

# Traveling with Elijah

Seven lessons from the life of Elijah



Created by  
Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

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# Lesson Three:

## **Confrontation on Mount Carmel**

### Kings 18:16-19:2

#### **1. Biblical text**

##### **Elijah meets with Ehab**

16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.

17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" 18 And he answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. 19 Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

##### **The Prophets of Baal Defeated**

20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. 21 And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only,

am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 23 Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. 24 And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken."

25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." 26 And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. 27 And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving

himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." 28 And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. 31 Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," 32 and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. 33 And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." 34 And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. 35 And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. 36 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah

the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back."

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God." 40 And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

### **The Lord Sends Rain**

41 And Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain."

42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. 43 And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go again," seven times.

44 And at the seventh time he said, "Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'" 45 And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. 46 And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment

and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

### **Elijah Flees Jezebel**

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

## **2. Meaning of the story**

### **2.1 The God who answers with fire (1 Kings 18:16-29)**

Elijah decided to confront the priests of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel. Mount Carmel was on the border between Israel and Phoenicia and [Picture 1] only a few hundred years earlier, the area had become part of Israel, so the religious influence of Tyrus in the area was enormous. Mount Carmel must have been seen as a strong place of the rain-god Baal, as it was suffering from less drought than the rest of the country. An inscription from ca. 200 AD has been found, related to a temple on



[Picture 1, Mount Carmel]

Carmel, mentioning Zeus Karmelos Heliopoleites. Was this maybe the regional Baal of Tyrus, Melkart, equated with the Greek god Zeus?

The God who would be able to answer with fire, would prove Himself to be the true one. (See 1 Kings 18:24) Elijah made very sure that after the contest the priests of Baal would not be able to accuse him of cheating. (See 1 Kings 18:33-35) It had to be obvious to everyone, especially to the people of Israel, that they had to choose for serving the Lord God. For many years the people had been wavering between Baal and JHWH. Now was the moment of choice.

During the morning, the priests of Baal called upon their god Melkart, but in vain. Their cultic dances did not help them, so they went as far as wounding themselves with knives. Cutting oneself with knives was forbidden in the Old Testament as it was part of middle eastern religious rituals. (See Leviticus 19:28, Deuteronomy 14:1)

Baal did not react however. The power of statues carved out of wood or rock and made from gold, is not great. (See Psalm 115:4-8, 135:15-18, Jeremiah 10:5) Baal's priests were not able to call him from his sleep. Every year in Spring, Tyrus celebrated the 'awaking' of Melkart, their fertile god.

### QUESTIONS:



- What do we learn from the power of the Baals? (See Ephesians 2:2, Revelation 13:13)
- Why would the Israelites have been so interested in worshipping the Baals?
- What are the local 'gods' that we worship? (See Philippians 3:17-19, Matthew 6:24)

## ***2.2. Restoring the Service of God (1 Kings 18:30-18)***

Elijah, or actually his Lord, wins the confrontation easily. The Lord God answers with fire, without Elijah having to shout, cry, dance, or wound himself. In fact Elijah makes it even harder for God by soaking the bull and the altar with water.

Elijah rebuilt a collapsed altar for God, waited for the time of the evening sacrifice in Jerusalem, and prayed a simple prayer. Then fire struck the altar. If this fire was 'just the normal lightning before a downpour', as some have it, then it was very timely and it struck at exactly the right place.

### QUESTIONS:



- Do you know more examples in the Bible of similar religious confrontations? Where do we encounter similar confrontations nowadays?
- What meaning has the altar Elijah made, and the timing of his prayer? (1 Kings 18:30-32, 36-37)

## 2.3 Victory (1 Kings 18:38-19:2)

Queen Jezebel did not learn much from the defeat of her friends, the priests of Baal. She wanted to kill Elijah right away. Most Israelites on and around Mount Carmel did draw the right conclusion: They fell on their faces to worship the Lord God. The people also understood that the priests of Baal had been cheating them. In a bloody manner they finished the worship of Baal. This was the Mosaic way to deal with pagan gods and their priests. (See Deuteronomy 13:12-18 17:2-5)

When Elijah saw how the people repented, he concluded that God wanted to send rain again. He fell on his knees and prayed for rain. One simple prayer was enough to make God send fire from heaven, but in order to get the rain, Elijah had to pray without ceasing.

He trusted God to not only send fire but also rain from heaven. That is why he told King Ahab to start feasting – there would be no lack of food and drinks any longer and it was time for joy. The drought was over.

### QUESTION:

- Would Elijah have expected persecution to increase after this event? (See Luke 4:16-30, Acts 5:12-18)
- Why did Elijah tell King Ahab that rain was coming? Would it not have been wiser to first pray and wait for the result?
- What are the things you need answers to prayer for? Do you pray for it?
- What do we learn about God from these stories?

