

1 Kings 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Kings chapter 18 After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.

So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.

And Ahab said to Obadiah, Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals. So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him.

And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, Is it you, my lord Elijah? And he answered him, It is I. Go tell your lord, behold, Elijah is here.

[1 : 04] And he said, How have I sinned that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab to kill me? As the lord your god lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you.

And when they would say, He is not here, he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation that they had not found you. And now you say, Go tell your lord, behold, Elijah is here.

And as soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the lord will carry you I know not where. And so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the lord from my youth.

Has it not been told, my lord, what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the lord? How I hid a hundred men of the lord's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water?

And now you say, Go tell your lord, behold, Elijah is here, and he will kill me. And Elijah said, As the lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.

[2 : 02] So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, Is it you, you troubler of Israel?

And he answered, I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the lord and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.

So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel, and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, How long will you go limping between two different opinions?

If the lord is God, follow him. But if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the lord.

But Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it.

[3 : 10] And I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the lord. And the god who answers by fire, he is God.

And all the people answered, It is well spoken. Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, Choose for yourselves one bull, and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, and put no fire to it.

And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it, and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, O Baal, answer us. But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep, and must be awakened.

And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation.

[4 : 13] But there was no voice, no one answered, no one paid attention. Then Elijah said to all the people, Come near to me. And all the people came near to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down.

Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be your name. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord.

And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seers of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. And he said, Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood.

And he said, Do it a second time. And they did it a second time. And he said, Do it a third time. And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near, and said, O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.

[5 : 25] Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and said, The Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God. And Elijah said to them, Seize the prophets of Baal, let not one of them escape.

And they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slaughtered them there. And Elijah said to Ahab, Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.

So Ahab went up to eat and to drink, and Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea.

And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again, seven times. And at the seventh time he said, Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand rising from the sea.

[6 : 34] And he said, Go up, say to Ahab, prepare your chariot, and go down, lest the rain stop you. And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain.

And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. Chapter 17 of 1 Kings began with the word of Elijah the prophet, declaring that there would be a drought until his word ended it.

In chapter 18, it begins with the word of the Lord declaring the end of the drought. The Lord himself calls time upon the judgment that Elijah has zealously initiated against Israel.

In the previous chapter, he was like Noah in the ark, cocooned and protected, the ravens bringing him food, and then later on, the widow of Zarephath feeding him with her jug of oil and her jar of flour.

So Elijah goes to present himself to Ahab. However, Elijah, as one who has been given power to perform miracles by God, doesn't just want to give up in his zeal, he wants a showdown, and so, with no evidence that he has given word to do so by the Lord, he initiates a showdown with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel.

[7 : 46] Once again, this is not an example of going against the word of the Lord, rather it's taking the initiative with an authority that has been granted to him by the Lord as a miracle worker and prophet. The famine at this point was wiping out human and animal life in the land, and Ahab and his servant Obadiah had to go throughout the land, dividing the land between them to find some grass for the horses to survive.

We saw allusions to Noah in the preceding chapter, and there are allusions that continue into this chapter. While Elijah is all on his lonesome in his cocoon that's protected by the Lord being served

by the animals, Obadiah is out there in the judgment of the drought itself, trying to protect the servants of the Lord, the prophets, and also the horses.

This contrast isn't exactly a favourable one for Elijah. Elijah, whose name means my God is the Lord, is greatly driven by zeal for the Lord. He is like the son who wants to avenge his father that has been bad-mouthed by one of his schoolmates.

While there might be a praiseworthy commitment to his father and a concern for his father's name, such zeal can easily be driven by a person's own pride. Elijah has notions that he is all alone and wants to call down the heavens from above to judge the earth, and yet it's clear by the case of Obadiah, whose name means servant of the Lord, that that is not in fact the case.

There are other prophets of the Lord that are being preserved by him, and many of the Lord's creatures are also being threatened by the drought that Elijah has brought upon the land. Elijah is a heroic prophet, but as we will see in the next chapter, his zeal needs to be broken down to size.

[9 : 21] The Lord has to challenge him in his particular way. Ahab and Obadiah searching throughout the land for grass might remind us of the raven and the dove that are circling round trying to find somewhere to land after the flood.

While the birds were looking for dry ground, here Ahab and Obadiah are searching for grass, something that can give life to the animals, and their concern for the animals here should also make us think of the story of Noah.

Obadiah, as a courageous person, has hidden 100 prophets, 50 to a cave, and he's fed them with bread and water. This should, as Rabbi David Foreman observes, remind us of the ravens of the preceding chapter.

Just as the ravens were ministers of God to the need of Elijah, so Obadiah is a minister of God to the needs of these 100 prophets. Elijah makes himself discoverable, and Obadiah is clearly afraid of him.

He believes it's quite likely that Elijah will just go his way and leave him to suffer the consequences. He's a faithful servant of the Lord, a servant in one of the most difficult situations of all, in the house of Ahab himself.

[10 : 24] However, this maverick miracle worker and prophet Elijah does not necessarily seem to care for anyone beyond himself. He's gone the last few years bringing great judgment upon the land, existing in his own cocoon, and while Obadiah has been struggling to protect the prophets and to feed the horses and to do all these other things, Elijah has been nowhere to be seen.

He is not sure that he can trust Elijah at this point. But Elijah assures him, and Ahab goes and meets Elijah, and as he meets him, he greets him as, you troubler of Israel.

Elijah throws the accusation back. It is Ahab, in fact, who is the troubler of Israel through his idolatry. It was not, in fact, Elijah that brought the drought upon the land so much as Ahab by his idolatry bringing the curse of the covenant upon the people.

We might also, as Rabbi David Foreman notes, see in these words troubler of Israel a reference back to a previous event. It's the story of Achan. Achan is the one other character in scripture who's referred to in this particular way as a troubler of Israel.

And he's referred to in that way after he has taken some of the devoted things from the destruction of Jericho. Why might that be significant? What happens immediately before Elijah comes on the scene?

[11 : 37] Hiel rebuilds the city of Jericho. As part of the re-canonisation of Israel, this is the climactic sign. They're rebuilding that place that was supposed to be a memorial to God's destruction of the pagans that pre-existed them in the land.

This is an Achan-like sin if Achan took of the devoted things in the city of Jericho. In rebuilding Jericho, Hiel and Ahab are also taking of devoted things.

If the story of Noah and the ark ended up on Mount Ararat, the story of Elijah and the drought ends up on Mount Carmel. Elijah arranges this seemingly on his own initiative as a grand showdown with the prophets of Baal.

He gathers together the prophets of Baal and Asherah and he sets up a test designed to prove once and for all that the Lord is the true God. As with the drought, this is a challenge to the great god Baal.

Baal is supposed to be the god of the storm, the god who brings thunder and lightning, the god who brings rain. He can't bring rain. The land has been in drought for many years and now he will be tested again.

[12 : 40] Can he answer by fire? The prophets of Baal end up making a fool of themselves and Elijah treats them as objects of ridicule. He speaks of Baal, their great deity.

Either he is musing or he is relieving himself or he is on a journey or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened. They challenge the honour of the Lord and he's going to challenge the honour of their god.

As they are whipped up into an ever greater frenzy to try and get Baal to respond, they make a humiliating spectacle of themselves. Like Noah built an altar for burnt offerings on Mount Ararat, Elijah re-establishes the altar of the Lord on Mount Carmel for his sacrifice of the burnt offering and he makes things hard for himself.

He pours out twelve jars full of water upon the burnt offering and the water fills the trench around the altar of twelve stones too. Then Elijah calls upon the Lord and the Lord answers his prayer and fire comes down from the Lord and consumes the burnt offering, the wood and the stones and the dust and licks up the water in the trench too.

Perhaps we might see this as a climactic symbol of the whole drought. You have the twelve stones representing Israel and you have the twelve jars of water, the rains that pour upon the nation over the course of the year and the trench as the rivers that irrigate it.

[13 : 57] The bull represents the whole congregation and the fire of the Lord comes down and consumes everything. What was once well watered has become as dry as a bone. Elijah wants to end the drought with a bang and the response of the people is encouraging.

They respond with a declaration of the Lord's sovereignty, the Lord, he is God, the Lord, he is God and then they kill the prophets of Baal. It seems as if the victory of Elijah has been achieved, that in his zeal he has effected the reformation of the nation, yet he will soon find himself most disappointed as no such reformation is forthcoming.

Elijah then instructs Ahab to leave because the rain is about to come and when Ahab leaves to eat and drink, Elijah goes to the top of Mount Carmel with his servant and he prays.

Once again, we have things that might remind us of the story of Noah and the raven and the dove. Like Noah sent up the birds, Elijah sends up his servant to look for rain, to scan the horizon to see if any cloud is to be seen.

Much as the sending of the birds occurred over periods of seven days, Elijah's servant is sent seven times until finally he returns with the news that he has seen a cloud like a man's hand.

[15 : 06] Ahab is instructed to prepare his chariot and to make haste. The heavens grow black and there is a tremendous rainstorm. Ahab rides his chariot to Jezreel but by the power of the Lord, Elijah runs ahead of him.

Perhaps we are supposed to see something of the pursuit of the Israelites by the chariots of Pharaoh in this particular event. A question to consider.

Elijah is a zealous prophet of the Lord who wants a great public showdown with the enemies of the Lord that will prove once and for all that the Lord is God. Obadiah, by contrast, is a faithful servant of the Lord who is a deep operative within the court of Ahab.

His work is not served by great showdowns but requires secrecy and care. What might the relationship between the characters of Obadiah and Elijah have to teach us today about different forms of service in a hostile society?