

The Bible's Most Amazing Stories:
Elijah on Mt. Carmel

1 Kings 18:16-40

Elijah said, "Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the LORD's prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let them choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God."

Then all the people said, "What you say is good."

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire." So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. "O Baal, answer us!" they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood."

"Do it again," he said, and they did it again.

"Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

When all the people saw this, they cried, "The LORD -he is God! The LORD -he is God!"

Then Elijah commanded them, "Seize the prophets of Baal. Don't let anyone get away!" They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

Baal in Israel

The struggle between the followers of Yahweh, the personal name for the God of Israel, and the followers of Baal take center stage in this section of Scripture. Baalism existed as a religion for several centuries in various ancient Near Eastern countries. Its prominence in Canaan and Phoenicia is especially important for understanding Kings, since it is from those cultures that the major influence on Israel and Judah came. Baal was believed to be a storm god. Baal worshipers believed that their god made rain, which is quite an important detail in an agricultural community. Elijah apparently prays for a drought to prove that Yahweh, not Baal, is in charge of crop-enriching rains.

Given the lack of rain in specific seasons of the year in that region, Baal cultists had to explain why Baal could not guarantee rain at all times. They said that Baal submitted to Mot, the god of death, each year, which caused drought and barrenness to the land. Eventually Anat defeated Mot and freed Baal each year, which restored fertility. Elijah's actions in Kings expose Baal as a nonentity and at the same time reestablish Yahweh as sovereign in the people's minds.

Baal took prominence in Israel's government when the princess of Tyre, Jezebel, married Ahab. She and her retainers were allowed to continue to worship as they had in their homeland, and Ahab built a temple to Baal for her. But Jezebel was not satisfied with the prerogative of private worship. Rather, she insisted on attempting to promote Baal as a replacement for Yahweh and took steps to silence opposition to her goals (1 Kings 18:1-15; 19:1-10). Her successes moved Israel beyond tolerance of pagan temples and syncretism to outright worship of another god (Paul House, *The New American Commentary: 1.2 Kings*, Broadman & Holman, 210-211).

As the storm god, Baal is depicted with lightning bolts in his hand and is spoken of in the texts as flashing forth with fire or lightning. In one text fire is even used by Baal as a means of constructing his house. Baal was therefore considered by his worshipers as the lord of the fire. In the continuing flow of the narrative that Yahweh show his superiority in every area of Baal's domain, the ability to bring fire is strategic. It shows that Yahweh is king even over the areas where Baal supposedly reigns (John Walton, *The IVP Bible Background*, IVP, 378).

As the religion of Baal spread in Israel, those who served Yahweh had to combat a growing public perception that the faith of Moses was no longer viable. Followers of Yahweh rid themselves of idols, multiple sanctuaries, and religious compromise, while followers of Baal welcomed all three. What made things even more difficult was the fact that followers of Yahweh were the minority in the Israelite population. God called on two men, Elijah and Elisha, to serve as the chief preachers and theologians who supported the religion of Yahweh. These God ordained prophets were also forced to face suffering. We learn from them that commitment to the truth may be the right lifestyle to uphold, but it is not a safe lifestyle to choose.

Elijah's career strikes at the very tenets of syncretism and Baalism. His name means "Yahweh is my God," and he believes it his mission to help others make this confession instead of declaring allegiance to Baal. His proclamation that there will be no rain is forceful because Baalists believed their god made rain. Elijah claims that Yahweh, not Baal, controls nature. Because of his stand, Elijah is forced to go into hiding- in Baal dominated territory. While there he feeds a starving widow and her son, and he raises the son from the dead. These activities indicate that Yahweh is the living God who feeds the hungry, cares for the helpless and has the power to give or take life. Baal is merely a sham ruler. Baal is unable to take care of his people because he is not really there. He is not real (Paul House, *Old Testament Theology*, IVP, 260-261).

Elijah vs. the prophets of Baal

When the two men meet, Ahab calls Elijah the “troubler of Israel,” blaming the drought on him, but he does not attempt immediately to have him killed. Elijah returns the accusation, stating fearlessly that Ahab's family's commitment to Baal has forced Yahweh to withhold rain, thus proving the Lord's power over the storm god. Now Elijah suggests a contest to determine who benefits Israel and who troubles the land. The site will be Mount Carmel, a place that may have long held significance for both worshipers of Yahweh and adherents of Baalism. What better place to decide who is God, what prophets tell the truth, and what leaders benefit or harm the people (House, *Kings*, 218)?

Despite all their plaintive wailing and ecstatic dancing, when morning gave way to noon and still Baal had ailed to provide the necessary fire, Elijah began to taunt his antagonists (v. 26-27). Was Baal not a god? Perhaps he was lost in deep thought or preoccupied with his many cares or had gone to care for his many commercial interests. All these activities were characteristic of the duties attributed to the pagan gods. Perhaps, like many of the gods of the ancient Near East, he was asleep and needed to be awakened by cultic ritual.

The prophets of Baal became more frantic (v. 28). In renewed frenzy they lacerated themselves with swords and spears, the blood flowing freely down their perspiration-soaked bodies. The ritual went on and on at an increasingly feverish pitch. As the time for the evening sacrifice came, there was still no response. While odd to us that Elijah would use such talk about a god, many of these actions were believed to be things that the gods actually did (R. D. Patterson and Hermann J. Austel, *Expositor's Bible Commentary: 1, 2 Kings*, Zondervan, 145).

Geography of Mt. Carmel

It is likely that Mount Carmel, south of the modern port of Haifa, had long served as a boundary between Israel and Phoenicia and was, like many mountains, considered a sacred site. Carmel actually refers to a mountain range that stretches about thirty miles from the outcropping into the Mediterranean southeast toward Megiddo and stands at the northwestern end of the valley of Jezreel. It is uncertain which summit in the range is the location of the contest. It is possible that the contest took place at the foot of the mountain rather than on its summit. Sacred mountains usually featured the places of worship at their base rather than at the summit, which would have been considered holy ground inaccessible to the populace. Elijah eventually ascends to the summit to offer his prayer for rain (v. 42). (Walton, 377-378). To this day a Carmelite Monastery, dedicated to the remembrance of Elijah, exists at the end of the northwestern part of the mountain (Patterson and Austel, 146).

Elijah in the Bible

Elijah plays a significant role in the biblical texts that came after his time. His unstinting opposition to syncretism and Baalism is notable, but it is as the greatest prophet that he is remembered. Malachi 4:5-6 expects Elijah to announce the day of the Lord's judgment. Jesus claims that John the Baptist was this “Elijah” (Luke 7:25-35). Both John and the one announced by Malachi proclaim a time of salvation and judgment for those who refuse to turn to God. Elijah's presence at the transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8) indicates his status as the greatest prophetic messenger. It also highlights his nondeath and implies that no greater prophet will arise. It is to the shame of Israel that they do not follow more closely the teachings of such an important prophet (House, *Old Testament Theology*, 264).

Home Group Questions

1. Why was this miracle particularly powerful for those witnessing it?
2. How did the sins of the king of Israel help lead the country away from God?
3. How can our sins pull others away from God?
4. Was it wrong of Elijah to kill the prophets of Baal? Why or why not?
5. How can we tell if we are riding the fence with God?
6. What are some of the consequences for riding the fence with God?
7. What things has God done in your life to display his truth, his presence, or his power?

Questions for the Family

8. In this story, how does God show that he is the one true God of the universe?

Questions for Personal Application

9. Are you riding the fence with God? What prevents you from fully serving and trusting in God?