

Elijah
March 28, 2021
I Kings 18:5-18

We finally come to Elijah. When we started this study of prophets, it seemed inevitable that we should include Elijah. Of all the various prophets, Elijah seems the most prototypical – he sort of sets our expectations of what a prophet should be and do. Elijah is one of just two people mentioned in the Bible as rising to Heaven without dying. He was taken up in a whirlwind (*II Kings* 2:11). Also, it was prophesied that Elijah would come again before the Messiah. Even now, at Passover, the Jews pour a “Cup of Elijah,” should the prophet come to join them in the celebration. So, Elijah’s role in Israelite faith and history, and in Judaism, is very important. Yet, there is no book named for him, since he is one of the “former” prophets in the books *Joshua* to *II Kings*. Those books were considered part of “The Law and The Prophets,” the Jewish Scriptures, in Jesus’s time.

Elijah’s story spans *I Kings* 17:1 to *II Kings* 2:15. This is coincident with and extends a little longer than the reign of King Ahab of Israel, and his wife Queen Jezebel. Ahab, the son of Omri, came to the throne in 874 B.C. He took as wife Princess Jezebel of Sidon, the same place as the modern Sidon in Lebanon. Phoenician culture and Canaanite culture were essentially the same.

Jezebel worshiped Baal, as well as the rest of the Canaanite pantheon. She may have been a priestess of Baal. Marrying the daughter of a neighboring king was good politics. For Ahab, it meant becoming an ally of King Ethbaal of Sidon. (Notice Ethbaal’s name – derived from Baal.) Such a marriage meant becoming one family – treaties were in effect covenants of a family relationship, sometimes as an inferior, sometimes as equals. That meant shared religion as well. This is why the Assyrian treaties with vassal states required the adoption of Assyrian religion. It is why Solomon built temples for the gods of his heathen wives, daughters of neighboring kings. In a Canaanite context, this was no problem; you just added another god and another temple to the capitol city, Samaria in the case of King Ahab of Israel. That was what Ahab did. **“He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. And Ahab made an Asherah [idol].”** (*I Kings* 16:32-33a). Do you recall the curse Joshua laid upon anyone who would rebuild the city of Jericho? Well, it was rebuilt under Ahab’s reign, by someone named Hiel of Bethel. As part of the heathen consecration of the city (wall) and its gates, Hiel’s own two sons Abiram and Segub were sacrificed. (*I Kings* 16:34).

As an aside, Jezebel's niece fled from her brother and helped build Carthage. She is the Dido of *Dido and Aeneas*. Jezebel's daughter Athaliah became Queen of Judah, and if anything, was perhaps more evil than her mother (*II Kings* 11:1-16).

The best illustration of Queen Jezebel in action is the story of Naboth's Vineyard, *I Kings* 21. I suspect that this story may be out of place; it seems unlikely that Elijah could confront the king directly without being executed after Jezebel's declaration of war on him in *I Kings* 19:2. Seemingly this would logically precede the drought and famine that begin in Chapter 17. In *I Kings* 21, we see Ahab look at the nice vineyard next to his palace in Jezreel. He'd like to buy it, but Naboth doesn't want to sell. It's been in his family for generations. Poor Ahab! In vs. 4 ff. we read, **“And Ahab went into his house vexed and sullen ... And he lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food.”**

Enter Jezebel. **“Why is your spirit so vexed that you eat no food?”** (v. 5)
Ahab explains his sad plight.

Jezebel says, **“Do you not now govern Israel? Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.”** (vs 7)

So, Jezebel concocts false charges against Naboth for having cursed God and the king. Naboth is framed, found guilty, and stoned. Now Jezebel was able to go to her dear Ahab and say, **“Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead.”** So, Ahab took possession. Dear sweet Jezebel had taken care of things for him. After all, Ahab was an oriental potentate! Why should he not have whatever he wanted?

That's not the end of the story. Elijah confronts Ahab and condemns him, saying from the LORD, **“In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood.”** (vs. 19) More so, Ahab's whole house is condemned. (vs.21 ff.) Ahab repented after hearing Elijah's words (vs. 27), and Elijah heard from God that the punishment would fall after Ahab's days, during the days of his son instead.

So, with that in mind, we return to Chapter 17 where Elijah enters the narrative:

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.” (I Kings 17:1)

Then, Elijah left and hid, for a while being brought food by ravens. The drought got so bad that the brook where he was hiding dried up. Elijah then found refuge with a poor widow in the town of Zarephath in Sidon, the very country Jezebel came from! After three years of famine, a long time, the LORD told Elijah to return to Israel, and Ahab, and that he would again send rain. (*I Kings 18:1*) That leads us into today's lesson.

It is interesting that here we meet the prophet Obediah. This is not the Obediah of the book of that same name in the Bible; that Obediah is much later. Here we see that Obediah is cooperating with Ahab as his chief steward to help save the horses and mules during the famine. He has also hidden away 100 "prophets" of The LORD and kept them fed. These were men who roamed Israel or attended to various shrines to The LORD. Jezebel had "cut them off," presumably meaning from any support, and perhaps also killing many of them, hence the need to hide. So, it's interesting, that in the same time and place, we see Elijah as a prophet confronting Ahab, while Obediah is working cooperatively, doing what he can to good effect. Each was called by The LORD in a different way, we may suppose. Nevertheless, Obediah is fearful of his life, if he tells Ahab that Elijah is back. Messengers bringing bad news in antiquity were often killed.

When Ahab meets Elijah, he greets him with the words, **"Is it you, you troubler of Israel?"** Ahab puts the blame for the famine on Elijah, not the LORD. In Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, Jezebel similarly accuses Elijah of, "calling down a famine upon the land." This is an authentic pagan viewpoint. The forces and effects of nature were not understood. Various gods were believed to be in charge of different domains. Baal was the god of thunder and rainfall. His symbol was the bull, in which form he fertilized the clouds so that rain would fall. The trick of paganism was to know how to manipulate the gods into doing what you wanted done. After all, the gods cared nothing for humanity. The job of the pagan priests was to know the ceremonies by which the gods would be persuaded, or forced, to do what was needed, often by emulating "in worship" what was wanted from the god. Of course, the gods might want sacrifices too, the more valuable the better.

From Ahab's and Jezebel's perspective, Elijah had done something to manipulate The LORD to cause the drought and famine. Just as their worship of Baal was supposed to get him to give abundant rainfall. The presence of the drought and famine was a demonstration of Baal's powerlessness, and of God's

power. Now, Elijah was appearing to demonstrate that the LORD could make it rain, too, even though Baal couldn't.

Elijah called for Ahab to bring the prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel for a showdown. The prophets of Baal called for fire from heaven to burn the sacrifice they had prepared, but none fell. Then Elijah called on God to send fire to burn the water-soaked sacrifice that he had prepared. Fire fell and consumed the sacrifice (as lightning, perhaps?). That was followed by a tremendous storm; rain had again come to Israel.

The basic sin of Israel from the time of the Judges to the destruction of Jerusalem was idolatry. That is, the Israelites failed to obey the First Commandment of their covenant with the LORD, who had brought them out of Egypt and given them a land of their own. They may have worshiped the LORD, but not exclusively, even to the time of King Josiah, as we saw last week. They may have thought, "What harm can it do to worship Baal? That's just another way to get it to rain." Or, "We really have to worship the Queen of Heaven, or the Assyrians will come and do terrible things to us." This way of seeing the world put humanity at the top of the Universe. It is they who manipulate the gods. The gods just have to be properly controlled. The King or High Priest was in charge of doing that. He was not accountable to anybody. Jezebel's father was both – he was originally a priest of Astarte who murdered [the king?] and became king-priest of Tyre [and Sidon], as related in Josephus's history). Israel's god was fundamentally different. He was beyond manipulation. Attempting to do so like the pagans was idolatry. An example was the golden calves set up by King Jeroboam for the Israelites to worship so they need not go to Jerusalem in Judah (*I Kings* 12:28,29). Being willing to worship other gods was a denial of the all-powerful true God with whom the Israelites had made their covenant. Or a belief that he could so be manipulated.

Ultimately the problem of paganism and idolatry wasn't solved in the days of Israel. That was beyond what either the northern Israelite kingdom could do, or the southern Kingdom of Judah. Through Elijah, God reached out to Ahab. It seemed at some points that Ahab really might turn his heart back to the LORD, as after the demonstration at Mount Carmel, and even after Naboth's vineyard. But it was not to be. Later prophets in Israel typically did not go and challenge the king as Elijah had. Elisha was often a friend to the king. Consider Amos and Hosea. Their messages were to the people, not the king. So, in a sense Elijah failed. The Kingdom of Israel, the northern kingdom, perished. That was the "ten lost tribes."

Judah failed ultimately too, a bit over 100 years later. But as they went into exile, they found God went with them, and blessed them with prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah of the Exile. When the Jews were finally reestablished in their own land after the Exile, the one error they did not make was idolatry. They didn't return to worshipping other gods in the way they had worshiped the Canaanite deities.

I think the lesson writer put the matter very well. "The bottom line is that throughout history God's people would rather be God than worship God." (p. 23) This is our condition even today. We no longer see people bowing down to material idols in the shape of a supposed god believed to have powers in nature. But humans have constructed all sorts of other gods who are supposed to explain things and can be manipulated to make people happy. In this country, the power of the state, especially the federal government, may be our most dangerous idol. If only we sacrifice sufficient freedoms, resources and power to it, the government can fix every problem, including poverty, racism, economic inequity, and disease. Maybe even war, once one big world government is established. Doesn't that sound like what Communism promised? That faith in the power of government seems to be the religion of our times, in this country, that competes for attention with God. Just as for the priest – king of Sidon and his daughter the Queen of Israel, ultimate power comes to the man or woman ruthless, determined, and lucky enough to get to the top and then crush any opposition. Just how benevolent will such a ruler ultimately be? We have seen people like Hitler, Stalin, Mao and numerous others get to that position, within a thankfully limited portion of the world. We know what it looks like.

The author points out that Elijah, for all his strength in Chapters 17-18, is a broken man in Chapter 19, having fled to the mountain of God, seeing himself a failure. But, he had done what God commanded, and what God needed him to do. Elijah didn't fail in God's eyes. He wasn't alone, either. On the mountain, God answered Elijah, and gave Elijah three things to do that would put Israel on the path God decreed. God remained in control. He protected Elijah. Ultimately, His will was done, and through Jesus, has come to be a blessing available to all. This long journey of faith has not been an easy one.

Prayer: Gracious God, give us the courage to follow you when the forces around us would mock that decision. Empower us to trust in your omnipotence, as Elijah did. Amen.