

1 Kings 16:29–17:7 (NRSV)

²⁹In the thirty-eighth year of King Asa of Judah, Ahab son of Omri began to reign over Israel; Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. ³⁰Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.

³¹And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him. ³²He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. ³³Ahab also made a sacred pole. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him. ³⁴In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; he laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua son of Nun.

Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” ²The word of the LORD came to him, saying, ³“Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith,¹ which is east of the Jordan. ⁴You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” ⁵So he went and did according to the word of the LORD; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi. ⁷But after a while the wadi dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

How good are we at speaking the truth to people who don't want to hear it? Are we willing to tell an unbelieving world that there is a God? Are we ready to tell them that all life is to be lived in the light of the cross? Elijah was a true prophet of God, a man willing to speak the truth, regardless of the consequences.

The prophet Elijah was one of the great prophets of Israel. Though no book bears his name, his ministry of proclamation imprinted itself deeply on the people of God. At the end of his ministry, Elijah does not die, but is taken to the heavens in a whirlwind while riding a chariot of fire (2 Kings 9:12). Based on Malachi 4:5 (“Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes”), the Jews of Jesus day expected that Elijah would return to announce the arrival of God’s Messiah. Indeed, both John the Baptizer and Jesus are mistaken for Elijah by the people.

In this series, we’ll be taking a look at the stories of Elijah, putting them within the biblical context, and considering how they speak to us today. Building on our last series, I’ll make a special effort to connect some dots.

Elijah and Ahab

What do we know about Elijah? The truth is, not much. We know nothing of his birth or his life before his ministry began. Elijah simply arrives on the scene unannounced and we’re told only that he is a Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, an area on the eastern side of the Jordan river. His name means “My god is the LORD.” It is the mid-ninth century BC and Elijah has come to confront the king of Israel², Ahab.

¹A wadi is a dry river or creek bed in arid climates. Most of the year, a wadi is empty, but when rains come the wadi can quickly overflow with the powerful runoff. Wadis are unreliable sources of water.

²The Israelite kingdom, unified under Saul, David, and Solomon, split in two after Solomon’s death. Israel was the name of the northern kingdom, whose capital was Samaria. Judah was the southern kingdom, whose capital was Jerusalem. For more on this, see the page two text box.

In 1 Kings, we are introduced to King Ahab a few verses before we meet Elijah. Ahab is the son of Omri and took the throne of Israel after his father's death (873 BC). He reigned over Israel for about 22 years, until 852 BC. Like the other kings in the book of

A Kingdom Divided

Solomon, David's son, took the kingdom of Israel to its political and economic zenith. He used the wealth to build a great temple in Jerusalem. But he also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction. Solomon had a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom were foreign. His wives brought the worship of foreign gods into Israel and turned Solomon's own heart away from the LORD God and toward other gods (see 1 Kings 11). Despite the building of the temple, the people's abandonment of the covenant between God and his people could lead only to a bad end.

The united kingdom had always struggled under the threat of rebellion and tribal warfare. Toward the end of Solomon's reign, Jeroboam, a leader among the northern tribes, led a rebellion against Solomon. Though Jeroboam was unsuccessful at the time, upon Solomon's death Jeroboam was able to split the kingdom in two. The ten northern tribes followed Jeroboam, who became the first king of the northern kingdom, Israel. The largest Israelite tribe was that of Judah which, with the tribe of Benjamin, constituted the southern kingdom, Judah. Rehoboam was the first king of Judah (see 1 Kings 11 for all this).

From 1 Kings 11 forward, the book of Kings traces the history of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The successive kings of each kingdom are named and most get a report card from God! Most of the kings got a failing grade – they did what was evil in the sight of God (e.g., see 1 Kings 15:25). Doing evil in God's sight meant that the king had led the people away from YHWH to the worship of other gods. Only a few, like Hezekiah, did what was right in God's sight (e.g., 2 Kings 22:1-2), leading the people back to the worship of the one true God.

Though the kingdoms would enjoy periods of peace and prosperity, both were on a path toward destruction and death. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586BC.

Kings³, Ahab gets a report card from the biblical writers. Again like nearly all the kings, Ahab's report card is bad, but, indeed, his is the worst of all. We're told that "Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him" (1 Kings 16:30). Quite an indictment!

This damning charge against King Ahab had nothing to do with his administrative or leadership qualities. The report cards of the kings were focused on one thing: Did the king lead the people toward God or away from God? Against that standard, Ahab failed miserably.

Foremost, Ahab married a non-Israelite, a woman who did not worship the Lord God. Her name was Jezebel. She was a Phoenician, the daughter of Ethbaal⁴, the king of Sidon (northwest of Jerusalem on the coast). Jezebel was a devotee of Baal, the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon, and a fervent missionary for Baal. If you are wondering how a worshipper of a pagan god could be the queen for the people of God . . . well, you are asking the right question.

Thus, we're told that Ahab, the king of Israel, worshipped Baal and served him. Ahab built a temple for Baal in his capital city of Samaria and erected a sacred pole to Baal.⁵ He allowed the walls of Jericho to be rebuilt, despite Joshua's prophetic declaration that the walls must never be rebuilt. We're told in 16:34 of two sons who die during the rebuilding. Either they were sacrificed in a grotesque pagan ritual or their deaths were seen as punishment for disobedience of God.

In all, Ahab did more to provoke God's anger than any of the kings before him or

³1 and 2 Kings is actually a single literary work. It was split in two only because it was too long to fit on a single scroll.

⁴The names of both Jezebel and her father praise the Canaanite god, Baal. "Baal" is not a proper name, like Tom or Sally, but a title, "Lord" or "Master." Here's an interesting tidbit about Jezebel. In the Bible, the vowels of her name have been changed a bit so they hint at dung ("zebel"). That says a lot about how she was viewed by the later Israelites.

⁵Such poles were a common pagan religious practice. For example, Asherah was a pagan goddess and you'll find references to the erection of Asherah poles, as her name came to be attached to a variety of religious objects.

after. Think back to when the Israelites met God at Mt. Sinai after the Exodus. One of the “Top Ten” teachings of God was that they were to have no other gods. The adulterous chasing after foreign gods by Ahab and the people, who followed Ahab in this, was exactly what the LORD God had feared would happen.

The confrontation

“Speaking truth to power” is a phrase that’s made its way into the American lexicon, though too often the power is in the eye of the beholder. A high-level presidential aide, upon assuming her responsibilities, told a reporter that she was there to speak truth to power. It had not yet sunk in to her that she was now the power. We may toss the phrase around in our world, but imagine that you stand before an ancient king who holds the power of life and death in his hands. Would you speak the truth to such power, even when it is a truth that the king doesn’t want to hear?

In ancient Israel, most “prophets,” at least those who claimed the job title in the king’s court, were unwilling to be the messengers of bad news. 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of “prophets” in the court of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail. Micaiah stood strong before the king, unwilling to water down or even ignore the word that had been given him by God. Certainly, one mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

Elijah too is willing to come before the king and deliver bad news. Elijah tells Ahab that there will be a drought. At first glance, this looks like bad news that could come from any meteorologist who was brave enough to deliver the news. But this is no weather forecast.

Baal, the Canaanite god, was the bringer of rain. And for people living in an arid climate like Israel, water was life. Thus, Baal was really the bringer of life . . . or so it seemed to Ahab and Jezebel.

Thus, when Elijah arrives at the king’s doorstep and announces a drought, it is a direct challenge. It is as if Elijah says to Ahab, “You think your god brings the rain? Ha! My God, the LORD God of Israel, is going to bring a drought and there is nothing that your ‘god’ can do about it.” It is really quite an “in your face” moment.

You can imagine how well Ahab took this “in your face” challenge. God wisely tells Elijah to run and hide from Ahab. He is to go to a certain wadi and hide out. God will command the ravens to come and feed Elijah.

And that is just what he did. The ravens would bring Elijah bread and meat in the morning and again in the evening. Sound familiar? After fleeing across the Red Sea, God’s people found themselves in the Sinai wilderness. As supplies ran low they began to complain, to whine and moan that God had brought them out of Egypt only to die in the wilderness. But God provided them with food every day. It was called manna and they could gather it every morning. But it wouldn’t keep overnight. God provided the people with *daily* bread, for which Jesus taught his disciples to pray. God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness, for Elijah in the wadi, and God provides for you and me. That’s connecting some dots.

After a while however, Elijah had to leave the wadi and the ravens for there was no water as the drought worsened. So God sends Elijah, this speaker of truth, to the home of a widow. But that’s the story for next week.

Elijah and Ahab

Because the Elijah stories set the stage for all the later confrontations between the prophets and a unfaithful Israel, it is worth spending some time really grasping what is at stake in Elijah's struggles. In his commentary on 1 Kings in the *International Theological Commentary* series, Gene Rice provides this introduction to the drama about to play out.

During Ahab's reign Israel experienced unprecedented political stability, strength, and prosperity. Ahab succeeded his father without opposition and renewed the alliances with Phoenicia and Judah. Trade with Phoenicia and tribute from Moab brought great wealth to the nation. Ahab had one of the largest military establishments in Palestine-Syria, fielding 2,000 chariots and 10,000 troops against the Assyrians at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. (*ANET*, 279). Archaeologists confirm a building boom at Samaria, Megiddo, and Hazor during the reigns of Omri and Ahab unsurpassed for excellence of craftsmanship and luxury.

The author of 1-2 Kings ignores these achievements, for according to his theological criteria Ahab did "evil in the sight of the LORD more than all that were before him" (16:30) and did more "to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger" than all his predecessors (v. 33b). Specifically, Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians (an inclusive term for the Phoenicians), served and worshipped Baal, built a temple and altar for Baal in Samaria, and made an Asherah (vv. 31-33a; cf. Deut. 16:21). This represents a quantum leap in the history of apostasy.

Appended to the introduction to Ahab's reign is a report of the rebuilding of Jericho (1 Kgs. 16:34). After the conquest of Jericho, Joshua pronounced a curse on anyone who might rebuild it (Josh. 6:26). In arrogant disregard, Ahab had Jericho rebuilt, most likely to strengthen his hold on Moab. The project was supervised by a certain Hiel of Bethel. Both the laying of the foundation of the city and the completion of its gate were marked by the loss of one of Hiel's sons.

Placed at the beginning of Ahab's reign—such information is normally given in the conclusion (1 Kgs. 15:23; 22:39)—this building report portends that Ahab, as the one responsible for the rebuilding of Jericho, also stands under Joshua's curse.

With the king embracing Canaanite religion and the queen aggressively promoting it (ch. 18), what chance did the authentic faith of Israel have of surviving? In a wonderful, mysterious way, however, the LORD had prepared an Elijah to "come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I tend to see this story as the marriage of a sure faith and stalwart courage. Let's talk about Elijah's faith in the truth of his message. Elijah seems quite sure that YHWH has given him a word that he is to take to king Ahab. What are we that sure about? God the creator? Jesus? It is easy to say that Elijah must have had some miraculous moment that made him so certain and that such a moment is denied to us. But I doubt it was quite like that. The Old Testament often uses dreams and other "everyday" events to convey what is given to the prophets. Yes, they have visions. But we can't really know what they experience. How can we ever hope to have such confidence in God's truth? If you had to state God's message to the world today, how would you do it? You might try writing it out. . . . How confident are you in the truth of the message? What is the "so what" of the message? What action would follow from the message? Finally, and very importantly, we all know that many horrors have been perpetrated in the name of the truth? How can we guard against such horrors even as we strive to speak the truth?

And now on to courage. It is never easy to tell someone something they don't want to hear. This is as much true of the Good News as anything else. Increasingly, our culture is happy for you to have any religious beliefs you like, so long as you keep them to yourself. But we are to be bearers of the Good News, in word and action. How do we do this? How must we be equipped? Mike Breen suggests that we look for persons of peace, those whom God has prepared for our message. That sounds really good to me, but then I come to Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel are anything but persons of peace. What is the message for us in this first Elijah story? How can I be an Elijah in this? Should I try?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

All the passages this week are related to this first Elijah story.

<p>Monday, Joshua 6:15-27 The walls of Jericho come tumbling down and Joshua pronounces an oath that they are never to be rebuilt.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Exodus 16 The story of manna, the God-given daily bread, in the wilderness.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 6:18-15 Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, even to pray for their daily bread.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Kings 22:1-28 The story of Micaiah, the prophet willing to stand alone and speak the truth.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Peter 3:13-17 Always be ready to offer a defense of your faith, but do so with gentleness and reverence. Don't be surprised if there is a price to be paid for it.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

