

## **ELIJAH AND THE PROPHETS OF BAAL**

8-21-11          I Kings 19  
Dean Feldmeyer

### **REVIEW**

It's about 850 BCE. Israel has been divided into two countries for nearly 80 years, now. The southern kingdom is Judah and the capital of Judah is Jerusalem. Judah's king is Jehoshaphat. The northern kingdom is Israel with the capital city of Samaria. The king, there, is Ahab. His wife is Jezebel.

When King Ahab of Israel married his Phoenician princess one of the things she brought with her was her religion. Her father had not been a king only but a priest of the god, Baal and Baal's concubine Asherah, as well. To keep the peace in the palace, Ahab had a temple built to Baal in the capital city and even made some sacrifices to the Canaanite god, himself. He also had a phallic shrine to Asherah built in the middle of the city.

This was not his only fault, just his most visible. He had also allowed the wealthy to ignore laws on the treatment of slaves and indentured servants; he had turned a blind eye to a resurgence of human sacrifice in the southern part of his kingdom around Jericho; and he had allowed the illegal practice of usury, loaning money at extreme interest rates, to flourish.

YHWH finally got fed up with Ahab and Jezebel and their antics and raised up a prophet named Elijah whose only job would be to hold them accountable to God. Elijah's first bit of business was to announce a drought that God was going to use to force even the wealthiest and most powerful Israelites repent and change their ways.

When the king and queen responded to this news by threatening to kill Elijah, he fled to the Phoenician city of Sidon, where he hid out for three years, living with a widow and her son.

### **MEANWHILE, BACK IN SAMARIA**

Meanwhile, back in Samaria, the drought was taking its toll and the capital city seemed to be getting it worse than anywhere else.

Jezebel managed to convince King Ahab that this was happening not because YHWH was angry, but because Baal was. And Baal was angry because the king was allowing so many of YHWH's prophets – about 100 of them -- to run around the countryside unchallenged. If he wanted it to rain, she said, he was going to have to do something about those prophets of YHWH. Make them shut up or, failing that, just kill them all. Ahab became convinced and sent his soldiers out into the countryside to find and then threaten the prophets of YHWH. If they did not obey, they were to be killed.

In those days the king's chief of staff was a man named Obadiah and Obadiah was devout in his worship of YHWH, the one true god. When Obadiah heard that Jezebel was planning to have the prophets of YHWH killed, he warned them and then helped them to hide out in a series of caves and supplied them with food and water. But he was still the king's chief of staff and when the king said jump he jumped.

In the third year of the drought, things had gotten so bad that even the king's stable was affected. Unless some grazing land was found, his horses and mules were in danger of starving. So Ahab met with Obadiah and they divided the country into two halves and went in opposite directions in search of water and grazing land.

### **ELIJAH RETURNS**

About that time YHWH decided that the drought had lasted long enough and came to Elijah in a dream and told him to return to Samaria and announce the good news to Ahab who should, by now, be in more of a listening mood.

On his way back to Samaria who should Elijah run into but Obadiah?

He greeted his old friend and then told him to go back and tell Ahab that Elijah was coming to talk to him. But Obadiah was reluctant to do Elijah's bidding.

"What," he says in about the 7<sup>th</sup> verse of I Kings 19. "Do you want me dead?"

And then he explains: "Ahab has been looking for you to kill you for three years, now. He blames this whole drought thing on you. Every time he goes into village or a town or even a neighboring country he asks if they've seen you and if they say they haven't, he makes them swear an oath to that effect. They know that if they are discovered making a false oath to the king, every person in the village will be killed."

He goes on: "Now you want me to go and tell him that I've found you and he'll come looking for you but God will have called you away to something else and you won't be here and Ahab will have me killed. And that's not fair! Didn't I do YHWH's bidding? Didn't I protect his prophets when Jezebel wanted them all killed? Didn't I..."

Elijah interrupts him: "Just go tell him. I promise to show up at the palace when he gets back there."

So they part company and Obadiah takes the message back to Ahab and Ahab hurries back to the palace in Samaria to meet Elijah there. When he does he greets him with less than hearty enthusiasm: "Hello, Elijah! You troubler of the people, you!"

Elijah responds with typical prophetic candor: "Me?!? You're the one who has troubled Israel with your idolatry and refusing to obey God's commandments. Every bad thing that has happened is your fault. But never mind that. Go

tell the prophets of Baal and Asherah – all 850 of them –to meet me on top of Mt. Carmel. And then send out messengers to all of the people of Israel and tell them that God wants them, to come to Mt. Carmel. I'll be waiting there.” And with that, he turns on his heel and leaves to start climbing up Mt. Carmel for what would become known far and wide as....

### THE SUPER BOWL OF PROPHECY

RANDY: Hello, everyone, I'm Randy Riley.  
 DEAN: And I'm Dean Feldmeyer.  
 RANDY: Welcome to ESPN History Radio's exclusive coverage of the first ever broadcast of the Old Testament Prophetic Games. Dean, is this a beautiful day or what?  
 DEAN: Just beautiful, Randy. It's a perfect day, here, high atop Mount Carmel. Temperatures are in the low seventies. There's a slight breeze out of the west, rolling in from the Mediterranean Sea and the sun is bright, as it just about always is, here in Israel.  
 RANDY: That may be at least one of the contributing factors to this record crowd. It looks like just about every single person in Israel is here, wouldn't you say?  
 DEAN: Well, if it isn't every single person, it's close, Randy. As you know King Ahab made attendance at this event mandatory for all non-essential personnel. And speaking of non-essential personnel, here come the prophets of Baal, now.  
 RANDY: That's right, Dean. The prophets of Baal are entering from the right side of the mountain. They're decked out in their usual red, orange and yellow priestly robes. Looks like about 450 of them.  
 DEAN: They have a deep bench, that's for sure. Who are these guys following them?  
 RANDY: Oh, those are the prophets of Asherah, Baal's concubine.  
 DEAN: Really! They still haven't tied the knot?  
 RANDY: That's what they say. Hey, maybe Baal has commitment issues?  
 DEAN: Or maybe she's not ready to settle down? Who knows?  
 RANDY: Who, indeed. Looks like she's got a deep bench as well. Say 400 prophets of her own?  
 DEAN: That would be about right, Randy. 450 for Baal and 400 for his goddess girlfriend. 850 in all.  
 RANDY: That's a lot of prophets.  
 DEAN: It is, for real. And now, coming in from the other side of the mountain, here's the Lord Yahweh's prophet, a guy named Elijah.  
 RANDY: That's it? Just the one guy?  
 DEAN: That's it, Randy. Just the one prophet of Yahweh against 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah.  
 RANDY: Doesn't seem fair, does it?  
 DEAN: Well, you wouldn't think so but, remember, this whole challenge was Elijah's idea. He challenged the prophets of Baal to match the power of their god to the power of the one true God, the God of Israel, the Lord God, Adonae. Also known as Yahweh Elohim.  
 RANDY: No kidding? Hey, why don't you bring us up to date on the rules for this prophetic tournament?  
 DEAN: Sure thing, Randy. They're simple, really. The prophets of Baal will be up first. They'll choose one of the two sacrificial bulls, kill it, butcher it and place it on the woodpile atop the altar they've constructed up here on the mountain top. Then they'll pray to their god, Baal, to consume the sacrificial bull with fire.  
 RANDY: And, then, it'll be Elijah's turn, right?  
 DEAN: That's right. Elijah will take the other bull, kill and butcher it and lay the pieces atop his altar. And then he'll pray to his God, the Lord Yahweh, to consume the beast with fire.  
 RANDY: First to fry wins?  
 DEAN: You got it. The first team to have their bull sacrifice completely consumed by their God is the winner.  
 RANDY: That's awesome!  
 DEAN: Oh, it gets better.  
 RANDY: Really?  
 DEAN: This is a death match.  
 RANDY: Oh, wow!  
 DEAN: That's right. The loser of this match is to be taken out, immediately, and killed by the winner.  
 RANDY: That's harsh!  
 DEAN: These prophets play for keeps. No denying that.  
 RANDY: Well, it looks like things are getting underway down on the mountaintop. The prophets of Baal have placed their slaughtered bull on the altar...  
 DEAN: Kinda gruesome...  
 RANDY: According to the rules of this competition, no accelerants or flames of any kind can be used by the prophets themselves. All fire or sources of fire must come from Baal and Baal alone. The prophets have concluded their warm up and now they're starting to sing and dance around the altar. So... I guess we'd better brace ourselves and get ready for some, uh, fireworks?

DEAN: Well, I certainly hope so, Randy. Fireworks would be pretty nice right about now.

RANDY: Yep...fire...fireworks... sparks...maybe some smoke?

DEAN: Uh, okay... while we're waiting for Baal to consume his offering with fire, maybe this would be a good place to remind our listeners that this broadcast is the sole property of ESPN History Radio and any rebroadcast, retransmission, or account of this event, without the express written consent of ESPN, is prohibited.

RANDY: Yeah. Okay... nothing much happening down on the field. The prophets of Baal have begun crying and weeping, it seems, but still not so much as a wisp of smoke. Why don't we take a moment to let our local affiliates identify themselves?

DEAN: Good idea, Randy. This is WUMC, home of the Wilmington United Methodist Broadcast Network.

RANDY: Okay, we're back.

DEAN: Anything?

RANDY: Nope, nothing.

DEAN: Are they cutting themselves? Ouch!

RANDY: Yeah. Swords and knives have come out and now they're cutting themselves.

DEAN: That's disgusting.

RANDY: Good thing they haven't invented television, yet. That's all I've got to say.

DEAN: And here comes Elijah. Is he allowed to do that?

RANDY: I guess he is. Looks like he's taunting them. Can you make out what he's saying?

DEAN: Something about maybe Baal is taking a...walk? Or maybe he's asleep. Or...oh, man...that's cold.

RANDY: What?

DEAN: He's saying that Baal may not even be a real God. Maybe he doesn't even exist at all.

RANDY: Goes for the juggler, doesn't he?

DEAN: Takes no prisoners, that's for sure.

RANDY: Well...let's...uh...take another commercial break and then we'll come back to the action.

*(Long Pause)*

RANDY: We're back on Mt. Carmel and now, in the fourth hour, we're still waiting. Most of the prophets of Baal have fainted from loss of blood. It's just a mess down there, folks, let me tell you. With the blood and the flies and the dead bull carcass and... well, it's just a mess, that's all.

DEAN: Elijah is back!

RANDY: Yes! And it looks like he's moving to his altar. There are some men with him and they're carrying, oh...

DEAN: Yep, they're bringing his sacrificial bull and there it goes on to the altar.

RANDY: Wait! There's more. Are those big urns filled with water? Oh, wow!

DEAN: Yes, they are. And those guys are pouring the water all over Elijah's altar to Yahweh. And what are those guys with the shovels?

RANDY: They're digging a trench around the altar and the water guys are filling it with water, too.

DEAN: So, let's review, shall we? That's a stone altar covered with green wood and a bloody bull carcass, and it's all been soaked in and surrounded by water. Hardly an invitation to fire!

RANDY: Elijah has just made this challenge twice as hard as it was to begin with. Maybe three or four times as hard.

RANDY: Sh-sh-sh-sh! He's praying.

DEAN: Yes, and he's not talking as loudly as he was.

RANDY: That's probably because he made everyone scoot up closer.

DEAN: Something about God proving to these people that he is the one true God and showing them his power and...That's all I've got.

RANDY: Well, that must be enough! Look at that!

DEAN: Wow! What was that, lightening?

RANDY: Something...something like lightening. Whatever it was it completely burned up the altar, stones and all.

DEAN: And even the trench filled with water. That was awesome!

RANDY: And you're not the only one who thinks so. Look! All the people are on their hands and knees, praying and saying that only Yahweh is God.

DEAN: Well, not all of them. Those Israelite soldiers aren't. And neither are those other guys, whoever they are.

RANDY: Those, my good man, are the prophets of Yahweh who have finally come out of hiding. And they are rounding up the prophets of Baal.

DEAN: That's right. This was a duel to the death. Things are not going to go well for Baal's prophets.

RANDY: Nope, that's off to the gallows with them, reservation for eight hundred and fifty, please.

DEAN: Queen Jezebel is not looking any too happy, either. This could be big trouble for Elijah.

RANDY: Yeah, I don't think she's beaten yet. She may have lost this battle.

DEAN: But the war isn't over.

RANDY: That's right, partner.

*(Thunder)*

DEAN: Hello! Did you hear that?

RANDY: Or feel that? Was that a raindrop?

DEAN: Whoa! It hasn't rained here in, what, three years?

RANDY: It looks like the drought is over!

DEAN: Better clear outa here before we drown.

RANDY: This is Randy.

DEAN: And this is Dean.

RANDY: This has been a production of ESPN History Radio. Thanks for joining us everyone!

DEAN: We'll be back next week with another edition of ESPN History Radio, the year will be 845 BC, the King will be Ahab, again, and the event will be the Battle of Qarqar.

RANDY: Goodnight, everybody.

### REFLECTON

The false gods who tempt us to worship them are many and powerful.

They come in many disguises. They look like automobiles, houses, jobs, philosophies and principles, and politics and power, and sometimes they even look like our children, our church, and even the Bible itself.

None of these, however, is God.

They do not give our lives their final sense of authenticity. They did not speak the universe into existence. They did not breath into us the breath of life. They are real but they are not our final reality. They have being but they are not the ground of our being. They may be important but they are not that by which all importance is measured.

Put any or all of them in a contest with the Lord God and they will lose.

They are wonderful, beautiful, marvelous... but they are not God.

This is the lesson of Elijah and the Prophets of Baal.

May we all relearn that lesson this day.

Amen.