



Elijah: Making Spiritual Connections

Leaders' Notes



Introduction

It is too easy to see the prophets of Baal as a joke. They were not! They were pagan spirit worshippers accustomed to connecting with the spirit world and seeing the supernatural.

In the contest on Mount Carmel we see opposing spiritual connections. Elijah, with strong connections with God on one side and the Baal priests with their affinity to the dark side of the spiritual world, on the other side. 1 Kings 18-19

One of the key factors in Israel's alliance or covenant with God was that they worship only him and keep his laws on how to treat each other. He would then bless them with good harvests and no enemy attacks. It was an excellent deal, yet they had repeatedly broken it, opting for something vastly inferior.

Elijah's Story

Introductory background if needed. To be read with dramatic effect, perhaps using 2 readers for alternative phrases, (Riding Lights style) It's like playing ping pong! Add jokes if you can!

A long time ago in a far-off land (the Middle East), there was a family of tribes,
known as the Children of Israel.

The great God Yahweh had adopted them as his own children
to teach them his ways and to be blessed by him.

These tribes had been united in the days of King Saul, (a former donkey farmer),
King David, (the good-looking giant slayer) and King Solomon (the wise)

But Solomon for all his wisdom had broken God's laws,
by allowing his many wives to practice pagan rites in the land.

This broke the alliance with Yahweh, their Protector and Provider
which in turn broke up the kingdom.

The southern Kingdom of Judah was sometimes blessed by having a godly king.

But the northern Kingdom of Israel embarked on a troubled history.

Successive kings failed to provide godly leadership.

Sixty years on, a man named Ahab came to the throne of Israel,
who aided by his wife, proved to be the worst so far.

He adopted paganism wholeheartedly as a national religion
and allowed the persecution of Yahweh's prophets,
who had to go and hide in caves, and be sent secret food parcels.

In an attempt to save the North from certain destruction,
God raised up two very godly men who repeatedly demonstrated his power,
in the same way that Moses had done before them.

There was to be no one greater than they, until the arrival of the Messiah.

The first of these was the great prophet Elijah... (Drum roll)

Enter Elijah

The challenge was clear.

Baal, the Canaanite god of winter rains and fertility, introduced by King Ahab himself, had become the people's new favourite.

The true God of Israel, having been relegated to a Sabbath day only, position, was seen as being no greater than the local pagan gods.

Yahweh's response, 'Okay. Let this 'Baal' meet your needs then. Let him provide you with the rain you need for your crops to grow. Then we'll see who is God!'

An unknown man, dressed as a simple peasant, arrived at the palace to make the announcement.

"As surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there will be no dew or rain during the next few years until I give the word!"

This prophet, 'Elijah' then left and wasn't seen again for a long time. Being a prophet, this symbolised that God had left his people for a time.

Ahab shrugged his shoulders and thought no more of it. Until the rains failed to arrive. Just coincidence, surely? Until the rains failed to arrive again, and again, and again. By which time he was hunting high and low for the prophet, uttering murderous threats against him, but with no sign of remorse or regret, for either his own, or the people's unfaithfulness in breaking the sacred Yahweh-Israelite Sinai Treaty. Elijah by now, was hiding in the middle of Jezebel's homeland, the last place Ahab would have ever thought of looking.

After a third year of drought, the country was at breaking point. Ahab was either pigheadedly stubborn or else lamely under his wife's thumb. He seemed more concerned about his precious war horses, than about his people. With 2,000 chariots¹ in his armoury, plus mules and cattle, he had plenty of animal mouths to feed. It was God who had to break the deadlock because unlike Ahab, he was not insensitive to the hardship and suffering of the people. So he sent Elijah back to complete the challenge with this message.

'Let there be a contest. Let's make it really easy on Baal. His worshippers believe that he controls thunder and lightning, so let him send one of his lightning flashes from heaven to ignite an offering. Let every one of his 450 prophets be assembled to make the offering and let it be on Mount Carmel, a site sacred to Baal for centuries. And let's assemble all of Israel to watch.'

Elijah instructed the king to summon these people, and the king did so.

The people hadn't attended a national assembly for years, so they were excited and intrigued. What was this all about? Details hadn't been given to them, so rumours abounded in plenty.

Despite his simple attire, there was a real presence about Elijah as he stood alone representing the true God of Israel.

¹ According to Assyrian records

“How long are you going to keep jumping between two branches?² he demanded of the Israelites. Make up your minds. Which one is God? You cannot have a foot in both camps, worshipping God on the Sabbath and living like the rest of the world during the week. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

They say nothing! He explains the terms of the contest. They agree it's a good idea.

The 'home team' went first. They began their rituals in the usual way, and spent the whole morning leaping and dancing around their altar calling, “O Baal, answer us! O Baal, answer us!” With 450 of them, it was noisy!

By noon, they were thirsty, hot, and hoarse. What could Baal be doing that was so important that he was ignoring ALL of his priests? Elijah started making jokes at their expense.

“Maybe you need to shout louder,” he mocked, “or perhaps he's too busy or is meditating or asleep.”

A short pause for breath and a quick half-time consultation. Like many pagan worshippers, they believed that if priests offered their own blood, it opened up a pathway to the spirit world.³ They therefore started cutting themselves, 'as was their custom'.

Was it inevitable that they would get no response?⁴ They seem genuinely surprised when nothing happened all day. Any spirits who usually appeared to them, knew full well that with a man of God such as Elijah present, God was going to show up in force. They were keeping well clear of the place.

It was approaching 3pm, the time of the evening sacrifice. Elijah's turn. He rebuilt the altar of God, using 12 stones not just 10, to emphasise that Israel was still one nation spiritually, whatever the political differences between north and south.

He dug a ditch around it. This was unusual! He prepared the offering and then ordered them to soak the whole thing in plenty of water, enough to fill the trench. Sea water presumably, after 3 years of drought.⁵ No man could have lit it after that so no room for doubt or trickery. Elijah's prayer was short, powerful and took about 30 seconds!

³⁶ At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. ³⁷ O Lord, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to yourself.”

² ... and Elijah cometh nigh unto all the people, and saith, `Till when are ye leaping on the two branches?
1 Kings 18:21 Young's Literal Translation

³ Ten Thousand Years of Ancient History: McIntosh & Twist

⁴ Revelation 13:11 Then I saw a second beast... it spoke like a dragon... ¹³ And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people.

⁵ They were near the coast, approximately 500 metres above sea level

What happened next was almost a re-enactment of a scene from the opening ceremonies of the Old Covenant back at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses, nearly 600 years earlier.⁶

³⁸ Immediately the fire of the Lord flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench!”

The impact was not lost on the Israelites. God had once again revealed himself to his people. God's fire not only burnt up the offering, the stones, the water, and the 'dust', it also rekindled their faith in God and healed their relationship with him; for a time at least with some of them, indefinitely with others.

³⁹ And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, “The Lord—he is the Mighty One! Yes, the Lord is the Mighty One”

It wasn't over yet of course. Whilst Ahab went off for a late lunch, Elijah, without even stopping to eat, climbed to the top of the mountain, and started to pray.

He knew how to pray, and he knew how to keep praying until God gave him a sign that the answer was on its way. Seven times he prayed, until finally, that tell-tale cloud appeared on the horizon. Soon the sky was black with clouds and a heavy wind brought a terrific rainstorm. Everyone got soaked. The drought was over, the people's faith in God had been restored, and Elijah ran the 20 miles back to Jezreel, in an unrecorded world record time.

- How was Elijah able to receive such great answers to prayer? John 15:7
- He had received even more amazing answers to prayer when he had been away during the drought. See 1 Kings 17:10-24

Notes on 1 Kings 19, if you have time for it

It had been a great spiritual victory. Elijah had never doubted the outcome which had been awesome. Vast numbers of people had turned back to God. So why, the next day, is he then fleeing for his life? This had not been part of his hopes and dreams.

On hearing the news, Jezebel, who had stayed at the palace, swore to have him killed. Her threatening message to Elijah was a defiant claim that she was still in power. Had Ahab learned anything? Moreover, the people were fickle and likely to turn away from God again soon.

If Jezebel really intended to kill Elijah, why did she send a messenger rather than a soldier? She was angry but she was also badly shaken. This was a power, the like of which she had never encountered before. Better to just use bully tactics to chase him out of the country.

Caught unawares, her tactics worked as fear took a hold of Elijah. Deflated, demoralised and depressed, the man of God fled south to Beersheba in Judah, over 100 miles away. By the time he stopped, he was burnt out, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

⁶ Leviticus 9:22-24: Aaron ... after presenting the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offering, he stepped down from the altar. Then Moses and Aaron went into the Tabernacle, and when they came back out... the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole community. Fire blazed forth from the Lord's presence and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When the people saw this, they shouted with joy and fell face down on the ground.

He finally poured it all out to God. "I gave this project my best shot. I put everything into it, but it was all in vain and now I'm finished. What was the point? Nobody cares anyway. What's there to live for that has any real meaning? I wish I could just die and be done with it all."

God gently met his needs. First priority, some physical refreshment, starting with a good long sleep. Waking to the smell of freshly baked bread, Elijah finds an angel on kitchen duty. Another sleep, another meal and he was ready for some spiritual refreshment. What better than to go on a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai? Although 200 miles away, the angel food sustained him.

Here he experienced an intimate time with God that renewed and strengthened him. He showed Elijah that although he can sometimes be found in dramatic exciting events, those quiet times of solitude when we reach out and connect with the presence of God are also essential to us.

At Sinai, God showed him the 'bigger picture'. He gave him new direction, fresh purpose, and a soulmate. Far from being over, it had only just begun.

What did God's new instructions to Elijah mean?

- Anoint Hazael as king of Aram = *my plans are more far reaching than you might expect.*
- Anoint Jehu as king of Israel = *It may look as though nothing has changed but just you wait.* Ahab and Jezebel's days in power are numbered. They were succeeded by someone who ruthlessly wiped out Baal worship.
- Anoint Elisha = *you have been on your own long enough.* It is time for you to take an apprentice who will provide support through friendship.
- And you are not as alone as you think. Many others will remain faithful. It's easy to feel alone when we are down, but it is usually not true.

1 Kings 19:18 is a foretelling of the end of the Northern Kingdom which occurred 140 years later. Elijah and his followers could not save the state, but they could increase the numbers of those who remained faithful to God, although 7,000 is probably a symbolic number.

- Why did Elijah go from being so high to being so low? What can we learn from this?

Background Notes on Elijah

'Elijah' means 'the Lord is my God'. Was this his birth name or his chosen name for his ministry? He is unusual in that we are not told his family name or his tribe. Were they of little importance or did he keep it quiet to protect them from a vengeful king and queen? Elijah's 'garment of hair with a leather belt' was the dress of the average poor peasant and different from the sanctuary prophets. In later times, it became the badge of a prophet.

Elijah came from a small settlement somewhere in the Trans-Jordan where lived the tribe of Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh. Originally it included a few towns for the Levites but many of them migrated south when the king started to appoint men from any tribe as priests.

Ever since Jeroboam had downgraded the religious establishment due to the Temple being in the sister state of Judah, the people had come to think of the God of Israel as being of similar status to Baal. Elijah was to demonstrate the absolute power of Yahweh.

Ahab (874 - 853 BC) married Jezebel possibly because he was looking for allies against the growing power and threat of Assyria. Her father Ethbaal, was king of Sidon, the most powerful city-state of ancient Phoenicia. Zarephath was a coastal town between Tyre and Sidon.

Mount Carmel is a plateau mountain range along the Mediterranean coast in northern Israel, approximately 500 meters high. It forms a balcony opening onto the plain of Jezreel. Worship sites were often at 'high places'.⁷

Carmel – Jezreel = about 20 miles; Jezreel – Beersheba in Judah = over 100 miles
Beersheba – Mount Sinai = about 200 miles

Baal Worship and the God of Israel: Worlds apart

In the mythology of Canaan, Baal⁸, the god of fertility was all important. He was seen to die when the rains cease in May and spend the summer in the underworld battling with Mot, the god of death. He was revived as he renewed his sexual relationship with his sister Anath, the goddess of love and war, resulting in the autumn rains. Another myth told of him fathering a divine bull calf from a heifer. Farmers would have sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes as part of their religious rituals so that Baal would ensure the fertility of their land that year.

The worship of Canaanite gods therefore, led to immoral practices, such as the sacred prostitution of women, and in times of crisis, even human sacrifice, often children.⁹ King Mesha of Moab sacrificed his eldest son to the god Molech, when he was being defeated by Israel¹⁰. It was essential that the people of God did not fall into such practices, which were strictly banned under Old Testament law, but tragically many of them did.¹¹

For Canaanites, their gods focused on empty rituals. In contrast, Yahweh was very concerned about lifestyle, rather than the empty performance of religious practices. He declared himself as a God who wanted to be in relationship with his people, disclosing his character in personal ways and desiring them to treat each other in the best possible ways.

Vegetarians will shudder at the idea of animal sacrifice, but that was the whole point, a sacrifice is something that is **difficult** to make. It was the custom in most religions for priests to sacrifice animals to their gods, as well as grains, fruit and sometimes flowers, but its significance varied greatly from one religion to another.

For the Israelites, a sacrifice, a sin offering, had to be made as an atonement on behalf of the people for their unfaithfulness, before God's judgement could be removed. This whole event was an affirmation and re-iteration of God's covenant with his chosen people.

Sources and further information

The Prophets of Israel: H L Ellison

<https://www.ancient.eu>

[Baal - God of Fertility, War and Weather | Mythology.net](#)

Writer: Brenda Lord; 16 Oct 2014; reviewed Nov 2020; Image: Microsoft clip art

⁷ <https://www.bibleplaces.com/mtcarmel> For a photo of Mt Carmel

⁸ Baal means 'lord or master' as does 'El', a title for God. His Canaanite name was Hadad.

⁹ There is archaeological evidence for this. The Ugarit tablets found in northern Syria in 1928 also tell us much about ancient cultures. They date back to the Late Bronze Age c. 1550 BCE – c. 1200 BCE.

¹⁰ 2 Kings 3:26-27;

¹¹ Leviticus 18:21; Jeremiah 32:35