

## BIBLE SERIES: **"EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"**

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### **1 KINGS 16-18 ELIJAH THE PROPHET, AHAB & JEZEBEL**



We now enter a very colorful section of Scripture—the story of the prophet Elijah, King Ahab and Jezebel. It would make a great movie! Also, the life of Elijah is important because it has prophetic implications for the future. So let's take the plunge.

After the powerful King Omri of Israel died, around the year 875 B.C., his son Ahab took over the throne. He had married the wicked Tyrian princess Jezebel of the Phoenicians. Omri had made a peace treaty with the Phoenician king, Ethbaal, and to seal the deal, he had his son Ahab marry Jezebel.

As Merrill notes, "This marriage, of course, would prove to be disastrous to Israel's (and Judah's) spiritual well-being...At the same time, however, closer Israelite-Phoenician ties must have been viewed with suspicion in Damascus, Syria. It is not surprising, then, that the next time we hear of Beh-Hadad, he is at war with Israel under Ahab" (*Kingdom of Priests*, p. 340).

Archaeologist Alfred Hoerth adds about Ahab, "He so surpassed his father and the previous kings of Israel in his apostasy that 1 K. 16:33 declares he 'did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who were before him.' Specifically, Ahab worshiped the god Baal (an altar and temple to that god were built in Samaria) and he erected a pillar to the sex goddess Ashtoreth. 1 K. 21:25 states that Jezebel incited her husband to evil, and introduced Baal-Melqart (the Sidonian form of Baal worship) into her new land. Indeed, Jezebel was so zealous for her Phoenician deity that she even caused the death of the prophets of the Lord (1 K. 18:13). Further, as a Phoenician princess, Jezebel had grown up to believe that royalty was not to be denied" (*Archaeology and the Old Testament*, p. 310).

Yet, when so much evil appears, God always steps in. Halley mentions about Jezebel, "She was an imperious, unscrupulous, vindictive, determined, devilish woman, a demon incarnate...She gave her name to later prophetesses who sought to fasten voluptuous practices of idol worship on the Church (Revelation 2:20). Six chapters are given to Ahab's reign, while most of the kings have only a part of one chapter. The reason: it is largely the story of Elijah.

"Elijah was God's answer to Ahab and Jezebel, who had substituted Baal for God. God sent Elijah to eradicate Baalism, a vile and cruel religion. Elijah's 'rare, sudden and brief appearance, his undaunted

courage and fiery zeal, the brilliance of his triumphs, the pathos of his despondency, the glory of his departure, and the calm beauty of his reappearance [as part of a vision] on the Mt. of Transfiguration, make him one of the grandest characters Israel ever produced'" (*Bible Handbook*, p. 198).

Elijah appears suddenly, when it seems all was lost concerning God's religion in northern Israel. We read, "And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word'" (1 Kings 17:1).

For three and a half years, there is no rain in northern Israel. This drought is a forerunner and type of a future drought referred to in Revelation 11:3-6. However, the end-time drought will be much greater in scope—as the dire events preceding Christ's return will be worse than any before (Matthew 24:21).

So Ahab is furious with Elijah, and sends his men to kill him, searching even in foreign lands. But God had hidden Elijah, first by the Brook Cherith, which flowed into the Jordan. He had ravens provide bread and meat in the morning and in the evenings, so he wouldn't give his hiding place away when procuring food. We also see here how God can command animals to do His bidding when necessary.

When the brook dried out, God told Elijah to move to the Phoenician town of Zarephath. It is curious that God would have Elijah leave the territory of Israel and go to a pagan country. The reason is later revealed by Jesus Christ Himself: "Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow" (Luke 4:24-27). So this is an indictment about the lack of faith of the widows in Israel back then, to the point that this Phoenician widow had more faith than any of them.

God had to produce more miracles to keep Elijah fed and hidden from view. He made the widow's jar of oil and bin of flour not run out. So they had all the bread they needed. Then the widow's son fell gravely ill and died. The widow complained to Elijah and he prayed to God and then, "he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and

said, 'O Lord my God, I pray let this child's soul come back to him.' Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived" (1 Kings 17:21-23).

That was a great miracle, and the first instance in the Bible of bringing the dead back to life. As a side note, the term "soul" or *nephesh* in Hebrew, shows it means "life" and not an immortal soul. Also, if the child was conscious as an immortal soul presumably in heaven, why bring him back to the earth?

After three and a half years, God told Elijah to present himself to the wicked Ahab. The king was so desperate at this time, that he divided his entire army to try to find some hay near any streams still flowing, since their animals were dying. Ahab told his commander, Obadiah, a righteous man that had hidden 100 prophets of God from the wrath of Jezebel (but not the later prophet by that same name).

It was Obadiah's group that ran into Elijah and he told Obadiah he wanted to meet Ahab. Yet, Obadiah thought it was a trick to get him killed, since Elijah could hide again. But Elijah assured him that he would be there to greet King Ahab.

When Ahab met Elijah, he angrily shouted, "Is that you, O troubler of Israel?" (1 K. 18:17). Needless to say, Ahab thought in his twisted mind he wasn't doing anything wrong and that it was Elijah who was the real problem. But Elijah told him the grim truth: "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house have, in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and have followed Baals. Now therefore, send and gather all Israel to me on Mount Carmel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (1 K. 18:18-19). It's a reminder of what the two witnesses will do in the end time when facing the beast, the false prophet and an unbelieving and deluded world (Rev. 11:5-10).

So Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a grand test to show who is the true God and who are His true servants. He also admonished the people to stop sitting on the fence—to falter between two opinions—and accepting the mixture of the worshiping the true God and Baal.

The same message applies today to the participants of modern Christianity, who, however unwittingly, mix elements of pagan worship—such as the immortality of the soul, crosses, Christmas trees,

Sunday observance, Easter eggs, and Halloween—with the worship of the God of the Bible.

The contest Elijah arranges is designed to give every advantage to the Baal worshipers. Mount Carmel, on the Mediterranean coast, was considered sacred to Baal. The answering by fire apparently referred to lightning—and Baal was considered to be the god of storms, with lightning as his weapon.

Elijah is just one against 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:22). It does not appear that the 400 prophets of Asherah answered the challenge (verse 19). The prophets of Baal begin calling on their gods in the morning, and by noon, Elijah begins his taunting, and was well versed enough in the Canaanite religion to know some of their prayers were designed to awaken the gods. We read, "Pray louder!" he said. "Baal must be a god. Maybe he's daydreaming or using the toilet or traveling somewhere. Or maybe he's asleep, and you have to wake him up" (1 K. 18:27, CEV). And rather than give up, they cry out louder, leaping more vigorously—and they even "cut themselves, *as was their custom*" (verse 28). Such uncontrolled frenzy and self-mutilation were actually normal elements in their worship and illustrate how pagan religion is often quite harmful to its participants. By contrast, the true religion God gave through Moses forbade such cuttings in the flesh (Leviticus 19:28; 21:5).

All of this continues until the time of the evening sacrifice, when Elijah finally takes his turn, beginning with the construction of God's altar and the soaking of the sacrifice and altar with water. After Elijah's short prayer, lightning comes out of heaven and disintegrates the entire sacrifice and altar! So God showed Himself to be the true God over storms, with real power to control the elements—while Baal was proven to be a worthless and false god.

The people were shocked, and cried out, "The Lord, He is God!...And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal! Do not let one of them escape!" So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Brook Kishon and executed them there" (1 K. 18:40). Afterwards, Elijah prays, and the rains begin to pour down, ending the drought. He is then given such physical power that he runs the 13 miles to Jezreel—even faster than King Ahab's chariot! If this was the Olympics, he would have won a gold medal!

Yes, Elijah was on a "spiritual high." He had defeated the prophets of Baal with a great miracle from God. Now, just as God had told him, the rains came and the terrible drought was over. Another

miracle was running without tiring—a Samson-like feat—and even Ahab had to be impressed! Perhaps Elijah thought this wayward king at last could be brought back to the true religion of his fathers.

But when Ahab told the news to his wicked wife, instead of being intimidated, she released all her hell-bent fury on Elijah! We read, “Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.’ And when he saw that, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, ‘It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!’” (1 K. 19:2-4).

Unger adds, “Here he shows himself as a man of like passions with us (James 5:17) by fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel to Beersheba, 130 miles south of Jezreel, well into the territory of Judah and out of Jezebel’s jurisdiction” (*Bible Handbook*, p. 223).

Now Elijah needed to learn an important lesson from a loving God. So God directs an angel to take him to Horeb, or Mt. Sinai. We read, “And the angel of the Lord...touched him, and said, ‘Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.’ So he arose, and ate and drank, and he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights as far as Horeb, the mountain of God. And there he went into a cave, and spent the night in that place; and the word of the Lord came to him, and said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah? So he said, ‘I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life’” (1 K. 19:7-10).

Unger explains, “There, God also spoke to the distraught prophet, rebuking him for being where he should not have been. What a contrast! Elijah the hero of faith on Carmel, victorious over Baalism! And Elijah the coward of unbelief at Horeb, self-occupied, utterly discouraged, wishing to die, praying *against* rather than for God’s people!” (p. 223).

So God patiently and lovingly teaches him an important lesson—a lesson we also should never forget. We read, “Then he said, ‘Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.’ And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks to pieces before the

Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. So it was, when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave” (1 K. 19:11-13). Then God gave Elijah instructions on how to proceed.

*Expositor’s* notes, “There followed a faint whisper, a voice quietly hushed, and low. Elijah knew it instantly. It was God! What a lesson for Elijah! Even God did not always operate in the realm of the spectacular! [He could let His divine will be known in a whisper and not in some dramatic way.]

“Again came the divine question: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ Elijah’s reply was the same. How slow he was to learn! Yet much of what he said was true. Though he had failed at the last, he had been faithful; and truly persecution was rampant in Israel. It was understandable why he would feel quite alone.

“God again dealt graciously with his prophet. He was to go back to the northern kingdom, the place where he had veered off the track with God, in his spiritual life. Elijah still had work to accomplish for God. That task was threefold: (1) in the realm of international politics, he was to anoint Hazael to succeed Ben-Hadad, Israel’s perennial adversary in Damascus; (2) in national affairs, Jehu was to be anointed as the next king; and (3) in the spiritual realm, Elisha was to be commissioned as his own successor. The threefold commission was singularly interrelated. Jehu’s work would supplement that of Hazael, that is, any who fell to Israel to escape Hazael’s purge would be dealt with by Jehu. In turn those who survived Jehu’s slaughter must face the spiritual judgment of Elisha. To encourage his restored prophet further, God set the record straight: there were yet seven thousand true believers in Israel.”

Next time, we will study the incredible life of the prophet Elisha, and the horrible end of Jezebel and Ahab, as was prophesied.