

The Super Bowl No-Show

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3 of 9 in the Elijah series: *Truth and Life*

July 25, 2010

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1 Kings 18 (The Message)

A long time passed. Then GOD's word came to Elijah. The drought was now in its third year. The message: "Go and present yourself to Ahab; I'm about to make it rain on the country." Elijah set out to present himself to Ahab. The drought in Samaria at the time was most severe.

Ahab called for Obadiah, who was in charge of the palace. Obadiah feared GOD—he was very devout. Earlier, when Jezebel had tried to kill off all the prophets of GOD, Obadiah had hidden away a hundred of them in two caves, fifty in a cave, and then supplied them with food and water.

Ahab ordered Obadiah, "Go through the country; locate every spring and every stream. Let's see if we can find enough grass to keep our horses and mules from dying." So they divided the country between them for the search—Ahab went one way, Obadiah the other.

[While Obadiah is out looking for grasslands, he runs into Elijah and immediately falls on his knees. And when Elijah tells him that he is to go tell Ahab that Elijah is coming for a chat . . . well, Obadiah is terrified that Ahab will shoot the messenger. But Elijah reassures the terrified man, letting him know that the confrontation will be that very day. So, Obadiah runs to tell Ahab, who comes out to meet Elijah.]

The moment Ahab saw Elijah he said, "So it's you, old troublemaker!"

"It's not I who has caused trouble in Israel," said Elijah, "but you and your government—you've dumped GOD's ways and commands and run off after the local gods, the Baals. Here's what I want you to do: Assemble everyone in Israel at Mount Carmel. And make sure that the special pets of Jezebel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of the local gods, the Baals, and the four hundred prophets of the whore goddess Asherah, are there."

So Ahab summoned everyone in Israel, particularly the prophets, to Mount Carmel.

Elijah challenged the people: "How long are you going to sit on the fence? If GOD is the real God, follow him; if it's Baal, follow him. Make up your minds!"

Nobody said a word; nobody made a move.

Then Elijah said, "I'm the only prophet of GOD left in Israel; and there are 450 prophets of Baal. Let the Baal prophets bring up two oxen; let them pick one, butcher it, and lay it out on an altar on firewood—but don't ignite it. I'll take the other ox, cut it up, and lay it on the wood. But neither will I light the fire. Then you pray to your gods and I'll pray to GOD. The god who answers with fire will prove to be, in fact, God."

All the people agreed: "A good plan—do it!"

Elijah told the Baal prophets, "Choose your ox and prepare it. You go first, you're the majority. Then pray to your god, but don't light the fire."

So they took the ox he had given them, prepared it for the altar, then prayed to Baal. They prayed all morning long, "O Baal, answer us!" But nothing happened—not so much as a whisper of breeze. Desperate, they jumped and stomped on the altar they had made.

By noon, Elijah had started making fun of them, taunting, "Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project, or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?" They prayed louder and louder, cutting themselves with swords and knives—a ritual common to them—until they were covered with blood.

This went on until well past noon. They used every religious trick and strategy they knew to make something happen on the altar, but nothing happened—not so much as a whisper, not a flicker of response.

Then Elijah told the people, "Enough of that—it's my turn. Gather around." And they gathered. He then put the altar back together for by now it was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Jacob, the same Jacob to whom GOD had said, "From now on your name is Israel." He built the stones into the altar in honor of GOD. Then Elijah dug a fairly wide trench around the altar. He laid firewood on the altar, cut up the ox, put it on the wood, and said, "Fill four buckets with water and drench both the ox and the

firewood.” Then he said, “Do it again,” and they did it. Then he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. The altar was drenched and the trench was filled with water.

When it was time for the sacrifice to be offered, Elijah the prophet came up and prayed, “O GOD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, make it known right now that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I’m doing what I’m doing under your orders. Answer me, GOD; O answer me and reveal to this people that you are GOD, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance.”

Immediately the fire of GOD fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench.

All the people saw it happen and fell on their faces in awed worship, exclaiming, “GOD is the true God! GOD is the true God!”

Elijah told them, “Grab the Baal prophets! Don’t let one get away!”

They grabbed them. Elijah had them taken down to the Brook Kishon and they massacred the lot.

Elijah said to Ahab, “Up on your feet! Eat and drink—celebrate! Rain is on the way; I hear it coming.”

Ahab did it: got up and ate and drank. Meanwhile, Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bowed deeply in prayer, his face between his knees. Then he said to his young servant, “On your feet now! Look toward the sea.”

He went, looked, and reported back, “I don’t see a thing.”

“Keep looking,” said Elijah, “seven times if necessary.”

And sure enough, the seventh time he said, “Oh yes, a cloud! But very small, no bigger than someone’s hand, rising out of the sea.”

Quickly then, on your way. Tell Ahab, ‘Saddle up and get down from the mountain before the rain stops you.’”

Things happened fast. The sky grew black with wind-driven clouds, and then a huge cloudburst of rain, with Ahab hightailing it in his chariot for Jezreel. And GOD strengthened Elijah mightily. Pulling up his robe and tying it around his waist, Elijah ran in front of Ahab’s chariot until they reached Jezreel.

Well . . . that is a long Scripture passage. But it is such a great story that I couldn’t bear to chop it up. Take the time to read it slowly, lingering over the details. The writer takes such care, sprinkling the story with wit and action. And he certainly makes it easy for us to imagine the story with our minds eye. The keen anticipation of a confrontation between the Israelite god, YHWH, and the Canaanite god, Baal. It is the super bowl, played on the side of a mountain in northwest Israel. And the crowds ready for a climactic struggle.

Whenever you come across a story in the Bible that is so long and artfully written, you have to ask yourself, Why? What is the purpose of such length and skilled storytelling? What is the writer trying to convey to us? What does God want us to see in the story? Let’s take a look.

The basics of the story¹

After telling King Ahab that YHWH was bringing a drought, Elijah has spent considerable time hiding from Ahab. First, in a dry creek bed. And then with a widow and her son. Now, after three years, the time has come for Elijah to return to Ahab and confront the idolatrous king a second time. God has told Elijah that he is going to make it rain, but that isn’t what Elijah tells Ahab. Elijah simply tells the king to assemble 450

¹If you haven’t read the Weekly Bible Study for the week of July 11, the first in this nine-part series, you should. It has lots of background information that is important to the story, much of which I can’t repeat here. The study is available for download at www.scottengle.org.

prophets of Baal and 400 hundred prophets of Asherah² on the slopes of Mount Carmel.³

While the king is busy rounding up all the prophets of Baal and Asherah, Elijah goes straight to the people with simple, yet profound, proposition: “If YHWH is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” This is to be a contest and the people will have to choose between these two rival gods . . . or so it seems.

So the crowds assemble. I picture stands of cheering fans. Many shouting fervently for Baal to march down the field to triumph. And a few brave souls keeping their fingers crossed for YHWH. Even then, it was pretty hard to root against the king’s favorite and Ahab was most assuredly on team Baal.

The rules of competition are clear. Whichever God can light a bonfire first wins. Not much need for instant replay with that one.

And, to make a long and well-told story shorter, Baal is a complete no-show. The altars⁴ are built. The wood for the bonfire is made ready. A bull is cut into pieces and laid on Baal’s stack of wood. Then Baal’s prophets begin to chant all the right words. And nothing happens. No Baal. Even when Elijah heaps scorn on them, all they can do is dance faster, even scourging themselves in an attempt to make Baal show his face. Perhaps, Elijah asks with derision dripping from every word, Baal is napping or has taken the afternoon off. But all those forlorn prophets can do is redouble their efforts. But nothing . . . no Baal, no fire, just a bunch of bloody, exhausted, and hoarse guys wondering why the team bus never got there. As the writer puts it, “As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.” You almost feel sorry for them. No voice. No answer. No response. What a pathetic performance by the mighty Baal.

But then it is Elijah’s turn. He asks the crowds to gather around and pay close attention. His altar is bit of a mess after the morning’s activities. So he straightens it up and lays out twelve stones, signifying the twelve tribes of Israel. He cuts the bull in pieces and lays it on the wood. Then, he builds a trench around the altar and asks that water be poured over the wood. Then he has water poured a second time. And a third. By then, the wood is completely soaked and the trench is full.

Then, at just the right moment, Elijah steps back, implores God to do God’s thing and BOOM, the wood bursts into flame. The soaked timbers have been transformed into a raging fire. There will soon be barbecued bull for all. The people, surely astounded by this display, fall on their faces saying and repeating: “The LORD [YHWH] indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.”

Elijah then orders the crowds to seize the prophets of Baal and Asherah. They are all killed. What is to be done with King Ahab?

Elijah makes it plain and simple. Ahab better hurry down for the mountain, for the rain is coming. YHWH has stopped the rain for three years and now the time has come for life to return to the land. As Ahab races away in his chariot, YHWH strengthens Elijah so that he is able to beat Ahab to the gates of Jezreel where Queen Jezebel awaits her husband’s triumphal return. What a surprise she is about to get . . . but that’s for next week.

²The numbers here alert us to the fact that across the ancient near-eastern religions various prophets and priests were common. Here, these many hundreds of prophets are the mouthpieces of this pagan god and goddess.

³Mt. Carmel is just northwest of modern-day Haifa in northern Israel.

⁴This is all done in the context of a religious sacrifice. Thus, the wooden bonfire is an altar and an animal is to be sacrificed on it.

One God or many gods?

The real power of this story is lost to us unless we know that until this period in their history, the Israelites were not monotheists. That is, they didn't think there was only one God; they believed that there were many gods, including those named YHWH, Baal, Asherah, and others. Yes, of course, the Israelites at their best understood that in YHEH they had the best God on the block, but they still believed that other gods, other deities, existed as well.

Thus, when Moses tells the Israelites that God commands his people that they are to have no other gods -- for YHWH, the LORD God, is a jealous God -- he means just that. No chasing after the other gods that the people actually exist. Though Elijah lived hundreds of years after Moses, the people still believed in the existence of other gods.

So, when the people gather excitedly on the side of Mt. Carmel for this great showdown, Baal is a complete and utter no-show. Not just a poor or out-of-sorts appearance, Baal is nowhere to be found. Why? Because THERE IS NO BAAL! There no other gods to be found anywhere. No greater deities. No lesser deities. There is only one god and that God is YHWH, the one who rescued his people from Egypt and who will yet rescue all of creation from the clutches of sin and death. Alleluia. Alleluia.

And for us?

We in the west increasingly find ourselves in cultures which see Jesus as one expression of divinity amongst many. Earlier in the year, we looked at a common objection to Christianity. Namely, that Jesus is the only way to God, and hence, rescue.⁵

This dramatic story of Elijah and the priests of Baal reminds us that, truly, there is only one God. This is the God whom we gather to worship each week and who became flesh, suffered, and died for our sake and the sake of the whole world.

There simply are no other gods . . . of any sort.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Go back over the story again. Take the time to read it slowly. Why do you think the writer spends so much time with this? In what ways are you drawn into the story? Is there enough detail to put your imagination to work in the story? Were surprised at any point in the story? What do you think it was like to be a part of the crowd that day?
2. In his reflections on this story, Choom-Leon Souw⁶ writes:

“For Elijah, there can be no theological compromise, we have to choose to be on one side or the other. In this perspective, *not* to choose is already to choose an alternative other than the way of the Lord. It is not only in genuine polytheism that such a threat exists, however, for even people who do not believe in the actual existence of other gods might have equally pernicious delusions of alternative powers. Jesus called attention to one such alternative in his generation, pointing out that the command to love God allows no other allegiance: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matt. 6:24, NRSV)

Souw points us to wealth as one possible power to which we could give our allegiance. What are some of the other earthly “principalities and power” which demand our allegiance? How do we stay faithful to one true God and Lord in the face of these pressures? In what ways, is this story a word of warning for us?

⁵This was the Weekly Bible Study for January 24, 2010, “Is Jesus Really the Only Way?” It is available as a pdf download at www.scottengle.org.

⁶From his commentary on 1 and 2 Kings in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1999.

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.

<p>Monday, Exodus 2:1-6 God's people are to have no other gods, plain and simple. Much later, they will learn that there are no other gods.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Deuteronomy 6 God's people are to be loyal to YHWH. Some of this chapter will seem very familiar to you. Jesus and others draw on it.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 5 A confrontation between the Ark of the Covenant and a statue of the pagan god, Dagon. Guess who wins?!</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 44:9-22 The silliness of the peoples' obsession with idols and notions of other gods.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 8 This may take a couple of readings. Paul is asked whether it is ok to eat meat that has been sacrificed to a pagan god. His answer is yes, for there are no such gods. But he urges the more mature believers to be sensitive to the feelings of the new believers, who may feel that eating such meat violates their consciences.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

