

Elijah. Part 1: 1 Kings 17. 1-3.

INTRODUCTION

I suspect that we all regard the incident on Mount Carmel in the latter section of 1 Kings **18** as the great and decisive confrontation between Jehovah and Ba'al, when the Lord established His supremacy by fire from heaven. And so it was!

But I want to look first at 1 Kings **17** and to see that it was really *there* that the battle was joined ... that it was really *there* that the Lord set about (i) discrediting the claims made for Ba'al by his many followers, and (ii) demonstrating that He, the Lord, and only He, was the true and living God.

BACKGROUND

At the close of chapter 16, things looked (and were) very bleak for the northern kingdom of Israel. The spiritual condition of the nation was at an all-time low.

The seventy years or so since the division of the kingdom in the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam had been a period of steady and sad decline. Israel's seven kings so far¹ had – without exception – been bad, but the latest king, Ahab, was by far the worst.

I understand that, when we come into chapter 17, Ahab had been reigning some 14-15 years,² and the idolatrous and apostate conditions described in the closing section of chapter 16 had taken firm root. This was beyond doubt Israel's 'darkest hour' to date.³

AHAB

It is clear that Ahab was a fairly complex character.

1. On the one hand, there is no question but that Ahab actually *hated* the Lord, most certainly 'the Lord' who Elijah worshipped. We read elsewhere that 'Jehu the son of Hanani the seer (the prophet, that is) went out to meet (King) Jehoshaphat (of Judah), and said to him (with reference to Ahab), Should you help the *wicked*, and love those *who hate the Lord*?'⁴

We can hardly miss that the Holy Spirit's comments about Ahab at the end of chapter 16 are enclosed between two bookends, positioned at verses 30 and 33. '*Ahab*', we read in verse 30, 'did evil in the sight of the Lord, *more than all who were before him*' ... and, in verse 33, that '*Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him*'.⁵

Between these bookends, we are told that 'he went and served Ba'al and worshipped him. He set up an altar for Ba'al in the house (or temple) of Ba'al, which he had built in Samaria⁶ (which we learn elsewhere was a very large temple⁷). The fact that Ahab built such a temple for Ba'al in Israel's new capital city (in obvious competition with the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem) suggests strongly that Ahab was determined to install the worship of Ba'al as the state religion of Israel.⁸

The closing section of chapter 16 tells us that the sins of both Ahab and his father Omri exceeded the sins of all the kings who had preceded them.⁹ For his part, Omri had gone further than any of his predecessors in the matter of the calf-worship introduced by Jeroboam,¹⁰ which in itself is regarded by scripture as extremely serious, receiving mention no less than nineteen times in the books of Kings.¹¹

But if Omri had been rated the extreme form of evil in Israel to date, this award was wrenched from him and handed to his son. For, 'as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in' the ways of Jeroboam and Omri, Ahab was responsible for introducing Ba'al worship into Israel wholesale, causing the sins of his father to seem mild by comparison to his own. It was Ba'al worship then which engraved Ahab's name at the head of the monument of apostasy.

2. And yet, on the other hand, later, Ahab is quite willing to consult the nominal *prophets of the Lord* before he goes out to battle against the Syrians. In response to the request of king Jehoshaphat, we are told that he enquired 'at the word of the Lord'.¹²

And, remarkably, in spite of being married to Jezebel, he gave to each of his three children names structured around the name, not 'Ba'al', but 'Jehovah'; namely, *Ahaziah* ('Jehovah has taken hold', possibly 'Jehovah sustains'),¹³ *Jehoram* ('Jehovah is high'),¹⁴ and *Athaliah* (possibly meaning 'Jehovah is exalted' or 'afflicted of Jehovah')¹⁵ ... although, in the event, Athaliah, when Queen of Judah, followed faithfully in her mother's steps, serving Ba'al as zealously, and as murderously, in Judah as Jezebel did in Israel.¹⁶

Religiously then Ahab was a curious mixture. Seemingly he had much in common with the successors to Israel's land (the Samaritans), of whom we read that they 'feared Jehovah, and served their own gods'.¹⁷

I can only conclude that religion wasn't Ahab's strong point. And we are specifically told that, in his idolatrous ways, he was 'stirred up' ('incited', 'urged on') by his wife Jezebel,¹⁸ whose influence for evil he did nothing, alas, to suppress – as was required by God's law.¹⁹

The evidence is that Ahab's main interests in life lay with such earthly and mundane matters as his horses and mules,²⁰ as his planned herb or vegetable garden,²¹ and as his many construction projects—including the fortification of Samaria and the building of many other cities, together with his luxurious 'house of ivory',²² as it called in chapter 22, within which archaeologists have found 200 ivory figures, plaques and decorations.²³

We learn from chapter 18 that Ahab was present himself on Mount Carmel,²⁴ and I suspect that Elijah's question then, 'How long do you halt between two opinions'²⁵ (possibly, 'how long will you limp – how long will you hobble – on two crutches between two opinions') was as much a word to Ahab *personally* as it was to Ahab's people *generally*.

JEZEBEL (AND HER FATHER)

But Ahab's wife Jezebel was a very different kettle of fish, being made of much tougher and sterner stuff than Ahab ever was.

International courtesy required that a foreign queen (such as earlier each of the foreign wives of Solomon had been,²⁶ and now this Phoenician princess had become) should have a sanctuary of her own religion in her adopted country.²⁷

But it wasn't in Jezebel to be content to practise her faith privately within the confines of some palace chapel ... no, not Jezebel! She was a true and worthy daughter of Ethba'al (namely, IttoBa'al I) 'king of the Sidonians'.

IttoBa'al I was a particularly nasty piece of work, who was not only king of Tyre and Sidon²⁸ (having gained the throne by murder) but also a priest of Astarte²⁹ (in all probability to be identified with Asherah, the principal goddess of Tyre and Sidon, who functioned, seemingly, as both mother and consort of Ba'al.)

And Jezebel had a great deal of her father's blood in her. Nor was she content that Ba'al-worship should co-exist with Jehovah worship in Israel.³⁰ She was determined to displace and stamp out all forms of Jehovah worship, and to that end, she had her own missionary society—450 prophets of Ba'al and 400 prophets of Asherah, all of whom enjoyed her royal patronage, hospitality and support.³¹ When it says that these prophets ate 'at Jezebel's table', it doesn't mean that they literally sat at the same table as the Queen, which would have run counter to all Eastern propriety. It is saying that these men received their sustenance *from* the royal table, not *at* it.³²

And it is clear that, in reality, it was Jezebel, and not Ahab, who ruled, not only in the palace, but in the kingdom.³³ Jezebel was very much the power behind the throne, the driving force of Israel's state policy. It was, we note, Jezebel who gave the order to butcher the prophets of Jehovah³⁴ and it was Jezebel who sent the threatening note to Elijah (which set him off hotfoot to Beersheba),³⁵ and, in all likelihood, it was Jezebel who was chiefly responsible for the many 'altars of the Lord which had been broken and thrown down'—a statement we meet three times in chapters 18 and 19.³⁶

ELIJAH: ONE THING IN COMMON WITH JEZEBEL

Though poles apart spiritually, Jezebel and Elijah therefore shared one thing in common. Whereas many nations and rulers of the ancient world could happily tolerate the importing of foreign deities, neither Jezebel nor Elijah could, or would, countenance any rival god alongside their own.

Jezebel hadn't one ecumenical bone in her body, any more than Elijah had in his. Their very names said as much; 'Jezebel' meaning "Where is the Prince?"³⁷ ('the Prince' being one of the stock titles of Ba'al) and 'Elijah' meaning 'My (or, possibly, 'Whose') God is Jehovah'. Both therefore carried their creeds in their names.

ELIJAH: A SUDDEN ENTRANCE

If you ignore the man-made break on the page of your Bible and read straight from chapter 16 into chapter 17, it is impossible to miss the abruptness of Elijah's appearance, as he suddenly leaps onto the page ... bursting unannounced onto the scene.³⁸

2 Kings 2 tells how Elijah 'went up ... into heaven',³⁹ and, as far as anyone in the court of Samaria at the time was concerned, he might as well have *dropped down* from there! One sixteenth century scholar, with an eye to Elijah's sudden appearance and miraculous disappearance, expressed it well: 'He comes in like a *tempest*, who went out in a *whirlwind*'.⁴⁰

ELIJAH: BACKGROUND UNKNOWN

Elijah is the fourth most mentioned Old Testament character in the New Testament, after Moses, Abraham and David, being referred to or quoted more or less 30 times.⁴¹ And yet we know precious little of the man's personal circumstances.

The First Book of Kings tells us next to nothing of Elijah's background. And, because the Books of Chronicles focus mainly on the kingdom of Judah and not the kingdom of Israel, no mention is made there of either Elijah or Elisha. We therefore lack the benefit of a parallel account, and so possess no details of Elijah's birth, parentage or call to be a prophet.

Chapter 17 verse 1 tells us only from where he came. Elijah is described first as 'the Tishbite'—a man from Tishbe, situated in upper Galilee in the tribal area of *Naphtali*.⁴² He is further described in the King James Version as 'of the inhabitants of Gilead' on the other side of Jordan from Israel, that is. But the word translated 'inhabitants' is more accurately rendered 'sojourners, settlers, resident-strangers', and indicates that Elijah lived in some place (in this case *Gilead*) other than his birthplace (*Tishbe*).⁴³

Chapter 15 tells how Benhadad I, the king of Syria (summoned by Asa, King of Judah) had struck and smitten 'all the land of *Naphtali*' in Israel,⁴⁴ no doubt compelling many of the inhabitants there, whose eastern border was the Jordan, to flee across the river to find refuge in the wild, rugged region of Gilead. I suspect that Elijah was one of them.⁴⁵

ELIJAH: PRAYING IN SECRET ⁴⁶

This may or may not be so. But I know one thing for sure about where Elijah had come from when he faced Ahab in verse 1 ... and this because the New Testament tells us. He had come from the presence of God.

Very much as his later antitype, John the Baptist, Elijah 'was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel'.⁴⁷ And, as far as I can tell, up to that moment, Elijah was unknown either to the palace or to the people in general; but he was certainly not unknown to God.

James cites Elijah as a striking example of the mighty things which can be accomplished by the earnest prayer of one righteous man: 'The prayer of a righteous man is very strong in its working (literal translation). Elijah was a man of like passions ('like feelings') to us, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit'.⁴⁸

Interestingly, James didn't choose a man whose prayer had commanded *the sun* (as had the prayers of both Joshua and Isaiah⁴⁹) nor a man whose prayer had commanded *the thunder* (as had the prayer of Samuel⁵⁰) but a man whose prayer had commanded *the dew and the rain*.

In view of the extraordinary answers to Elijah's prayers, James was careful to assure his readers that the prophet was an ordinary man—a man just like the rest of us ... 'a man subject to like passions as we are' ... 'a man with a nature like ours'.⁵¹ James wants us to know that it was Elijah's *prayer in private* which was the secret and source of Elijah's *power in public*. Elijah could stand before a wicked king without his knees knocking because he had first bent his knees before a higher throne!

Unknown to Ahab (or I guess to any others at the time) the prophet from Gilead had agonised over the idolatry of God's people and had prayed to the Lord for severe corrective action. Elijah clearly believed that a serious disease called for drastic measures and realised that it was better by far for the people to suffer years of destructive drought, if this would turn them to God, than to enjoy prosperity in defiance of His laws.

He *may* have been aware of (and even possibly rested his intercession on) the Lord's promise to Solomon many years before: 'If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain ... and my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land'.⁵²

If my interpretation is correct, *Elijah bent his knees* in prayer for the shutting of heaven that this might *bring Israel to its knees* in repentance—that this might bring the people back again to Jehovah, the true God. Hear him praying on Mount Carmel, 'Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again'.⁵³ Elijah was

then, not merely *the prophet* of the drought, but, by means of his prayer, he was very much *the cause* of the drought.

James noted, in particular, (i) that Elijah prayed *earnestly* (literally, 'in prayer he prayed'), that his prayers were not just empty words, and (ii) that Elijah prayed *specifically*—initially, 'that it might not rain', and then, at the end of three and a half years years, that it might rain again.⁵⁴ There was nothing vague or fuzzy about this man's prayers! He prayed in such a way that he would know for sure whether or not his prayers were granted! A lesson for us perhaps?

James doesn't say it, but we know (iii) that Elijah also prayed *biblically* ... that he prayed consistent with the known will of God.⁵⁵ He prayed, that is, in accord with the principles, the warnings and curses which he found written in the Book of Deuteronomy. Take, for example, the following extracts:

(a) 'Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce'⁵⁶ and

(b) 'If you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God ... your heavens which are over your head shall be bronze, and the earth which is under you shall be iron'.⁵⁷

Elijah was able to pray with confidence therefore because he knew that his prayer was in harmony with the revealed will of God. Though he was *a man of few words* (as we gather from verse 1), he was *a man of great faith*—of the kind of faith which grips firm hold of the word of God, and says, in effect, with David long before, 'Do as you have said'.⁵⁸

Although I acknowledge we are not directly told this, I think we must take it for granted that Elijah received the assurance from the Lord that his prayer was to be answered.

In chapter 3 of his prophecy, Amos noted, 'Surely the Lord Jehovah does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets',⁵⁹ and I take it that the Lord revealed the forthcoming shutting of heaven to *this* prophet.

So, when Elijah spoke to Ahab of there being 'neither dew nor rain' in the *first* verse of our chapter, he knew that 'the word of the Lord' in his mouth was truth, just as the widow of Zarephath would later confess it to be in the *last* verse of the chapter.

But of Elijah's earlier praying, the Holy Spirit tells us nothing in our chapter.

THE MESSAGE: A LONG-RANGE WEATHER FORECAST

The Holy Spirit does not even tell us where Elijah met Ahab. It may well have been in Ahab's main palace at Samaria. (I note that, a little time later, Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, 'went down to visit Ahab in Samaria'.⁶⁰)

Although it might have been in Ahab's winter palace at Jezreel, to which he returned from Mount Carmel at the end of chapter 18⁶¹ and where, at a later date, Queen Jezebel was slain by Jehu.⁶² But, to the Holy Spirit, *the place* of their meeting was not the important thing; what mattered was *the message* which was delivered there.

But what was this message? I note first that there was *no preamble*; that Elijah made no attempt to follow the political protocol of the day by bowing and scraping when he came before the king ... there was no 'O king, live for ever' or some such equivalent.⁶³

Again, I note that (surprisingly perhaps) his message was *no sermon*; that Elijah made no appeal to Ahab for immediate repentance.

His message was simply a statement – *a declaration*.

To borrow words used in the New Testament of Moses, 'not fearing the wrath of the king',⁶⁴ this mystery man from Gilead simply walked into the royal court one day to provide the king with the latest weather forecast, boldly informing him that it wasn't going to rain tomorrow, nor, in fact, was it going to rain for *many* tomorrows!

Indeed, it wasn't going to rain again, except by his (Elijah's) word. And he made it crystal clear that he had no intention of saying the word for some time yet—that there would be 'neither dew nor rain *these years*'.

Not, of course, that Elijah himself could shut and open the heavens on his own authority. But he spoke, not in his own name, but in the name of the Living God⁶⁵ 'who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens'.⁶⁶

And who is this of whom Elijah knows himself to be simply the mouthpiece? None less, he claims, than 'the Lord, the God of Israel'.

I note that Elijah's choice of this title is particularly appropriate when addressing King Ahab in that, by this same title, the Holy Spirit links together the close of chapter 16 and the opening of chapter 17, telling us that the One in whose name Elijah speaks is the self-same one ('Lord, the God of Israel') whom Ahab had 'provoked' ('irritated', 'made angry'⁶⁷) more than had any king before him.⁶⁸

Again, I note that Elijah offered Ahab no word of explanation for his long-range weather forecast. The prophet gave no hint *why* there would be neither dew nor rain—leaving Ahab to work out for himself the significance of the announced drought.

We are not told whether Jezebel was present with Ahab when Elijah delivered his message, although we do know that queens often did sit alongside kings when they conducted official business.⁶⁹ But, even if Jezebel wasn't with Ahab on that occasion, we can be sure that Ahab would have wasted no time in telling her *the little Elijah had said*, just as later he wasted no time in telling her *'all that Elijah had done'*.⁷⁰

THE MESSAGE: UNMISTAKEABLE IN ITS IMPLICATIONS

And we can be sure that neither Ahab nor Jezebel would have had a moment's difficulty working out the implications of Elijah's bold declaration.

1. TO AHAB

First, Elijah was saying to Ahab, 'Does the stopping of dew and rain ring any bells with you, O king? Have you never read, O King, the great covenant curses of Deuteronomy—that a closed heaven is God's response to His people's breach of His covenant when they serve another god.⁷¹ And you, Ahab, need to know that the Lord is poised to inflict these very covenant curses on you and your people'.

Ahab would know, of course, that the results of such a prolonged drought would be catastrophic. For the land of Israel was (and still is) dependent for its fruitfulness on its rainfall. 'The land which you go to possess', Moses had explained to the nation of old, 'is not like the land of Egypt (which drew its main water supply from the Nile) ... the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys (much like my native Wales, which also happens to be roughly the same size), which *drinks water from the rain of heaven*'.⁷²

The land of Israel experiences a wet season during the winter, and a *very* dry season during the summer. It starts to rain in October/November ('the early rain') and it rains on and off through the winter until March (the time of 'the latter rain'). It doesn't rain properly at all through the summer (what rain there is being only very slight and intermittent) and the crops dry up. So, it is absolutely essential that there is plentiful rain during the wet season. If it doesn't rain then, Israel's economy falls apart.

And the 'dew' (the Hebrew word indicating, not only dew itself, but light rain or drizzle, particularly that which falls outside the rainy season) was also a certain sign of God's favour. As Moses had once promised, 'His heavens shall drop down dew'.⁷³

But if Elijah's announcement gave *Ahab* something to think about, it *most certainly* gave *Jezebel* something to think about.

2. TO JEZEBEL

To Jezebel, Elijah was saying in effect, 'And does the stopping of the dew and the rain suggest anything to you, O Queen? For you must know that my message is in effect a declaration of war ... not on you, Jezebel ... not on your husband ... not on your father ... but on *your god!*

'*You believe*, Jezebel, that your Ba'al actually dies each April/May and rises anew each October.

'*You believe* that your Ba'al ('the Rider of the Clouds' as you call him), the storm god, the source and dispenser of rain, thunder, lightning and fertility, is slain every year by Môt, the King of Death, the god of the underworld—resulting in the dry season, in times of parched soil and withered vegetation, when, as one of your own poems expresses it, the "furrows in the fields are cracked".⁷⁴

'And *you believe* that, with the assistance of his warlike sister, the goddess Anat, Prince Ba'al is then brought back from the dead, rising to occupy his celestial palace and to bestow abundant rain—bringing luxuriant pastures, well-watered fields and plentiful crops.⁷⁵

'You may well be familiar also, Jezebel, with the words of El, the supposed father of the gods, in an old poem much enjoyed by your Syrian cousins: "If Most Mighty Ba'al is alive, and if the Prince, Lord of Earth, exists ... Let the heavens rain oil, the brooks run with honey, that I may know that Most Mighty Ba'al is alive".

'And again, you will know well how, according to your myth, the goddess Asherah thanks El for letting Ba'al have his own palace, because, "Now Ba'al will begin the rainy season, the seasons of watercourses in flood; and he will sound his voice in the clouds and flash his lightning to the earth".⁷⁶

'Oh yes, Jezebel, *you believe* that all things (rainfall, crops, fertility and prosperity) depend entirely on your mighty Ba'al.

'But I tell you, Jezebel, that though it is part of your creed that, in due time, Ba'al is able to handle Môt, and even to handle the father god El, *he is no match for Jehovah!*

'Make no mistake, Jezebel, my God, Jehovah, 'lives' ... He always lives, without break or intermission.

'And, to discredit once and for all your myth that Ba'al is responsible for the seasonal cycle of "no rain, rain", "no rain, rain", the only true and living God, Jehovah, has authorised me as His consecrated servant ('before whom I stand'⁷⁷) to serve you (and to serve all your people) notice that there will be no rain – no rain, do you hear? – for "years".

'Do you hear me, Jezebel? "For years!" Jezebel, your fairy-tale Ba'al should rise from the dead and dispense the rains *every* year! What price then your high and mighty Ba'al, when forced to retire in utter shame before the power of Jehovah?⁷⁸

'And so, Jezebel, since Ba'al is the supposed provider of rain, and since Jehovah announces that He is going to withhold it, the gauntlet is down ... the contest has well and truly begun. It is very much a case of "Seconds out, round one". I champion Jehovah's corner and you champion Ba'al's'.

'The withholding of rain is then, **O Ahab**, a divine chastisement for covenant breaking, but not only so, it is also, **O Jezebel**, the opening shot in a war which will, I assure you, demonstrate Ba'al's total *impotence* and Jehovah's glorious *omnipotence*. So then, in effect, the God who answers by *rain*, let him be God'.^{79 80}

NOW GOD'S WORD TO ELIJAH

And, having thus faithfully delivered God's word to the ruling power in Israel, 'the word of the Lord' next came to Elijah himself.

We noted earlier that the prophet had appeared suddenly as if from nowhere. And now, having delivered his message, as far as the people were concerned, he vanishes just as suddenly!

Indeed, Elijah appeared and disappeared so mysteriously on several occasions that some folk actually believed it was the Spirit of God who transported him miraculously from place to place. For example:

1. According to the next chapter, Obadiah, Ahab's steward and governor, knew that Ahab had sought everywhere for Elijah and had failed to find him. 'As the Lord your God lives', he said to Elijah, 'there is no nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to hunt for you; and when they said, 'He is not here', he took an oath from the kingdom or nation that they could not find you', then expressing the fear, 'it shall come to pass, as soon as I am gone from you, that the Spirit of the Lord will carry you to a place I do not know'.⁸¹

2. Again, following Elijah's ascent to heaven in 2 Kings 2, the sons of the prophets at Jericho said to Elisha, 'Behold now, there are fifty strong men with your servants ... let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has taken him up and cast him upon some mountain (such as Carmel, perhaps?) or into some ravine (such as Cherith, perhaps?)'.⁸²

But we know Elijah had to do it the hard way ... that he would have to walk to the brook Cherith ... that there was no angel, no Spirit of the Lord, no chariot of fire, no whirlwind, to transport him there ... that he would need to use his legs to cover the twenty-five miles (well, twenty-five miles as the raven flies)!

'HIDE YOURSELF'

There at Cherith, he was to 'hide' himself,⁸³ as he did later at Zarephath.⁸⁴ But why 'hide'?

I suggest for several reasons. First, and most obvious, in the immediate future at least, his life would be in great danger—if not from Ahab, then certainly from Jezebel.

I say, 'if not from Ahab', because I note that, although the 'governor' of Ahab's house, Obadiah (Ahab's 'royal chamberlain') later told Elijah that Ahab had sought for him far and near,⁸⁵ he never suggested that *Ahab* did so with the intention of killing Elijah.

Indeed, when Elijah gave Ahab advance notice through Obadiah that he would present himself to him, he (Ahab) took no steps to organise a nasty reception committee or choose the hymns for Elijah's funeral.⁸⁶ I note that Obadiah's fear was that Ahab would kill *him* (Obadiah) if Elijah *failed* to put in an appearance, *not* that Ahab would kill *Elijah* if he *did* put in an appearance.⁸⁷

THE REAL THREAT: JEZEBEL

But Jezebel was a very different matter! Even if she wasn't present in verse 1, you don't need a first-class honours degree to work out what her reaction would be when Ahab informed her of Elijah's challenge. We can surely take it for granted that she would react then exactly as she did at the beginning of chapter 19—violently—and attempt to take Elijah's life.⁸⁸

I know that some have questioned whether, once drought and famine took firm hold, even Jezebel would have attempted to kill Elijah. And this because he had made it clear that the opening of the shut heavens was dependent entirely on his word (in truth, of course, the word of the Lord through him) and for Jezebel, therefore, to have put him to death would have cut off any hope of ending the crippling drought.

But, for my part, I am confident that, as an ardent and devoted follower of Ba'al, Jezebel firmly believed that, although Elijah had claimed that any future rainfall would come only 'according to his word', the *real* reason that there was no rain was that her Mighty Ba'al had taken umbrage at Elijah's blasphemous claim, and that it was Ba'al, who, in his anger, had withheld the rain, which she had been taught from her earliest childhood to attribute to his power.

And, therefore, if I am right, as Jezebel saw it, for her to eliminate Elijah, far from extending the length of the drought, would in fact end it.

Indeed, it is at least possible that it was only following Elijah's declaration of the Lord's war on Ba'al that Jezebel issued the order to massacre the Lord's prophets generally. We are told that Obadiah had then hid two sets of fifty of these prophets in a cave,⁸⁹ which I suspect he could not have sustained indefinitely, and hardly for more than three and a half years.⁹⁰

I note also that, even after the Lord had demonstrated in the most 'striking' way that (i) He (Jehovah), and not her 'Most Mighty Ba'al', was the only true and living God, and (ii) that Elijah truly was His servant (and I have my eye on the end of verse 36 of the next chapter) and even though, courtesy of Ahab's report, Jezebel knew all this, she still served Elijah notice of her intention to have him killed.

There was, then, just no telling how far Jezebel's hatred for Elijah would have taken her now. So, for Elijah to 'hide' himself was sound policy.

ELIJAH'S REMOVAL BEST FOR THE PEOPLE

Apart from which, it may well be that God saw fit to remove Elijah from the public stage for over three years that the people of Israel should suffer the full impact of the drought without being able to plead with Elijah to call it off.

Now, faced with the severe drought visited on them by Jehovah, the people would be compelled to acknowledge His superiority over Ba'al, even before the great fire-from-heaven contest on Mount Carmel.⁹¹ Ba'al's reputation will shrink as the cracks in the fields expand!

Jehovah's prophets may be slaughtered by Jezebel⁹² and Ba'al may still be worshipped throughout the length and breadth of the land but there could be no denying the evidence provided by the prolonged drought; namely, that Jehovah lived and that He (and not Ba'al) was the only true God.

To be continued.

Notes

¹ Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri and Ahab.

² 'Elijah must have first encountered Ahab in about 860, fourteen years after he had commenced his reign', Eugene Merrill, *'Kingdom of Priests'*, page 346.

³ 'The same guiding principle which led (the writer) to devote so many of his pages to the reign of Solomon, when the theocratic kingdom was at its highest, impelled him to linger over the reign of Ahab when religion was *at its lowest ebb*', J. Hammond, *'1 Kings: The Pulpit Commentary'*, page 373.

⁴ 2 Chron. 19. 2. This Jehu is to be distinguished from the king of Israel by the same name.

⁵ 'It is not difficult to see in what way Ahab's rule was worse even than Omri's. The latter had gone beyond his predecessors in the matter of the calf-worship ... "And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him", Hebrew "was it a light thing?"', J. Hammond, *ibid.*, page 374.

The reference to the rebuilding of Jericho by Hiel the Bethelite, 1 Kings 16. 34, 'is not a piece of unrelated trivia about construction work', Dale Ralph Davis, *'The Wisdom and the Folly'*, page 200. This example of open defiance against God's word is included to highlight the character of Ahab's reign.

For clarification, Joshua's curse (Josh. 6. 26) did not prohibit men from living on the site, and, indeed, Joshua himself later allocated it to the tribe of Benjamin, Josh. 18. 21; the curse was on anyone who presumed and dared to rebuild Jericho as a fortress. Joshua's curse 'does not refer to the erection of houses upon the site of the town that had been burnt to ashes, but to the restoration of the town as a fortification, the word (translated, 'build') being frequently used to denote the fortification of a town', *'Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch'*, Volume II, page 73.

⁶ The name 'Ba'al' appears first in the name of Jezebel's father, then we are told of Ahab's service to and worship of Ba'al, his altar to Ba'al, and the house of Ba'al, 1 Kings 16. 31-32 ... four references to Ba'al in just two verses!

⁷ 2 Kings 10. 21.

⁸ In many ways this temple may have been meant to vie with the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. We read that Ahab also made an Asherah pole ('a grove', KJV), Asherah being the goddess of Tyre and Sidon (see J. M. Hadley, *'New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis'*, Volume 1, number 895, page 569) and consort of Ba'al (see 'as Baal's consort, Asherah was usually given the name Baalat', <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Asherah-Semitic-goddess>), 1 Kings 16. 33.

⁹ 1 Kings 16. 25, 30, 33.

¹⁰ 1 Kings 16. 25-26.

¹¹ 1 Kings 14. 16; 15. 26, 30, 34; 16. 19, 26; 22. 52; 2 Kings 3. 3; 10. 29, 31; 13. 2, 6, 11; 14. 24; 15. 9, 18, 24, 28; 23. 15.

¹² 1 Kings 22. 5-16.

¹³ 1 Kings 22. 51. It seems that Jezebel had a strong religious influence on Ahaziah, for, after a fall through the lattice in his upper room, he sent a deputation to 'Ba'al-Zebub, the god of Ekron', 2 Kings 1. 2.

¹⁴ 2 Kings 1. 17; 2 Chron. 22. 5-6.

¹⁵ 2 Kings 8. 26-27. See http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_elijah.html.

¹⁶ She constructed a house for Ba'al in Jerusalem itself together with numerous altars and images, 2 Chron. 23. 17, and murdered all her own grandchildren of David's line – except for the one, Joash, who was saved providentially, under God, by the timely intervention of his aunt, Jehosheba/Jehoshabeath, 2 Kings 11. 2-3/2 Chron. 22. 10-11.

¹⁷ 2 Kings 17. 33.

¹⁸ 1 Kings 21. 25. To marry a princess from Phoenicia was a master-stroke; Israelite goods now had access to world ports via Phoenician ports and seamanship. The alliance profited both countries. For Ahab's 'diplomatic alliances', see D. N. Pienaar, *'New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis'*, Volume 4, article 'Ahab', page 365.

¹⁹ 'If ... the wife of your bosom secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods ... of the gods of the people which are all around you, near to you or far off from you ...you shall not consent or listen nor shall your eye pity ... but you shall surely kill her; your hand shall be first against her to put her to death, and afterward the hand of all the people', Deut. 13 .6-9.

²⁰ 1 Kings 18. 5.

²¹ 1 Kings 21. 1. 'When Naboth refused to part with his vineyard ... Jezebel ... could not accept this because she came from a country where individual rights were subject to the desire of the king', D. N. Pienaar, *loc.cit.*.

²² 1 Kings 22. 39.

²³ 'In excavating Samaria archaeologists discovered more than 200 ivory figures, panels and plaques in one storeroom', T. E. Constable, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, page 535.

²⁴ 1 Kings 18. 41-46.

²⁵ 1 Kings 18. 21.

²⁶ 1 Kings 11. 1-8.

²⁷ D. N. Pienaar, *loc.cit.*. See also http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_elijah.html.

²⁸ Flavius Josephus, *'Antiquities of the Jews'*, Book 8, Chapter 13, Paragraph 1.

²⁹ 'According to Menander ... he was the priest of Astarte, who gained for himself the throne of the Zidonians by the assassination of Pheles', J. Hammond, *ibid.*, page 374.

³⁰ Compare the Lord's word to the angel of the church in Thyatira, 'you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce my servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols', Rev. 2. 20.

³¹ 1 Kings 18. 19. They were, that is, fed of her bounty.

³² Cf. 2 Sam. 9. 10-11, 13; 2 Kings 25. 29; Dan. 1. 5.

³³ Jezebel was certainly not of the same meek and quiet disposition as the wife of King Artaxerxes in the book of Nehemiah: 'the king said to me (*the queen also sitting by him*), "How long will you be gone?"', Neh. 2. 6.

³⁴ 1 Kings 18. 4.

³⁵ 1 Kings 19. 2. Note the artful way in which she wrote of Naboth blaspheming 'God' (*Elohim*) and not 'the Lord' (*Jehovah*), 1 Kings 21.10.

³⁶ 1 Kings 18. 30; 19. 10, 14.

³⁷ See D. N. Pienaar, *'New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis'*, Volume 4, article 'Jezebel', page 776. The name probably indicates, 'A seeker of Ba'al'. Compare the words of 'The Ba'al Epic': 'El shouts aloud to the Virgin Anath ... "As for the Lord of the Plowed Furrows, where is Ba'al the Mighty (possibly, victorious Ba'al)', *where is the Prince, Lord of the earth*" (UT 49, III, 20-21); see John Gray, '1 & 2 Kings', SCM, page 368.

³⁸ 'The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes like a thunderbolt into the midst of Ahab's court', Alexander Maclaren, *'Elijah: A Prophet's Preparation'*, quoted in Hasting's, 'The Greater men and Women of the Bible: Ruth to Naaman', page 363.

³⁹ 2 Kings 2. 11.

⁴⁰ Bishop Joseph Hall, *'Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments'*, page 279.

⁴¹ Elijah is the fourth most mentioned Old Testament character in the New Testament (after Moses, Abraham and David). Elijah is referred to or quoted 29 times; the majority of these references occur in the Gospels, with once each in Romans, James and Revelation. See Table 3 in http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_elijah.html.

- ⁴² According to the apocryphal book of Tobit, ‘... the acts of Tobit ... of the descendants of Asiel and the tribe of Naphtali, who in the days of Shalmaneser, king of the Assyrians, was taken into captivity from Tishbe, which is to the south of Kedesh Naphtali in Galilee above Asher’, Tobit 1. 2..
- ⁴³ The word translated ‘sojourners’ (which could perhaps be rendered ‘colonists’) is very similar to the word translated ‘Tishbe’, and may therefore ‘involve a pun’, J. M. Hadley, ‘*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*’, Volume 4, article ‘Elijah and Elisha’, page 573.
- ⁴⁴ 1 Kings 15. 20; 2 Chron. 16. 4. This was some 21 years (2 Chron. 15. 10 with 16. 1) after many in Israel went over to Asa in Judah, ‘when they saw that the Lord his God was with him’, 2 Chron. 15. 9.
- ⁴⁵ See WTJ — V41 #1 — Fall 1978 — 124.
- ⁴⁶ See Matt. 6. 6.
- ⁴⁷ Luke 1. 80.
- ⁴⁸ James 5. 16-18.
- ⁴⁹ Joshua 10. 12-13; 2 Kings 20. 11.
- ⁵⁰ 1 Sam. 7. 9-10.
- ⁵¹ James 5. 17 (KJV and ESV respectively).
- ⁵² 2 Chron. 7. 13-14.
- ⁵³ 1 Kings 18. 36, 37. ‘
- ⁵⁴ James 5. 17-18.
- ⁵⁵ Cf., ‘This is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing *according to His will*, He hears us’, 1 John 5. 14.
- ⁵⁶ Deut. 11. 16-17.
- ⁵⁷ Deut. 28. 15, 23.
- ⁵⁸ 2 Sam. 7. 25.
- ⁵⁹ Amos 3. 7; cf. Gen. 18. 17 with ‘he is a prophet’, Gen. 20. 7.
- ⁶⁰ 2 Chron. 18. 2.
- ⁶¹ 1 Kings 18. 45-46.
- ⁶² 2 Kings 9. 15-37.
- ⁶³ See 1 Kings 1. 31; Neh. 2. 3; Dan. 2. 4; 3. 9; 5. 10; 6. 6, 21.
- ⁶⁴ Heb. 11. 27. He boldly confronts Ahab, bearding the lion in his den.
- ⁶⁵ He speaks in God’s name as one who understood the only real authority of all true prophets. Compare the claim of Jeremiah: ‘the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me: “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant”’, Jer. 1. 9-10.
- ⁶⁶ Rev. 3. 7.
- ⁶⁷ Compare the use of the word in 1 Sam. 1. 6-7.
- ⁶⁸ 1 Kings 16. 33; 17. 1.
- ⁶⁹ Compare Neh. 2. 6 and Acts 26. 23.
- ⁷⁰ 1 Kings 19. 1.
- ⁷¹ Deut. 11. 16-17; 28. 23-24.
- ⁷² Deut. 11. 10-12.
- ⁷³ Deut. 33. 28.

⁷⁴ J. C. Gibson, 'Canaanite Myths and Legends', Ba'al and Môt: Column iv, page 78.

As the storm-god, Baal's terrifying voice rent the heavens in the form of thunder. As the rain-giver and "the Rider on the clouds" he dispensed fertility. He was the centre of the widespread seasonal myth. When he was killed by Môt (Death), the dry season came. All vegetation withered, and procreation ceased. When he was revived, rain fell again and nature blossomed into productivity. According to 'The Ba'al Epic':

El says,
"if Aliyan Baal is alive,
And if the Prince, Lord of Earth, exists,
In a dream of the God of Mercy,
In a vision of the Creator of Creatures,
Let the heavens rain oil,
The wadies run with honey,
That I may know that Aliyan Baal is alive,
That the Prince, Lord of Earth, exists".

According to 'The Tale of Aqhat':

Seven years shall Baal fail,
Eight the Rider of the Clouds.
No dew,
No rain;
No welling up of the deep,
No sweetness of Baal's voice.

⁷⁵ 'Ba'al is taken by Môt into the underworld and rain on earth ceases as a result. Eventually Môt is defeated by Anath, Ba'al consort, who breaks Môt's body and uses it to fertilise the earth (hence Môt's association with the ripening of grain and fruit). Ba'al's return from the underworld is marked with the renewal of the rains', http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_elijah.html..

⁷⁶ Compare John Gray, *ibid.*, page 402.

⁷⁷ 1 Kings 17. 1.

The expression, 'before whom I stand', signifies to wait before someone with a view to service. In effect, 'whose servant I am'.

We might recall the words of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, 'Happy are your men and happy are these your servants, *who stand continually before you* and hear your wisdom!', 1 Kings 10. 8 ... although Elijah was well aware that he stood before One far greater than Solomon.

Even the angel who appeared to Zacharias could claim nothing higher for himself; 'Zacharias said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For *I* am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years". And the angel answered and said to him, "*I* am Gabriel, *who stand in the presence of God*, and I have been sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings", Luke 1. 18-19.

⁷⁸ Well did Jeremiah ask, 'Are there any among the false gods of the nations that can bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Are you not He, O Lord our God? We set our hope on you, for you do all these things', Jer. 14. 22.

⁷⁹ Compare, 'the God that answers by *fire*, let him be God', 1 Kings 18. 24.

⁸⁰ 'As the Lord ... lives' was a common expression in Old Testament days. Yet it held special significance for Elijah. Indeed, the word translated 'living' is the first word in the Hebrew text of Elijah's declaration, placed there for emphasis and stressing his faith in the reality of God.

⁸¹ 1 Kings 18. 10-12.

⁸² 2 Kings 2. 16.

⁸³ 1 Kings 17. 3.

⁸⁴ 1 Kings 17. 9.

⁸⁵ 1 Kings 18. 4.

⁸⁶ The impression from 1 Kings 18. 16 is that Ahab went immediately to meet Elijah – probably to reduce the chance that Elijah would disappear again. In which case, Jezebel would have known nothing of the meeting, and therefore have had no opportunity to order Elijah's execution – even if she had wanted.

⁸⁷ It is just possible that the Lord expected, as the drought began to bite, that Ahab would plead with Elijah. After all, if the prophet had claimed that the sorely-needed rain would come only at his word, what more reasonable than to urge him to open the heavens. I suppose it is even possible that God wished to deliver His servant from the temptation of praying for rain when he witnessed the acute sufferings of his people. See no hint that judgement on nation – Elijah not well known yet to people and not been among them for many years to be withdrawn – they certainly never have got point, as Psa. 74. 7-9! or not return.

⁸⁸ 1 Kings 19. 1.

⁸⁹ 1 Kings 18. 4.

⁹⁰ 1 Kings 18. 1; James 5. 17.

⁹¹ Surely, if Ba'al 'cannot produce in the area of his expertise, in his speciality, his reputation will suffer a shattering blow', Dale Ralph Davis, *ibid.*, page 204.

⁹² 1 Kings 18. 4, 13, 22; 19. 10, 14; Rom. 11. 3.