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Head between the Knees: Reinterpreting Elijah's Gesture in 1 Kings 18:42 as an Expression of Crisis

Twarz między kolanami. Nowa interpretacja gestu Eliasza z 1 Księgi Królewskiej 18,42 jako wyraz kryzysu

Abstract. This article offers a fresh perspective on the widely accepted interpretation of Elijah's gesture in 1 Kings 18:42. Traditional exegesis typically views the prophet's posture of putting "his face between his knees" as evidence of intense prayer. This interpretation has persisted despite limited explicit textual support. While some aspects of this gesture were briefly examined in a recent interdisciplinary study (Iwański & Plante 2025), the current article provides a detailed philological analysis previously unavailable. The examination of גָּהָר (*gahar*), combined with Egyptian and Mesopotamian comparative evidence, suggests a possible alternative reading. The gesture may represent psychological distress following Elijah's traumatic experience of executing hundreds of prophets. His posture appears consistent with expressions of acute stress or emotional exhaustion documented in ancient Near Eastern contexts. This proposed reading offers a more coherent narrative connection between chapters 18 and 19, bridging Elijah's triumph on Mount Carmel with his subsequent breakdown. Recognizing the psychological complexity of biblical characters contributes to a more nuanced understanding of prophetic portrayal. This approach invites scholars to reconsider whether certain physical gestures that have been traditionally spiritualized might also express profound psychological dimensions of human experience.

Streszczenie. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia nowe spojrzenie na powszechnie przyjętą interpretację gestu Eliasza z 1 Księgi Królewskiej 18,42. Tradycyjna egzegeza zazwyczaj postrzega pozycję proroka, który „położył twarz między kolanami” jako dowód intensywnej modlitwy. Interpretacja ta utrzymuje się pomimo ograniczonego wsparcia w tekście. Choć niektóre aspekty tego gestu zostały pokrótce zbadane w niedawnym badaniu interdyscyplinarnym (Iwański & Plante 2025), niniejszy artykuł zawiera szczegółową analizę filologiczną, która nie była wcześniej dostępna. Badanie גָּהָר (*gahar*) w połączeniu z egipskimi i mezopotamskimi dowodami porównawczymi sugeruje możliwe alternatywne odczytanie. Gest ten może reprezentować cierpienie psychiczne po traumatycznym

doświadczeniu Eliasza związanym z egzekucją setek proroków. Jego postawa wydaje się zgodna z wyrażaniem ostrego stresu lub emocjonalnego wyczerpania, udokumentowanym w kontekście starożytnego Bliskiego Wschodu. Proponowana interpretacja oferuje bardziej spójne powiązanie narracyjne między rozdziałami 18 i 19, łącząc triumf Eliasza na górze Karmel z jego późniejszym załamaniem. Uznanie psychologicznej złożoności postaci biblijnych przyczynia się do bardziej zniuansowanego zrozumienia proroczego wizerunku. Podejście to zachęca uczonych do ponownego rozważenia, czy niektóre gesty fizyczne, które tradycyjnie były uduchowione, mogą również wyrażać głębokie, psychologiczne wymiary ludzkiego doświadczenia.

Keywords: prophet Elijah, 1 Kings 18:42, bodily gestures, prophetic psychology, psychological interpretations, biblical exegesis.

Słowa kluczowe: prorok Eliasza, 1 Krl 18,42, gesty ciała, psychologia prorocka, interpretacje psychologiczne, egzegeza biblijna.

Introduction

Biblical narratives often contain subtle details that can be easily overlooked or misinterpreted due to the temporal, linguistic, and cultural distance between ancient texts and modern readers. Among such details is Elijah's enigmatic gesture in 1 Kings 18:42, where, following the dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, the text describes him as having "bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees" (וַיִּגְהַר אֶרְצָה וַיִּשֶׂם פָּנָיו בֵּין בְּרַכְיָיו, *wayyiggar 'artsah wayyāsem pānāyw bēn birkāyw*). This seemingly minor detail has significant interpretive implications for understanding the psychological and theological dimensions of the Elijah cycle.

The prophet Elijah has been the subject of significant scholarly attention and criticism. Some scholars have been highly critical of the prophet, depicting him as a person with an inflated ego, a megalomaniac, and a coward who only listens to God's commands when it suits him (Hauser & Gregory 1990; Olley 1998; Glover 2006). The enigmatic posture described in 1 Kings 18:42 has become a significant point of contention in these discussions. This gesture was briefly noted in a recent interdisciplinary study (Iwański & Plante 2025), where it was examined as part of a broader analysis of Elijah's psychological state. The present article offers a focused philological-exegetical analysis that more thoroughly examines the linguistic and cultural dimensions of this specific textual detail.

Traditional commentaries have predominantly interpreted this gesture as a posture of intense prayer – a view that has become remarkably entrenched despite limited textual evidence. Gray (1970) observes that scholarly interpretations of this posture have varied, with many linking it to prayer, while others have viewed it as representing a mourning rite or an act of imitative magic. This article suggests that such interpretations may reflect the commentators' theological presuppositions rather than being primarily grounded in a detailed analysis of the text within its narrative and cultural context. Through a reexamination of this passage, this study explores the possibility that Elijah's gesture might represent not exclusively prayer but possibly also a physical manifestation of psychological distress following his traumatic experience on Mount Carmel. This interpretation significantly expands on observations briefly introduced in the previous research (Iwański & Plante 2025).

This reinterpretation helps explain the enigmatic transition between the seemingly triumphant Elijah of chapter 18 and the dejected, fearful Elijah of chapter 19. DeVries suggests the problem disappears if we recognize that the segments composing the Elijah saga were originally independent stories. Similar source-critical approaches are presented by Otto (2003) and Sweeney (2007). However, this explanation seems overly simplistic. The present study contends that Elijah's crisis, which becomes fully visible in chapter 19, is already present in 1 Kings 18:42, and that this theme of crisis is a common denominator for the entire Elijah cycle. As demonstrated in a more detailed interdisciplinary analysis (Iwański & Plante 2025), Elijah's retreat following Jezebel's threat and his subsequent death wish in the wilderness represent the culmination of psychological struggles that began on Mount Carmel.

Methodological Premises

This study employs several complementary methodological approaches to analyze Elijah's gesture:

1. **Philological Analysis:** The study conducts a detailed examination of the key terminology, particularly the verb גָּהַר (*gahar*, "to bend down," "to crouch") and the complete expression "put his face between his knees." This involves lexical analysis based on established lexicographical works and consideration of the limited occurrences of this term elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, with attention to the ketib/qere distinction in the Masoretic text.

2. **Comparative Philology:** Given the limitations of biblical attestations, extrabiblical evidence becomes valuable for understanding this potentially idiomatic expression. The study examines relevant parallel expressions in ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, drawing especially on the work of Bottini (1982) and Layton (1983).
3. **Synchronic Literary Analysis:** While acknowledging the potential composite nature of the Elijah narratives, this study approaches the final form of the text as a coherent narrative unit. Following Hadjiev's observation that "Once a final-form perspective is adopted, the only question we need to be asking ourselves is what function do they perform now as part of the finished narrative?" (2015, 442), this study examines how this gesture functions within the broader narrative arc of 1 Kings 17–19.
4. **Contextual Analysis:** Rather than isolating the gesture from its narrative context, this study situates it within the broader story of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal, his triumph, and his subsequent flight and breakdown, paying particular attention to narrative connections and lexical links between chapters 18 and 19.
5. **Interdisciplinary Considerations:** While maintaining focus on philological and literary analysis, this study acknowledges insights from psychological perspectives on the text, considering what the gesture might reveal about Elijah's internal state as portrayed in the narrative.

It should be noted that while this study shares some foundational observations with Iwański and Planté's (2025) interdisciplinary analysis of Elijah's psychological state, the present work employs a primarily philological-literary methodology. Where their previous work balanced psychological and exegetical perspectives to examine Elijah's broader narrative arc, the current study focuses on linguistic evidence, comparative ancient Near Eastern literature, and narrative analysis to reinterpret this specific gesture. This approach allows for a more thorough examination of the philological dimensions that could only be briefly addressed in the previous interdisciplinary framework.

1. Lexical Analysis of Key Terms

The Hebrew description of Elijah's posture in 1 Kings 18:42 contains terminology that requires careful philological examination. The text states:

וַאֲחָזָב עָלָה לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹת וְאֵלִיָּהוּ עָלָה אֶל־רֹאשׁ הַכַּרְמֶל וַיִּגְהַר אַרְצָה וַיִּשָּׁם פָּנָיו בֵּין בְּרַכְיֹו

“And Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel, and he bent down (*wayyighar*) to the ground and placed his face between his knees.”

1.1. The Verb *gahar* (רהג)

The Hebrew verb גהר (*gahar*) in this passage is crucial for understanding Elijah's posture. This verb appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible: here in 1 Kings 18:42 and in 2 Kings 4:34–35, where it describes Elisha's posture when reviving the Shunammite woman's son. The verb's rarity makes its precise meaning difficult to establish from biblical contexts alone.

According to standard lexicographical works, *gahar* has the basic meaning of “to bend, stoop, or bow down.” Koehler and Baumgartner (1994, 173) define it as “crouch,” while Brown-Driver-Briggs (1907, 155) suggest “to bend, crouch.” The precise form used in 1 Kings 18:42 is וַיִּגְהַר (*wayyighar*), a Qal imperfect with the conversive waw, indicating a sequential action following Elijah's climbing to the top of Carmel.

The vocalization pattern of וַיִּגְהַר follows the standard paradigm for initial-guttural verbs in the Qal stem with conversive waw (Joüon & Muraoka 2006, §79). The absence of any technical cultic terminology in this verb formation contrasts with other biblical descriptions of prayer postures, which typically employ verbs from roots with established ritual connotations, such as שָׁחָה (“to bow down”) or כָּרַע (“to kneel”). These verbs frequently appear in liturgical contexts and are often accompanied by prepositional phrases indicating the object of worship (e.g., לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, “before the Lord”). The absence of such cultic markers in 1 Kings 18:42 further weakens the traditional prayer interpretation.

Morphologically, *gahar* is likely related to other Hebrew roots expressing bending or curving, such as גָּהַה (*ghh*, “to be bent”) and כָּהַר (*khr*, “to bow down”). As Rendsburg (2003) notes, the phonological relationship between these roots reflects a common semantic field of physical lowering or bending in Northwest Semitic languages. The interchange of gutturals (כ/ח/כ) is well-documented in Semitic linguistics (Blau 2010). The related Aramaic term גהר (*gahar*) carries similar connotations of bending or stooping, further supporting the primary meaning of physical posture rather than ritual action.

Those who interpret this gesture as prayer face a significant linguistic challenge: unlike verbs commonly associated with prayer postures (such as כָּרַע, *kra'*, “to kneel” or שָׁחָה, *shh*, “to bow down”), *gahar* lacks established cultic or religious

connotations in Biblical Hebrew. As Gruber observes in his comprehensive study of prayer gestures, “when Biblical Hebrew describes prayer postures, it typically employs terminology with established religious associations, which *gahar* notably lacks” (1980, 89).

The sequence of actions is significant: Elijah ascends the mountain, bends down to the ground, and places his face between his knees. The parallelism of the three verbs *וַיִּשָּׁם* ... *וַיִּגְהַר* ... *וַיִּלָּחֵם* (*alah... wayyighar... wayyašem*) suggests a continuous movement, from standing to a crouched position with face downward (Leithart 2006). The psychological implications of this term were briefly noted by Iwański and Plan-te (2025), but the present study provides a significantly expanded philological analysis that was beyond the scope of that interdisciplinary work.

1.2. The Phrase “Between His Knees” (בֵּין בְּרָכָיו)

The expression “between his knees” (בֵּין בְּרָכָיו, *bên birkāyw*) requires careful analysis. While the meanings of both “between” (בֵּין, *bên*) and “his knees” (בְּרָכָיו, *birkāyw*) are clear individually, their combination with “his face” (פָּנָיו, *pānāyw*) creates an unusual expression that does not appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Similar constructions elsewhere typically involve different contexts:

1. Genesis 48:12 describes Joseph removing his sons from “between Israel’s knees” (מִבֵּין בְּרָכָיו, *mibbên birkāyw*), referring to a familial blessing posture.
2. Judges 16:19 mentions Delilah making Samson sleep “upon her knees” (עַל-בְּרָכֶיהָ, *‘al-birkêhā*), indicating a position of vulnerability.
3. Job 3:12 uses “knees” (בְּרָכִים, *birkāyim*) in reference to being received at birth.

None of these parallels, however, involve placing one’s face between one’s own knees, making the expression in 1 Kings 18:42 distinctive. The lack of clear biblical parallels suggests we may be dealing with an idiomatic expression whose meaning is not immediately apparent to modern readers.

It is worth noting that the Masoretic text presents a textual issue regarding the form בְּרָכָיו (“his knees”). The *ketib* (written form) appears as בְּרָכוֹ (singular, “his knee”), while the *qere* (reading tradition) suggests בְּרָכָיו (plural, “his knees”). This textual variation, while minor, has interpretive significance. The *qere* plural form suggests a posture with the face positioned between two knees, which aligns with a crouched, self-enclosed position consistent with the psychological interpretation proposed here. The Masora’s preference for the plural form is supported by other attestations of this body part in similar constructions (e.g.,

Gen. 30:3; 48:12) and has been adopted by major scholarly editions including BHS and BHQ (Tov, 1999).

1.3. Absence of Prayer Terminology

It is worth noting that the biblical Hebrew terms typically associated with prayer are conspicuously absent from this passage. The noun תַּפִּלָּה (*tefillah*, “prayer”) does not appear here, nor do common verbal expressions for prayer such as הִתְפַּלֵּל (*hitpallel*) or פָּלַל (*palal*). This absence is particularly striking given that the text explicitly describes Elijah praying with specific terminology earlier in the same chapter (1 Kings 18:36–37), where his prayer is presented with explicit wording and in a standing posture.

The contrast is significant: During the contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36–37), Elijah’s prayer is fully vocalized and recorded verbatim (“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel...”). He prays openly, publicly, and audibly in a standing position. Yet in verse 42, we encounter only silence and a private physical posture. No prayer is recorded, no words are attributed to Elijah, and no indication is given that he is communicating with God.

This pattern of explicitly identifying prayer continues later in the narrative, when Elijah explicitly prays for death in the wilderness (1 Kings 19:4), with the text clearly stating that he addressed God (יְהוָה) with the verbal request “take my life” (קַח נַפְשִׁי). The marked absence of such explicit prayer terminology in 18:42, situated between two clearly identified prayers, raises an important question: why have commentators consistently interpreted this gesture as prayer? They do so despite the complete absence of textual evidence supporting this interpretation.

2. Comparative Usage in 2 Kings 4:34–35

The only other biblical occurrence of *gahar* appears in 2 Kings 4:34–35, where Elisha revives the Shunammite’s son:

Then he [Elisha] went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him (וַיִּלָּצֶה הַחַיִּי, *wayyig'har 'alayw*), the flesh of the child became warm... Then he got up again and walked once back and forth in the house and went up and stretched

himself upon him (וַיִּלָּע רֶגְלָיו, *wayyighar 'alayw*); the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

In this context, *gahar* clearly describes a physical stretching or bending over the child's body, not prayer. This parallel usage supports understanding the term in 1 Kings 18:42 as primarily describing a physical posture rather than a spiritual activity.

McKenzie (2008, 225) notes that "There is no mention of prayer or even of YHWH's name. This is, rather, an act of ritual magic, as indicated by the verb *gahar* 'crouch,' which occurs elsewhere only in the description of a magic rite in 2 Kgs 4:34–35." However, while the connection to the Elisha episode is valid, the interpretation as "ritual magic" seems speculative and not supported by the broader context of Elijah's character and actions.

3. Conclusion of Lexical Analysis

The philological evidence presents several challenges to the traditional interpretation of Elijah's posture as prayer:

1. The verb *gahar* primarily indicates physical position, not spiritual activity.
2. The only other biblical usage of *gahar* has no prayer connotations.
3. The phrase "face between knees" has no clear biblical parallels.
4. Prayer terminology used elsewhere in the same chapter is absent here.

These lexical observations suggest that we need to look beyond the literal meaning of the words to understand what this posture might have signified in its ancient context. The evidence points toward the need to consider extrabiblical parallels to fully understand this potentially idiomatic expression.

4. Comparative Philological Evidence

The methodological justification for this comparative approach is well-established in biblical studies (Talmon, 1991; Smith, 2001), where similar physical gestures often carried related symbolic meanings across cultural boundaries, particularly when described with analogous terminology. As already demonstrated by Gruber (1980) in his comprehensive study of nonverbal communication in the ancient Near East, bodily gestures frequently conveyed similar psychological states across different cultural contexts.

Given the limited occurrences of the gesture described in 1 Kings 18:42 within biblical literature, extrabiblical evidence becomes valuable for understanding its potential meaning. Building on the preliminary connections suggested by Iwański and Plante (2025), this section provides a comprehensive analysis of parallel expressions in ancient Near Eastern literature that may illuminate this obscure phrase. The current study significantly expands these comparative observations through detailed philological examination of specific textual parallels.

It should be emphasized that the approach taken here is not to suggest direct borrowing or influence between cultures, but rather to illuminate the potential range of meanings this gesture might have conveyed within the broader ancient Near Eastern cultural context. This comparative methodology acknowledges that while each culture maintained its distinctive traditions, certain symbolic gestures transcended cultural boundaries and shared similar conceptual frameworks throughout the region.

5. Egyptian Parallels

Bottini (1982) has collected attestations of similar expressions in Egyptian literature, where the gesture of putting the head between or upon the knees appears primarily as a sign of mourning or distress. For example, in the *Story of Sinuhe* (ca. 1960 BCE), after the death of Amenemhet I, “The residence was silent, hearts were in mourning, the two great gates were sealed, the courtiers sat with their heads on their knees, and the people lamented.”

Similarly, in the *Book of Kemit* (ca. 2000–1785 BCE), we find the poignant expression, “They found me south of the city, with a joyful heart; but when home is far away, the head rests on the knees like an orphan in the corner of a foreign city.” In these contexts, the expression is often associated with funeral events or situations of profound sadness, suggesting it had become idiomatic for expressing grief or emotional distress.

In Egyptian literature, the attestations demonstrate that the gesture appears as a sign of mourning or sadness in connection with funeral events or unpleasant occurrences. The expression became so popular as to acquire a figurative meaning. These Egyptian parallels suggest that the posture could express emotional states rather than religious devotion, with an emphasis on grief and withdrawal.

6. Mesopotamian Evidence

The Mesopotamian evidence, only briefly mentioned in previous study by Iwański and Plante (2025), deserves examination for its striking similarities to the Hebrew expression in 1 Kings 18:42. Particularly noteworthy is the evidence presented by Layton (1983). He identifies an Akkadian expression that appears in a late Babylonian bilingual tablet from Babylon describing the storm-god Enlil:

o lord of the land, Enlil, the withdrawn one
 -how long will your heart not be appeased?
 o father Enlil, your eyes are alien-how long will they be tireless?
 You who have covered your head with a garment-how long?
You who have laid your head upon your lap (*kisiida ana suni šakānu*)-how long?
 You who have closed your heart like a box-how long?
 o honored one, who has placed his fingers in his ears-how long?

This excerpt from a hymn depicts the dark side of Enlil's character. The Akkadian phrase *kisiida ana suni šakānu* ("to place the head upon the lap") bears striking linguistic similarity to the Hebrew expression. The Akkadian term *suni* (lap) corresponds semantically to Hebrew בִּרְכָיו (*birkāyw*, knees), while *šakānu* (to place) parallels Hebrew וַיָּשֶׁם (*wayyāšēm*, and he placed). As Layton (1983, 61) observes, "The linguistic parallels between the Akkadian and Hebrew expressions extend beyond mere conceptual similarity to actual lexical correspondences."

It is important to acknowledge that this parallel describes a deity rather than a human figure. However, ancient Near Eastern literature frequently attributed similar emotional expressions to both divine and human subjects, reflecting a shared conceptual understanding of how psychological states manifest physically (Foster, 2005). Pongratz-Leisten (2001) has shown how similar gestural expressions were used to convey emotional states across different literary contexts in Mesopotamian traditions, suggesting a widely recognized cultural understanding of bodily postures across the ancient Near East. The value of this parallel lies not in suggesting direct literary borrowing, but in illuminating the cultural and semantic field within which Elijah's gesture would have been understood by ancient audiences.

The context clearly indicates withdrawal, detachment, and inaccessibility. Layton notes that "the idiom 'head on lap/knees' is polysemous" and may denote "submission or meekness as well as fear" (1983, 62). The text specifically asso-

ciates this posture with emotional withdrawal and unresponsiveness. Cooper (1978) identifies this as a stock phrase in Mesopotamian laments, associated with feelings of despair and dejection.

The parallels with Elijah's situation are striking. Both contexts involve:

1. A figure associated with controlling natural elements (rain/storms);
2. A posture of head on/between knees;
3. A context of withdrawal following intense activity.

The Akkadian parallel is particularly valuable because:

1. It uses a similar construction of "placing" (*šakānu*) the head, comparable to Hebrew *וַיָּשֶׁם* (*wayyāšem*);
2. It occurs in a clearly non-prayer context;
3. It is explicitly associated with withdrawal and detachment.

Layton's analysis suggests that "in terms of modern psychology, Enlil can be described as withdrawn. Each line of the hymn reinforces the general notion of detachment, of one who has cut himself off from the outside world" (1983, 60). This characterization bears notable similarities to aspects of the narrative portrayal of Elijah in 1 Kings 18–19, though appropriate caution must be exercised when drawing such cross-cultural comparisons.

7. Ugaritic Material

Additional evidence comes from Ugaritic texts, where similar postures appear in contexts that require careful interpretation. As Bottini (1982) documents, in the myth of the Battle between Baal and Yamm, when the divine assembly sees the messengers of Yamm arrive, "the gods lowered their heads onto their knees (*l'r brkthm*) and onto their princely thrones." Baal then rebukes them, asking "Why, O gods, have you lowered your heads onto your knees (*l'r brkthm*)?"

While the text suggests this posture reflects the gods' reaction to the messengers, scholars differ on its precise meaning. Bottini acknowledges that while the gesture appears to denote fear and affliction in this context, the meaning of such postures can be fluid across different cultural settings. Some scholars see it as primarily expressing submission, while others argue it communicates withdrawal or emotional distress.

This interpretive ambiguity parallels the scholarly debate surrounding Elijah's posture in 1 Kings 18:42. The Ugaritic evidence, though limited, highlights the complexity of interpreting bodily gestures across ancient cultures and cautions

against overly simplistic readings of Elijah's posture as exclusively representing either prayer or distress.

8. Implications of the Comparative Evidence

The comparative evidence suggests that the expression “head between/upon knees” was recognized idiomatically in the ancient Near East, associated with emotional states like grief, fear, withdrawal, or detachment—not prayer. The contexts typically involve response to crisis or distress rather than religious devotion, with the Akkadian text about Enlil specifically describing a state of withdrawal.

In the context of Mount Carmel, these meanings align with Elijah's situation. The gesture could express withdrawal, mourning (having just sentenced to death hundreds of enemies), or fear. Elijah stands suspended in a void—the expected resolution has not arrived, behind him are hours of confrontation with death, preceded by years of being pursued as a fugitive.

This comparative evidence challenges the traditional interpretation of Elijah's posture as prayer, suggesting instead that ancient readers may have recognized this gesture as an expression of psychological distress—compatible with Elijah's circumstances following the intense confrontation on Mount Carmel.

9. Ancient Translations and Reception History

Examining how ancient translations and interpreters understood Elijah's gesture provides valuable insights into its reception and interpretation throughout history.

Ancient Translations

The earliest translations—Septuagint, Targum Jonathan, and Vulgate—all preserve the ambiguity of the Hebrew text without explicitly interpreting the gesture as prayer. The Septuagint uses the verb ἔκυψεν (*ekupsen*, “he stooped”), focusing on the physical motion rather than any spiritual meaning (Tov, 1999). Similarly, Jerome's Vulgate renders it with “pronus in terram” (casting himself down upon the earth), maintaining the literal physical description (Kamesar, 1993). This suggests that the prayer interpretation was not definitively established in early translation traditions.

9.1. Patristic and Later Interpretations

The Church Fathers generally understood the gesture as related to prayer, though with different emphases. Chrysostom saw it as showing “the intensity of his supplication” (Hom. Stat. 3.5), Augustine interpreted it allegorically as representing humility, Ephrem focused on concentration and withdrawal from distractions, and Gregory the Great viewed it as symbolizing contemplative humility (*Moralia* 5.36). Their interpretations were heavily influenced by theological concerns rather than historical-critical considerations (Young, 1997, 192).

9.2. Contemporary Interpretations

In contemporary biblical scholarship, many exegetes continue the prayer interpretation despite the absence of explicit prayer terminology. Gray (1970, 403) assumes it was “to induce concentration” in prayer, and Sweeney (2007, 229) asserts without substantial justification that Elijah “prostrates himself, with his head between his knees, in a position of prayer.” However, some commentators acknowledge the interpretive challenges, with McKenzie (2008, 125) noting that “there is no mention of prayer or even of YHWH’s name,” and Kruger (2005, 190) suggesting it expresses “a mood of depression.”

10. Contextual Exegesis: The Narrative Setting

The narrative context surrounding Elijah’s gesture provides crucial evidence for understanding its meaning. While the psychological dimensions of this context were explored more broadly by Iwański and Plante (2025), the present study focuses specifically on how these contextual elements inform the philological understanding of the gesture in 1 Kings 18:42.

10.1. The Broader Context: Elijah as Fugitive

The narratives about Elijah occupy a central part of the Books of Kings (1 Kgs 17 – 2 Kgs 2:11). From his first appearance, Elijah is portrayed as an elusive figure constantly on the move. After announcing the drought (17:1), he becomes “public enemy number one,” targeted by Ahab and Jezebel. As noted in 1 Kings

18:10, Ahab had sent to every nation and kingdom to seek Elijah, forcing him to live as a fugitive.

This prolonged period as a fugitive, constantly looking over his shoulder, would inevitably have psychological consequences. As Hauser and Gregory (1990, 72) observe, “The text portrays Elijah as a man under tremendous strain, both from his mission and from the constant threat to his life.” Living in hiding, moving from place to place, and being in constant danger would create a state of chronic stress that would likely manifest at moments of crisis.

10.2. The Immediate Context: The Mount Carmel Confrontation

The dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40) represents a decisive turning point in the narrative and creates the immediate context for Elijah’s enigmatic gesture:

1. **Physical and Emotional Exertion:** The Mount Carmel episode depicts Elijah engaging in intense physical and emotional activity against overwhelming opposition. As Cohn (1982, 341) observes, “The scene is one of frenetic activity culminating in a climactic resolution.”
2. **Life-Threatening Risk:** Throughout the confrontation, Elijah places himself in extreme danger. As Kissling (1996, 98) notes, “Had he not won, or even if the meeting had ended in a draw, the Baal priests, being in the hundreds, could have torn him to pieces.”
3. **Ritual Violence:** The confrontation culminates in the execution of the prophets of Baal (18:40), an act of extraordinary violence in which Elijah is directly implicated. Participation in violence, even when deemed necessary, frequently results in psychological trauma (Herman, 1992).
4. **Public Pressure and Uncertainty:** Following the confrontation, Elijah makes a bold prediction to Ahab that rain will come (v. 41), but there is no immediate sign of rain. This creates another high-pressure situation with his credibility at stake.

10.3. Elijah’s Actions on Mount Carmel

With this contextual background, Elijah’s specific actions on Mount Carmel are revealing:

1. **The Separation from Others:** The text notes that Elijah separates himself: “Elijah went up to the top of Carmel” (18:42). This physical withdrawal is

significant and contrasts with Ahab's departure "to eat and drink," creating a stark contrast between celebration and isolation.

2. **The Physical Posture:** Elijah "bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees" (18:42). Particularly significant is the narrative progression: Elijah first "bent down" (וַיִּגָּהֵר, *wayyiggar*) and then "placed his face between his knees" (וַיֵּשֶׁם פָּנָיו בֵּין בִּרְכָיו, *wayyāšem pānāyw bēn birkāyw*). This two-stage description emphasizes the deliberate assumption of a protective, withdrawn posture.
3. **The Delegated Observation:** Rather than looking for the rain himself, Elijah sends his servant to look toward the sea (18:43). This delegation of a simple task contrasts with Elijah's previous direct engagement. The repeated sending of the servant (seven times) suggests both anxiety about the outcome and inability to face potential disappointment directly.
4. **The Delayed Response:** Only when the servant finally reports a small cloud does Elijah resume active engagement, sending a message to Ahab (18:44).

Narrative Continuity with Elijah's Subsequent Breakdown

A strong argument for interpreting Elijah's gesture as an expression of psychological distress comes from the narrative continuity with the events in chapter 19. While some scholars have treated the segments of the Elijah narrative as independent units with little internal coherence (DeVries, 1985), close literary analysis reveals sophisticated narrative techniques that create meaningful connections between these episodes. The structure of the narrative employs what literary critics identify as foreshadowing and character development (Alter, 2011), techniques that were well-established in ancient Near Eastern literature. Elijah's gesture in 18:42, when interpreted as a sign of psychological distress, serves as narrative foreshadowing that prepares the reader for his subsequent breakdown in chapter 19.

If we recognize Elijah's posture in 18:42 as an early sign of psychological distress, the narrative progression becomes much more coherent. Rather than a sudden, inexplicable collapse, we see a gradual psychological deterioration:

1. Initial stress response (18:42) – physical manifestation of acute stress following traumatic events.
2. Temporary recovery when rain comes (18:45–46) – brief reprieve from psychological pressure.
3. Full breakdown when facing new threat (19:3–4) – complete collapse under continued stress.

This progression appears psychologically plausible and may offer a more unified reading of the narrative. As Hadjiev (2015, 444) argues, "The theme of

crisis is a common denominator for the entire Elijah cycle.” Exploring the potential psychological dimension of Elijah’s experience allows for consideration of narrative connections that might otherwise remain unexplored.

The narrative progression becomes particularly clear when examining key vocabulary and motifs that connect chapters 18 and 19. Elijah’s isolation on Mount Carmel (18:42) prefigures his solitary journey into the wilderness (19:4); both episodes feature withdrawal from human contact. The physical posture of 18:42 finds its parallel in 19:5, where Elijah lies down under a broom tree. Most significantly, the text uses the same root שלח (“to send”) in both episodes—Elijah repeatedly “sends” his servant to look for rain (18:43–44) but then literally “throws” (נִשְׁלַח, derived from the identical Hebrew root) himself under the bush in despair (19:4). This deliberate verbal echo creates lexical cohesion across the narrative (Bar-Efrat, 2004). Far from being disconnected episodes, the text presents a carefully crafted portrayal of a prophet experiencing progressive psychological strain, temporary recovery, and eventual breakdown.

This progressive deterioration in Elijah’s psychological state creates a coherent narrative arc that extends through chapter 19. As demonstrated in a more detailed interdisciplinary analysis (Iwański & Plante, 2025), Elijah’s retreat following Jezebel’s threat and his subsequent death wish in the wilderness represent the culmination of psychological struggles that began on Mount Carmel. His journey into the wilderness, marked by isolation and exhaustion, ultimately propels him toward renewal. The wilderness becomes a space for self-discovery and spiritual healing, a pivotal moment in his relationship with Yahweh. Rather than an inexplicable collapse, the narrative presents a plausible psychological progression from acute stress (18:42) to full emotional breakdown (19:4) to eventual restoration at Horeb. This reading enhances the literary and theological richness of the text, revealing the narrative sophistication of the biblical author(s) who crafted this compelling portrayal of prophetic experience (Long, 1984).

Some interpreters have sought to resolve the apparent narrative discontinuity between chapters 18 and 19 by positing different source materials or redactional layers (Otto, 2003). While source-critical approaches have contributed valuable insights to understanding the composition history of Kings, they sometimes overlook the sophisticated literary techniques employed by biblical narrators and editors. The final form of the text presents a coherent psychological portrayal that would have been recognizable to ancient audiences.

Walsh (1996, 263–267) observes that biblical narratives frequently depict character development through subtle details and gestures, inviting readers to

make connections between seemingly disparate episodes. When read as a unified narrative, Elijah's withdrawal and posture in 18:42 serve as a crucial narrative link that makes his subsequent flight in chapter 19 comprehensible rather than abrupt or inexplicable.

11. Reinterpretation and Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented in this study, this article suggests the possibility of interpreting Elijah's gesture in 1 Kings 18:42 in a way that includes psychological dimensions alongside or perhaps instead of its traditional understanding as prayer. This interpretative possibility finds support in several lines of evidence worthy of scholarly consideration:

1. **Philological Evidence:** The verb *gahar* primarily indicates physical posture, not spiritual activity. The text lacks typical Hebrew terminology for prayer, which is used explicitly earlier when Elijah actually prays (18:36–37).
2. **Comparative Philological Evidence:** Similar expressions in ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly the Mesopotamian text about Enlil, associate such postures with withdrawal, distress, or emotional depletion rather than prayer.
3. **Reception History:** Early translations maintained the ambiguity of the Hebrew text without explicitly interpreting the gesture as prayer. The progression from ambiguity in ancient translations to certainty in modern commentary suggests a gradual hardening of an interpretive tradition not necessarily grounded in the text itself.
4. **Contextual Evidence:** The narrative context provides compelling support for a psychological interpretation. Elijah's behavior on Mount Carmel—physical withdrawal, unusual posture, delegation of simple tasks—aligns with patterns of acute stress response and creates narrative continuity with his subsequent breakdown.

The present study thus substantially expands the preliminary observations regarding Elijah's gesture noted in Iwański and Plante's (2025) interdisciplinary work, providing a comprehensive philological foundation for understanding this enigmatic biblical detail.

Theological and Literary Implications

The human face of Elijah emerges more clearly through this reinterpretation. As we glimpse the prophet with his face between his knees, we see not merely

a man at prayer, but a complex human being at the edge of his endurance. This reading transforms our understanding in several important ways:

1. **For Understanding the Elijah Narrative:** It creates a more coherent character development across chapters 18–19, showing a gradual unraveling of a man who has experienced extraordinary stress—first manifesting in his withdrawn posture, then temporarily relieved by rain’s arrival, before completely overwhelming him under Jezebel’s threat.
2. **For Biblical Anthropology:** It reveals an ancient understanding of how extreme stress manifests physically and challenges idealized views of biblical figures. As Olyan (2008, 65) argues, “Biblical texts frequently present their protagonists as complex individuals subject to the full range of human emotions and limitations.” This more psychologically nuanced portrait resonates with what we see elsewhere in Scripture—heroes of faith presented in their full humanity.
3. **For Theological Interpretation:** It suggests that divine calling does not exempt individuals from psychological struggles, and that human frailty can coexist with spiritual power. When Elijah collapses under the broom tree wishing for death, heaven’s response is not rebuke but gentle provision. The narrative arc from Elijah’s moment of crisis to his renewed commission (19:15–18) suggests that psychological vulnerability does not disqualify one from prophetic service.

By considering the possibility that this gesture might express human vulnerability alongside its potential spiritual significance, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of biblical prophetic figures. This approach presents them not as superhuman individuals immune to stress, but as complex characters who experienced the full spectrum of human psychological responses.

This more humanized portrayal potentially enriches rather than diminishes the theological significance of these narratives, offering readers a deeper window into the prophetic experience that resonates with contemporary understanding of the psychological dimensions of spiritual vocation. Elijah’s possible moment of emotional exhaustion reminds us that even the greatest figures of faith may have encountered periods of profound vulnerability, making their continued faithfulness all the more meaningful.

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