
Yahweh is the True God

by G. Herbert Livingston

During the reign of King Ahab of the northern kingdom of Israel,¹ a crisis of religious commitment arose and came to a climax while Elijah served the Lord as His prophet. The crisis began with King Ahab's marriage to Jezebel, a princess of Sidon. The story is told in I Kings 16:29 through 18:46.

This study will concentrate on several key passages. The New International Version will be quoted, unless otherwise stated.

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" (I Kgs. 18:21).

At the time of the evening 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, 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 fell prostrate and 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

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had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain." So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

"Go and look toward the sea," he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Seven times Elijah said, "Go back."

The seventh time the servant reported, "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising from the sea."

So Elijah said, "Go and tell Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.'"

Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel (I Kgs. 18:36-46).

Pertinent textual matters in the Masoretic Hebrew text of these passages, compared with ancient versions, will be considered, and then the passages will be viewed in terms of the larger context. The literary organization and movement; and the themes and genres of the context (I Kgs. 16:29-18:46) will be analyzed and evaluated. Next, the historical and religious setting of the crisis will be summarized, both from the information in the biblical text and from information available in other ancient Near Eastern literature. The interpersonal relationships of the individuals and groups participating in the crisis will be highlighted as the text is examined in terms of content. Significant theological concepts, especially the concept of covenant, will be elucidated and their bearing on constructing a relevant message for today will be explored.

The Condition of the Text

The textual variants in I Kings 18:21 are not numerous and all are of little significance. The Greek version shows that the key problem is knowing how to translate the sense of Elijah's question adequately.

In the Hebrew text, the first key word is *posihim* which is a participle, designating continuous action, and referring to limping on crippled legs. Mephiboseth, son of Jonathan, is several times described as lame in both of his feet, because his nurse dropped him in a moment of panic (II Sam. 4:4; 9:13; 19:26). One group of physically handicapped are called lame in II Samuel 5:6, 8. The fact that the prophets of Baal are said to limp as they danced about the altar (II Kgs. 18:26) indicates that a simulated limp had religious significance.

In II Samuel 18:21, the total statement of Elijah to the people shows that he intended lameness to carry a metaphorical sense. The people's spiritual indecision is comparable to having crippled feet.

The second key word in verse 21 is *se'iffah*, a feminine noun having a symbolic or metaphorical import. In its literal sense, the word means to be split, broken or divided. Hence in Judges 15:8, 11; Isaiah 2:21; 57:5 the RSV has "clefts of the rocks" whereas NIV has "cave" and "overhanging crags." In relationship to trees the term means "branches" or "boughs" (Is. 17:6; 27:10), because they divide or fork off the main trunk of the tree. A metaphorical extension of this feature can be seen in Isaiah 10:33 and Ezekiel 31:5-8, designating rulers as branches. In Psalm 119:113 the term becomes more abstract. See "double-minded" in RSV and NIV, but, strangely, "vain" in KJV. The conditional sentence, "If you follow . . .," which comes after the question, gives *se'iffah* a sense similar to Psalm 119:113.

In I Kings 18:21 the LXX has *tais 'ignuais*, meaning, the knees, apparently an attempt to interpret the Hebrew figure of speech which is based on the division of the lower body into two legs. In combination with limping, the term possibly refers to legs of unequal length.

The text of I Kings 18:36-46 is expanded in several places in the Greek version. In verse 36, after "answer me, O Lord," it has "answer me this day by fire." In the next verse, instead of "their hearts" it has "the hearts of this people." At the beginning of verse 44 the Greek adds, "And the servant went again seven times," and at the end reads, "a little cloud like the sole of a man's foot brought water." In verse 45,

the Greek adds a word and reads, “And Ahab wept and went to Jezreel.”

These additions in the Greek version appear to be efforts to explain the text; and in the last two instances tend to obscure the clear meaning of the text, or are indications the translators had a Hebrew text somewhat different than that preserved in the Masoretic text. One may conclude that the prototypes of the Masoretic Hebrew text had survived in good condition.

The Literary Structure of the Context

The context of the Mt. Carmel contest begins with I Kings 16:29 and continues to 19:18. I Kings 16:29-34 provides the overall political and religious setting for the crisis that was facing the people of Israel. I Kings 17 introduces Elijah as the prophet of the Lord and presents a series of incidents that demonstrate the validity of his prophetic relationship with the Lord. Chapter 18:1-19 gives the circumstances of Elijah’s confrontation with King Ahab, and 18:20-40 has the crucial contest itself. I Kings 18:41-46 presents the circumstances of the storm that broke the drought. I Kings 19:1-9 describes the aftermath of the contest in terms of Elijah’s flight from Jezebel’s wrath, and concludes with the Lord’s revelation to the prophet (19:10-18).

How are each of these sections constructed? Are they unrelated, or do they have bonds which hold them as a unit? Answers to these questions would help us see the importance of the passages under consideration.

Looking more closely at I Kings 16:29-34, we find these components of the passage. Verse 29 provides the setting in terms of the temporal dates of King Ahab’s reign. Verse 30 is an evaluation of Ahab’s reign and amounts to an indictment of the king. Verses 31-33a are a list of violations of long-cherished religious and moral values in Israel, going back to the covenant of Sinai, with an emphasis on polytheism. Verse 33 ends with another evaluation in the form of an indictment. Verse 34 highlights a violation of a ban based on the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6:26). Since this act of child sacrifice occurred within the boundaries of Ahab’s authority, he is regarded as responsible for it.

During the reign of Ahab, a formidable challenger of his pagan practices arose in the person of Elijah whose home was in Gilead to the east of the Jordan. I Kings 17:1 is a brief glimpse of the initial

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confrontation. Elijah's message to Ahab is in the form of a personal oath, anchored to the reality of the Lord, the God of Israel. Identifying himself as the Lord's servant, Elijah declared that dew and rain would cease and not come again until he gave his approval.

The next segment is I Kings 17:2-7 and begins with a standard statement, a revelation formula (2) and continues with an oracle from the Lord composed of a command (3) and a promise (4). Verse 5 notes Elijah's obedience to the command, verse 6 relates how the ravens fed him, and verse 7 concludes by observing that the brook Kerith ceased to flow due to the drought.

The third segment in the chapter is made up of verses 8-16. Verse 8 is the standard revelation formula, with a command and a promise in verse 9. The next verse notes Elijah's obedience and his discovery of the widow at the gate of Zarephath and asks for water. The second request for bread (11) brought forth a retort from the widow, in the form of an oath (12). Next comes a reply from Elijah in the form of an exhortation, a command and a delivery of a message from the Lord containing a promise (13-14). The widow responds obediently (15) and the segment closes by noting the correspondence between the provision and the word of the Lord.

The fourth segment is 17:17-27, involving the same widow in whose home Elijah was staying. Verse 17 provides the data for the crisis of illness and the widow turns on Elijah with an accusation in the form of a question and a statement (18). Verses 19-23 deal with Elijah's concern for the son's sickness. There are two prayers to the Lord: verse 20 has a prayer made up of a question of accusation and verse 21, a simple request. The Lord responds by reviving the lad (22), and Elijah presents the now healthy boy to his mother (23). The segment concludes with a confession by the widow, recognizing that Elijah is God's man (24).

In 18:1-6, the scene shifts and new data is given. This section continues through verse 19 and is made up of two conversations. One dialogue is between Elijah and Obadiah (7-15) and contains two oaths, one by Obadiah (10) and one by Elijah (15). Verse 16 is a transition sentence which prepares the reader for the confrontation between Elijah and Ahab. Verse 17 has a question regarding identification, as does verse 10; then Elijah delivers an accusation and a command (18-19).

The second section, 18:20-40, has the contest itself and is made up of three sub-sections: 20-24; 25-29 and 30-40. In verses 20-24, Elijah

addresses the people, challenging them to make a decision (21) and laying down the procedures of a contest (22-24a) to which the people respond favorably (24b). Elijah then turns to the prophets of Baal and commands them to begin their part of the contest (25) and they obey (26). Elijah ridicules them (27) and the prophets of Baal intensify their efforts (28), but end in failure (29).

The third sub-section, verses 30-40, is the account of Elijah's part of the contest. Verses 30-35 relate the preparatory acts, 36-37 has Elijah's prayer and verse 38 the dramatic act of God. The concluding verses (39-40) summarize the execution of the prophets of Baal.

The third major section of chapter 18 is made up of verses 41-46. Elijah commands the king to eat and drink (41) and he obeys (42a). Then Elijah prays (42b-43) and a cloud appears (44a). The prophet gives another command to the king (44b) and the chapter concludes with the race to Jezreel in the storm (45-46).

Chapter 19 is tied to the preceding chapters in that, regarding Elijah, it depicts the aftermath of the contest on Mt. Carmel, and serves as a transition to the work of a new servant of the Lord, Elisha.

Verses 1-4a serve as the setting and contain Ahab's report to Jezebel (1), her vow to kill Elijah (2) and his flight (3-4a). Verses 4b-7 begin with the prophet's prayer and follow with two visits by an angel. Verses 8-9a are a transition passage, relating Elijah's travel to a cave. Then the Lord personally appears to him (9b-13a), giving a message (13b-18) to the prophet. Since this oracle directs Elijah into a new phase of his service, we will not proceed further.

Geographical and chronological bonds tend to tie these segments together. The opening segment (16:29-34) centers in the city of Samaria, and presumably it was there Elijah delivered his first message to Ahab (17:1). The prophet lived for a while at the brook Kerith, near the Jordan River (17:2-6), then moved north of the borders of the kingdom of Israel to Zarephath in the land of the Phoenicians (17:7-24).

Chapter 18 begins with a reference to Samaria (2) and it was in the vicinity of that capital city that Elijah contacted Obadiah and then met Ahab. The contest took place on Mt. Carmel and at the conclusion of the chapter both Ahab and Elijah are shown racing to Jezreel near Mt. Gilboa. Frightened by Jezebel's vow to kill, Elijah fled south to Beersheba (19:3) and then on to Mt. Horeb (19:8).

Temporal references begin in 16:29. The other time references are sequential but largely indefinite, giving no indication in which year

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or years of Ahab's reign they occurred. The references are "in Ahab's time" (16:34), "next few years" (17:1), "some time later" (17:7), "until the day the Lord gives rain" (17:14), "some time later" (17:17), "After a long time, in the third year" (18:1), "from morning till noon" (18:26), "at noon" (18:27), "Midday passed . . . until time for the evening sacrifice" (18:29), "at the time of sacrifice" (18:36), "a day's journey" (19:4), and "forty days and forty nights" (19:8). Of interest are references to the drought: "there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (17:1), "After a long time, in the third year . . . I will send rain on the land" (18:1), and "Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain came on" (18:45).

The personnel of this series of passages tie them together. Predominately, the Lord, Elijah, Ahab and Jezebel are present, with the Lord and Elijah in all sections. The widow and her son are significant in 17:7-24, Obadiah in 18:3-16, the prophets of Baal are important in 18:19-40, and the angel in 19:5-7.

Certain phrases and key words serve as threads which weave in and out of the several units of these chapters. The following list and references give some indication of this phenomena: "Lord, God of Israel," 16:33; 17:1, 14; "Lord Almighty/ Lord God Almighty," 18:15; 19:10, 14; "word of the Lord," 16:34; 18:2, 8, 16, 24; 18: 1, 31; 19:9; "man of God," 17:18, 24; "prophet/s," 18: 4, 13, 19, 20, 22, 25, 36, 40; 19:1, 10, 14; "water" and allied words, 17:1, 7, 10, 14; 18:1, 4, 33, 35, 38, 41, 44, 45; 19:6; "foods" and allied words, 17:9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16; 18:4, 5, 13; 19:6, 8; "eating and drinking," 17:4, 6; 12; 18:19, 41, 42; 19:6, 7, 8; "altar/s," 16:32; 18:26, 30, 32, 35, 38; 19:10, 14; "die" and allied words, 16:34 (by inference); 17:12, 17, 18, 20; 18:4, 5, 9, 12, 13, 14, 23, 25, 26, 33, 40; 19:1,2 (by inference), 4, 10, 14, 17; "live" and allied words, 17:1, 12, 21, 22, 23; 18:5, 10, 15; 19:2, 3, 4.

The content of various segments and phrases combine to bind these passages together. The thrust of 16:29-34 is basically an indictment and Elijah's retort to Ahab (18:18) is of the same nature. So is the reply of Elijah to the Lord (19:10, 14).

Oaths are present in several of the passages. Elijah's first message to Ahab was an oath (17:1), the widow of Zarephath responded to Elijah's request for food with an oath (17:12). So did Obadiah (18:10), and the same man reported that as Ahab searched from country to country for Elijah, he made their leaders swear they could not find him (18:10). Elijah replied with an oath (18:15). Queen

Jezebel took an oath by her own gods she would kill Elijah (19:2). It would be interesting to know how she managed to explain her failure to do so.

Revelatory events in which the Lord spoke to Elijah span the several chapters we are dealing with. The first is given in 17:2-4, and the others are in 17:8-9; 18:1; and 19:9b, 11, 13b, 15-18. In 19:5b, 7 an angel is God's messenger. The usual content of these events is a command but is often paired with a promise. Verses 19:9b and 13b have the same question. In every case Elijah responds obediently.

In several passages, prayer is a binding element. Prayers offered by Elijah are found in 17:20, 21; 18:36-37 and 42-44 by implication. Also a prayer is found in 19:4, and the responses of Elijah to the Lord in 19:10, 14, which are identical, may be understood as prayers.

Most of the passages in the context of the selected portions have a crucial act on which the trend of events turned, followed by a climactic event. The crucial event in 16:29-34 is Ahab's marriage to Jezebel (31b) and the climax is Hiel's act of sacrificing his two sons (34). The delivery of food to Elijah (17:6) is crucial for it fulfilled God's promise (4b) as well as sustaining his body. The drying up of the brook is a climax (7) for it demonstrated the validity of Elijah's message to Ahab (1b). The turning point in 17:8-16 is the delivery of God's word to the widow, for it persuaded her to obey Elijah, and the climax is the ever renewing supply of flour and oil (15b-16a). The crucial moment in the next incident (17:17-24) is the Lord's response to the prophet's prayer (22) and the climax is Elijah's announcement, "Look, your son is alive!" (23b). The turning point in 18:1-40 is the dramatic moment when "the fire of the Lord fell" (38) and the climax is the confession of the people, "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" (39). In 19:1-18 the crucial act is the visit of the angel (5b-7), for, with the visitation, the prophet's attitude changed from despair to new hope. The climax is the "gentle whisper" and the voice that came from it (12b-13).

In terms of literary types, 16:29-34 is a judicial indictment, and 18:1 the declaration of punishment. The next three stories in chapter 17 are miracle stories that validate the special servant relationship of Elijah to the Lord. Overall, 18:1-40 is a covenant renewal event, followed by a miracle story that again validates Elijah's prophetic mission in terms of the threat in 17:1, and the release from punishment in 18:45, not for Ahab's sake but for the people who had renewed their covenant relationship with the Lord. The passage in 19:18 is

much like the accounts of call to mission found in Exodus 3, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1-3, and may be regarded as a recall to mission with a new aspect of that task being unveiled.

Historical Contest

To demonstrate more fully the crucial nature of the contest on Mt. Carmel, a summary of the broader historical and religious factors is called for. The passage, 16:29-34, is remarkably brief when compared to the importance of Ahab in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel.

This kingdom got its start with the successful revolution of Jeroboam against the son of Solomon, Rehoboam,² who soon set up worship centers at Bethel just north of Jerusalem and at Dan at the foot of Mt. Hermon. In these centers he placed golden calves (I Kgs. 12:26-33), for which sin he was condemned and punished (I Kgs. 13:1-14:18). Ahab also was condemned for continuing this policy (I Kgs. 16:31a).

Since the northern kingdom had no tradition or procedure for succession of leadership, it experienced much turmoil. Jeroboam's son Nadab attempted to take his father's place but was assassinated within two years by Baasha, who wiped out the royal family. After Baasha's death, 24 years later, Elah sought to continue his father's dynasty but was killed by Zimri who destroyed all others in the family.³

A general named Omri rebelled and Zimri committed suicide. Omri spent four years overpowering those who resisted his claim to the throne; but, once successful, proceeded to bring stability to the northern kingdom (I Kgs. 16:21-23). Early in his reign he built a new capital on a mountain and called it Samaria (I Kgs. 16:24). He next regained control of the area east of the Jordan and Dead Sea⁴ and made a treaty with the sea power headed by Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, whose capital was Tyre. Omri was probably responsible for arranging the marriage of Ahab and Jezebel. Peace was made with the kingdom of Judah.

Omri needed the aid of Judah and the Phoenicians, for the Syrians of Damascus had become strong and aggressive. Even more dangerous were the ominous moves westward of Assyria whose brutal power was centered on the Tigris River.

For the first time in the northern kingdom, a son was able to continue his father's power as king. Ahab became an important

political figure and no one was able to challenge his grip on the throne. With Jezebel, Ahab enjoyed the new prosperity sparked by his father's policies, and they enlarged their wealth by exploiting trade routes that passed through their realm, and by taking advantage of the farmers. Even more serious was the strong will of the new foreign queen who actively established polytheism with all its sordid practices, and enticed Ahab to participate in them. Worship of the Lord God of Israel was forbidden and His worshipers were hunted like animals. Elijah was called by the Lord to challenge this grip of paganism at great risk of life. If the trend continued unchecked, the worship of the Lord could become a memory only.⁵

The main deities championed by Jezebel were Baal and Asherah. Basically, Baal was the god of storm and crops and often names of localities were added as part of his title. It would appear that Jezebel preferred Baal-Melqart, for he was popular among the Phoenicians and Mt. Carmel was thought to be one of his special mountains. Temples and altars in his honor were many and his prophets were masters in divination and magic. A drought that continued unchecked for more than three years would be a direct challenge of his power and magical tricks with fire were favored by his followers.

As we move now to a closer examination of the contest itself, it would be well to note several aspects of the relationship between Ahab and Elijah. Chapter 16:29-33 depicts Ahab as a bold sinner who espoused the sex worship of Baal and Asherah with enthusiasm. Elijah's delivery of the threat of the drought must have non-plussed him, for traditionally in Israel kings did not harm prophets. But Jezebel must have stirred him to action. The fact that Elijah hid himself in the ravine of Kerith and in the city of Zarephath, which ironically was near the capital of Jezebel's father, and Ahab's search for Elijah in neighboring countries, are evidences of the wrath of the royal household.

When Ahab next met Elijah (18:16) he was arrogant and hostile, but yielded to the prophet's challenge to the contest, for it appeared to be a game he couldn't lose. How could one man win against hundreds of Baal prophets?

During the contest, Ahab is in the background, probably smugly awaiting Elijah's downfall. The failure of the Baal prophets and the spectacular fire that consumed Elijah's sacrifice must have stunned the man. He seems remarkably docile as he obeys Elijah's instructions that he eat and drink, and then hitch up his horses to

return to Jezreel. His report to Jezebel seems mild compared to the immediate rage of the queen.

A Closer Look at I Kings 18:21, 36-46

We have already looked at the text of verse 21, but more needs to be said of its significance. Though the NIV, like many translations, has blurred the picturesque images of Elijah's question, it has captured the essence of its thrust, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" Elijah proceeds to face the people who probably were mostly leaders of villages and cities, with alternatives, which brought into focus the dilemma they were wrestling with. It was a conflict between the state and their religious heritage. If they did indeed follow the true God, the God of their fathers,⁶ they were in danger of the vicious wrath of the royal family. If they did wholeheartedly practice the immoral rites of Baalism, they would come under the wrath of God and be punished even more severely than by famine.

Dilemmas were not unknown by other participants mentioned in 16:29-19:18. Elijah lived in the painful boundaries of a dilemma. If the Lord did not protect and support him, he could be destroyed by Ahab, and the king was in the background at Mt. Carmel waiting for an opportunity to take vengeance on the prophet.

The widow had felt the pangs of a dilemma. If she obeyed Elijah, she could lose precious food by feeding him (17:12), and the apparent loss of her son seemed to be a punishment for hiding Elijah in her home. She was angry and afraid. If she did not obey a man of God, who knows what would happen.

Obadiah knew the agonies of a dilemma. He had been secretly hiding prophets of the Lord, but at any moment he could be exposed and killed. The possibility that Elijah might disappear heightened that danger. If Obadiah did not obey Elijah, he would be violating his faithfulness to his Lord.

Ahab did not seem to realize it, but he too faced a dilemma. If he gathered his many prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, he ran the risk that they would be discredited and destroyed. If he did not do so, it would appear to others he was a coward, and that would enhance Elijah's popularity in the nation. He was stunned when he realized the trap he had walked into.

Like the king, the prophets of Baal did not realize their dilemma. If they participated in that contest, they risked exposure as frauds and

then death. If they did not enter the contest, they would face reprisals by Ahab who would have been humiliated. They too did not see the trap.

The functioning of these dilemmas in all the participants in the test gave to that event its intensity and its crucial character.

The people had been challenged to choose between Baal and the Lord of Israel (18:21), and the prophets of Baal had desperately begged their god to consume their sacrifice. They had failed.

Now it was Elijah's turn to demonstrate that his God could miraculously send fire to the altar. Twelve stones representing the tribes of Israel, including both the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, made up the restored altar. Jars of water drenched the area of the altar. An impossible situation had been created.

The exact time of "the evening sacrifice" cannot be ascertained, but it surely was not long after midday, for one must allow time for the other events recorded in 18:40ff. to take place before dark.

Elijah's approach to his God was uncomplicated and direct. He simply "stepped forth and prayed." The prayer was not begun with "O Lord, my God," (17:19, 20), but with an appellation that reached back to the ancestors of Israel who first knew a covenant relationship to God: "Abraham, Isaac and Israel" the same phrasing Moses used in a prayer after the incident of Aaron and the golden calf (Ex. 32:13). Note that Elijah had just stressed that the 12 stones making up the altar of the Lord represented all the tribes of Jacob whose name had been changed by the Lord to Israel (cf. Ex. 24:4). Evidently, Elijah was seeking every means to emphasize the spiritual elements rather than the purely physical lineage of the people.

Elijah desired that God's act would have a teaching impact on the people present, "so these people will know." The prophet well knew that the truth of true identity of deity did not rest on a declaration that the Lord was "God in Israel." The truth would have to be impressed on heart and mind by a powerful act of God which could not be duplicated by human ingenuity.⁷

Elijah was not asking God to demonstrate His universality; rather, he was praying that God make clear by a powerful act His reality as the only true God, in contrast to the unreality of Baal. In Hebrew, the word translated "know" means more than a grasp of fact or concept. The word often means to experience another by intimate contact, as in marriage and involves acceptance of another as friend or ally.

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In the covenant, it means to recognize a superior person as lord who has authority to rule.⁸ This latter meaning seems to be what Elijah had in mind.

Elijah regarded himself as a servant of the Lord (cf. 17:1), the widow of Zeraphath called him a man of god (17:18, 24), but Ahab rebuked him by calling him a troubler of Israel (18:17). The Lord often called His prophets, my servants,⁹ and Elijah preferred this label for he looked on himself as obedient in word and deed. The prophet observes that all he had done up to that moment had been “at your command” (18:36b). He believed the Lord supported those who obeyed Him; so, confidently he asked his Lord to act. Elijah did not seek self-glory. His concern was for his people. He knew they needed help to make their decision in that crucial hour. The prophet asked the Lord to perform a re-creative work in their hearts so they could enter into a renewal of covenant. This was the objective that really mattered.

Elijah had offered a short, simple prayer of faith, and if nothing had happened, all would have been lost. But a wonder did happen. The sky was clear of clouds; yet, a bolt of fire fell upon the sacrifice with intense heat so that all of it, the altar, wood, stones, soil and water were consumed.¹⁰ God had demonstrated that He is in fact deity.

The shockwaves of that firey event were profound. The text gives mention of the impact on the people primarily. As one “they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!” As in verse 21 and 36, the Hebrew word for God possesses an article, paired with a pronoun of emphasis, “He,” which designates the Lord as the only true God, exclusive of all others. Implicitly, the confession affirms that Baal is a false deity. The people had made their choice.

In accordance with ancient Mosaic law, the false prophets were punished for their fraudulence with death.¹¹

Elijah now turns his attention to a matter of crucial importance, the ending of the drought. He issues orders to Ahab (he seemed in a state of shock) and to his own servant, and gives himself to prayer. The content of the prayer is not recorded but the expectancy of the prophet is highlighted. In contrast to the short prayer at the altar, this time he persists in prayer and immediately acts when he hears that a cloud has appeared.

The coming of “the power of the Lord upon Elijah” was a con-

firmation to him of God's approval and support.¹² He did not prophesy, he just ran and ran.

The Covenant Framework of the Mt. Carmel Contest

The basic clue that the ancient covenants were functioning as the framework in the work of Elijah comes to the surface in 19:10, 14, with the phrase, "The Israelites have rejected your covenant." Earlier, Elijah had accused Ahab of the same sin, though in different words, "you have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals" (18:18b). The opening paragraph of the context of the incident on Mt. Carmel has a statement which the same concern, namely, "Ahab . . . did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than . . ." (16:33).

All of these accusations point back to the covenant made on Sinai (Ex. 19-24), and it is instructive to compare motifs of our exegetical passages and their context with the original event recorded in Exodus 19-24, with the first fracturing of the covenant and its renewal (Ex. 32-34), with the covenant renewal in Moab (Dt. 29), with the first covenant at Shechem (Josh. 8:30-35) and then the second renewal (Josh. 24).

The normal title of the covenant-making God is Lord in all instances, with Lord, God of Israel in 32:27, and God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel in 32:13. In relation to the designation of the Lord as the true God, all tendencies or acts of recognizing the gods and goddesses of other nations, especially the Canaanites, and espousing their immoral practices are forbidden. Such restrictions are found in Exodus 20: 3-7, 23; 23:13, 24, 33; 32:7-8; 34:12-17; Deuteronomy 16-18; Joshua 24:15, 19-20.

God's attitude toward those "whose heart turns away from the Lord our God" (Dt. 29:18) is anger and punishment. Warnings of His anger are sounded in Exodus 32:10, with which Moses wrestled in intercession, and demonstrated in 32:33-35 with punishment. Anger is also highlighted in Deuteronomy 29:22-28 and punishment in Joshua 24:19-20.

The association of oaths with divine acts are found in Exodus 22:11; and Deuteronomy 29:12, 14. Audible revelations of God to the covenant mediator are recorded in Exodus 19:3-6, 9, 10-13, 21-22, 24; 20:22-25; 21:1-33; 24:1-2, 12; 32:7-10; 33, 34; 33:1-3, 5, 14, 17, 19-23; 34:1-3, 10-27.

The possibility of divine forgiveness and then renewal of covenant are established in Moses' intercessions with the Lord recorded in 32:11-14, 31-34; 33:1-6, 12-17; 34:8. The covenant events in Moab (Dt. 29) and twice at Shechem (Josh. 8:30-35; 24) are demonstrations that a broken covenant can be renewed and thus served as precedents for the covenant renewal event on Mt. Carmel.

The most vivid parallels to Elijah's challenge to make a choice between the God of Israel and Baalism are found in Exodus 32:26 and Joshua 24:15. Declarations of commitment are found in Exodus 19:8; 24:3b, 6; 32:26b, and Joshua 24:16-18.

An altar and young bull sacrifices are associated with the covenant on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 20:24-26; 24:4-5), in which case 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel make up the altar. In the incident of the golden calf, the assembly sets up an altar and sacrifices burnt offerings and dances about it. Moses destroys the golden calf and commands the Levites to kill the offenders, which they do (Ex. 32:20, 27-28), to which the Lord adds a plague (32:35).

The demonstration of God's presence and power through fire of several kinds is evident at various stages of the making of the covenant at Sinai. See Exodus 19:16, 18; 20:18; 24:17. The same is true of the cloud (Ex. 19:9, 16; 24:15, 16; 33:9) though its function is a bit different. At Sinai the cloud represented the presence of God and confirmed God's special relationship to Moses. On Mt. Carmel the cloud marked God's answer to prayer, signaling the coming storm. In so doing, the cloud served to confirm Elijah's prophetic relationship with God, as did also the fire on the altar.

All these parallels between the Sinaitic covenant and the several renewals of it make clear the covenant renewal nature of the contest on Mt. Carmel. Baalism had been successfully challenged and exposed and the reality of God was now known by the Israelites, who in awe declared allegiance to Him. An event of divine covenant had been established in Israel comparable to the covenant of Sinai.

The Prophets at Mt. Carmel

An important feature of the contest was the fundamental difference between the nature of prophecy in the worship of Baal and that associated with the Lord God of Israel.

The prophets of Baal are well known from the Old Testament and from Canaanite literature as claimants of revelations from their deity and as wonder workers, especially in the realm of rainmaking.

Artistic representations of Baal show him with a war club in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other. Divination has to do with the skills of obtaining knowledge about future events. Nothing in the contest bears upon their arts of divination, though the prophets of Baal appear quite confident as they enter the contest. The crux of the trial is power, the power to do the spectacular.

Like the Israelites, the worshipers of Baal offered bulls as burnt offerings on stone altars, but it was not usual for them to worship without carved images of Baal and live coals present for the sacrifice. Yet, Canaanite myths relate how Baal used magic to perform many remarkable feats. Having mythical tales about magic and having to produce fire at the spur of the moment are not the same. The Baal worshipers were bold enough to try, and engaging in their usual limping dance, then their desperate act of cutting their flesh, they hoped sympathetic magical powers would be released so unnatural fire would result. Elijah well knew that their magic could not be effective without trickery and deception, so he sprung the test on them at the last moment. These prophets did not have time for deceptive preparations, they did not have their idols present, and the eyes of perhaps several thousand people were observing their every move. Magic cannot produce wonders under such circumstances. They prophesied, but it was a frenzy, instead of a proclaimed message.

In contrast, Elijah was a true prophet of the God of Israel. Under oath, he predicted the drought, a challenge to the storm producing powers of Baal, and did it in the presence of a mighty king (17:1). He predicted the continuous supply of flour and oil (17:14), and the soon coming of the storm (18:41). The latter is clearly based on a revealed word of the Lord (18:1). The prediction in 17:14 begins with "For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says," which means Elijah was a messenger of a word received from the Lord (cf. 17:16b and 24b). The first prediction was based on his servant relationship to the Lord, which means Elijah's word had come from the Lord.

Elijah was a messenger of the Lord's messages and he was also a prosecutor of the Lord's court. The prophet's first message was a pronouncement of judgment, an expression of the anger of the Lord. As the Lord's legal representative, he possessed authority and did not hesitate to give commands, even to the king. He also was an intercessor, taking on himself the burdens of the widow (17:19-21) and the destiny of his people at the drenched altar, "so these people

will know . . .” (18:37) and be converted. He persevered in prayer that God’s mercy be evident in the giving of rain (18:42-44), and that he, himself, might gain a new understanding of his mission (19:4, 10, 14), for he was grappling with despair.

The wonders that accompanied his ministry were not his own acts, they were acts of the Lord. He was fed at Kerith by the ravens the Lord had promised. The continuous supply of flour and oil were fulfillments of God’s word (17:16). The restoration of the boy to life was the Lord’s answer to prayer, not a magical result of Elijah’s body touching the boy’s body. The fire fell in answer to prayer because the Lord chose to demonstrate His reality (18:38), and the storm came in God’s answer to prayer and in fulfillment of promise (18:1, 44). The final wonder was to make clear to the prophet that the Lord must not be identified with any natural display of power, not even fire; but, that He comes by means of a gentle whisper, a voice to the inner being.

Elijah was a human being. He suffered the pangs of doubt (17:20) and felt the grip of despair (19:4; cf. James 5:17). Yet, once he knew the will of his Lord, he was a messenger with indomitable courage, an obedient servant.

What Does This Mean to Us?

The answer to this question would depend on where we may live in the world today. Christians in Oriental countries that are polytheistic, as in Baalism, or in communistic countries where atheism holds power, would apply the truths of the event on Mt. Carmel in different ways. We who experience the pluralism of America need to sort out applicable truths in another manner.

We know nothing, experientially, of a government headed by a royal family of great power, though we do know of governmental agencies who seem to encroach on religious freedoms. Generally speaking, numerous deities, idols, outdoor altars and burnt offerings are foreign to us, though temples dedicated to Oriental deities are increasing in number, and interest in polytheism seems to be growing. For decades occult practices have had a behind-closed-doors existence, but are now openly publicized in the media, involving people of all ages in its arts.

Ways of worshiping the true God differ from Elijah’s time. No longer are stone altars and sacrificed animals accepted in our worship services. Public execution of enemies of the faith has been set aside in favor of loving our enemies. Nor is the stress primarily on the

God of Israel. Rather, the emphasis is on the God of the universe, the triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, revealed in the New Testament.

There are truths regnant in both the context and exegetical passages we have discussed which are applicable to people in all ages, in all nations, in all situations.

Fundamental to our faith is the truth that the Lord God is not to be identified with any human being, any natural object, or any natural power. God is creator of all these aspects of nature and sovereign over all. His reality renders all polytheistic deities and atheistic theories false. A naturalistic humanism that would equate nature with deity must be challenged; and so must a government that would control and persecute religious faith and practice. God alone must be Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

God's people must be challenged to choose between the prevailing and aggressive cultures of our day, and loyalty to the God revealed in the Scriptures. All must be urged to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to perform His own kinds of wonders in individuals and in the body of Christ, the church. All must witness publicly to their commitment to Jesus Christ, the revealed Son who was born, lived, died and arose again for the salvation of all who receive Him as Savior.

The messenger of the Lord must know the written word of God and know the life-changing encounter that changes the inner being and lays upon the soul a fresh word of the Lord for the present evil age. The true servant will be confident like Elijah in the authoritative source of the message and proclaim it with courage, seeking the conversion of many to God. Though, like Elijah, the mind may be puzzled by the way things are going, and even clouded by feelings of loneliness and despair, the Spirit will be open to the visitation of angels and the gentle whisper. The presence of God will be felt anew and broader horizons of service will be revealed. The Lord's promises will be fulfilled and excitement and courage surge through the soul. ■

Footnotes

¹Representative dates for Ahab's reign are 874-853 B.C. by Leon Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1971, p. 310; and 869-

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850 B.C. by John Bright, *A History of Israel*. Phil: The Westminster Press. 1972. p. 480.

²John Bright gives the year as 922, but Leon Wood prefers 933 B.C.

³The accounts of these events can be found in I Kings 15:25-31; 16:8-20.

⁴This data is based on a statement in the Moabite Stone which is translated in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1969. p. 320.

⁵For more detail see John Bright, *Ibid.*, 1972. pp. 236-245; and, Leon Wood, *Ibid.*, pp. 308-315.

⁶Note the reference to the Patriarchs in Exodus 2:24; 3:6, 15; 4:5 and 33:1 in the context of the Exodus from Egypt and the events at Sinai.

⁷This phrase occurs in the Sinai context in Exodus 6:7; 16:12; 18:17 and in many other passages. See a concordance.

⁸See the excellent treatment of this word by A. J. Heschel, *The Prophets*. New York: Harper and Row, Pub. 1962, pp. 57-60.

⁹See the phrase, "my servants the prophets," in II Kings 9:7; 17:13, 23; 21:10; 24:2; Ezra 9:11; Jeremiah 7:25; 24:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15; Ezekiel 38:17; Daniel 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7; Zechariah 1:6, and other similar phrases. See a concordance.

¹⁰Note the several forms of fire in relationship to God's acts at Sinai (Ex. 19:16, 18; 20:18; 24:17, 18).

¹¹The basic law is Deuteronomy 13:5 and 18:20 which is in a book organized after the pattern of ancient covenants, both as a whole and in some of its chapters (cf. 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 29). The book is dated early.

¹²Compare Micah 3:8 and a similar statement in Zechariah 4:6.