

1 Kings 18:1-46

Elijah Challenges the Prophets of Baal

This is one of the most exciting incidents in the Bible.

After three years of hiding, Elijah hears from God. Elijah is to go to Ahab to announce that He will send rain to the land.

Meanwhile, the severe famine and drought caused Ahab to task Obadiah, his chief steward, with helping to find any remaining sources of water that had not dried up. Obadiah went one way, while Ahab went another.

Obadiah, a believer in Yahweh, had been secretly sheltering 100 prophets from the wrath of Jezebel and Ahab. He happens to run into Elijah, who he knew but hadn't seen for these years of drought.

1 Kings 18:7-8 - "And as Obadiah was in the way, behold, Elijah met him: and he knew him, and fell on his face, and said, Art thou that my lord Elijah? And he answered him, I am: go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here."

But that would be a very dangerous message to deliver.

1 Kings 18:9-11 - "And he said, What have I sinned, that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me? As the LORD thy God liveth, there is no nation or kingdom, whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee: and when they said, He is not there; he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they found thee not. And now thou sayest, Go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here. And it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone from thee, that the Spirit of the LORD shall carry thee whither I know not; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me: but I thy servant fear the LORD from my youth."

i.e. what if Elijah disappears again for three years? The Spirit actually did later literally transport Elijah, taken up in the chariot of fire. Elisha's companions tell Elisha they would go and search for Elijah.

See **2 Kings 2:16** - "...let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the LORD hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley..."

So Elijah changes his mind and decides to go to Ahab himself that day.

1 Kings 18:15 - "And Elijah said, As the LORD of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him to day."

Obadiah tells Ahab that Elijah is coming, and Ahab goes out to meet him.

1 Kings 18:17 - "And it came to pass, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said unto him, Art thou he that troubleth Israel?"

"trouble" i.e. by preaching against Baal and causing the terrible drought.

1 Kings 18:18 - "And he answered, I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the LORD, and thou hast followed Baalim."

In fact, Israel had regressed to this spiritual position in the time of the judges:

- **Judges 2:10-12** - "After that whole generation had also been gathered to their fathers, another generation rose up who did not know the LORD or the works that He had done for Israel. 11And the Israelites did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. 12Thus they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they followed after various gods of the peoples around them. They bowed down to them and provoked the LORD to anger..."

The "works that He had done" were forgotten. So now God was preparing to show them another miraculous work.

Showdown on Mt. Carmel

1 Kings 18:19 - "Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel unto mount Carmel, and the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves (*Asherah/Ashtoreth*) four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table."

Mt. Carmel is on Israel's northeast coast. The challenge would take place in a location convenient for Israel to gather, but away from Ahab and Jezebel's power center in Samaria.

Apparently Jezebel did not allow her prophets of Ashtoreth to attend, only the prophets of Baal showed up. The real question is why did Ahab agree to this arrangement? Maybe it developed out of a verbal dispute between them, back and forth, about the reality and power of the idols. Perhaps Ahab was desperate because of the drought.

Double-mindedness

1 Kings 18:21 - "And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word."

- **James 1:6-8** - "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does"

- **Matthew 6:24** - "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and

love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

The term "double-minded" comes from the Greek word *dipsuchos*, meaning "a person with two minds or souls." And they are pulling in opposite directions - flesh and Spirit.

1 Kings 18:22 - "Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men."

Elijah knew that Obadiah was sheltering 100 prophets, but Elijah was the only one actually there, to confront the 450 prophets of Baal.

Sacrifices Prepared

1 Kings 18:23-24 - "Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken."

Some of the rabbis propose that Ahab and the prophets of Baal knew that God had forbidden any offerings conducted away from the Temple in Jerusalem, and so were betting that God would refuse to honor Elijah's sacrifice. Others said the Baal prophets hoped fire would descend on both the sacrifices, leaving the question still in dispute.

1 Kings 18:26 - "And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made."

Targum Jonathan - "They acted like madmen, as if agitated by a frenzy"

"the bullock which was given them" - Rashi says the bull didn't want to be sacrificed to an idol and hid under Elijah's robe. But Elijah told him, "Go! Through both of you the Omnipresent will be sanctified."

Elijah Mocks

1 Kings 18:27 - "And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked."

"Cry louder!"

- **Psalm 121:4** - "Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

Rabbi Nachman said, "All mockery and obscenity is forbidden except for mockery of idol worship, which is permitted, as it is written: 'Bel bows down, Nevo stoops' (Isaiah 46:1)." The prophet mocks these idols by describing them as crouching in order to defecate.

Rav Huna bar Manoah said in the name of Rav Aha, son of Rav Ika: It is permitted for a Jew to say to a gentile: Take your idol and put it in your shin tav, i.e., shet, buttocks.

They Crank it Up a Notch

1 Kings 18:28-29 - "And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded."

"they prophesied" - The Jewish translation says "they feigned to prophesy."

The cult of Isis in Egypt and the Dionysian cult of Greece practiced self-flagellation.

In *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, priests of the Syrian goddess were said to leap in procession "like those possessed with Bacchic fury, and exciting insane dancing by the sound of the pipe... sometimes biting their muscles, they, in the last place, cut their arms with a two-edged sword which they carried." Then one of the priests "Seizing, therefore, a whip, gave himself with it many lashes which were severe, on account of the numerous knots of the whip; being fortified with a wonderful firmness against the pain of the blows."

(Apulei Metamorph. I. 8.)

The idea was that the god or goddess was excited by the sight of flowing blood from their followers.

In Medieval times, Catholics would whip themselves in imitation of Christ's sufferings or to chastise their flesh to suppress sinful thoughts. Shia Muslims still stage large processions in which participants whip or hit themselves with swords or knives. The practice is common in some ascetic Hindu sects.

But for believers, God only requires repentance. If you find that you are psychologically "beating yourself up" over past sins, you're really only worshipping an idol. God's grace is freely given. We exchange our life for His. It's not earned, or transactional.

Even fasting, which is commended in scripture, can be misguided. If you do it to manipulate God or to do the "right thing," then **Isaiah 58:4** applies - "ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high."

The prophets of Baal were doing everything they knew how to feel something real. But they were hoping in an unreal god. Many times a drug or pain-induced ecstasy can produce a kind of spiritual experience. Ecstasy can often elicit someone speaking a message they really believed to be from the gods. But here it says "they feigned to

prophecy." I think God was suppressing even that natural response in them. They felt nothing. There was no word from Baal. The magic wasn't happening.

Repairing the Altar

On Mt. Carmel there was an old altar used in ancient times by the patriarchs or forefathers when high places and altars were allowed to offer sacrifice to Yahweh. Some said it had been built by King Saul.

- **1 Samuel 15:12** - "Saul has come to Carmel, and behold, he is setting up a place,"

Elijah puts its fallen stones back together, acting out a metaphor for Israel's repentance.

1 Kings 18:30 - "And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down."

The faith of Israel was so degraded that Elijah had to go back and show them how they needed to rebuild it from the ground up. They had to relive the history of repeated backslidings and revival that was represented by this repaired altar. They needed to reimagine the time when they had been one kingdom and not two.

1 Kings 18:31-33 - "And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood."

"twelve stones" - This passage is a Haftarah for the story where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, the sons of Jacob who will found the 12 tribes of Israel. (**Genesis 45**)

The rabbis saw this as a sort of replica of the Tabernacle's courtyard - "Its width was as great as to hold two se'ah, one hundred cubits by fifty cubits like the court of the mishkan."

Because of the drought, perhaps the water came from the sea, which was nearby.

Three Times

1 Kings 18:34-35 - "And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water."

This reminds us of how Naomi rebuffed Ruth three times (**Ruth 1:12-18**). God is always removing everything of the flesh, without enticements or so we will know the Holy Spirit alone is doing the work. God wants a bright line dividing Spirit and flesh, unmistakable

and without doubt.

A rabbinical story sees an even greater miracle. The propose that Elisha was already helping Elijah. "Elisha poured on his hands, and his fingers became like springs, and the trench became full." The extrapolate this from a statement in 2 Kings 3:11 - "Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat who poured water on Elijah's hands, and a miracle took place with the water through him."

The Fire Falls

1 Kings 18:36-37 - "And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again."

By God's act of consuming the sacrifice, the people would know not only that God is the true God, but that their hearts had been turned back to Him. i.e. God didn't act *because* they had repented. They "realized" they had already repented after witnessing His mighty work. We can never even repent from our own strength or power. It's all Him.

Like at the Red Sea, Israel was saved and then they believed:

- **Exodus 14:31** - "And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses."

1 Kings 18:38-39 - "Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God."

Slaughter of the False Prophets

1 Kings 18:40 - "And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there."

Some of the rabbis surmised he took them down to where the brook entered into the sea, so their blood would not defile the land. Or it might have been in recollection of the victory Deborah and Barak had over Sisera, in which this same Brook Kishon "swept them away" (**Judges 5:21**)

Elijah may have killed some of the 450 prophets but more probably the people participated.

The slaughter was in response to a commandment:

- **Deuteronomy 13:1-3,5** - "If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.... And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee."

Like Samuel's execution of Agag, this is a picture of "revenging the disobedience" we discover within ourselves:

- **2 Corinthians 10:6** - "And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."

Spiritually, the 450 prophets of Baal are the lying voices in our heads that deceive us.

Why wasn't Ahab killed too? Apparently God had decided to allow him time to repent, or he had other plans for him later. Maybe Elijah was respecting his office as king.

The Rains Came

1 Kings 18:41-43 - "And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain. So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees, And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times."

This time period is fraught with tension. It's the uncertainty and expectancy that fills the void between our prayers and God's response. But our uncertainty and weakness is transformed into faith by waiting on God.

- **Lamentations 3:25** - The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him.

- **James 5:7-8** - Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

- **Psalms 62:5** - My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him.

- **Isaiah 40:31** - But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk,

and not faint.

1 Kings 18:44-45 - "And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand. And he said, Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not. And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel."

One Last Miracle - 'They Shall Run and Not be Weary'

1 Kings 18:46 - "And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel."

The Targum says, "the spirit of strength from the Lord was with him."

Apparently Elijah ran faster than Ahab's chariot and beat him to Jezreel, which was Ahab's capital, 16 miles away.