

Elijah, 1 Kings 17-18. Augusta. October- November 2011. (3) Reading : 1 Kings 17.17-18.21.

This evening, we continue our studies in the life of Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 17 and 18, sitting in again as spectators to watch how the Lord further set about discrediting the claims made for Ba'al by his followers, by demonstrating that He – the Lord – and only He – was the true and living God. Our reading begins at verse 17 of chapter 17, and we shall continue our reading for now down to the middle of verse 2 of the following chapter.

[Read 1 KINGS 17. 17 to 18. 2a.]

We noted in our first study on Monday that Elijah's announcement in verse 1 was in effect a declaration of war – not a declaration of war by Elijah on Jezebel not on Jezebel's husband Ahab – not on Jezebel's father IttoBaal, but a declaration of war by Elijah's God, Jehovah, on Jezebel's god – on Ba'al!

At the end of last evening's meeting, we noted that, if the dry brook at Cherith in verse 7 declared, 'Round 1 to Jehovah!' – the well-fed family at Zarephath in verse 16 proclaimed 'Round 2 to Jehovah!'

And I closed by telling you that this evening it is very much a case of 'Seconds out – round three' – a round which occupies verses 17-24, and where we discover that the Lord continues to discredit all claims made for 'high and mighty Ba'al', providing still further proof that He – and He alone – is the true and living God.

Previously, we have seen Elijah standing before Ahab, hiding at the brook Cherith, and feeding the widow-woman and her household. In this section we shall see him raising her son back to life.

But let's not race ahead too quickly. First, verse 17 – which informs us that the young boy's sickness proved terminal – that it 'was so severe, that there was no breath left in him'. Illness had succeeded where famine had failed – the widow's son was *dead*.¹

Imagine his poor, distraught mother – having the means *to sustain life* – her small jar and the cruse – standing on her shelf ... while the victim *of death* – her only son² – lies in her bosom. And his sudden death (I say 'sudden death' because surely we can take it that had the lad become progressively sick, his mother would have sought Elijah's intervention at an earlier stage) ... And his sudden death was a particularly severe and painful blow to *this* mother – previously reduced to *widowhood* – and now bereft of anyone to preserve the name of her late husband on the earth. Which of us has not felt the pathos of Luke's description of the young man from Nain, soon to be raised to life by our Lord, 'the only son of his mother; and she was a widow'?³

And can we not feel for this widow of Zarephath?

But what does this all mean? Has Jehovah *supplied the means to sustain life* only now to *cut off the very life He has sustained*.⁴ According to verse 12, the widow's very first recorded words were, 'As the Lord your God lives'. Doesn't the lad's sudden death call in question Jehovah's reputation as the living God?

What is God doing? Is He mocking the widow? Was Jehovah then – as the pagan gods the widow had once worshipped – was He also changeable, capricious and untrustworthy? And what part has His prophet played in this?

'What have I to do with you,⁵ O man of God?', she cried out – probably meaning, 'What have you against me?' or 'Is this the result of my association with you?, O man of God' – 'have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?', v. 18.⁶ Haunted perhaps by memories of her pagan past, she may have feared that, as God had shut up heaven upon an *idolatrous* land through the prayer and word of His prophet, so too she, a former Ba'al-worshipper, was now suffering *at a personal level* on his account.^{7,8}

'Give me your son', Elijah asked, 'and he carried him up into the upper chamber where he abode', v. 19 – in all likelihood, a separate structure on the flat roof, as seems evident from the statement in verse 23 that he later came down from there *'into the house'* – this arrangement not only safeguarding the widow's privacy but safeguarding both his and her reputation.⁹

But, when Elijah disappeared with the body of her son, did the widow *believe* that Elijah's God could raise him back to life? The boy was dead – unquestionably dead – and, as far as we know from scripture, *no-one* had ever been raised from the dead before. *True*, Abraham had believed that, *if it came to it*, God *could* raise *his* son Isaac from death to life again, Heb. 11. 19. But it had *not* come to it – although the outcome did rather spoil the day for one hapless ram caught in a thicket by its horns. There was therefore no precedent. And yet, it may well be that the answer was 'yes' ... that 'yes', she *did* believe that Elijah's God could restore her son to life – for the writer to the Hebrews almost certainly had this woman in mind, together with the Shunammite of 2 Kings 4¹⁰, when he wrote, '*Through faith* ... women received their dead raised to life again', Heb. 11. 35 – in all likelihood, 'faith', I suspect, not only of His two prophets, Elijah and Elisha, but of the two mothers.

And if this was so, what *remarkable* faith that would have been. I guess that our Lord would have said to this mother, as He did those 900 years later to that other desperate *mother* from the same area of Tyre and Sidon, 'O woman great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire'.¹¹

But at this point, the narrative focuses – not on the widow – but on Elijah – who, we are told twice, 'cried' to the Lord.¹²

Indeed, the whole section from verse 18 to 24 has a very simple and symmetrical structure – which focuses attention onto these prayers of Elijah.¹³

First, Elijah pleaded the widow's cause – 'Have you brought evil – brought tragedy – on *the widow* – and, Lord, I know from your word your great concern for widows¹⁴ – and, Lord, have you brought calamity – not on *any* widow – but on *this* widow – the widow with whom – as instructed by you – I have been staying – and who has shown great kindness to me, your servant ... to slay her son?' ... echoing at the close the words of the widow to him in verse 18, 'to slay my son'.

What a great start – to so feel the distress of the widow as to put himself, as it were, in her position to plead her anguish and sorrow before God. We do well to remember that which Paul wrote concerning the human body – and by way of his application – the body of Christ, 'if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it'.¹⁵ Such an insight should bring much greater sympathy and sensitivity into our prayers for one another.

'Have you brought evil?', he asks – not, I note, 'Why have you brought evil?' – though clearly Elijah has no idea yet why this tragedy has been allowed to strike. As far as the prophet is concerned, his part is to *pray* – not to *pry*.

Even to the question, 'Have you brought ... ?' Elijah looks for, and waits for, no answer – but simply stretches (measures) himself on the lad three times¹⁶ – thoroughly identifying himself with the dead child¹⁷ – acting out also, I suspect, his recognition that, in the presence of death, he has no more strength in himself than the dead child has.¹⁸

According to the prevailing pagan mythology, during the dry seasons *and periods of prolonged drought*, Ba'al lay defeated and slain by Môt, the god of the Underworld, the King of Death. When confronted by Môt, must Jehovah, like Ba'al, bow the knee?¹⁹ He, Jehovah, had proved that He was able to work powerfully across the border from His land – outside the land of Israel – but was there not *one 'boundary'* (namely, death) which even He could not cross – was this the one *domain* over which He had no power?

After all, it was one thing for the Lord to rescue a child from *the jaws of death*, as He had in verses 8-16 – but it would be something very different for Him to rescue that child now that death had *clamped its jaws tight, and swallowed up its young victim*.²⁰

But, though *the child* is *dead*, and though *he* himself is *powerless*, Elijah is confident that *His God* is *neither dead nor powerless* – that the living God – who has proved, over a long time, that He is able to *sustain* life miraculously – is able also to *restore* life miraculously.²¹

As we noted just now, as far as we know from scripture, *no-one* had ever been raised from the dead before. But, though with no precedent to plead, Elijah prays a second time:²² 'O Lord my God, let this child's soul come into him again'.²³

Throughout the chapter, *Elijah* had responded to *the Lord's* word – for example, in verses 2-5, when *God* said, 'go ...hide yourself by the brook Cherith that is before Jordan ... *he* went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan' – and, in verses 9-10, when *God* said, 'Arise, go to Zarephath ... *he* arose and went to Zarephath'. But this time it is *Elijah* who speaks, and *the Lord* who responds to *his* word – 'Let this child's soul come into him again ... and the child's soul came into him again', vv. 21-22.

The Holy Spirit wants us to see that Elijah's word prevails with Jehovah just as Jehovah's word had prevailed with Elijah – indeed, perhaps, that Elijah's word prevails with Jehovah *because* Jehovah's word had first prevailed with Elijah. For this is the principle taught, not only in the Old Testament, as in the words of Solomon in Proverbs 28, 'If one turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination', but in the New Testament, courtesy of the apostle John in chapter 3 of his first letter, 'whatever we ask we receive from Him, *because* we keep His commandments and do those things which are pleasing in His sight'.²⁴ Well did Thomas Watson, the English Puritan, write, 'When people do not consider what God speaks to them in His word, God as little considers what they say to Him in prayer'.

And the sequel? The prophet, who had earlier said, 'Give me *your son*' and had carried a *lifeless* form to his lodging – now returns from his lodging with a *living* child, to say, with equal brevity, 'See, *your son* lives'.²⁵ It seems that Elijah was not the man to waste words before the widow, any more than before the king or God!

We have it on good authority that Elijah was a '*man of like passions to us*' – but here – confronted with this indisputable evidence of God's power – the widow is convinced beyond all doubt that Elijah is *also* a '*man of God*'.²⁶ And not only so, but that – not *his word* – but *the word of the Lord – of Jehovah – in his mouth* – is 'truth'²⁷ – is faithful, reliable, dependable, that is.^{28 29} For she knew that the power which raised her son carried the fingerprint of God.

And so, in marked contrast to the last verse of chapter 16, which draws attention to how 'the word of the Lord' was belittled and disregarded by an Israelite, in open defiance of God and His word as spoken through Joshua many centuries before, the last verse of chapter 17 draws attention to how 'the word of the Lord' spoken through Elijah was acknowledged and recognised by a gentile.³⁰

And so a chapter which opened with *the God of Israel who lives* closes with *the son of a widow who lives*. And the raising of this boy was a further slap in the face for Ba'al – speaking volumes – as it did – about Jehovah's superiority to Ba'al – for if, in verses 8-16, Jehovah had revealed Himself as victor over *dearth*, now, in verses 17-24, He reveals Himself as victor over *death*.³¹

Jezebel and all other worshippers of Ba'al believed that their god regularly returned to life from the clutches of Môt – the King of Death. But where was Ba'al when this widow's child needed restoration to life³² – and that only a stone's throw from the seat and centre of Ba'al's worship? The raising of the widow's son was proof positive that it was Jehovah and not Ba'al who exerted the power of life over death. And, as in the case of Lazarus some 900 years later, the boy's sickness proved to be, in the words of the Lord Jesus, '*not unto death*, but for the glory of God'.³³

And so the events recorded in chapter 17 served to expose Ba'al for the fake and fraud he was – demonstrating that 'mighty Ba'al' had no existence at all – that, in reality, there *was* no Ba'al – that Ba'al wasn't some inferior god – some lesser god – some second-rate god. No! Ba'al wasn't any kind of god! Ba'al was only a myth, a fake, some ghastly fairy-tale – a mere figment of the imagination of a vile and degraded pagan world.³⁴

And the events of chapter 17 demonstrated that Jehovah *alone* was God – was the only true and living God. For, if the dry brook at Cherith in verse 7 declared, 'Round 1 to Jehovah!' – if the well-fed family at Zarephath in verse 16 proclaimed 'Round 2 to Jehovah!' – then the raising to life of the widow's son in verse 22 positively thundered 'And Round 3 to Jehovah!'

And so to chapter 18.

As no doubt you noticed, I deliberately stopped our reading this evening at the middle of verse 2.

Those who were here for our first study will remember – I hope – that chapter 17 opened with a brief scene³⁵ which set the stage for the remainder of that chapter – a scene where Elijah suddenly leapt onto the page of scripture to confront Ahab king of Israel with the declaration that there was to be no more rain until he, Elijah, gave the word. And, in much the same way, the opening scene of chapter 18 sets the stage for what follows through the rest of the chapter.

And there are certain obvious links between these two opening scenes. For example, the first verse of chapter 17 announces, 'there shall not be dew nor *rain*', whereas the first verse of chapter 18 announces, 'I will *send rain*'. Then, in verse 3 of chapter 17, '*the word of the Lord came*' to Elijah, 'saying .. hide yourself by the brook Cherith' – following which we are told in verse 5 that he 'went and dwelt by the brook Cherith', whereas, as we read, chapter 18 opens when again '*the word of the Lord came* to Elijah ... saying ... 'Go (not 'hide yourself', but) show yourself to Ahab', following which we are told that 'Elijah went to show himself to Ahab'.

And before we read on, I want us to pause for a few minutes to ask ourselves what, in the light of what we read in verse 1, we would expect to happen next.

And I guess that, if we weren't so familiar with the events of the chapter – which must rank as one of the best known chapters in the Bible – we would probably expect Elijah now to return to Ahab's palace, and simply inform the king that the time was up – that the long drought which he (Elijah) had previously predicted in the name of the living Lord had totally discredited Ba'al and all the fancy claims made for him by his followers – and that, having made the point, the Lord was going, without any further ado, to send the much needed rain.

Well, wouldn't we have expected something along those lines?

But before I read on, I need to make *two* points, which may help us understand *why* this *didn't* happen, and why the events we find in the main section of our chapter *needed* to happen just as they did.³⁶

First, I doubt very much that it would have been *safe* for Elijah to return to Ahab's palace and confront the king again. For I suspect that, had he actually entered the palace precincts, there was a very real risk that Jezebel would have had him killed on sight.

We noted on Monday evening from the opening section of the *next* chapter – chapter 19 – that ... even though the Lord had by then demonstrated in the most dramatic fashion that He – Jehovah – and not Jezebel's 'Most Mighty Ba'al', was the only true and living God, and that Elijah truly was His servant (and, as I said then, I have my eye on the end of verse 36 of our chapter) ... and even though, courtesy of Ahab's blow by blow account of all that had taken place on Mount Carmel, Jezebel knew all this ... she still served Elijah notice of her intention to have him killed – just as previously, according to verses 4 and 13 of our chapter, she had slain all other prophets of the Lord on whom she could lay her hands.

As I said on Monday, my impression is that, as a devoted follower of Ba'al, Jezebel firmly believed that, even though Elijah had claimed that any future rainfall would come only 'according to his word', the *real* reason there had been no rain for several years was that her Mighty Ba'al had been enraged by Elijah's blasphemous claim, and that, in his anger, he (Ba'al) had withheld the rain. And so, if I am right, as Jezebel saw it, for her to have eliminated Elijah, far from extending the lengthy drought, would in fact have brought it to a speedy end.

Unless I am mistaken then, if Elijah is to 'show himself to Ahab'³⁷ as God commanded him, it will need to be *well away* from Ahab's palace – whether that of his *main* palace in the capital Samaria, or his *winter* palace at Jezreel, to which we find the king racing back at the end of the chapter – and well away from *Jezebel*. Hence the need for some kind of private meeting – the arrangements for which, as we shall shortly discover, occupy one third of the entire chapter, taking us right down to verse 16.

But I said that, before I read on, I need to make two points. And *the second*, and in one sense, by far *the more important* point, concerns the perception of the people if the Lord had, so to speak, simply 'turned the tap back on'.

For there was *the very real* danger that Jezebel and the prophets of Ba'al – who between them no doubt controlled whatever media existed in those days – would have claimed the credit for the reopened heavens for Ba'al – who, so the story put out would doubtless run, had graciously heard and responded to their prayers... and you may remember from our study last evening the claim made by the Ephesian historian Menander that a year-long drought in the area of Tyre around this time had been ended by the prayers of Jezebel's father, IttoBa'al.³⁸

Nor would Elijah have been able to point *publicly* to *the timing* of the rainfall as evidence that it had come, exactly as he had claimed it would some three and a half years ago, 'at his word'. For he had not then – according to chapter 17 verse 1 – set any timetable for the rain to return. And I reckon we can assume that Jezebel was sufficiently powerful to ensure that any message Elijah *now* relayed to Ahab *privately* would never make the NBC evening news!

And consequently the welcome rain *could* – and no doubt *would* – have been attributed, by at least *many* in Israel, to the power of Ba'al.

And so, although, as we have seen, on account of Jezebel's violent hostility, it would be necessary for Elijah to have some kind of private meeting with Ahab, that get-together could only serve as a pre-meeting – as the lead up to something far bigger.

For, before ever the rain came, there would need to be a public – a *very* public – showdown to prove beyond dispute which of the two claimants to the title was indeed the only true God – so that, *when* the heavens opened, there could be no argument as to *who* had opened them. Before that could ever happen, Ba'al must be totally - and unquestionably - discredited in the eyes of the entire nation.

And such a showdown would require a *very* public *arena*.

We shan't have time to consider the events which led to Elijah's face-to-face meeting with Ahab in verse 17, but, for the sake of the connection, we shall read through from verse 1.

[Read 1 Kings 18. 1-21.]

We will hold our reading there.

The impression from verses 15 and 16 is that Ahab went immediately to meet Elijah – probably to reduce the risk that Elijah would disappear again before the king reached him. In which case, Jezebel would, of course, have known nothing of the meeting, and would therefore have had no opportunity to order Elijah's death – even if, as I suppose, she wanted him dead.

And so we take up the story at verse 17, where Ahab accuses Elijah of being ‘he who troubles Israel’ – literally, ‘Is it you – the troubler of Israel?’ – ‘the disturber, the calamity-bringer of Israel?’³⁹ ... hardly the most respectful mode of address, and standing in marked contrast to that used only a short time before by Ahab’s God-fearing governor, Obadiah, ‘Is it you, my lord Elijah?’⁴⁰

Not that such verbal abuse of God’s servants is anything unusual. You may remember that the masters of the demon-possessed slave girl at Philippi spoke of Paul and Silas in a similar fashion ... ‘These men, being Jews’, they told the local magistrates, ‘do *exceedingly* trouble our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans’.⁴¹ And when God’s servants then moved on to Thessalonica, they were again regarded as troublemakers – this time by the Jews there – being branded those ‘who have *turned the world upside down*’.⁴² Nor did such accusations subside. Some years later, Christians were called ‘*haters of mankind*’.⁴³ Nor are such accusations by any means dead. The militant new atheism of Dawkins and Hitchens, the gay-lobby, and much of the media today are very quick to brand evangelical Christians as ‘troublemakers’.

Nor, indeed, were accusations of troublemaking limited to the Lord’s servants. I was interested to discover that the word used by Ahab here of Elijah is translated in the Greek Old Testament by the same word as the Jewish Chief Council used of our Lord Jesus Himself in Luke 23, ‘We found this fellow *perverting* the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar’.⁴⁴ In effect, therefore, our Lord Himself was labelled as one ‘that troubles Israel!’

So, when Ahab addressed Elijah as he did, the prophet stood in the very best of company.

It is possible, I suppose, that Ahab shared Jezebel’s likely view of events – that, because Elijah had insulted the storm-god Ba’al, all the problems which he (Ahab) and his people were currently suffering by way of drought and famine, far from being Jehovah’s doing, were the expression of Ba’al’s anger – and that Elijah was therefore responsible for all Israel’s ‘trouble’.

You may recall that, back in the days of Joshua, following the ‘fall’ of Jericho, Achan of the tribe of Judah had stolen some articles of spoil which had been consecrated to the Lord, which action had provoked the Lord to anger and led to Israel’s unexpected and humiliating defeat at Ai, with the loss of thirty-six Israelite warriors. When Achan was identified by God as the culprit, Joshua confronted him with the words, ‘Why have you brought *trouble* (the same word as in our verse) on us? The Lord shall bring *trouble* on you this day’ – following which, Achan, together with his family, was put to death.⁴⁵ ‘And you, Elijah’, Ahab was saying in effect, ‘are a modern day Achan’.⁴⁶

But Elijah was having none of that – and without hesitation threw the charge back at the king. ‘*I* have not troubled Israel, but *you*’ – ‘It is not me, but you, O king, who is the present-day Achan’.⁴⁷

And the Holy Spirit has made it abundantly clear that Ahab was most certainly the trouble-maker – Elijah was, if anything, the trouble-shooter – on a mission to identify and to correct the sins and idolatry of God’s people.

Did you notice the change from plural to singular in Elijah’s accusation in verse 18? ‘I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father’s house, in that *ye* (plural) have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and *thou* (singular) hast followed Baalim (‘followed Ba’al’, that is⁴⁸)’.

Elijah’s point being that Israel’s earlier kings – from its first king Jeroboam onwards – together with the people at large – had broken God’s commandments, in particular by their worship of the calves at Dan and Bethel, but that Ahab had, as noted in the closing section of chapter 16, added the far more serious sin of introducing the worship of Ba’al into Israel.

But having charged Ahab with his sin, Elijah proceeds in verse 19 to command him what he must do. Indeed, from the way the prophet speaks to Ahab, anyone would think that their roles were reversed, and that *he*, Elijah, was king, and that Ahab was *his* subject and servant.⁴⁹

‘You have followed *Ba’al*’, Elijah charged Ahab. ‘Now’, he says in effect, ‘speaking of Ba’al ... send, and gather to me’ – note that ‘to *me*’ – ‘all Israel’ – the representatives of all Israel, that is; its leaders, elders, and other influential people⁵⁰ – ‘at mount Carmel, and the four hundred and fifty prophets of *Ba’al*, and the four hundred prophets of Asherah [A-SHARE-AH]⁵¹ ... rendered ‘the groves’ in the KJV ... Asherah being, as we noted on a previous occasion, the principal goddess of Tyre and Sidon.⁵² Which prophets, Elijah reminded Ahab, ‘eat at Jezebel’s table’ – that is, ‘those prophets, who, as you know well, Ahab, not only enjoy royal sanction but are supported by the state’.⁵³

Clearly the time has come for a showdown, but Elijah doesn’t spell even that much out to Ahab. Making no mention whatever of any fire contest, he offers Ahab no hint *why* he must gather Israel to mount Carmel. Simply that he is to do it. Although, I guess, the specific inclusion of the prophets of Ba’al and Asherah should have suggested to Ahab that Elijah was planning a confrontation of some kind.⁵⁴

Yet, whatever Ahab made of Elijah's demand, he meekly complies with the prophet's bidding. And so, everyone to Mount Carmel. But why Mount Carmel? Ahab may not ask, but the careful reader of scripture surely does.

I begin by noting that Carmel itself is more a ridge than a single mountain, extending some twelve miles in length.

I understand that, at its eastern end, there is a natural platform⁵⁵, some 1,000 feet above the Kishon below⁵⁶ – and that, apparently, this tableland boasts a spring of water less than 100 yards away – a spring which is said to flow even in the driest seasons – and which, in all likelihood, I guess, supplied the water of which we read later in the chapter.⁵⁷

Although the Mediterranean Sea isn't visible from the plateau itself, it can be seen from a point some 300 feet higher – a detail which dovetails perfectly with the account of Elijah's prayer at the end of the chapter, especially his command to his servant in verse 43, 'Go up now, look toward the sea'.⁵⁸

The plateau can easily accommodate many hundreds of spectators – and, because of its elevation, is easily visible from considerable distances, including, for example, from Nazareth, some twenty miles away ... about which (Nazareth) no doubt we will all be hearing more in less than two months time. Indeed, it is highly likely that the 'fire of the Lord' which fell later could be seen by Jezebel from her palace window at Jezreel⁵⁹ – some 17 miles away.⁶⁰

For this reason alone, Carmel was the ideal site for a public contest between Ba'al and the God of Israel. But there was far more to Elijah's choice than just its visibility.

The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III reigned from the days of Ahab to the days of Jehu, king of Israel.. In his annals, Shalmaneser referred to Carmel as 'Mount Ba'al of the Headland'⁶¹. The actual quote is 'I went up to Mount Ba'al of the Headland, which is over against the sea and over against the land of Tyre'. It was there, he recorded, that he received tribute both from the king of Tyre⁶² and from Jehu king of Israel.⁶³ Clearly therefore the seaward end of Carmel at least was recognised as then belonging to Tyre and Sidon – and therefore as Ba'al's territory.⁶⁴ Even though, according to Joshua 19. 26, the Carmel ridge had once formed part of the inheritance of the tribe of Asher⁶⁵, it was now 'on the border between Israel and Tyre'⁶⁶ – and, indeed, although it had once boasted an altar of Jehovah, it had more recently been taken over by the worshippers of Ba'al.⁶⁷

For many centuries the ancients had considered Carmel a sacred spot. Indeed, it was identified as such by the Egyptians some six centuries before the days of Elijah.⁶⁸ And scholars point to evidence that, in more recent times, the worshippers of Ba'al had come to regard Carmel as sacred to Ba'al, on account of the storms of lightning and thunder which were common there – which they viewed as manifestations of Ba'al's power.

And so, in his choice of Carmel as the battlefield between Jehovah and Ba'al, Elijah was giving the prophets of Ba'al the decided advantage of fighting on their own ground. And, since Carmel was very much Ba'al's 'home turf', Ba'al's prophets enjoyed what today is called 'home court advantage'.

Verse 20 tells us that Ahab did just as he was told. And so, with 'the stage now set', we are ready for 'the action to begin' – which it does in verse 21.⁶⁹ And, if we wouldn't have guessed it anyway, we will discover from Elijah's prayer in verse 36 that everything which Elijah did that day he did only 'at the word' – at the command – of his God. Nothing Elijah did or demanded of others was his own idea – everything formed part of God's own programme to discredit Ba'al once and for all in the eyes of His people.

And there we leave it for this evening. God willing, we shall take up the story tomorrow evening at verse 21 with Elijah's challenge to the people, 'How long do you halt between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Ba'al, then follow him'.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. 1 Kings 15. 29. Previously, we have seen Elijah *standing* before Ahab, *hiding* at the brook Cherith, and *feeding* the widow-woman and her house; now we see him *raising* her son to life. But first death seems to call in question the Lord's reputation as the living God.

² "The only son of his mother and she was a widow" (Luke 7. 12): who does not feel the pathos of these words?

³ Luke 7. 12.

⁴ It should seem, the child died suddenly, else she would have applied to Elijah, while he was sick, for his healing. The son was fed miraculously, yet to be fed miraculously did not in itself give any guarantee against sickness and death – as witness history of Israel in wilderness, of which Jesus said, 'Your fathers did eat manna, and are dead' – but there was result of unbelief, John 6. 49, 50. here there was no such explanation.

⁵ An ambiguous expression – it can express a hostile or a peaceful attitude; see Judg. 11.12 with 2 Chron. 35. 21. Here probably, "Is this the result of my association with you?"

⁶ How the widow's passionate outburst contrasts with the calm composure she had shown when Elijah had first met her – when she expected that she and her son were soon to die from starvation, v. 12.

⁷ This is not necessarily any special sin in her past life; her idea evidently is that the prophet by residing with her had become acquainted with her sinfulness, and had called it to the remembrance of the Almighty. It was a common assumption that suffering and sin are connected in this way. Job's friends deduced that he must have sinned in order to be suffering (Job 8. 4; 11. 6; *etc.*) and Jesus' disciples leaped to the conclusion that a man's blindness was the result of his sin (John 9. 1–3). We need to remember that the book of Job overturns the thinking of Job's friends, that Jesus rejected the logic of his disciples, and that the widow in our present story was mistaken. The Bible does not assume an inevitable cause-and-effect connection between sin and suffering (or between righteousness and blessing), but leaves room for suffering which is undeserved and, from the human point of view, unexplained.

⁸ Elijah could speak sharply when he wanted to – 17. 1; 18. 18 – but not here. Not the time for discussion – time to bring God into the sorrowful circumstances.

⁹ Such often served as guest chambers; 2 Kings 4. 10. Probably a roof-structure 'with' walls! See D R Davis and John Gray, page 381. I.e.a permanent structure not a temporary.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 4. 17-37.

¹¹ Matt. 15. 28; cf. Mark 7. 24-27.

¹² 1 Kings 17. 20-21.

¹³ The whole section has a very simple and symmetrical structure – which focuses attention onto these prayers of Elijah :

A 'What have you against me, O man of God?', v. 18

B 'Give me your son!', v. 19

C And he took him ... and carried (brought) him up to the upper room, v. 19

D And he cried to the Lord and said, 'O Lord my God', and he stretched himself on the child, vv. 20-21

D' And he cried to the Lord and said, 'O Lord my God', and the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, vv. 21-22

C' And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room [as v.19], v. 23

B' 'See your son lives!', v. 23

A' 'Now I know that you are a man of God', v. 24

¹⁴ Psa. 85. 6.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 12. 26.

¹⁶ Compare Mark 14. 39, 41; 2 Cor. 12. 8. See too Dan 6. 10, 13; Num. 6. 24-26; Isa. 6. 3. The number three is the signature of the Godhead.

¹⁷ Possibly a symbolic act saying, 'Let this lifeless body be as my living body'. Some have taken this as an example of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, since in ancient times death was determined as having taken place when the person stopped breathing. But the full weight of a man on a child would be counterproductive to that procedure. Or as though Elijah thought to impart his own vitality to restore the life of the boy. Often in cases of miraculous restoration God's servant placed his hand on the afflicted one. He did so to indicate that the power of God in him was passing to the needy individual (cf. Matt. 8. 3). In this instance, some believe that Elijah placed his whole body against the boy's body for the same reason (v. 21; cf. 2 Kings 4. 34; Acts 9. 31-43; 20. 10).

¹⁸ Cf 2 Kings 4.34 and Acts 20.10.

¹⁹ Based on Iain Provan, New International Biblical Commentary – quoted by Dale Ralph Davies.

²⁰ Jehovah had proved that He was able to act across the border from His own land – outside the land of Israel – but was there not *one 'boundary'* (death) which even He could not cross – was there not *one kingdom* (death) over which He had no power?

²¹ Elijah could not give life, but he could ask God for it. Nor can we arouse to new life by preaching, though God can do so through preaching. Our words are only the media through which the Holy Spirit works.

²² Note the two mentions of Elijah's prayers, both introduced with the same formula, 'And *he called to the Lord and said, 'O Lord my God'.*

²³ Throughout the chapter, *Elijah* had responded to *the Lord's* word – for example, in verses 3-5, when *God* said, 'go ...hide yourself by the brook Cherith that is before Jordan ... *he* went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan' – and, in verses 9-10, when *God* said, 'Arise, go to Zarephath ... *he* arose and went to Zarephath'. But this time it is *Elijah* who speaks, and *the Lord* who responds to *his* word – 'Let this child's soul come into him again ... and the child's soul came into him again', vv. 21-22. The Holy Spirit wants us to see that Elijah's word prevails with Jehovah just as Jehovah's word had prevailed with Elijah (he looks beyond the disease and the power of death and acknowledges that in some way God was in this. If this was the work of disease and death there was no hope, for disease and death could take the child away but they could not bring him back. But if *His God* – the God He knew and had proved – was somehow in the tragedy, then His God *could* recall the child to life) – indeed, perhaps, that Elijah's word prevails with Jehovah *because* Jehovah's word had first prevailed with Elijah. For this is the principle taught in the New Testament, that 'whatever we ask we receive from Him, *because* we keep His commandments and do those things which please Him', 1 John 3. 22. 'When people do not mind what God speaks to them in His word, God as little minds what they say to Him in prayer', Thomas Watson.

Having said, 'Give me your son' in v.19, Elijah had carried a *lifeless* form to his lodging – now, returning from his lodging with a *living* child in v. 23, he says, with no less brevity, 'See, your son lives'. He is not the man to waste words before God, before the king or before the widow. 'He gave him to his mother', v. 23 LXX, is identical to 'the dead sat up and began to speak and He gave him to his mother', Luke 7. 15. Then the people glorified God, saying 'A great prophet has risen among us', Luke 7. 16. Here in 1 Kings 17 the widow also acknowledges that the power which raised her son carries the fingerprint of God.

²⁴ 1 John 3. 22; cf. Prov. 28. 9.

²⁵ The prophet gave the child to his mother. Jesus restored Lazarus to his sisters, the young man at Nain to his mother, and the ruler's daughter to her parents. 'He gave him to his mother', v. 23 LXX, is identical to 'the dead sat up and began to speak and He gave him to his mother', Luke 7. 15. Then the people glorified God, saying 'A great prophet has risen among us', Luke 7. 16. Here in 1 Kings 17 the widow also acknowledges that the power which raised her son carries the fingerprint of God.

²⁶ It authenticated Elijah as a "man of God". This shows the general purpose of miracles in the Bible. They occurred to accredit God's messengers and to confirm God's message. Because of the circumstances David couldn't by fasting and prayer bring his child back to life, 2 Sam. 12. 23. But Elijah had power to work miracles, which David had not. The ministries of Elijah and Elisha involved a new outburst of miracles such as had not been seen since the Exodus and conquest.

²⁷ 1 Kings 16 concludes with 'the word of the Lord' disparaged by Israel, v. 34; 1 Kings 17 concludes with 'the word of the Lord' recognized by a gentile, v. 24.

²⁸ In the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat, the upright king, Danil, was given a son (Aqhat) by the gods. Falling into disfavor with the gods, his life is taken, but then apparently restored again, revived by the gods.

²⁹ Note that though she had addressed Elijah as 'O you man of God', v. 18, now she confesses him to be that with assurance, v. 24. The widow's exclamation in verse 24 contains a delightful irony: whereas an Israelite king, worshipping the chief god of Phoenicia, refused initially to acknowledge that Elijah spoke the word of Jehovah, a Phoenician woman readily acknowledged it.

³⁰ Well did one commentator label Elijah 'the first apostle to the gentiles' – J. R. Lumby, Cambridge Bible quoting Dr John Lightfoot.

³¹ In days when God's prophets were being slain by Ba'al's chief advocate, Jezebel, what a comfort it must have been for the godly in Israel to know, when they heard the account, that the raising of the widow's son confirmed that not even death could distance such from the sound of Jehovah's voice and the power of His hand.

³² Baal is the one who "gives life," who "drives out sickness", <http://reformedreader.wordpress.com/2008/01/>

³³ John 11. 4. The two miracles at Zarephath have parallels in the Elisha narrative, 2 Kings 4. 1-7 and 2 Kings 4. 18-37.

³⁴ Mere fiction; no more real than Sherlock Holmes or Winnie the Pooh.

³⁵ 1 Kings 17. 1-5

³⁶ The chapter covers three main episodes: Elijah's confrontation with Ahab through the good offices of Obadiah, vv. 1-20; the conflict on Carmel and the Lord's victory, vv. 21-40; and the sending of rain, vv. 40-41.

³⁷ Perhaps the time was now ripe for Elijah to return in that three years of drought and famine would have convinced many in Israel that the Lord was greater than Ba'al. The effect of a three year drought would be to reduce the people to the verge of starvation. 'The third year', 1 Kings 18. 1, probably dates from the beginning of Elijah's sojourn at Zarephath, 17. 7. that is, he would have spent about one year at Cherith, and about two and a half in the house of the widow. See Luke 4. 15; James 5. 17.

³⁸ Indeed, according to Josephus, the Ephesian playwright Menander, of the 4th century BC, mentioned a year-long drought at Tyre around this time, which, *it was claimed*, was brought to an end by the supplications of Jezebel's father, Ittobaal, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VIII, Chapter 13, Paragraph 2.

³⁹ We hear similar words in the New Testament. It was, for example, said of our Lord Jesus Himself, 'We found this fellow *pervverting* (the same word in the Septuagint as is used in 1 Kings 18. 17) *the nation*, and forbidding to give

tribute to Caesar', Luke 23. 2. It was said of Paul and Silas at Philippi, 'These men, being Jews, do *exceedingly trouble* our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans', Acts 16. 20-21, and, when they moved on to Thessalonica, they were described there as those 'who have *turned the world upside down*', Acts 17. 6. Nor did such accusations subside. The early Christians were called '*enemies of the human race*', Tacitus, *Annals*, 15. 44. 5. 'The Christians of Rome were unpopular ... credited with such vices as incest and cannibalism. In large numbers, then, they became the victims of the imperial malevolence – and it is this persecution of Christians under Nero that traditionally forms the setting for Paul's martyrdom', F. F. Bruce, '*Romans*', Tyndale Press – 'Introduction'.

⁴⁰ 1 Kings 18. 7, 17.

⁴¹ Acts 16. 20-21.

⁴² Acts 17. 6.

⁴³ Tacitus, *Annals*, 15. 44. 5. 'The Christians of Rome were unpopular ... credited with such vices as incest and cannibalism. In large numbers, then, they became the victims of the imperial malevolence – and it is this persecution of Christians under Nero that traditionally forms the setting for Paul's martyrdom', F. F. Bruce, '*Romans*', Tyndale Press – 'Introduction'.]

⁴⁴ Luke 23. 2; διαστρέφων in 1 Kings 18. 17.

⁴⁵ Josh. 7. 24-25; cf. Gen. 34. 30; Josh. 6. 18; 1 Sam. 14. 29; Prov. 11. 17.

⁴⁶ Possibly both Achan and Elijah were thought of as having an infectious influence. For 'troubling' Israel, see 1 Sam. 14. 29.

⁴⁷ And most certainly Ahab *was* the trouble-maker – Elijah was, if anything, the trouble-shooter – on a mission to identify and to correct the sins and the faults of God's people.

⁴⁸ The plural ('Ba'alim') may refer to the various names and forms under which Baal was worshipped (Ba'al-Berith, Ba'al-Zebub, etc.), or to the various images or statues of Ba'al which littered the land. But, more likely, the plural is applied to the one god; cf. 1 Sam. 5. 7; 2 Kings 1. 2. The Tyrian Melqart was probably a local manifestation of Ba'al, John Gray, page 393.

⁴⁹ In 1 Kings 18, everyone obeys the word of God's prophet – Obadiah, Ahab, the people (see verses 30, 34, 40), the prophets of Ba'al, and his own servant. Alas, that in the opening of the next chapter, it is the word of Jezebel which calls the tune.

⁵⁰ Cf. 1 Kings 8. 2, 65; 12. 16, 18. There must have been a considerable multitude of people on Carmel – to successfully keep any of the 450 prophets of Ba'al from escaping, 1 Kings 18. 40.

⁵¹ Pronounced 'ash-er-ah' ('a share ah'); not 'ash-ee-rah'!

⁵² New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, number 895.

⁵³ And, according to Josephus, Jezebel's father, Ethba'al (IttoBa'al I), the then king of Tyre and Sidon, was a priest of Astarte (probably the same as 'Asherah'), *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VIII, Chapter XIII, Paragraph 1; *Against Apion*, I, 18.

⁵⁴ Ahab had meekly done the prophet's bidding in summoning 'all Israel' and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah prophets, for an unexplained purpose.

⁵⁵ 'El Mohraka'.

⁵⁶ 'Perhaps 1000 feet above the Kishon', Keil and Delitzsch.

⁵⁷ 1 Kings 18. 33-35.

⁵⁸ Compare the notes in the Pulpit Commentary on 1 Kings 18. 19 ... 'The identification has only been effected in comparatively recent days (1852), but it is beyond dispute. Not only does the Arab name which it bears—El Murahkah, "the Burning," or "Sacrifice"—afford striking witness to the identity, but the situation and surroundings adapt themselves with such wonderful precision to the requirements of the narrative as to leave to reasonable doubt in the mind. For (1) it is a sort of natural platform, or pulpit, raised 1000 feet above the adjoining plain, and therefore well calculated to afford a view of the proceedings, or at least of the descent of the Holy Fire, to spectators of all Israel. The flame would probably be seen by Jezebel in her palace at Jezreel. This eminence is visible from Nazareth, some twenty miles away. "There is not a more conspicuous spot on all Carmel than the abrupt, rocky height of El Murahkah, shooting up so suddenly on the east" (Van de Velde, i. pp. 322, 323). "The summit ... commands the last view of the sea behind and the first view of the great plain in front" (Stanley). In fact, it was in its way just as well adapted for the solemn vindication of the law which took place there as Jebel Sufsaieh was for the giving of the law. (2) A sort of plateau near the summit—the table-land where the altars were built, &c.—would accommodate a vast number of spectators (ver. 21). (3) There is a spring of water close at hand—less than 100 yards distant—and a spring which is said to flow even in the driest seasons, which would supply the water of which we read in vers. 4, 33–35. Josephus (Ant. viii. 13, 5) says it came from the fountain. (4) The sea, though not visible from the plateau itself, is seen from a point some 300 feet higher, a detail which accords admirably with the account of vers. 42–44'.

⁵⁹ 2 Kings 9. 30.

⁶⁰ Present day Haifa is located on the northern slopes of Mount Carmel.

⁶¹ 'Mount Ba'li-ra'si'. Ba'al was 'particularly associated by the Pheonician seafarers with headlands', John Gray, page 385.

⁶² 'Ba'li-ma-AN-zer'.

⁶³ Quoted from Yohanan Aharoni, '*The Land of the Bible*', page 341.

[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=AMtoyNxWw0UC&pg=PA341&lpg=PA341&dq=carmel+shalmaneser+baal+mountain&source=web&ots=czDirYZ6rf&sig=_8nRjXDhcY7zDHDemr2tr9eC-dM&hl=en]

⁶⁴ See the IVP 'New International Bible Commentary' on 1 Kings 18. Possession of Carmel had fluctuated between Israel and Tyre through the previous centuries. Since it had been possessed part of the time by the Phoenicians it was the one of the first places at which Ba'al worship had been introduced to Israel.

⁶⁵ Which had once extended as far north as Tyre.

⁶⁶ Yohanan Aharoni, 'The Land of the Bible', page 341.

⁶⁷ See New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, topic '*Carmel*', volume 4, page 465.

⁶⁸ As early as the lists of Pharaoh Thutmose III (fifteenth century), Carmel is probably the site identified as a holy mountain in the vicinity of Acco.

⁶⁹ There, on the slope of Carmel, with the bright blue heaven gleaming down on them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand.