

## Elijah. Part 7: 1 Kings 18. 33-40.

### INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh and final part in our series of studies in the life of Elijah, as recorded in 1 Kings 17 and 18, where we witness how the Lord discredits the claims made for Ba'al by demonstrating that He and He only is the true and 'living' God.

In part 6, we noted that Elijah:

(i) taunted the ineffective prophets of Ba'al by suggesting that the absence of any response from heaven to their pleadings might be because their supposed god (a) is deep *in thought*, (b) is *in the lavatory*, (c) is *in a journey*, or (d) is simply still *in bed*, and

(ii) repaired 'the altar of the Lord' with twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and 'made a trench about the altar'.

We pick up the story with Elijah's actions at the repaired altar.

### SCRIPTURE

And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood.

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

And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that Thou art the Lord God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again.

Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God.

And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

1 Kings 18. 33-40 (*King James Version*)

### AN ABSENCE OF FIRE AND AN ABUNDANCE OF WATER

**Verse 33a.** 'And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood'.

#### An absence of fire.

There is nothing unusual about **some** of Elijah's preparations for offering up his sacrifice.

Elijah's (i) *arrangement of the wood* on the altar, (ii) *cutting up of his bullock*, and (iii) *laying the pieces on the wood* all comply with the biblical pattern for the offering a bullock as a burnt offering; namely, that the man who brought the offering 'shall kill the bullock ... and (ii) *cut it into pieces*. And the sons of Aaron the priest shall ... (i) *lay the wood in order* ... and ... (iii) *lay the parts*, the head, and the fat, in order *upon the wood*'.<sup>1</sup>

But there the parallel ends, for the Lord's instructions to Moses concerning the offering of a burnt offering had further stipulated that 'the sons of Aaron the priest shall *put fire upon the altar*, and lay the wood in order *upon the fire* and ... shall lay the parts ... in order upon the wood that is *on the fire which is upon the altar*'.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, as yet there is *no 'fire' on Elijah's altar*.

Nor (as shortly becomes apparent) is the wood required, as in the case of an ordinary burnt offering, to burn the appointed sacrifice—for 'the fire of the Lord' which soon falls certainly needs no help in doing that.

But if there was nothing unusual about **some** of Elijah's preparations for offering up his sacrifice, Elijah's *other* preparations were rather unusual—to put it mildly!

Having earlier given the prophets of Ba'al every advantage, he sets himself a few handicaps.

### An abundance of water.

**Verses 33b-34.** 'He said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time'.

Having first dug a trench<sup>3</sup> around the altar, Elijah proceeds to drench both his offering and the wood on which it is laid. And I mean 'drench'! For they are soaked with no less than twelve vessel-loads of water—with 'four barrels' (better 'pitchers' or 'jars'<sup>4</sup>) emptied three times over the pieces of the bullock and the wood.

I suspect it is hardly coincidental that the number of the vessel-loads of water equate (as did the number of altar stones) with the number of Israel's tribes.

**Verse 35.** 'And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water'.

And, then, when 'the water ran round about the altar', Elijah '*also filled* the trench with water'. That is, not only does the trench collect any water which runs off the sacrifice and the wood<sup>5</sup> but also the prophet then 'tops up' the trench to the brim with even more water.<sup>6</sup>

'But, wait a minute', somebody might say, 'that is a *lot* of water. And, surely, there has been no rain for forty-two months. From where is all this water coming?'

Personally, I very much doubt that the water came from the Mediterranean Sea,<sup>7</sup> which lay some fourteen hundred feet below<sup>8</sup> and at no small distance to the west. As I see it, for some energetic souls to have carried four empty vessels first down and then four full vessels up (and, assuming there were only four carriers, to do so three times) over such a distance would have taken far longer than the time available that mid-afternoon.

Nor is it necessary to speculate that the water-carriers managed to get down to the brook Kishon<sup>9</sup> and back in the time available.

As we noted on page 5 of part 4 of our studies, 'less than one hundred yards' from the plateau which almost certainly provides the stage for this contest between Jehovah and Ba'al, there exists a spring of water, 'which is said to *flow even in the driest seasons*'.<sup>10</sup>

I see no reason, therefore, to quarrel with the claim of Josephus that Elijah 'ordered them to fill ... barrels *with the water of the fountain*, and to pour it upon the altar'.<sup>11</sup>

Elijah is no simpleton; he knows that sodden meat and wood do not burn. Yet he takes every possible action to ensure that his bullock cannot burn by natural means. Indeed, if we didn't know better, we could be excused for thinking that Elijah is playing for the other side!

But the truth is that Elijah has unqualified confidence in God's power to do whatever is necessary to ignite his sacrifice. And so, on God's instructions,<sup>12</sup> he happily puts every conceivable difficulty in the Lord's way, knowing that, the greater the obstacles, the greater the glory for God when He overcomes them.

In this connection, I have long enjoyed a quotation from a sermon of Daniel Rowlands.<sup>13</sup> Speaking of God, Mr Rowlands says, 'His glory is seen when He works by means; it is more seen when He works without means; it is seen above all when He works contrary to means'.<sup>14</sup> And so it is here on Carmel.

### DEAD ON TIME

**Verse 36a.** 'It came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near'.

Don't ask me how Elijah knows it is the time of the evening sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem ... for I don't know. Perhaps he can tell from the position of the sun. Perhaps the Lord reveals it to him. Certainly, Elijah isn't wearing a watch or carrying an iPhone!

As I say, I don't know how Elijah knows that is 'the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice'. I know only that he does—for scripture says so.

## The significance of 'the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice'.

Jeroboam has long since disassociated the northern kingdom of 'Israel' from the worship at the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> Yet Elijah makes a point of waiting for 'the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice' in Jerusalem before calling on his God to accept the sacrifice that he has prepared. In so doing, he is openly making known his resolve to have fellowship both with the altar in Jerusalem and with the worshippers there.

And, as he waits, does Elijah give any thought, I wonder, to *the origin of the fire on the temple altar*, which is at that very moment consuming the evening sacrifice in Jerusalem? For I note that, about a century before this, following Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, 'fire came down from heaven' to ignite the burnt offering which the king offered,<sup>16</sup> which fire has, presumably, been kept burning on the temple altar ever since.<sup>17</sup>

'Hmm, now *there's* a thought, Elijah. Fire once "came down from heaven" in response to the prayer of a righteous man. A precedent, perhaps? Ah, but don't get too excited, Elijah. *That* was the temple in Jerusalem, the place where God had promised to place His name.<sup>18</sup> *This* is Carmel, currently situated in Ba'al's territory, and God has never promised to place His name here'.

### Carmel and Golgotha.

In all probability, the evening sacrifice was offered in Elijah's day (as we know it was in later times) at the ninth hour of the day.<sup>19</sup> This was, of course, the very hour when, some nine centuries later, our Lord Jesus cried at Golgotha, 'My God, my God, why did you forsake me'—before He released His spirit.<sup>20</sup>

And I can't help wondering whether this detail came up for mention when Elijah (along with Moses) appeared in glory with the Saviour on the so-called Mount of Transfiguration and spoke with Him about His forthcoming death at Jerusalem<sup>21</sup>—namely, that *Elijah* had offered *his* sacrifice at the very same hour of the day as that at which *the Lord Jesus* was to offer His!<sup>22</sup>

It is, then, 'at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice' that the man, who, *earlier*, 'came near to all the people',<sup>23</sup> *now*, not only 'comes near' (the same word) to the *prepared* sacrifice on the *repaired* altar but also 'draws nigh' to God.<sup>24</sup>

## 'GOD IS IN HEAVEN ... THEREFORE LET YOUR WORDS BE FEW' (ECCLES. 5. 2)

**Verse 36b-37.** 'And said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again'.

### Dignity.

We can hardly miss the stark contrast between the pleading of the prophets of Ba'al and the pleading of Elijah ... not least in that *they*, having kept up their wailing and wild ritual for the best part of the day, had *produced nothing*, whereas *he* prays, not with 'dancing, or shouting, or self-mutilation'<sup>25</sup> but earnestly and with calm dignity for less than a minute, with *the most 'striking' result*.<sup>26</sup>

### Brevity.

I note that Elijah's whole prayer occupies just two verses of text and comprises only sixty-three words in English— far fewer in Hebrew.<sup>27</sup> What an example to those of us who pray publicly to keep our public prayers short, sharp and to the point. I do emphasise, 'our *public* prayers', for, although Elijah's *public* prayer for *fire* is brief and concise, his *private* prayer for *rain* at the close of the chapter is anything but brief and concise.<sup>28</sup>

### Priority.

And Elijah's prayer testifies to his first priority in life; namely, the glory of God. For his request that *he* would be vindicated as the Lord's servant<sup>29</sup> is framed by two petitions that *the Lord* would be acknowledged as God.<sup>30</sup> Elijah has no wish to exalt himself; he wishes to be known only as the Lord's 'servant', who has carried out the Lord's 'word'.

It is no exaggeration to say, 'the heart of the prophet was filled with a burning zeal for the glory of God'.<sup>31</sup>

## Entreaty.

'The prayer of Elijah contains **two petitions**: (i) for the vindication of his own prophetic authority, a final proof that he had all along acted in accordance with the will of God; and (ii) for the bringing back of the nation to faith in the one true God'.<sup>32</sup>

I note:

(i) that it is crucial that Elijah is able to tell God that he has 'done all these things' at *His* 'word'—on *His* instructions. For Elijah had rested his whole case on fire falling from heaven to consume his sacrificial bullock (and had proceeded to drench that bullock, together with the wood on the altar, with water).

Had he acted on *his own* initiative, with no directing 'word' from God, the outcome would, doubtless, have proved, not only acutely embarrassing for Elijah personally but also deeply dishonouring to the Lord's name.

(ii) that Elijah is so confident of the Lord's intervention by fire and the resultant conversion of the people that he speaks of the latter 'as if it had taken place already'<sup>33</sup>—'that this people may know ... that you *have turned* their heart back again'.

## Addressee.

Significantly, Elijah addresses God as 'Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel'. I say, 'significantly' for two reasons:

(i) The equivalent description, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob', has been used only once before, and that by God Himself.

This was the occasion when God revealed Himself to Moses at Horeb '*in a flame of fire* out of the midst of a bush'.<sup>34</sup> Elijah now looks to God to make Himself known again in '*fire*',<sup>35</sup> although this time for the fire, not to leave a *bush* '*not consumed*'<sup>36</sup> but to leave a *bullock* wholly '*consumed*'.<sup>37</sup>

(ii) In Elijah's listing of the patriarchs, the name '*Israel*' replaces that of '*Jacob*'. I recall the earlier comment in verse 31, '*Jacob*, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, *Israel* shall be thy name'—by which comment, the Holy Spirit was 'censuring the ten tribes, not only for originally breaking away from the two tribes in the south, but also for appropriating the name 'Israel' exclusively for themselves'.<sup>38</sup>

## THE FIRE THAT CONSUMES

With an eye to words spoken by young Isaac to his father around twelve hundred years before,<sup>39</sup> at this point I feel like calling out, '*Elijah, behold the wood and the bullock for the burnt offering but where is the fire?*'

I suspect that, as Elijah draws his brief prayer to its close, while the sun begins its descent towards the western sea, a breathless hush settles on the people as they wait to find out whether Jehovah's prophet is to be as frustrated as Ba'al's prophets have been. For, if no fire falls from heaven on the repaired 'altar of the Lord', the contest would have to be declared a draw. It would be stalemate.

But the people do not have to wait long! For ...

**Verse 38.** 'Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench'.

'**Then** the fire of the Lord fell'. It has been well said that, 'Elijah proved the truth of Isaiah 65. 24: "it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and *while they are yet speaking, I will hear*". Israel must wait for this blessed experience until the glorious age when "the wolf and the lamb shall feed together".<sup>40</sup> Elijah had it while facing a whole pack of wolves with teeth undrawn!<sup>41</sup>

'Then **the fire of the Lord** fell'. Throughout past history, the Lord had established a reputation for responding or revealing Himself in *fire*. In the words of the German theologian and writer, Friedrich Krummacker:<sup>42</sup>

'God answered by *fire* the first transgression, when cherubim and a flaming sword were planted at the gate of Paradise.<sup>43</sup>

God answered Sodom and Gomorrah by *fire*<sup>44</sup> ... and by a *fiery* vision confirmed His promises to Abraham, when a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the pieces of the sacrifice.<sup>45</sup>

From the flame of *fire* in the bush, God spake unto Moses;<sup>46</sup> and out of the *fire*, clouds, and thick darkness, he spake to Israel on mount Sinai.<sup>47</sup>

By fire He answered the transgression of Nadab and Abihu, the two elder sons of Aaron, who in their priestly capacity offered strange fire unto the Lord; for “there went out fire from Jehovah, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord”.<sup>48</sup>

By fire as well as earthquake, God answered Israel in the matter of Korah; for “there came out a fire from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense”.<sup>49</sup>

By fire God answered Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple; for the fire came down and the glory of the Lord filled the house’.<sup>50</sup>

But scripture speaks of ***only two previous occasions when fire fell from heaven to consume sacrifices offered to God by His servants***—neither of whom had been an Aaronic priest.

(i) The first occasion was at Ornan’s threshing floor, concerning which we read, ‘David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called on the Lord; and He answered him from heaven by fire on the altar of burnt offering’.<sup>51</sup>

(ii) The second occasion was at the time of the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, when (on more or less the very same spot as fire had fallen from heaven in answer to the prayer of David<sup>52</sup>), following Solomon’s prayer, ‘fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering’.<sup>53</sup> It has been commented that ‘Solomon’s altar was consecrated by fire from heaven; but this [Elijah’s altar] was destroyed, because no more to be used’.<sup>54</sup>

And, because ‘the fire of the Lord fell’, it consumes the items in the order it does; namely, ‘the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust’. The fire, that is, works ever downwards, which is, of course, contrary to the action of all earthly and natural fire. The order in which the various items are consumed, therefore, rules out any possibility that this fire was merely natural lightning, preceding an approaching rainstorm.<sup>55</sup>

It is just possible that, if the items had burned from the bottom upwards, some suspiciously minded folk might have surmised that (in spite both (i) of his public statement to the contrary<sup>56</sup> and (ii) of the opportunity he gave them to study his every movement at close quarters<sup>57</sup>) Elijah has had something to do with it. But everything being burnt from the top downwards proved beyond doubt that this was no ordinary fire<sup>58</sup> ... that this was the work of God!

And we can hardly fail to link this downward movement of the fire with the downward rending of ‘the veil of the temple’ at the time of our Lord’s death, concerning which scripture says that ‘Jesus ... released His spirit, and behold, the veil of the temple was rent in two *from the top to the bottom*’.<sup>59</sup> In terms of the time of day, the downward rending of the veil in the Jerusalem temple on that occasion would coincide with the downward working of the fire now at Carmel’s altar.

**‘And consumed the burnt sacrifice’**. I note that the Hebrew verb translated ‘consumed’ means ‘ate, ‘devoured’<sup>60</sup> and is rendered ‘eat’ in all other five places where it occurs in 1 Kings 17 and 18.<sup>61</sup> It has been well commented, therefore, that ‘the fire consumes everything inside the sacred area bounded by the trench. The Hebrew word order highlights the completeness of the destruction by surrounding the direct objects with the verbs “to eat” and “to lick up”. It ate the offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and the water in the trench it licked up. Nothing escapes the divine fire’.<sup>62</sup>

In one sense, the fire which falls from heaven and consumes the bullock and the altar is a demonstration, not only of the existence and the power of God but also of the mercy and the grace of God. For that fire could equally have consumed the people. One commentator goes so far as to claim that ‘the fire of God’s wrath must fall either on the guilty people or on a sacrificial substitute’.<sup>63</sup>

Another writer suggests, ‘What a picture of the great sacrifice of Calvary! where the righteous judgement of God fell, not upon the wicked masses of men, nor even upon the unprincipled leaders who were primarily responsible for that cross being set up; the judgement of God in all its terrible severity fell upon the Holy One who hung there’.<sup>64</sup>

We note, however, one very important difference between the sacrifice on Carmel and the sacrifice at Golgotha; on Carmel the fire consumed the sacrifice whereas (if I may so speak) at Golgotha the sacrifice consumed the fire!

## **THE DECLARATION OF THE PEOPLE AND THE ‘EXIT’ OF THE PROPHETS**

**Verse 39.** ‘And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God’.

**The declaration of the people.**



At this point, the spotlight switches from Elijah and his (now non-existent<sup>65</sup>) altar to the people and their response.<sup>66</sup>

Just as the *choice* had been made clear to them ('if the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Ba'al, then follow him'<sup>67</sup>) and just as the *criterion* had been made clear to them ('the God who answers by fire, let Him be God') so now the *conclusion* is made clear to them ('the Lord, He is God'). Indeed, that conclusion is inescapable.

Throughout, the contest has been more than fair to the prophets of Ba'al. Elijah has deliberately weighted everything in their favour.

Ba'al's prophets have enjoyed the benefit of 'both the wind and the hill':

(i) the contest has played to what they claimed to be their god's strong point; namely, the casting down of lightning bolts to the earth;<sup>68</sup>

(ii) they have been offered the choice of bullock;<sup>69</sup>

(iii) they have been allowed to go first, thereby enjoying the obvious advantage of that time of day when the sun was at its hottest;<sup>70</sup>

(iv) they have been allowed to continue for more or less the whole day, from morning to mid-afternoon;<sup>71</sup> and

(v) they have enjoyed the 'home court advantage' of having the contest held in Ba'al's own territory at Carmel.

And what, pray, has been the outcome? Ba'al and his prophets may have been 'playing on their home turf' with everything weighted in their favour, but the result is clearly '*game, set and match*' to *Jehovah and His prophet!*

The Lord has beaten fairy-tale Ba'al at his own game. It is all over, bar the shouting—and we don't have to wait long for that. Because, with a further change of metaphor, the jury (comprised of the gathered 'people') delivers its verdict on the trial ... and its verdict is unanimous!

As one man:

(i) '***They fell on their faces***'. The fire, that is, which 'fell' on the altar causes the people to 'fall' on their faces!<sup>72</sup>

(ii) They confessed, '***The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God***'. The declaration of the people, '*He is God*', is an unmistakable echo of Elijah's earlier proposal when he set the contest rules earlier, to which the people had then assented: 'the God who answers by fire, *He is God*'.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, the people's pronouncement represents, more-or-less, a double echo of Elijah's own name, meaning 'my God is the Lord'.<sup>74</sup>

To no small extent, at this point, history repeats itself. For this is not the first time that scripture records a combination of

(i) divinely-sent 'fire' which 'consumed' a 'burnt offering',

and

(ii) the reaction of the then gathered people, who 'fell on their faces' and cried out.

There had been *two* such previous occasions; the first, following the consecration of Aaron and his sons at the tabernacle, and the second, following the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple.

For ease of comparison, the two relevant Bible passages, together with the comparable passage in 1 Kings 18, are as follows:

(i) '*Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and came out and blessed the people ... and **fire came out from before the Lord** and **consumed the burnt offering** and the fat on the altar. **When all the people saw it,**<sup>75</sup> **they shouted**<sup>76</sup> and **fell on their faces**'.<sup>77</sup>*

(ii) '*When Solomon had made an end of praying, the **fire came down from heaven**, and **consumed the burnt offering** ... and **when all the children of Israel saw** how the fire came down ... they **bowed themselves with their faces to the ground** ... and **praised the Lord**'.<sup>78</sup>*

(iii) '*Elijah the prophet came near and said, O Lord ... Then **the fire of the Lord fell** and **consumed the burnt offering** ... And **when all the people saw it**, they **fell on their faces** and **said, The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God**'.<sup>79</sup>*

There can be no mistaking the pattern, common to (i) Moses and Aaron at Mount Sinai,<sup>80</sup> (ii) Solomon at Mount Moriah,<sup>81</sup> and now (iii) Elijah at Mount Carmel.

But there was one notable difference between the action of the divinely-sent fire at Mount Carmel and that of the divinely-sent fire on the two previous occasions.

For, although on the first two occasions, the fire consumed the offerings, on neither occasion *did it consume the altar!* whereas the fire which strikes the Lord's altar on Carmel consumes, not only the burnt offering and the wood on which it had been laid but also the very stones of the altar and the dust of the ground around it ... and then '*licks up*' (an apt expression, I suggest, to denote the action of *tongues* of fire<sup>82</sup>) the water that filled the surrounding trench, leaving the whole area bare!

### The 'exit' of the prophets.

**Verse 40.** 'And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there'.

In one sense, all is settled; the contest is over.<sup>83</sup> And yet, although the *fire* has fallen from heaven, no *water* has—and it is water which is sorely needed. But, before the God who had sent *fire to revive the people's faith* sends *rain to revive their land*, two things need to happen. First, the prophets of Ba'al must be put to death and, second, Elijah must pray the rain down.<sup>84</sup>

I think we can safely say that the violent action taken by Elijah and the people against the prophets of Ba'al is not so much to avenge the earlier killing of the Lord's prophets<sup>85</sup> as to comply with the explicit command of God that false prophets among His people are to be put to death.<sup>86</sup> Apart from which, it is important to eliminate these prophets before God sends the rain, so as to establish beyond any doubt that the rain comes from the Lord and not from Ba'al.

On a final point of detail, I note that the slaughter of Ba'al's prophets takes place, not (as we might expect<sup>87</sup>) at the scene of their defeat but at 'the brook Kishon'.

It has been pointed out that 'the Kishon ... gathers the run-off of many springs and streams in the Jezreel Valley in its course west, reaching the sea on the north side of Mount Carmel ... The site was chosen "so that their blood would not pollute the land; and on this account, it was spilled [into the brook] that would carry it far off".<sup>88</sup> In other words, the brook was chosen 'that their blood might be ... conveyed into the sea, and might not defile the holy land'<sup>89</sup>—might not defile, that is, land which God speaks of as 'mine'<sup>90</sup>

## THE KNOCKOUT IN ROUND 4

In the first three parts of our series, we traced how the events recorded in chapter 17 demonstrate that Jehovah is the one and only true God. We noted how:

- (i) the *dry brook at Cherith* declares, '**Round 1** to Jehovah!'<sup>91</sup>
- (ii) the *well-fed family at Zarephath* proclaims, '**Round 2** to Jehovah!'<sup>92</sup>
- (iii) the *raising to life of the widow's son* positively thunders, 'And **Round 3** to Jehovah!'<sup>93</sup>

But, without doubt,

**it is 'the fire of the Lord' falling on 'the altar of the Lord' in chapter 18 that lands the spectacular knockout punch in Round 4.**



## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In closing, I ask – and answer – two ancient (and pertinent) questions.

- (i) The first question comes from *a pagan source*: '**What enemy would rise up against Ba'al?**'<sup>94</sup>  
**I can tell you who would—and who did.** And the heaven-sent fire trumpets the supremacy of Jehovah.
- (ii) The second question comes from *scripture itself*: '**Where is the Lord God of Elijah?**'<sup>95</sup>

***I can tell you where He is.*** He is where He has always been and where He will always be—on His throne, from where He reigns supreme.

I read once of a printer's error in the programme for a performance of Handel's 'Messiah'. On account of the addition of an intruding letter '**s**', the programme included the following lyrics in the Hallelujah Chorus: '*The Lord God Omnipotent Res**ign**eth!*'<sup>96</sup>

I cannot vouch for the truth of that story but I *can* tell you that, in any case, we have no need to be alarmed—God has most certainly *not* resigned. As George Frideric Handel *correctly* quoted in his oratorio, '*The Lord God Omnipotent **Reign**eth!*'<sup>97</sup>

You and I can rest in the certain knowledge that, no matter what is happening in the world, in our nation, in our locality or in our individual lives, 'the Lord God of Elijah' – our God – both knows all and has every situation firmly under His control.

**Yes, we can trust Him.**



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lev. 1. 5-8.

<sup>2</sup> Lev. 1. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> 'The 30-litre capacity trench', L. M. Wray Beal, '*1 & 2 Kings: Apollos Old Testament Commentary*', page 244.

<sup>4</sup> The word translated 'barrels' (כַּדִּים) 'designates the ordinary water-pitcher, generally carried then, as now, by women', J. Hammond, '*1 Kings: The Pulpit Commentary*', Volume 5, page 425. It is the word used, for example, of the flour jar of the widow of Zarephath, 1 Kings 17. 12 and of the water-pitcher carried by Rebecca to the well in Haran, Gen. 24. 14-20; cf. the use of the word in Judg. 7. 16-20.

<sup>5</sup> Which would otherwise have been absorbed into the dry earth around the altar.

<sup>6</sup> As Iain Provan dryly comments, 'No possibility of spontaneous combustion here!', Iain W. Provan, '*1 and 2 Kings: The New International Biblical Commentary*', pages 138-139.

<sup>7</sup> I am aware that Jeremiah speaks of 'Carmel by the sea', Jer. 46. 18, and that there is nothing in the text of 1 Kings 18 which requires us to insist that the water poured on the altar was fresh water. But, for reasons given in the main text, I do not believe that the Mediterranean Sea supplied the water for Elijah.

<sup>8</sup> Carmel's 'highest point ,1728 feet above the sea level', J. Hammond, *op. cit.*, page 420. In all likelihood, the platform of sacrifice was some 300 feet below the top of Carmel.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Kings 18. 40. 'Nowhere does the Kishon run so close to Mount Carmel as just beneath *El Murahkah*, which is ... perhaps 1000 feet above the Kishon', C. F. Keil, '*Commentary on the Old Testament by Keil and Delitzsch*', Volume 3, page 244.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hammond, *ibid.*, page 421. See also, 'Close by the steep rocky wall of the height, just where you can descend to the Kishon through a steep ravine, you find, 250 feet it might be beneath the altar plateau, a vaulted and very abundant fountain built in the form of a tank, with a few steps leading down into it, just as one finds elsewhere in the old wells or springs of the Jewish times', C. W. M. Van de Velde, '*Narrative of a Journey through Syria and Palestine*', Volume 1, page 325.

<sup>11</sup> Flavius Josephus, '*Antiquities of the Jews*', Book 8, Chapter 13, Paragraph 5.

<sup>12</sup> 'I have done all these things at your word', 1 Kings 18. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Rowlands served God in Llangeitho, in my native Wales, well over 200 years ago.

<sup>14</sup> Source: J. C. Ryle, '*Christian Leaders of the Eighteenth Century*', first published in 1885 and reprinted in 1978, page 206.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Kings 12. 26-29.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Chron. 7. 1.

<sup>17</sup> 'About a century before this, fire came from heaven which was still kept burning upon the altar at Jerusalem', J. A. Macdonald, '*1 Kings: The Pulpit Commentary*', Volume 5, page 447.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon prayed, 'that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, My name shall be there', 1 Kings 8. 29.

<sup>19</sup> The evening sacrifice, which was offered every day, consisted of both a burnt offering and a drink offering, Exod. 29. 38, 41; Num. 28. 3-8. The evening sacrifice was likely offered in Elijah's day at the ninth hour. We know that, during the second temple period, the oblation was offered around the ninth hour:

(i) 'The daily afternoon offering is slaughtered at eight and a half hours of the day, which is two and a half hours after midday, and is sacrificed, i.e., its offering on the altar is completed, at nine and a half hours of the day [thus allowing one hour for the entire procedure]', Mishnah, Pesachim 5. 1

(accessed at [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Pesachim.5.1?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Pesachim.5.1?lang=bi));

(ii) 'The priests were not at all hindered from their sacred ministrations ... but did still twice a day, in the morning and about the ninth hour, offer their sacrifices on the altar', Flavius Josephus; '*Antiquities of the Jews*', Book 14, Chapter 4, Paragraph 3.

<sup>20</sup> Matt. 27. 46-50; Mark 15. 33-37.

- <sup>21</sup> 'There talked with Him two men, which were Moses and Elias: who appeared in glory, and spoke of His decease ('departure', 'outgoing', 'exodus'; ἔξοδος) which He should accomplish at Jerusalem', Luke 9. 30-31.
- <sup>22</sup> 'The hour of prayer was the "ninth hour" (Acts 3. 1), that hour in which Jesus "cried with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit" (Matt. 27. 50)', J. A. Macdonald, *ibid.*, page 447.  
'It was 3 pm, and the evening lamb was being placed on the altar of Jehovah at Jerusalem, with its accompanying meal offering and drink offering, speaking to God of Christ, whose death at Calvary took place at that hour', W. W. Fereday, '*Elijah the Tishbite*', page 72.
- <sup>23</sup> 1 Kings 18. 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Heb. 7. 19; James 4. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> 'No dancing, or shouting, or self-mutilation—simply a prayer', Iain W. Provan, '*1 & 2 Kings (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series)*', comment on 18. 36-37.
- <sup>26</sup> 'The contrast between the Baal prophets and Elijah could hardly be sharper. Their preparations are sketchy, their prayer abrupt, their liturgical action frantic. Nothing happens. Elijah's preparations are methodical and correct. His prayer is impressive and dignified. He does nothing; God alone acts', R. D. Nelson, '*First and Second Kings: Interpretation*', page 117.
- <sup>27</sup> Elijah's prayer consists of a total of thirty-four words in Hebrew.
- <sup>28</sup> Although 1 Kings 18. 42-44 does not specifically mention that Elijah prayed at 'the top of Carmel', James makes it clear that he certainly did; 'Elijah ... prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. And he prayed again and the heaven gave rain', James 5. 17-18.
- <sup>29</sup> 1 Kings 18. 36c.
- <sup>30</sup> 1 Kings 18. 36b and 37a.
- <sup>31</sup> A. W. Pink, *ibid.*, page 151.
- <sup>32</sup> J. Skinner, '*Kings: The Century Bible*', page 234.
- <sup>33</sup> The apt expression of C. F. Keil, *ibid.*, page 249.
- <sup>34</sup> Exod. 3. 2, 6. Cf. Exod. 3. 16; 4. 5; Matt. 22. 32; Mark 12. 26; Luke 20. 37; Acts 7. 30-32. For the *identical* description of the Lord (including the reference to 'Israel' rather than to 'Jacob'), see 1 Chron. 29. 18 and 2 Chron. 30. 6.
- <sup>35</sup> 1 Kings 18. 24.
- <sup>36</sup> Exod. 3. 2
- <sup>37</sup> 1 Kings 18. 23-24. (The same word translated 'consume', ותאכל).
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted from Part 6, comments on 1 Kings 18. 31-32.
- <sup>39</sup> See Gen. 22. 7.
- <sup>40</sup> Isa. 65. 25.
- <sup>41</sup> W. W. Fereday, *ibid.*, page 74.
- <sup>42</sup> F. W. Krummacher, '*Elijah the Tishbite*', 1836, page 77.
- <sup>43</sup> Gen. 3. 24.
- <sup>44</sup> Gen. 19. 24.
- <sup>45</sup> Gen. 15. 17.
- <sup>46</sup> Exod. 3. 2.
- <sup>47</sup> Deut. 5. 22.
- <sup>48</sup> Lev. 10. 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Num. 16. 35.

<sup>50</sup> 2 Chron. 7. 1-3.

<sup>51</sup> 1 Chron. 21. 26.

<sup>52</sup> 'Solomon began to build the house of the Lord at Jerusalem in mount Moriah, where the Lord appeared to David his father, in the place that David had prepared in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite', 2 Chron. 3. 1; cf. 'David said, This is the house of the Lord God, and this is the altar of the burnt offering for Israel', 1 Chron. 22. 1.

<sup>53</sup> 2 Chron. 7. 1.

<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, '*Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*', comment on 1 Kings 18. 38.

<sup>55</sup> 'The fire proceeding from Jehovah, was not a natural flash of lightning, which could not produce any such effect, but miraculous fire falling from heaven, the supernatural origin of which was manifested in the fact, that it not only consumed the sacrifice with the pile of wood upon the altar, but also burned up the stones of the altar and the earth that was thrown up to form the trench, and licked up the water in the trench'. C. F. Keil, *ibid.*, page 249.

<sup>56</sup> 'I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, *and put no fire under*', 1 Kings 18. 23.

<sup>57</sup> 'Elijah said to all the people, *Come near to me*', 1 Kings 18. 30.

<sup>58</sup> 'This was a fire whose agency nothing could resist. In each instance the action of this fire was downwards, which is contrary to the nature of all earthly fire. No trickery was at work here', A. W. Pink, *ibid.*, page 165.

<sup>59</sup> Matt. 27. 50-51; cf. Mark 15. 37-38.

<sup>60</sup> 'אָכַל ... meaning "eat, consume, devour"', R. H. O'Connell, '*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*', Volume 1, page 394. So, too, J. B. Scott, '*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*', Volume 1, page 39.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Kings 17. 12, 15; 18. 19, 41, 42. The word occurs first in Gen. 2. 16 - 3. 22, where it is translated 'eat' in all twenty places where it is found.

<sup>62</sup> J. T. Walsh, '*1 Kings: Berit Olam*', page 253.

<sup>63</sup> A. W. Pink, *ibid.*, page 131.

<sup>64</sup> W. W. Fereday, *ibid.*, page 78.

<sup>65</sup> In contrast, 'the altar to Ba'al still stood as a monument to a lost cause', Warren W. Wiersbe, '*The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*', page 658.

<sup>66</sup> 'All the people' likely includes those 'on the house-tops in Jezreel and Samaria, and on the hills of Ephraim and Galilee' who 'are startled at the sight. It seems to them as if the pillar of fire that led their fathers in the desert had descended upon Carmel', D. March, '*Night Scenes in the Bible*', page 212.

<sup>67</sup> 1 Kings 18. 21.

<sup>68</sup> 'The God that answers *by fire*', 1 Kings 18. 24: Ba'al 'will sound his voice in the clouds and *flash his lightning* to the earth', John Gray, *ibid.*, page 402.

<sup>69</sup> '*Let them choose* one bullock for themselves', 1 Kings 18. 23.

<sup>70</sup> 'Dress it *first* ... they called on the name of Ba'al ... until *noon*', 1 Kings 18. 25-26.

<sup>71</sup> 'They called on the name of Baal *from morning* ... until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice', 1 Kings 18. 26, 29.

<sup>72</sup> 'There is an ironic echo here: the people must see fire "fall" before they themselves will "fall"', J. T. Walsh, *ibid.*, page 253.

<sup>73</sup> 1 Kings 18. 24. 'Their words were more than an acknowledgment that [the Lord] was the god with power in Israel. The Hebrew phrase ... proclaimed Him the one and only God'. J. J. Bimson, '*New Bible Commentary*', IVP, page 359

<sup>74</sup> 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God', 'was the universal cry; as if turning (by a slight inversion) the name of the Prophet himself into a war-cry, "Eli-Jah-hu"—"My God, He is Jehovah"', A. P. Stanley, *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*, Volume 2, page 305.

We might compare the prophet Micah, whose name means, 'Who is like Yah' and who, more or less, concluded his prophecy with the well-known words, 'Who is a God like you ...?', Micah 7. 18.

"Who is a God like You?" is another rhetorical question, and it may be a play on Micah's name, which means, "Who is like Yahweh?", Thomas Constable, *Expository Notes on the Bible*, comment on Micah 7. 18.

<sup>75</sup> The same Hebrew expression as in 1 Kings 18. 39.

<sup>76</sup> 'The word translated "shout" means a loud cry, usually one of joy', G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, page 150.

<sup>77</sup> Lev. 9. 23-24. Compare the later incident, 'when the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the Lord went up in *the flame of the altar*. Now Manoah and his wife were watching, and they *fell on their faces* to the ground', Judg. 13. 20.

<sup>78</sup> 2 Chron. 7. 1-3.

<sup>79</sup> 1 Kings 18. 36-39.

<sup>80</sup> The contents of Leviticus come between the completion of the tabernacle (Exod. 40. 17) and Israel's departure from Sinai (Numb. 1. 1; 10. 11).

<sup>81</sup> 2 Chron. 3. 1.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Acts 2. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Elijah is shortly to learn (from the death threat issued by Jezebel, 1 Kings 19. 2) that the victory achieved at Carmel will be short-lived ... that to win a battle is not necessarily to win the war!

'Tragically, this was only a momentary persuasion. This was no lasting revival in Israel. The people were decidedly persuaded, but not lastingly changed', David Guzik, *1 Kings: Enduring Word Commentary*, comment on 1 Kings 18. 38-40.

'The events on Carmel by no means brought Ba'al worship to an end. 1 Kings 22. 53 and 2 Kings 3. 2 tell how Ahab's sons worshipped Ba'al, and 2 Kings 10. 18ff. describe Jehu's extermination of Ba'al worship from the northern kingdom [Israel]. But, in the meantime, the Ba'al cult blossomed out again in Judah as a result of the support of Athaliah, the wife of Jehoram and daughter of Ahab ... The erection of altars for Ba'al is mentioned among the "abominable practices" of Manasseh enumerated in 2 Kings 21. 2f. Finally, Josiah's reform would seem to have brought the Ba'al cult to an end in Judah (2 Kings 23. 4ff.)', M. J. Mulder, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume 2, page 196.

More positively: 'In historical terms, it seems that Elijah failed in the task of completely turning Israel to an exclusive worship of Yahweh, but the abiding theological message of his narratives reminded Israel that Yahweh has kept in every generation those who have not bowed to Ba'al but have gladly lifted up Elijah's mantle', J. K. Mead, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, IVP, page 254.

Jerome Walsh has an interesting note on some of the contrasts between Jezebel and the widow of Zarephath: 'The comparison between the widow and Jezebel is an antithesis. Both are Sidonian women; this is the fundamental common element that invites us to compare them. Everything else is contrast. One is a widow, the other married. One is poverty-stricken, the other royally wealthy. One, living outside of Israel, respects Yahweh; the other, living in Israel, combats him. One provides food for the prophet of Yahweh, the other for prophets of Ba'al and Asherah. Elijah restores the one's favourite to life, and kills the favourites of the other'. J. T. Walsh, *ibid.*, page 263.

<sup>84</sup> 1 Kings 18. 42-45. (For the claim that Elijah prayed for rain, see note 28 above.)

I must leave you to dig into the closing 'prayer and rain' section of chapter 18 for yourselves. If, as I hope, you do that, you may find **the following quotations and comments on verses 41 to 46** helpful:

**Verse 41.** As yet, the 'sound of abundance of rain' is heard by Elijah's ears only.

To underline the fact that the three-and-a-half-year drought has been no accident of nature but has been a divine chastisement, the narrative of 1 Kings 17-18 ends as it began—with a predictive declaration from God's servant to the king ('there shall not be ... rain', 1 Kings 17. 1; 'there is a sound ... of rain', 1 Kings 18. 41).

**Verse 42.** Elijah *pleads* while Ahab *feeds*.

'Elijah prays for *life* in 1 Kings 17. 20-21, for *fire* in 1 Kings 18. 36-37, and for *rain* here in 1 Kings 18. 42', Dale Ralph Davis, *ibid.*, page 248. Sadly, he will later pray for his own *death*, 1 Kings 19. 4; that is the one prayer request which God does not grant.

In verse 21, 'as God's ambassador he had pleaded with Israel; here, as Israel's intercessor he is to plead with the Almighty', A. W. Pink, *ibid.*, page 182.

'He who stood bold and erect before king, prophets, and people now takes the lowest possible place before God'. W. W. Fereday, *ibid.*, page 78.

**Verse 44.** Elijah prays down the rain; 'he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain', James 5. 18.

'He answered Elijah immediately in one case (1 Kings 18. 36-38) and, apparently, after extended pleading in another (1 Kings 18. 42-44a). In another case, He will refuse Elijah's request altogether (1 Kings 19. 4)', Dale Ralph Davis, *ibid.*, page 252.

Rain 'will sweep in from the sea in a final slight to Ba'al, who in Canaanite mythology conquered the sea god. Now (the Lord) has conquered Ba'al and summons the rain from the sea', L. M. Wray Beal, *ibid.*, pages 245-246.

'The greatest gift Ba'al can give is rain', M. J. Mulder, *ibid.*, page 198.

'Behind the likeness of a man's hand, faith could discern the hand of God', Hamilton Smith, '*Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord*', page 52.

'A "handful of meal" had been sufficient under God to sustain a household for many months, and a cloud "like a man's hand" could be counted upon to multiply and furnish an abundant downpour', A. W. Pink, *ibid.*, page 188.

'Great blessings often rise from small beginnings', John Wesley, *ibid.*, comment on 1 Kings 18. 44.

'This is no natural rainstorm. From a wisp of cloud to a lowering sky with wind and heavy rain takes but an instant', J. T. Walsh, *ibid.*, page 257.

**Verse 45.** The rain from heaven follows the fire from heaven.

'Israel is to learn again this day that the God who sends fire to convert their hearts will also send rain to refresh and feed their bodies', R. S. Wallace, '*Elijah and Elisha*', page 41.

'To Jezreel' ... Ahab had a palace there, 1 Kings 21. 1.

**Verse 46.** Elijah *runs* while Ahab *rides*.

Elijah 'ran before Ahab', in all likelihood filling the role of an outrunner for the royal chariot; cf. 'Absalom prepared him chariots and horses, and fifty men *to run before him*', 2 Sam. 15. 1, and 'Adonijah ... prepared him chariots and horsemen, and fifty men *to run before him*', 1 Kings 1. 5.

'Elijah, girt his rough mantle close about his loins, took his stand before the chariot of the king, and ran all the way, fifteen miles, across the plain, through darkness and wind and mire and a deluge of rain, before the flying horses of the king, to the gate of the city, and then, like an Arab of modern times, he would not go in, but stayed outside the walls and cast himself upon the bare earth, in the midst of the storm, for his night's repose. The prophet had put the king to shame before his people at Carmel, and he ran before his chariot as an act of homage to show that *he still acknowledged him as his sovereign*. He who could call down fire from heaven, and bring the clouds and the rain, was still willing to perform the menial service of running in the rain and darkness before the chariot of his king', D. March, '*Night Scenes in the Bible*', page 214.

<sup>85</sup> 1 Kings 18. 4; 19. 10, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Deut. 13. 1-5; 17. 2-3.

<sup>87</sup> See Judg. 7. 25; 8. 17-21.

<sup>88</sup> M. Cogan, '*1 Kings: The Anchor Bible*', page 444.

<sup>89</sup> John Wesley, *ibid.*, comments on 1 Kings 18. 40.

<sup>90</sup> Jer. 2. 7; 16. 18. The Carmel range of mountains had once formed a border of the inheritance of the tribe of Asher, Josh. 19. 24, 26.

<sup>91</sup> 1 Kings 17. 1, 7.

<sup>92</sup> 1 Kings 17. 16.

<sup>93</sup> 1 Kings 17. 22.

<sup>94</sup> 'What enemy would rise up against Ba'al? What foe against the Rider of Clouds?' are words spoken *triumphantly* by the goddess Anat; quoted in Norman C. Habel, '*Yahweh Versus Ba'al: A Conflict of Religious Cultures*', page 56.

<sup>95</sup> A question posed by the prophet Elisha following Elijah's 'whirlwind' ascent to heaven, 2 Kings 2. 11, 14.

<sup>96</sup> 'Many years ago, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Swedish Choral Club combined to present a performance of Handel's Messiah. But the printer made an error when he printed the lyrics for the program. Instead of the word "Reigneth", the program read, "Hallelujah! The Lord God Omnipotent Resigneth!"' Robert C. Shannon, '*Standard Lesson Commentary*', 1997-1998, page 214.

<sup>97</sup> Rev. 19. 6.