

Elijah, 1 Kings 17-18. Augusta. October- November 2011. (4) Reading : 1 Kings 18. 16b-32.

This evening, we continue our studies in the life of Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 17 and 18, and take up the story properly in 1 Kings 18 verse 21, but, for the sake of context, we shall begin our reading by breaking in at the middle of verse 16.

[Read 1 Kings 18. 16b-32.]

As we noted last evening, although the time has come for a showdown between Jehovah and Ba'al, Elijah said nothing of that to Ahab. Making no mention of any fire contest, he offers Ahab no hint *why* he, the king, must gather Israel to Mount Carmel. Simply that he is to do it.

I suggested last evening why it was that Elijah chose Mount Carmel as the scene for the showdown, and concluded by saying that this evening we would take up the story 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'.

The action starts then when 'Elijah came near to all the people'. And I imagine every eye riveted at that moment on this solitary – and strangely dressed – figure ... hoping, I guess that the man who, three and a half years ago, had announced his long-range weather forecast – and at whose word the heavens had since been as brass – would now proclaim the end of the crippling drought. But, if that was what they were expecting, they were sorely disappointed!

For Elijah immediately fired a broadside at them – the people – 'How long do you halt between two opinions?', he demanded to know – 'if Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Ba'al, follow him'. For too long they had straddled the spiritual fence, trying to combine the worship of Jehovah with the worship of Ba'al. By *profession* they still largely saw themselves as the Lord's people, but by *practice* they were very much worshippers of Baal.

It isn't easy to decide exactly what Elijah meant by the word translated 'halt'. Considering how the word is translated elsewhere in the Old Testament, there are three main possibilities. (i) I note first that a form of the same verb is used in verse 26 of our chapter to describe the antics of the prophets of Ba'al – not so much 'upon', as 'about' or 'before' their altar – in all likelihood some form of ritual leaping or dancing. (ii) But I note that the word is used also in Isaiah 31. 5 of birds hovering; 'as birds flying (hovering overhead, that is)', the prophet says, 'so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem'.¹ (iii) But then I note again that this is the word translated 'lame' (twice) in 2 Samuel 4. 4, when describing the effect of the injury to Mephibosheth's feet – where it clearly means 'crippled'.

And it is worth noting that scholars tell us the word translated 'opinions' probably refers to items 'made out of the limbs of trees'.²

Although therefore Elijah *may* have been saying something like '*how long will you dance between two alternatives?*', or, given the word translated 'opinions', rather more likely, '*how long will you flit as a bird from branch to branch?*', personally I take his question to be, '*how long will you limp – how long will you hobble – on two crutches?*³ *How long will you totter and lurch from side to side?* That is, 'how long will you look to both Jehovah and Ba'al for your support – for your blessing and prosperity. Frankly, the time has come, gentlemen, to make up your mind, and to throw away one crutch or the other'.

In any event, Elijah was clearly challenging Israel's lack of decision – one way or the other. The time had come for them to get down off the fence! And I find that the adjective which comes from the same root as the word translated 'opinions' is (correctly, I believe) rendered 'double-minded' in the NKJV of Psalm 119. 113 – 'I hate *the double-minded*, but I love your law'. Well, Elijah would certainly have signed up to that! And I suspect that, as someone fired by passionate zeal for the Lord – as he tells the Lord twice in the next chapter⁴ – Elijah would have found the people's double-mindedness and lack of whole-hearted commitment – their fickle wavering – he would have found that especially distasteful.

And with that quote from Psalm 119 about those who are 'double-minded' before us, we cannot fail to link Elijah's condemnation of the people with the description (given by the New Testament writer who makes much of Elijah's prayers) of the 'double-minded man, unstable in all his ways'.⁵

The prophet Elijah could have said of the Israel of his day as did the prophet Hosea of the Israel of a later day, 'their heart is divided'⁶ ... or as one Commentary renders the word, their heart is 'dissimulating, not sincerely devoted to the Lord'.⁷

And, like it or not, we have to face the fact that God demands the undivided loyalty of His people.

I have read that, at a conference between the Northern and Southern American States during the war of 1861-66, representatives of the South explained what concessions they were prepared to make by way of territory, provided

that they could secure the independence of the rest. Larger and larger offers were made, but each met with steadfast refusal. Finally, Abraham Lincoln placed his hand on that portion of the map which covered *all* the Southern states, and delivered his ultimatum, 'Gentlemen, this Government must have the whole'. He knew that the constitution of the United States was at an end if any part, no matter how small, was allowed to be independent of the rest. The constitution allowed for no exceptions. It was either kept in its entirety or it was not kept at all. And such is the claim, my brothers and sisters, which God makes on all of us. He *will not* share us with mammon ... or anything. His Government must have the whole!

In Elijah's rulebook you couldn't play for both sides! And, contrary to popular – and so-called 'politically correct' opinion today, religious beliefs which are diametrically opposed cannot *both* be right – one *must* be right and the other wrong.

And so, Elijah demands, 'If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him'. And, what, we may ask, does it mean to 'follow' – literally, to 'go after' – a god? Let scripture answer. Judges chapter 2 traces the four-stage cycle which characterized the days of the Judges: sin, servitude, supplication, and salvation. Verse 19 of that chapter says, 'it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that (the people of Israel) returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, by following other gods, *to serve them and bow down to them*'. So there you have it. To 'follow' any god is to serve and bow down to that god.⁸

'But', according to the close of verse 21, 'the people answered him not a word'. Elijah's *fervent challenge* roused no more reaction from the people than Ba'al's prophets' *frenzied cries* later did from their non-existent god – when, according to both verse 26 and verse 29, 'no-one answered'!

Joshua had once faced the nation with a rather similar challenge: either to serve Jehovah or to serve another god. 'Far be it from us', the people had then responded, 'that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods'.⁹ But, unlike the men of Joshua's day, the men of Elijah's day held their peace! If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless – and 1 Kings 18 would have been a much shorter chapter ... and we wouldn't have need a meeting tomorrow evening!

You would think that three and a half years of drought and famine would have convinced the people that Ba'al, the supposed rain and fertility god, was no god at all, and that Jehovah, in whose name Elijah had declared the coming of the drought, was indeed the only true and living God. But no – they just stood there like so many dummies, and 'answered him not a word'.¹⁰

And it was only when, in verse 24, Elijah offered them a contest, to be settled by tangible and miraculous evidence of fire from heaven, that he obtained any response – when 'all the people answered and said, It is well spoken' – in other words, 'Good plan, Elijah; let's go for it'.¹¹

It would be hard not to see the word 'answer' as one of the key words of the section. When the people '*answered not*' here in verse 21, Elijah proposes in verse 24 that 'the God that *answers* by fire, He is God', to which 'the people *answered* ... It is well spoken'. Then, according to verse 26, the prophets of Ba'al cried out from morning to noon, 'O Ba'al, hear us' ('*answer* us', the same word), and, according to both verse 26 and verse 29, when they called to Ba'al, no one '*answered*'. And, finally, according to verse 37, Elijah closed his prayer, 'Hear me ('*answer* me', the same word again), O Lord, hear me ('*answer* me)'. Eight occurrences of the word in the space of just 17 verses isn't bad going! In one sense, therefore, the whole section is dominated by the question of who will answer and who will not.

'Then said Elijah to the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord (literally, 'I, I am left [the same word he uses later in 1 Kings 19. 10, 14], a prophet of the Lord, I alone'¹²); but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men', v. 22. Yes, it was true – and, thanks to Obadiah, Elijah knew it – there were at least another hundred prophets of the Lord in Israel.¹³ For while Elijah had been hidden in the home country of Jezebel, this good man – who, your Bible says, 'feared the Lord greatly' – had been hiding these prophets in a cave, or caves – as he served the Lord courageously in the very palace of Jezebel and Ahab.

'Another hundred prophets of the Lord in Israel', yes, but they were not on Carmel!

Indeed I note that, when, in verse 24, Elijah said, '*you* call on the name of *your god*, and I will call on the name of Jehovah', he was addressing, not yet the prophets of Ba'al as said explicitly in verse 25, but, as verse 22 makes clear, 'the people' generally. As, therefore, no one else *in the whole of Israel* had been prepared to take a public stand against Jezebel and the introduction of Ba'al-worship – not even one of the seven thousand whose knees had not bowed to Ba'al and whose mouths had not kissed him¹⁴ – Elijah really did stand 'alone' – as the only warrior on Jehovah's side of the battlefield.¹⁵

And yet, in another sense, he did not stand alone – any more than, over 900 years later, the apostle Paul stood alone when he appeared before Nero; 'At my first answer ('defence')', he wrote in 2 Timothy 4, 'no man stood with

me, but all forsook me ... *notwithstanding the Lord* – who has pledged Himself never to leave or forsake His people¹⁶ – ‘stood with me’.¹⁷ No, in that sense, Elijah most certainly wasn’t standing alone – and neither do we!

‘But Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men’, Elijah added – one man against 450. Not *particularly* good odds at the best of times! Indeed, the very same odds that Gideon’s gallant 300 faced when first attacking the Midianites in Judges chapter 7; namely, in their case, 135, 000 men.¹⁸ And now on Carmel, as then on the plain which extends, as it happens, to the east of Carmel, such overwhelming odds would prove of no great significance – for *God’s* presence rather tipped the scales in His people’s favour!

This past Monday marked the anniversary of a great landmark event which allegedly took place 494 years ago. It is commonly believed that, at mid-day on 31st October 1517, a 33-year-old university professor walked up to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenburg in Germany, and posted a document to the door. The young man’s name was Martin Luther, and the document – which set out a devastating critique of the Catholic Church’s sale of indulgences – later became known as ‘the 95 Theses’. In a very real sense, that high noon, the young Professor of Sacred Theology and document sparked the Protestant reformation.

In Geneva, Switzerland, there stands a monument to the great Protestant Reformers.¹⁹ By the statue of John Knox, written in French, is a saying attributed to him, ‘One man with God is always a majority’.²⁰ Yes, indeed, brother Knox.

You probably noticed that no mention is made in verse 22 of ‘the prophets of Asherah’ – who, back in verse 19, Ahab had been specifically told by Elijah to summon to Carmel. Nor again are they mentioned in either verse 25 or verse 40. In each case, we read only of ‘the prophets of Ba’al’.

And yet the impression given by verses 19 and 20 is that they *were* present : ‘gather to me ... the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba’al and the four hundred prophets of Asherah’ were Elijah’s words, and then we read, ‘so Ahab ... gathered the prophets together at mount Carmel’ – and we read of no adverse comment made by Elijah to Ahab about any failure on Ahab’s part in complying with Elijah’s instruction. And Ahab’s report to Jezebel in the opening verse of chapter 19 suggests much the same: ‘Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done’, we read, ‘and how he had slain *all the prophets* with the sword’.

Either therefore the expression ‘prophets of Ba’al’ in verses 22, 25 and 40 is the Holy Spirit’s shorthand for both sets of prophets, or (possibly through Jezebel’s influence) the prophets of Asherah somehow managed to worm their way out of the contest – and thereby escaped execution in verse 40. I suspect that the former is the case, but certainly I am in no position to be dogmatic.

But returning to what we *do* know, Elijah boldly proposes that the future direction of Israel’s faith and worship be submitted to *trial by fire*; ‘Let them ... give us two bullocks²¹’, he says, ‘and the God who answers by fire, he is God’ – let Him be acknowledged as God.²²

But why by *fire*?

John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) offered an interesting suggestion. I quote, ‘Elijah does not say, “The God who answers by *water*”²³ – though that was the thing the country needed – but “who answers by *fire*, he is God”, because the atonement was to be made by sacrifice, before the judgment could be removed in mercy’. End quote. And, yes, fire from God would certainly indicate His acceptance of the sacrifice – and, yes, the fact that, according to verse 38, the fire fell on and consumed the burnt offering – and not the people – who by then had drawn near to Elijah and to the altar – proved indeed that God was not only great but was gracious.

And, yes, I guess it may just be possible to see Elijah’s accepted burnt offering on the altar he built on Carmel as having, in some sense, made atonement ... much as David’s offering of burnt offerings upon the altar which he had built in Ornan’s threshing floor – when the Lord ‘answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering’ – served to deliver the people of Israel in his day from God’s judgement – the story of which is told in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 ... which some of us will be looking at together on this coming Lord’s day.

But surely there was *far* more to it than that.

Over the past three and a half years, Elijah, as Jehovah’s servant, has been discrediting the myth that Ba’al ruled the clouds and the rainfall. And now he sets out to prove that Ba’al exercised no more power over fire. And the test which Elijah proposed was very fair. Indeed it played to what was reckoned to be Ba’al’s strength. For, according to the prevailing pagan mythology, Ba’al was the storm God, depicted on stone slabs with lightning bolts in his hand and spoken of in the texts as flashing out fire or lightning.²⁴ One of his popular names was ‘Hadad (meaning ‘thunder’), lord of the storm-cloud’.²⁵

For example, the so-called 'Ba'al Epic' puts into the mouth of Asherah the words, 'Lo, it is the time of his rain. Ba'al sets the season, and sounds his voice from the clouds. He flashes lightning to the earth'. While another pagan text says of him, 'Seven lightning bolts he casts, eight magazines of thunder, he brandishes a spear of lightning'.²⁶

Again, the myth known as 'Ba'al battles Môt' addresses Ba'al, 'Mightiest Ba'al ... take your clouds, your winds, your thunder-bolts'.²⁷

I'm sure you have got the message. That, as the god of fire, lightning and thunderbolts, Ba'al should have been in his 'element'. After all, 'answering by fire' was supposedly just up his street.

Yes, the test which Elijah proposed was certainly fair. Indeed, Elijah saw to it that all the odds were stacked in favour of Ba'al's prophets. As we noted earlier, the contest was to be fought on their home ground. On top of which, not only did the chosen trial play to their god's strength, but they were to go first – during the most promising part of the day, when the sun was at its zenith and its rays at their hottest.

Clearly, from Elijah's point of view, the more favourable the circumstances enjoyed by Ba'al's prophets, the more impressive and decisive their defeat.

And by Elijah letting the opposition go first, their failure – about which he never entertained one moment's doubt – would make the greater impression upon the people. For, had Elijah pressed to go first himself, or even had both parties prepared their bullocks simultaneously, and then God had answered by fire, as Elijah was confident He would – even if Ba'al's prophets had then been put to death, neither Ahab nor the people would have known for sure that these prophets would have failed if they had been given more of a chance. True, Ahab and the rest may have had their suspicions, but for Elijah to insist on the other team going into bat first was a masterstroke.

For witnessing first the prophets of Ba'al exposed for the fakes they were, and then to see fire to come from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer would leave neither Ahab nor the people in any doubt as to whose God was the real God.²⁸

No less than three times in verses 23 and 25 Elijah uses the words, 'put no fire under'. There was to be no cheating or sleight of hand – by either party. The true God was the one who proved himself able to light His own bonfire.²⁹

When addressing the people back in verse 23, Elijah had said that the prophets of Ba'al were to have the choice of whichever bullock they wanted of the two provided by the people. But we now read in verse 26 that 'they (the prophets of Ba'al) took the bullock which was given them'³⁰ – which must mean either that they were then given the bullock which they had selected for themselves, or that, for some reason, they declined the offer. And though I incline to the first interpretation, it matters little – and certainly has no effect on the outcome.

Verse 26 speaks of 'the altar which one had made', literally.³¹ This may refer to the action of the prophets of Ba'al then – or it may refer to some event in the past. If the latter, it would be consistent with Carmel being *now* in use for Ba'al worship – with a Ba'al altar standing ready to hand.³²

They 'called', we read, 'on the name of Ba'al' – repeating their monotonous chant, 'O Ba'al, hear us (answer us) – 'from morning until noon' – *longer by far* than the two hours for which the townfolk of Ephesus cried 'Great is Diana ('Artemis' – an Asiatic up-dated version of Asherah!³³) of the Ephesians' over nine centuries later.^{34 35}

I think we can assume these prophets had been invoking Ba'al for the past three and a half years – and Ba'al hadn't performed at all well! But their pleas had then been for water. Perhaps they were hoping for greater success when it came to lightning bolts!³⁶ 'But there was no voice, nor any who answered', says verse 26.

And it is important to note what the scripture *does* and does *not* say. For the Bible does not say, 'But Ba'al didn't speak or answer' – which would have been to acknowledge that Ba'al did exist, but that, for some reason, he failed to respond to the cries of his prophets.

Whereas, by wording the text as He has, the Holy Spirit makes it clear rather that Ba'al *had no real existence* at all – that there was no voice or answer for the simple reason that there was no-one to speak or to respond³⁷ – that Ba'al simply wasn't there – that Ba'al was, as I emphasised last evening, only a myth – the mere figment of man's fertile and filthy imagination.³⁸

No doubt many even of the nation of Israel actually believed that the clash between Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al indicated a struggle between two rival – and real – deities. But they were wrong! There was – and is – only one God ... and any other object of worship is but an idol.

Verse 26 concludes by telling us that 'they leaped about the altar' – in all probability, 'danced about the altar'. 'When Herod's birthday came' (this is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great) we read in Matthew 14, 'the daughter of Herodias (whom we know from non-biblical sources to be Salome by name³⁹) danced before the company, and

pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask'.⁴⁰ I think we can assume that these prophets hoped, in a not dissimilar manner, by means of their ritual dancing to please, not a human king such as Herod Antipas, but their god – and thereby to secure from him that which they wanted most.

And so, to verse 27, which records the first of two interruptions by Elijah in the activities of Ba'al's prophets. And it is clear that Elijah chose the timing of both these interventions most carefully – the first coming, as verse 27 tells us, 'at noon', and the second coming, according to verses 29 and 36, 'at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice'.

First then, at noon (when the sun was at its hottest, and when the prophets of Ba'al would have expected fire to fall from heaven if it was ever going to come⁴¹) Elijah began to deride them – mingling *his* sarcasm with *their* screams.⁴² And you do notice, I hope, that, although his scathing words refer throughout to Ba'al, the text says explicitly that 'Elijah mocked *them*' – Ba'al's prophets, that is. And this for the simple reason that Elijah couldn't mock someone who did not exist – and in this way the Holy Spirit again refuses to acknowledge Ba'al as being in any sense real.

Elijah opens by suggesting that the prophets try turning the volume up: 'Cry aloud: for he is a god'. And Elijah's biting sarcasm – 'for he is a god' – reminds me of the words of Joash, the father of Gideon, in Judges 6, words spoken to the men of his city who sought to slay Gideon because he had broken down Ba'al's altar and had cut down its associated Asherah pole. 'Will you plead for Baal?', Joash challenged them, 'if he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been broken down'.⁴³ A 'god' indeed!

Perhaps, Elijah suggests, this supposed 'god' of theirs 'is *talking*', which should, more likely, be translated 'is meditating' or 'is musing'. Perhaps, Elijah proposes, Ba'al is either daydreaming or is so preoccupied with his own affairs that he hasn't even noticed the predicament of his unhappy prophets.

Or, then, maybe he 'is *pursuing*' – better 'is gone aside', in all likelihood a euphemism for relieving himself.⁴⁴ Perhaps, Elijah scoffs, 'he is using the facilities – closeted in the celestial "gents rest room"'. To us, a little crude perhaps, but certainly effective!

Or, for that matter, he may be '*on a journey*'. Hmm, now this one may have really hit home.⁴⁵ For, according to the ancient pagan texts – one of which is known to scholars as 'Anat and the Buffalo' – Ba'al's sister, the goddess Anat, came to Ba'al's house looking for him, only to be told that he had gone off on a hunting trip.⁴⁶ Apart from which, Ba'al's followers believed that their god, who – alas for them – was not (as mine) omnipresent, accompanied the Phoenician sailors when they were away at sea.⁴⁷ Thinking of that expression 'away at sea', I remember reading of one near-sighted minister, who, just minutes before the beginning of the prayer meeting, was passed a note from a Mrs Johnson. The note read: 'Bill Johnson, having gone away to sea, his wife asks the prayers of the congregation for his safety'. Not being the sharpest when it came to spelling and punctuation, the minister startled the company by announcing: 'Bill Johnson, having gone away to see his wife, asks the prayers of the congregation for his safety'.

As I was saying, Ba'al's followers believed that he accompanied their sailors when they were away at sea.

And so Elijah taunts the prophets that, one way or another, it looked as if Ba'al may be away from home – and, again alas for them, Ba'al clearly didn't carry a cell phone with him!

Or, finally, it may be as simple as '*he is asleep* and must be awakened'. What, you say, asleep at *noon*? But again, there may well be something deeper – and more pointed – to Elijah's suggestion. For, as we seen previously, according to their pagan myths, Ba'al was thought to die in the autumn, when the dry season began, then to lie dead all through the winter, before rising again in the spring when the rain returned. Indeed, Menander of Ephesus, the historian of the second century B.C. we have had occasion to quote in another context, reports that Hiram, the King of Tyre (who, according to the beginning of chapter 5, had enjoyed friendly relations with both David and Solomon) ... that Hiram had actually introduced a ritual ceremony specifically for 'the awakening of Ba'al'.⁴⁸ Perhaps Elijah was suggesting that Ba'al might still be enjoying his *dry-season* nap⁴⁹ – and after 42 months without rain things *were certainly pretty dry!* – and that he needed a wake-up call.

And you can sense throughout the acid sarcasm in Elijah's voice – 'Speak up', he taunts, 'perhaps this god of yours is *deep in thought*, is *in the lavatory*, is *in a journey*, or is *simply still in bed*.'

And perhaps one of the saddest things is that, although Elijah's pointed words are meant to be taunts, they are not in fact unrealistic descriptions of pagan beliefs. I suspect that the prophets of Baal would not have regarded his 'suggestions' as in any way ridiculous or unworthy of their god. Poor, blind men.

And so Elijah's withering scorn only served to drive Ba'al's prophets to an even greater frenzy.⁵⁰ Previously, according to verse 26, they had confined their efforts to leaping – in all probability, to dancing – either in front of or around their altar. But now, in verse 28, they not only, as Elijah mockingly suggested, cried louder – and it's hard to imagine the din which hundreds of so-called prophets all crying out together would have made – but they also

resorted to self-laceration – ‘cutting themselves’, ‘with knives and lancets’ – literally, ‘with swords and spears’ (both words describing the weapons of heavily-armed troops)⁵¹ and that ‘until blood *gushed* out on them’.

And I note that the word translated ‘gushed out’ is the same as is used back in chapter 13 to describe the ashes of Jeroboam’s altar which were ‘poured out’ when the Lord split the altar open.⁵² These were no small scratches which the prophets inflicted on themselves! These men were in earnest.

Presumably they hoped that, if the sight of *a bullock’s blood* failed to move Ba’al to pity and stir him to action, the sight of *his own prophets blood* might just do the trick.

But, again, I think there may be more to it. For, in their pagan literature, the other gods are portrayed as practising self-mutilation when they hear of the death of Ba’al.

For example, according to the so-called ‘Ba’al Epic’, when in mourning for Ba’al, between his supposed death and resurrection, much the same words are used of the god El and of the goddess Anat. Of El, the ‘Epic’ says that ‘He cuts cheek and chin. He lacerates his forearms. He ploughs his chest like a garden Like a vale he lacerates his back. He lifts his voice’ ... with very similar words applied to Anat.⁵³

And it is at least possible therefore that the cries and the actions of these prophets were also linked to some form of ritual mourning over Ba’al – whose ‘death’ was evident, to their thinking, from the lack of any rain.⁵⁴ And, for my part, I interpret the expression ‘after their manner’ in verse 28 as meaning ‘in accordance with their pagan ritual’.

Such self-laceration was forbidden to God’s people from the first, of course, by God’s law.⁵⁵

And their feverish activities and frenzied cries – spoken of here as ‘prophesying’⁵⁶ – continued from mid-*day* until mid- *afternoon*. But, according to verse 29, all this ranting and raving yielded no more than a deafening silence – which the Holy Spirit emphasises by His powerful three-fold declaration, literally translated ... ‘No sound, no one answering, no one paying any attention’.⁵⁷

And, in *one* sense, we’re not in the least surprised that there wasn’t even a flicker of response to all their frantic efforts. For we know what Elijah knew – that there *was* no ‘Ba’al’ to respond – that ‘Ba’al’ was no more than a figment of man’s perverted imagination.

And yet, in *another* sense, it *is* rather surprising that no fire fell in response to the frantic cries of Ba’al’s prophets. For the one spoken of by Paul in Ephesians 2 as ‘the prince of the power of the air’ – as ‘the ruler of the authority of the air’ – is *anything but* a figment of somebody’s imagination! And, what is more, we know that, under God, he, the devil, possesses enormous power.

So we find that, with the Lord’s express permission, *in the past*, according to Job chapter 1, Satan did cause *fire to come down from heaven* – to burn up all of Job’s 7,000 sheep, together with all but one of Job’s shepherds.⁵⁸

And, *in the future*, according to Revelation chapter 13, the second ‘beast’ – the ‘false prophet’⁵⁹ – the first beast’s ‘Minister for propaganda’ – will perform ‘great signs, so that he makes even fire come down from heaven’ – by means of which he will ‘deceive those who dwell on the earth’.⁶⁰ And this – ‘makes even fire come down from heaven’ – he will do, we read, by means of power and authority which is delegated to him, through the first beast, from ‘the dragon’ himself.⁶¹

And I think we can take it for granted that the devil, who through the false *prophet* is one day to bring down fire from heaven, would have gladly brought down fire from heaven for the *prophets* of Ba’al – and, with just one ‘*bolt out of the blue*’⁶² – for there was cloudless sky over the land – to *discredit God’s prophet*, to *deceive God’s people*, and to *defeat God’s purpose*. Oh yes, fire falling onto Ba’al’s altar would have suited Satan ‘down to the ground’ – if you will excuse the pun! But ‘the ruler of the authority of *the air*’ *didn’t* bring down fire out of *the sky* – and I can only conclude that he *didn’t* because he *couldn’t!* – that in this case, unlike in that of Job, the sovereign Lord withheld His permission and restrained him. For it is clear from scripture that, as far as interfering with God’s people is concerned, no matter how hard he may try, Satan cannot create any space for himself which falls outside the range of God’s ultimate control.⁶³

And, as a result, Ba’al’, the so-called ‘god’ who, according to pagan mythology, when he willed, ‘flashed lightnings on the earth’ was shown to be the sham he was.⁶⁴ And you could well write over verse 29, with an eye on Daniel 5, ‘Ba’al, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting’.⁶⁵

‘Then Elijah said to all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near to him’. So reads verse 30. Back in verse 21, ‘Elijah came near (the same word) *to all the people*’ when he first arrived at Carmel, but I assume that he now invited *them* to come near to *him* because he was standing at a distance from *Ba’al’s* altar and prophets – near, it seems, to the place where ‘an altar of *Jehovah*’ had once stood.

And so, gladly leaving behind us all the antics and hysterical cries of Ba'al's prophets, we enter an atmosphere of spiritual calm as Elijah takes centre stage – the Lord's prophet knowing well that his God needed no wake-up call!⁶⁶

And Elijah's summons 'come near to me' showed clearly that there was to be no suspicion of any trickery or sleight of hand on his part. And we are told that the people did as he said; they all 'came near to him'. Not that this is in any way surprising. After all, there was no indication that anything was ever going to happen at Ba'al's altar!

But I do wonder if the people would have been *quite so ready* to 'come near' to Elijah if they had guessed what was going to happen in verse 38! And yet, they were safe enough. For, in God's 'amazing grace', 'the fire of the Lord', when it did fall, would strike His *sacrificial altar* and not His *sinful people*.

And there we leave it for this evening. God willing, we shall pick up the story in our final session tomorrow evening at the latter part of verse 30, where we read of how Elijah set about repairing (literally 'healing') the altar which, along seemingly with all other altars of the Lord, had been 'broken down' – presumably on Jezebel's instructions.

Endnotes

¹ See New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, volume 3, page 353 (number 6414). Also see the ESV; 'Like birds hovering, so ...'.

² New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, volume 3, page 275 (number 6188).

³ See John Gray, page 388.

⁴ 1 Kings 19. 10, 14.

⁵ James 1. 7.

⁶ Hosea 10. 2.

⁷ K&D.

⁸ And Elijah laid it on the line. As one commentator expressed it, 'Theology leads to discipleship'.⁸ If therefore you believe that Jehovah is God, you should – and must – serve and worship Him – and, as Elijah was in effect saying, worship Him *alone* – for He brooks no rival.

⁹ Joshua 24. 15-16.

¹⁰ It would be hard not to see the word 'answer' as one of the key words of the section. When the people will 'not answer' here in verse 21, Elijah proposes in verse 24 that 'the God that answers by fire, He is God', to which 'the people answered ... It is well spoken'. Then, according to verse 26, the prophets of Ba'al cried out from morning to noon, 'O Ba'al, hear us' ('answer us', the same word), and, according to both verse 26 and verse 29, when they called to Ba'al, no one 'answered'. And, finally, according to verse 37, Elijah closed his prayer, 'Hear me ('answer me', the same word again), O Lord, answer me'. Eight occurrences of the word in the space of just 14 verses isn't bad going!

¹¹ Only if such irrefutable evidence was forthcoming were the people prepared to acknowledge that Jehovah indeed was God. It would be hard not to see the word 'answer' as one of the key words of the section. When the people will 'not answer' here in verse 21, Elijah proposes in verse 24 that 'the God that answers by fire, He is God', to which 'the people answered ... It is well spoken'. Then, according to verse 26, the prophets of Ba'al cried out from morning to noon, 'O Ba'al, hear us' ('answer us', the same word), and, according to both verse 26 and verse 29, when they called to Ba'al, no one 'answered'. And, finally, according to verse 37, Elijah closed his prayer, 'Hear me ('answer me', the same word again), O Lord, answer me'. Eight occurrences of the word in the space of just 14 verses isn't bad going! In one sense, therefore, the whole section is dominated by the question of who will answer and who will not.

¹² Compare the similar Hebrew expression used of Jacob, 'And Jacob was left alone', Gen. 32. 24.

¹³ While Elijah had been hiding in the very home country of Jezebel, this man had been serving the Lord within the very palace of Jezebel and her husband.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 19. 18; Rom. 11. 4.

¹⁵ 'If today's poll-peddling press were reporting, it would recite Yahweh's plummeting 'approval ratings'. But Yahweh's power has never depended on how many cheerleaders He has', D. R. Davis, 'The Wisdom and the Folly; an Exposition of 1 Kings', page 237.

¹⁶ Heb. 13. 5.

¹⁷ 2 Tim. 4. 16-17.

¹⁸ Judges 7. 16 with Judges 8. 10. There are several similarities between Judges 4, 7 and 1 Kings 18. All three of these encounters with Israel's enemies took place on the south side of the Jezreel Valley. The Kishon figured in both Barak's and Elijah's victories over the Canaanites. Gideon faced odds of 450 to one as Elijah did, and both men experienced miraculous deliverances. In the future, Israel's enemies will again assemble against her in this valley at Armageddon. But then our Lord Jesus will achieve an even more spectacular victory for His people.

¹⁹ 'The International Monument to the Reformation', usually known as 'The Reformation Wall'.

²⁰ 'Un homme avec Dieu est toujours dans la majorite.'

²¹ Clearly, the pagan world didn't restrict their sacrifices to Ba'al to bulls: 'They built the high places of Ba'al to burn their sons with fire, for burnt offerings', Jer. 19. 5!

²² 'Call ye on the name of your gods' ...As Elijah is still addressing the people, not the prophets of Baal (see ver. 25), this change of person is significant. He sorrowfully assumes that they have taken Baal and Astarte for their gods.

²³ It is observable that there is no mention of rain. We might have expected, after the long drought, that this would be the test. But that could not be promised until the Lord had first been recognized as God.

²⁴ 'The Ugaritic myths depict Ba'al as a mighty warrior-king who controls the elements of the storm. Many of his names and epithets reflect his position and roles, including, among others, "Hadad' (thunder), lord of the stormcloud" ...The myths speak of Ba'al appointing a time "for the sounding of his voice in the clouds, for him to release (his) lightnings on the earth". Another text describes Baal in the following manner: "Seven lightning bolts he casts, eight magazines of thunder, he brandishes a spear of lightning", *Bibliotheca Sacra*—V151 #603—Jul 94—270.

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²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 'Ba'al battles Mo'el', column v. See <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/lofts/2938/mythobaal.htm>

²⁸ 'He is anxious that their inability shall be fully manifested before he shows his own power', George Rawlinson, 'The Speaker's Commentary'.

²⁹ The narrative action slows down at verse 26, as many details are introduced to stress that Ba'al was altogether unable to come up with the goods. When addressing the people back in verse 23, Elijah had said that the prophets of Ba'al were to have the choice of whichever bullock they wanted of the two provided by the people. But we now read in verse 26 that 'they (the prophets of Ba'al) took the bullock which was given them'²⁹ – which must mean either that they were then given the bullock which they had selected for themselves, or that, for some reason, they declined the offer. It matters little – and certainly has no effect on the outcome.

³⁰ The Hebrew reads, 'which he (or one) gave'.

³¹ Keil and Delitzsch. Heb. *he*, that is, *one made*, impersonal.

³² Certainly, the Holy Spirit gives no details of this altar being built by the prophets of Ba'al, as He does of the Lord's altar being restored by Elijah.

³³ See the article 'Diana' in ISBE – Astarte was the same as Asherah.

³⁴ Acts 19. 34.

³⁵ Longer by far than the two hours for which the townsfolk of Ephesus cried 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' over nine centuries later, Acts 19. 34. 'Diana' is literally 'Artemis' – an Asiatic up-dated version of Asherah! See the article 'Diana' in ISBE (Astarte was the same as Asherah).

³⁶ 'The Ugaritic materials corroborate the biblical testimony concerning Baal as a rain, lightning and storm god. The very god who was supposed to bring lightning (cf. the Baal au foudre stele) was now unable to', Baalism in Canaanite Religion and its Relation to Selected Old Testament Texts, by Greg Herrick, Ph.D. [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2053] For a picture of the stele, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/1511357968/> and <http://www.kacmac.com/cities/latakia/ugarit/photos/>.

³⁷ The same words, translated 'neither voice, nor hearing', are used of the dead boy in 2 Kings 4. 31. These prophets got no more response from non-existent Ba'al than they would from one who was dead.

³⁸ 'They leaped' is most likely a reference to a ritual dance about – just possibly before – the altar. Cf. Psalm 26. 6.

³⁹ Herodias' daughter by her previous marriage to Philip was Salome who was then between 12 and 14 years old. See Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas*, pages 151-156.

⁴⁰ Matt. 14. 6-7.

⁴¹ Noon was the hour of the sun's greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah's taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved.

⁴² Compare Isaiah 44-46.

⁴³ Judges 6. 31.

⁴⁴ Cf. Judges 3. 24; 2 Sam. 24. 3.

⁴⁵ This particular taunt was certainly not farfetched!

⁴⁶ Text CTA 10. See the reference to Anat's fruitless visit at : <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anat>

⁴⁷ Normally engaged in some trading enterprise.

⁴⁸ Menander of Ephesus reports that the Tyrian king, Hiram, contemporary of David, instituted the ritual for the awakening of Melqart (alias Ba'al). See Flavius Josephus, '*Antiquities of the Jews*', book 8, chapter 5, paragraph 3 – 'he was the first to celebrate the awakening (*egersis*) of Heracles in the month Peritius' - Whiston's translation incorrectly has "first set up the temple of Heracles in ..". Heracles was almost certainly one and the same as Melkart, the Ba'al of Tyre. <http://www.economicexpert.com/a/Melqart.htm>

⁴⁹ Indeed, perhaps he had overslept!

⁵⁰ Not that spiritual fervour and exuberance is wrong in and of itself, as witness King David dancing before the ark, 2 Sam. 6. 14.

⁵¹ The KJV translation is misleading. From the Hebrew words used, it is clear that the instruments they used were weapons of heavy-armed troops – swords (the normal word, used 372 times; e.g. in 1 Kings 19. 1, 10, 14 and 17) and spears (used 15 times; often found in the expression 'shields and spears').

⁵² 1 Kings 13. 3-5.

⁵³ Perhaps mimicking the mourning of both El (the God of mercy) and Anat in the period between Baal's death and resurrection ...

*He cuts cheek and chin,
He lacerates His forearms.
He ploughs His chest like a garden;
Like a vane He lacerates His back.
He lifts His voice
And shouts:
"Baal is dead!"*

*She cuts cheek and chin.
She lacerates Her forearms.
She ploughs like a garden her chest,
Like a vane she lacerates the back.
"Baal is dead!"*

('The Ba'al Epic' at ... <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ba'al>.)

⁵⁴ Which may be why, in part at least, on more than one occasion the Law of Moses forbade any form of self-mutilation. See Lev. 19. 28; Deut. 14. 1 (and, for the priests, Lev. 21. 5); and compare Jer. 16. 6; 41. 5. But no doubt the reason for the Lord's prohibition of such deliberate disfigurement is due also to the need for respect of the human body as being part of His creation.

⁵⁵ Lev. 19. 28; Deut. 14. 1; contrast Zech. 13. 6.

⁵⁶ The expression seems to be used of any case where there was an utterance of words by someone under some influence he couldn't control.

⁵⁷ 'No sound, no one answering' of verse 29 echoes verse 26. Compare 'no sound, no one regarding (paying attention)', 2 Kings 4. 31.

⁵⁸ Job 1. 12, 16.

⁵⁹ Rev. 19. 20.

⁶⁰ Rev. 13. 13-14.

⁶¹ Rev. 13. 2, 12.

⁶² 'Lightning strokes have been observed on what appeared to, be a clear day (giving rise to the expression "a bolt from the blue")', Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963) in its opening paragraph on the article '*Lightning*'.

⁶³ Compare Luke 22. 31.

⁶⁴ 'The Ugaritic materials corroborate the biblical testimony concerning Baal as a rain, lightning and storm god. The very god who was supposed to bring lightning (cf. 'the Ba'al au foudre' stele [pronounced as stee'lee]) was now unable to', '*Baalism in Canaanite Religion and its Relation to Selected Old Testament Texts*', by Greg Herrick, Ph.D. [http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2053] For a picture of the stele, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wallyg/1511357968/> and <http://www.kacmac.com/cities/latakia/ugarit/photos/>.

It is believed by some scholars that Ba'al holds 'tree-lightning' in his hand – see

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jfx4YwtaVkc&pg=PA339&lpg=PA339&dq=Baal+au+foudre+steele&source=web&ots=0FgHE6ZjQ5&sig=i6KcQ7gvd94SbGBg6imTaLkcHi8&hl=en#PPA339,M1>

'Yahweh also revealed Himself in the storm in the days of Samuel. Following Israel's repudiation of false gods, including the Ba'als (1 Sam 7:4), Yahweh won a great victory over the Philistines as He thundered from the heavens (v. 10). Just as He would do later at Carmel, Yahweh demonstrated that He, not Baal, controls the storm', *Bibliotheca Sacra*—V151 #603—Jul 94—270.

⁶⁵ Dan. 5. 27.

⁶⁶ We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in verse 30.