; they may not be factually true about the past, but they still contain important truths about the present. Why bother to construct such a mythical history in the first place?

Stop for a moment: Before reading on, why do you think the medieval Carmelites claimed to have descended directly from the prophet Elijah and the 'brotherhood of prophets'?
Telling our story

There are two main reasons why the first Carmelites developed a mythical history about descending from the prophet Elijah.

The first is that they wanted someone whose lifestyle and characteristics we could emulate. We wanted to be able to say to people “Elijah and Mary are authentic examples of what a true Carmelite is like.”

The second reason for the medieval Carmelite friars constructing the myth of our Elijan heritage was that all the major religious orders in the medieval Church had a founder. Saints Francis, Benedict, Dominic and so on were real people who put their names to various orders, and to whose memory those orders could turn when they needed to discern their future direction, wondering whether they were being true to the founder’s vision. We Carmelites had no such founder. We had also rejected the various religious *regulæ* (‘rules’) that were around at the time in favour of a *formula vitae* (‘way of life’) written by Albert, the Latin Patriarch (Roman Catholic Bishop) of Jerusalem. Having no founder left us without a figurehead. “Who are these Carmelites?” people asked of us. So although they aren’t mentioned in our Rule of Saint Albert, we Carmelites chose Elijah and Mary as our inspirations, referring to Mary as our Mother and Sister, and to Elijah as ‘Father of All Carmelites’.

And that makes sense when you look at the geographical and historical context in which the Carmelite tradition developed. There was a long practice of men and women going off into the deserts of the Holy Land to seek God in solitude and silence. One of the first was St. Anthony who lived in the deserts of Egypt in the third century. Many followed him in a radical decision to forsake all and seek the face of the living God in solitary prayer. They are collectively known as the ‘Desert Fathers and Mothers’. They had always regarded Elijah as their great exemplar, as the ‘first monk’, the template upon which they drew their own lives. Because Elijah was seen as the first monk it was only natural that he be chosen by the Carmelite hermits to be their patron, particularly since they themselves lived on Mount Carmel, the place where Elijah had carried out his great contest against the prophets of Baal.

It was Elijah’s mythical role as ‘founder’ of the first community on Carmel that the medieval Prior Provincial of Catalonia, Felip Ribot, wrote about in his *Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites* (often called *The Book of the First Monks*, after the first followers of Elijah).

![A map of Elijah’s many journeys.](image)
Contemplatives: standing in the presence of God

Of course, we are all called by our Rule of Saint Albert to live a life ‘in allegiance to Jesus Christ’. But there are a variety of ways in which that can be done, just as there are a variety of temperaments. What unites all Carmelites, however different they may be in other ways, is that we are contemplatives by our very nature. Being contemplative is part of who we are. Contemplation is the unifying element at the heart of Carmel. Contemplation cannot be earned; rather, it is a gift of God to Carmelites and others who seek to be open to that gift, and given when and how God wills.

But what is contemplation? Contemplation is often spoken of synonymously with praying, but that is not the Carmelite understanding of the term. Contemplation is simply standing in the presence of God with an open heart. And that is exactly what Elijah did. Come hell or high water, he tried to make his heart always open to the presence of God. ‘Standing in the presence of God’ was Elijah’s catchphrase. He would come up to the idolatrous King of Israel, Ahab, and say ‘As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except according to my word’ (1 Kings 17:1). We should note in this phrase that the first truth Elijah declares is that ‘the Lord lives’. Elijah then puts himself in second place, in relation to God, ‘before whom I stand’. As Carmelites our mission, inherited from Elijah, is to declare first the truth that ‘God lives’, and secondly, that we stand in God’s presence, that is, we are in relationship with God.

Every action and thought of Elijah was done whilst standing in the presence of God. Elijah thus had a contemplative attitude, and encountered God when he prayed, when he engaged with his community, and when he served that community. According to the 1995 Carmelite Constitutions, Elijah represents for us Carmelites ‘the solitary prophet who nurtured his thirst for the one and only God, and lived in his presence’ (§26). All our Carmelite saints throughout the ages have attested to the fact that contemplation is the foundation and core of our spirituality. Arising from that contemplation comes our prayer, our building of community, and our service to the Church and the World.

The task that was before Elijah, and that is facing us as Carmelites today, is to cooperate with God in becoming contemplative. We can’t achieve it by our own efforts, nor does God force contemplative grace on us; rather, it is a collaboration between us and God. In a spirit of vacare Deo (openness to God), we offer God a loving and pure heart (remember Mary’s purity of heart discussed in the previous chapter), and our heart is filled with God’s love as a pure gift. This two-way relationship is at the heart of the Carmelite way of life, as expressed beautifully and simply hundreds of years ago in The Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites (better known as The Book of the First Monks):

The goal of this life is twofold. One part we acquire by our own effort and the exercise of the virtues, assisted by divine grace. This is to offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin ... The other goal of this life is granted to us as the free gift of God, namely, to taste somewhat in the heart and to experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only after death but already in this mortal life.

(translated by Richard Copsey, p. 9)
**Did you know?** In many cultures standing is a mark of respect. Elijah stood in the presence of the Lord, and his words remind us of the Eucharistic Prayer: ‘we thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.’ In many Carmelite communities around the world it is common practice to stand during the Eucharistic Prayer. This is because before the reform of the liturgy around the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Carmelite Rite was not Tridentine but rather that of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where standing (which is symbolic of Christ’s Resurrection) is the tradition, as is common in the Eastern Rites.

What effect does contemplation have on us?

We have said that contemplation is simply standing in the presence of God with an open heart. It is not possible to spend your life standing in the presence of God with an open heart and not be filled with love. That love touches the world. It is that love which we are called to show in order to set the world on fire with God’s love.

It is not possible to spend your life standing in the presence of God with an open heart and not be transformed, albeit gradually, from one degree of glory to another. It is that transformation that is called ‘divinisation’ – that process whereby women and men realise their roots in the divine nature because they have been made in the image of God, a God who became a man and who died for love of us. The journey of formation on which you are engaged is all about this transformation, this divinisation.

Elijah’s experience of being in the presence of God transformed him, and made him full of ardent enthusiasm. Elijah’s declaration ‘With zeal I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts’ (1 Kings 19:10) is the motto we Carmelites have adopted. It is displayed in Latin on our crest alongside the hand and the fiery sword which indicate the passion of Elijah whose word ‘burned like a torch’ (Ecclesiasticus 48:1) for the one true God. Like Elijah, Carmelites carry ‘the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God’ (Rule of Saint Albert, Ch. 19).

The Shield of the Order of Carmel

It is worth taking this opportunity to explore the symbolism of the Carmelite shield or crest. The Carmelite historian, Fr. Emanuele Boaga, O.Carm., tells us that the shield appeared for the first time at the end of the fifteenth century, on the cover of a book about the life of Saint Albert dated 1499. The symbol appears in the form of a vexillum, that is, a sign, standard or banner. With the passing of time this was modified until the present form of a heraldic shield was reached. There has never been an official explanation of the shield’s symbolism, and therefore different interpretations of it have been given.

Stop and look at the crest over the page: What do you currently understand about the symbolism on the Carmelite shield?
At the centre is a stylised mountain whose peak points towards heaven; it has rounded sides and three gold six-pointed stars, one in the centre of the mountain, the others in the sky on either side of the mountain. With regard to colours, white and brown appear together and correspond to the colours of the Carmelite habit.

We can safely presume that the mountain is symbolic of Mount Carmel, where the Order originated. Thanks to the writings of the Carmelite saints, and the liturgy of the Order, the mountain has itself become a symbol of Christ.

The lower star is often interpreted as representing the Virgin Mary, Star of the Sea. The two higher stars flanking the mountain perhaps represent the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Seen in this way, the stars symbolise the Marian character of the Order and its Elijan origins.
A more recent interpretation is that the two upper stars represent Mary and Elijah, whilst the white star represents us – the Carmelites of today – ascending the mountain that is Christ. The fact that the stars are six-pointed perhaps is a reminder of the roots of Carmel (and indeed Christianity) in Judaism.

In the 16th century the shield began to appear bearing a crown above, from which the arm and sword of Elijah emerge, surrounded by a semicircle of a dozen stars. The stars are a typical depiction of Mary that recall the apparition of ‘the woman clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars’ (Revelation 12:1). The crown can likewise be seen as symbolising Mary’s queenship, but could also be a symbol of the Kingdom of God with Jesus the sovereign Lord of Carmel. It is common also for the Order’s motto – the words of Elijah from 1 Kings 19:10 – to appear above or below the crest: Zelo zelatus sum pro Domine Deo exercituum (‘I am full of zeal for the Lord God of Hosts’).

A cross has sometimes been depicted on the summit of the mountain, and is often associated with reform movements within Carmel. Though this originated within the ‘Ancient Observance’ of the Carmelite Family, a cross on top of the mountain is now more commonly associated with the Discalced Reform. The Ancient Observance in Sicily places a Jerusalem cross above the mountain.

**Elijah: example of prophecy and promoter of justice**

Returning to the figure of Elijah, he bears witness to the fact that it is not possible to spend your life standing in the presence of God with an open heart and not be filled with a deep longing for justice, peace and love to abound in this world, because it is what God desires. This awareness is what made Elijah a prophet. Prophecy is not so much about foretelling the future but is rather about telling the truth of the present and speaking out that truth in the name of God. As it says in the Creed, God the Holy Spirit ‘has spoken through the prophets’.

Elijah inspires Carmelites to be prophetic. That is why Carmel is dedicated to pursuing justice, building peace, and upholding the integrity of God’s created world. Elijah is very much an inspiration to Carmel’s apostolate, including the Order’s presence at the United Nations as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). We will return to the Carmelite vocation to work for justice, peace and the integrity of Creation in Chapter 17. Such work is not simply something we do, but is part of who we are as descendents of the prophet of Carmel.

Elijah’s prophetic voice on behalf of God’s people was heard not only on Mount Carmel, but in his condemnation of the king’s possession of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). Urged on by his wife Jezebel, King Ahab plotted to have Naboth killed so that he could take possession of his subject’s property. Elijah was charged by God with the mission of denouncing this injustice and calling the king to repentance.

**Stop and ponder the Scriptures**: Read the account of Naboth’s vineyard in 1 Kings 21. What can Carmelites learn from Elijah’s prophetic stand against corruption?
Elijah: bridge between the Old and New Laws

According to the prophet Malachi, Elijah – who was taken up to paradise in a fiery chariot – would return to the Earth before the day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5-6). Because John the Baptist and Jesus spoke with the spirit of prophecy, many contemporaries thought they might be Elijah come back (see the descriptions of this in Mark 6:15, 8:28, 9:12; Matthew 16:14). Elijah is an Old Testament personality who figures very prominently in the New Testament, and he is a bridge between the two.

Did you know? Because Jesus associated his cousin John the Baptist with the prophet Elijah, and because John dwelt in the desert like Elijah, John the Baptist has a particularly important place in the Carmelite tradition. We know that some Carmelite statues of John the Baptist in medieval England depicted him wearing the Order’s habit.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Elijah is closely linked to Christ in the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-6; Mark 9:1-8; Luke 9:28-36), when Jesus’ divinity shone through his humanity, and he engaged in conversation with Elijah (representing the Prophets) and Moses (representing the Law). In this episode Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In Jesus everything God wishes to say is spoken; in Jesus the new Law of God’s Love find perfect expression. The Covenant of the Old Law finds its perfection in the New Covenant in Christ, brought about by his transforming life, death and resurrection.

Elijah: foreseer of Mary?

Carmelites have also associated Elijah with Mary. As we read in the last chapter, the ‘cloud, small as a man’s hand, rising from the sea’ which Elijah’s servant saw from the top of Carmel announced the end of the drought that Elijah had foretold to Ahab (1 Kings 18:41-46). Many have interpreted the cloud as a symbol of Mary, arising as pure water from the salty sea of sinful humanity, bringing rain (Jesus) so that the land and the people can live again. Carmelite legend says that Elijah was so moved by his ‘vision’ of Mary that he ‘founded’ the first hermit community on Mount Carmel in her honour. There is no historical evidence for this claim, but it shows how Carmelites have always given special honour to Mary and Elijah as patrons of the Order and as living embodiments of Carmel’s values. Through such interpretations the medieval Carmelites sought to weave the Order into the history of salvation.
Elijah: man of pure heart

We have already considered Mary’s purity of heart (*puritas cordis*). We can also recognise in Elijah a man of pure heart. When confronting the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah asked the Israelites: ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ (*1 Kings* 18:21). As Fr. John Welch, O.Carm., observes: ‘A perennial theme in Carmel’s spirituality is the need to decide which God to follow. Our tradition was born on Mount Carmel, the scene of the struggle between the followers of Yahweh and the followers of Baal. Elijah encouraged the people to be clear about their choice of the one, true God. The Carmelite community as well as individual Carmelites have had to continually wrestle with the forces of disintegration and fragmentation brought about by the pursuit of idols.’

Elijah: prophet of fire

One of the enduring symbols associated with Elijah is that of fire. He called down fire that set light to his sacrifice on Mount Carmel (*1 Kings* 18). Elijah’s worship proved that the God of Israel is the one true God and that Ahab and the prophets of Baal had led the people astray, promoting false notions of who God is and what God is all about. Looking through the Bible we see that fire is a symbol of the presence of God: the burning bush which Moses was not allowed to approach without taking off his sandals (*Exodus* 3); Daniel’s vision of God whose ‘throne was a blaze of flames, its wheels were a burning fire’ (*Daniel* 7:9); John the Baptist who told the people that the one coming after will baptise ‘with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (*Luke* 3:16). Jesus himself said that ‘I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how
I wish it were blazing already!' (Luke 12:49). The Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles in what appeared to be ‘tongues of fire’ at Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

There is an ambivalence about fire. It is one of the most destructive forces on earth and yet it purifies, giving us light and heat. According to the 2003 Rule for the Third Order of Carmel (RTOC), ‘every Lay Carmelite is like a spark of love thrown into the forest of life: they must be able to enflame anyone who approaches them’ (§44). This fire gives light and heat and love, but it also burns away the dross. In St Teresa: Her Life and Times, G. C. Graham quotes a visitor to Avila speaking of the Carmelites there: ‘Sir, in the eyes of the flesh they are mad; in those of faith, angels and ministers of fire in fantastic bodies, so that we, the weak, may see something of the flame which burns in them.’

Oh still small voice of calm
Although Elijah is a character associated with fire, with decisive action, and with zeal for God, he is also someone who realised that God is encountered in silence and stillness. On Horeb, the mountain of God (also known as Sinai where the Lord’s presence was manifested in the burning bush), Elijah realised that God does not only reveal himself through dramatic earthquakes, fires, and winds, but primarily through ‘the sound of sheer silence’ (1 Kings 19:12). This episode has inspired Carmelites, and others, over the centuries, to seek God in silent prayer, and to find God in absence.

Stop and ponder the Scriptures: Read the passage from 1 Kings 19 in which Elijah encounters the Lord in silence. What does this episode mean to you?

In his book on Elijah, The Sound of Silence, the former Prior General of the Order, Fr. Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., offers the following reflection on the prophet’s encounter with God in silence:

The meeting between God and Elijah on Mount Horeb in ‘the sound of a gentle breeze’ or in ‘the sound of sheer silence’ or in ‘the light murmuring sound’ has been much used for prayer and meditation over the centuries. This experience must have been very difficult for the prophet Elijah because God came to meet him in a totally unexpected way. God did not come in the earthquake or in the fire or in the mighty wind, all the ways that God had used previously to announce the divine presence, but instead God came in silence.

Through the gift of faith we can know something about God but God always goes beyond our human concepts. The contemplative way leads to the complete transformation of the human person whereby our human ways of seeing, loving and interacting with the world, which are always limited, become divine ways. This is naturally the work of God but we must do everything in our power to facilitate and accept this personal and structural transformation. We must learn gradually who is God. An intellectual knowledge of the fundamental truths of the faith is important. However, it is one thing to intellectually grasp what love means, and another thing to know love by experience.
experience of God helps us to grasp theological concepts in a new way. Often God will surprise us and act completely outside our limited possibilities. Little by little we have to learn to see everything from another perspective. Everything may remain the same but may in fact appear totally different because we have a different way of seeing.

Prayer is in some way relating to God, and so every prayer is good, and every method of prayer that helps us to grow in our relationship with God can be helpful. Just as in a human relationship, so also in the relationship with God, it is very normal for it to become simpler with the passage of time. We become less and less surprised when God approaches us in a way that we are not used to. We learn to accept that we are always at the beginning of the spiritual journey and that God is always ahead of us.

All prayer, if it is authentic, must be open to contemplation in the sense that it must encourage the transformation of the human heart. The Christian tradition gives various suggestions regarding methods of prayer that have proved their worth over the centuries. After the liturgy, which is the prayer of the whole Body of Christ, head and members, comes Lectio Divina, the prayerful reading of the Word of God. Then we have many devotions approved by the Church. All these devotions or methods of prayer must be directed toward the contemplation of God and our own transformation. (Sound of Silence, pp. 107-08)

**Stop and reflect:** Elijah’s approach to life was grounded in reality, as was his relationship with God. When his pursuit by Jezebel and being the only faithful prophet left in Israel was too much for him, Elijah cried out to God that he wanted to die. He went to sleep (1 Kings 19:1-8), and in Elijah’s utter desolation, God sent an angel with food. Are we this honest with God? Do we recognise the angels who come to help us?

**Elijah in the Order today**

Much work is being done to interpret the message that Elijah brings to our world in the 21st century. Since the Second Vatican Council called for religious communities to go back to their founding documents, and for Christians generally to return to the Scriptures, we are rediscovering the richness of our ‘Elijan heritage’. In recent years scholars such as Jane Ackerman have produced excellent studies on Elijah in the Carmelite tradition (listed in the bibliography below). Other books have encouraged Carmelites to rediscover our Elijah heritage, such as Richard Copsey’s translation of The Ten Books (Book of the First Monks) from Latin into English, and Joseph Chalmers’ reflection on the Elijah narratives in The Sound of Silence.

Not everything Elijah is reported as doing in the Bible (such as the slaying of the prophets of Baal) makes comfortable reading today, but understood in the context of his times he can be upheld as a man for all times. An interesting recent development within Carmel is the way that devotion to him has encouraged interfaith encounter and dialogue, because Elijah is revered by the three monotheistic religions: Christianity,
Judaism and Islam. The 1995 *Constitutions of the Carmelite Order* take this fact as the starting-point for engaging in dialogue:

In the Scriptures and in Carmelite tradition, the prophet Elijah is respected as the one who in various ways knew how to read the new signs of the presence of God and who was able, not least, to reconcile those who had become strangers or enemies. As Carmelites, heartened by this example and by our strong desire to put into practice our Lord’s teachings of love and reconciliation, we shall take part in the ecumenical movement and in inter-religious dialogue, promoted by the Second Vatican Council. Through the former we shall promote relationships with the Orthodox and other Christians. Through the latter we shall promote dialogue at various levels with Jews and Muslims, with whom we share devotion to the prophet Elijah as a man of God. (§96)

**Passing on Elijah’s mantle**

Elijah was not part of the priestly hierarchy, he spoke his mind, he was zealous for God, and he did not tolerate half-measures. He was a friend of God, a confidante of the almighty. Elijah is one of the keys to unlocking the Carmelite charism, and well worth studying and getting to know as a friend, not only in our initial formation but throughout our lives as Carmelites. He shows us all how to be contemplatives: people of prayer who are active in the midst of the world. He was solitary but not confined to any one spot, and drawn out of solitude to engage with God’s people, such as the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7-16), Obadiah (1 Kings 18:1-6), and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19-21).

Elijah’s relationship with Elisha is particularly important for Carmelites. We read in the *First Book of Kings* that God told Elijah ‘You must anoint Elisha son of Shaphat, of Abel-Meholah, as prophet to succeed you’ (1 Kings 19:16). Elijah made Elisha his successor symbolically by throwing his mantle or cloak over him (1 Kings 19:19-21). With
this gesture Elijah transferred to Elisha his spirit, his gifts and his mission as a prophet. When Elijah finally ascended to paradise in a whirlwind accompanied by a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:1-13) he again threw his mantle down to Elisha, confirming his prophetic vocation.

**Did you know?** Before the Carmelite cloak became plain white in the late 1200s (symbolising Mary’s purity of heart and Christ’s Resurrection), the cloak worn by the hermits on Mount Carmel used to be striped. Some medieval commentators interpreted the stripes as the different virtues of the hermits. Others said the stripes were burnt into the cloak when it fell from Elijah’s fiery chariot!

Carmelites celebrate Elijah and Elisha with liturgical feasts on 20th July and 14th June respectively. Our tradition tells us that their gifts have been passed on through the ‘company of prophets’ who have inhabited Mount Carmel – physically and spiritually – through the generations. Living with Elijah as an inspiration for Carmel, we can be confident that there will always be someone who can pass on the Carmelite tradition to the next generation.

**Stop and think:** As a Carmelite you are part of an ongoing tradition, and you have a responsibility to pass that tradition on to others. How can you encourage someone to consider a vocation within Carmel?
Conclusion: In this sixth chapter we have considered the role of Elijah the prophet as an inspiration for Carmelites over the centuries. With Mary he is a model for living contemplatively, open to God’s word and will in our lives. Elijah is regarded as ‘Father of All Carmelites’; our appreciation of Elijah is based primarily on what we read about him in the Bible, and secondarily on the Order’s own traditions.

You might like to conclude your time of study and reflection with a prayer, perhaps in silence, or pondering a passage from Scripture that relates to Elijah.

In the next chapter we will consider another man who can be considered foundational to our Carmelite Family, Saint Albert of Jerusalem, whose way of life is a touchstone for all of us in Carmel.
Ideas for Reflection, Discussion and Action

- Reflect – either individually or as a community – on any passage in this chapter that has stood out for you as significant. There’s much more that could be said about Elijah, but space in this book is limited; is there anything in particular that you think should have been included but wasn’t?

- How would you summarise the chapter and its key points in one or two paragraphs?

- Do you see any similarities between yourself and Elijah? What do you find attractive about him? What bothers you about his story?

- Is Elijah ‘a man just like us’? Would you like to meet him?

- What ‘false gods’ do we recognise in our lives that weaken our resolve to stand in the presence of the living God?

- Why is the link between the Old and New Testaments so important for Christians, and especially for Carmelites?

- In what ways is it possible to live Elijah’s radical lifestyle today?

- Find out what Jews and Muslims say about Elijah. Perhaps make contact with a local synagogue or mosque and ask if you can visit to learn more about that faith community.

- Identify someone you think might appreciate knowing more about Carmelite spirituality and invite them to a meeting of your community.

- Who are the prophets speaking God’s truth in today’s society? Do you see yourself as a son or daughter of the ‘company of prophets’?

- The work of the Carmelite NGO and other groups within the Carmelite Family are inspired by Elijah’s example. Consider finding out how you can get involved in their work.

- Mendelssohn’s oratorio *Elijah* is often performed in different places; attending a performance or listening to a recording might be an entertaining way of enhancing your appreciation of the prophet.
Recommended Further Resources

A number of good resources relating to Elijah have become available in recent years, which you will find in most Carmelite libraries, or from Carmelite and other Christian bookshops.

Jane Ackerman, *Elijah: Prophet of Carmel*, (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 2003). This is an excellent study of the role that Elijah has played in the Carmelite Family over the centuries.

Emanuele Boaga, O.Carm., *Come pietre vive ... nel Carmelo*, (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1993). This is a very good introductory history of the Carmelite Order, but unfortunately is not available in English at present.

Joseph Chalmers, O.Carm., *The Sound of Silence: Listening to the Word of God with Elijah the Prophet*, (Faversham: Saint Albert’s Press, 2007). In this beautifully illustrated book, the former Prior General of the Carmelite Order considers all the Bible passages that relate to Elijah and what we can learn from him today.


The website of the Carmelite NGO: www.carmelitengo.org