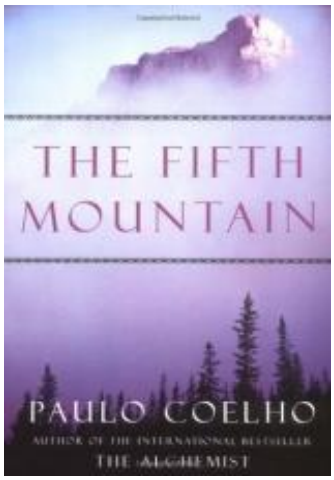
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The Fifth Mountain

by Paulo Coelho



About the Book

When the novel begins, the year is 870 B.C., and the prophet Elijah is in his early twenties and fleeing for his life. His death has been ordered by the beautiful but implacable Jezebel, wife of Israel's King Ahab. His "crime": denouncing the false gods that Jezebel has brought from her native Phoenicia, known to the Hebrews as Lebanon. Through an angel, God orders Elijah to make the arduous journey across the desert and take refuge in the Phoenician city of Zarephath, which its inhabitants call Akbar.

There, Elijah is befriended by a widow, older than him, who offers him lodging with her and her young son. Like her countrymen, she is a worshipper of Baal, who is said to reside with the other gods at the fog-shrouded summit of the Fifth Mountain. Still, she and the Israelite gradually form a warm bond, though neither dare voice their feelings.

But events conspire against Elijah. When the woman's son becomes ill and dies, the blame falls on Elijah, who is accused of having brought misfortune with him. Taken before the High Priest of Akbar, he is condemned to die on the Fifth Mountain, from which no man returns. There, the priest declares, either he will be consumed by the fire from heaven or, should the gods choose not to sully their hands with him, upon his descent he will be beheaded in the city square.

On the *Fifth Mountain*, an angel of God directs him to descend and, through God's power, restore the boy to life. The people of Akbar, interpreting the miracle as a sign of the gods' favor, hail the Israelite as a sage. Soon he is settling disputes among the townspeople and becomes an adviser to the governor, evoking the wrath of the high priest.

As his feelings for the widow and her son grow, Elijah is torn between an earthly love he has never known and the desire to return to Israel and remove Jezebel from the throne, destroying idolatry and restoring the worship of the One God. But he must remain in Akbar until the Lord orders him to depart.

Phoenicia, the commercial center of the Mediterranean at this time, has a merchant fleet that trades throughout the known world. But the country's wealth draws the covetous attention of the Assyrians, who begin gathering a force to conquer the coastal cities of Sidon and Tyre -- and Akbar lies strategically in the advancing army's path. Soon Elijah finds himself at the center of a military and political maelstrom that challenges his faith and forces him to confront the unavoidable.

Out of the tragedy that emerges, Elijah learns lessons that are applicable to all of humankind and are as timeless as the desert sands and the mountains that gaze silently down on the ashes of Akbar. In a resolution that resonates vividly for modern men and women, he wrests from the unavoidable a new beginning, an opportunity to give meaning to tragedy and direction to a shattered life.

Discussion Guide

1. The Fifth Mountain and The Alchemist share the theme of a quest, a journey that takes the main character far from his own country. In what ways does Santiago's search in The Alchemist differ from Elijah's in The Fifth Mountain? In what ways are the two quests similar?

2. Angels play an important part in The Fifth Mountain, whether the angel of God or Elijah's personal guardian angel. Today, many people profess to believe in the existence of angels. What forces may contribute to the resurgence of belief in angels in the last years of the 20th century?

3. A major theme of The Fifth Mountain is the crucial role of the development of the alphabet as a conveyor of information easily disseminated. Why was the "invention of Byblos" such an essential element of civilization? How did the Greek and Roman alphabets, unlike previous forms of writing such as hieroglyphics and cuneiform, make literacy accessible to all?

4. "Sometimes," Elijah says, "it [is] necessary to struggle with God." Is this how most believers -- Christian, Jewish, and Muslim -- feel? What Scriptural authority can be cited to sustain such a position? What arguments support the opposing view--that one should always submit to the "will of God"?

5. Everything has its reason for being, the angel tells Elijah. He need only distinguish the temporary from the lasting: the unavoidable is temporary; the lessons of the unavoidable are lasting. To what extent does this apply to everyday life? Has the complexity of late 20th century existence rendered this advice obsolete? Or has the essential truth of this observation remained valid for thousands of years?

6. "All life's battle teach us something, even those we lose," Elijah tells the young boy. In what way is this demonstrated in The Fifth Mountain? Which battles does he lose and which does he win? Is the most significant battle in the novel a literal or a spiritual one?

7. Elijah is sometimes torn between the desire to serve God and the needs of those he has come to love. He attempts to return to Israel, only to find his way blocked by an angel with a flaming sword. Is it unusual to find the dictates of God in conflict with worthy human goals? Would most people today, faced with such contradictory demands, experience the conflicts that Elijah suffered?

8. In the rebuilding of Akbar, Elijah enlists the aid of women, the old, the very young--those who could not flee the destroyed city. In so doing, he discovers a resource that had never been utilized. What does he mean when he says, "Today we know that the old, the widows, the orphans also departed. They left in their place a band of youths of every age..."?

9. Many cultures, both ancient and contemporary, have believed that knowing the true name of a person or thing gives one mastery over it. What is the significance of Elijah's telling the survivors of Akbar to choose new names for themselves? In the end, does he live up to his own chosen name--Liberation?

Author Bio

Paulo Coelho is the author of many international bestsellers, including THE ALCHEMIST, ELEVEN MINUTES, THE PILGRIMAGE and THE FIFTH MOUNTAIN. He has been a member of the Academy of Letters of Brazil since 2002 and in 2007 was named a Messenger of Peace by the United Nations. In 2009, he received the Guinness World Record for Most Translated Author for the Same Book (THE ALCHEMIST). He lives in Geneva, Switzerland.

Paulo Coelho?s books have been translated into 82 languages and have sold more than 230 million copies in more than 170 countries. His 1988 novel, THE ALCHEMIST, has sold more than 85 million copies and has been cited as an inspiration by people as diverse as Malala Yousafzai and Pharrell Williams.

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