

1 Kings 17:1–6 (NIV)

Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”

²Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah: ³“Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. ⁴You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.”

⁵So he did what the LORD had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. ⁶The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

[And so a severe drought ensued. In the third year, God told Elijah to go and confront King Ahab again. The king and his wife, Jezebel, were worshipers of Baal and other pagan gods. The prophet Obadiah (not the one who wrote the OT book) put the meeting together.]

1 Kings 18:16–46 (NIV)

¹⁶So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. ¹⁷When he saw Elijah, he said to him, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?”

¹⁸“I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.”

²⁰So Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

But the people said nothing.

²²Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the LORD’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. ²³Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

²⁵Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” ²⁶So they took the bull given them and prepared it.

Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

²⁷At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” ²⁸So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.

³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the LORD, which had been torn down. ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” ³²With the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. ³³He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

³⁴“Do it again,” he said, and they did it again.

“Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

³⁶At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your

servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

³⁸ Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

³⁹ When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!”

⁴⁰ Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there.

⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go, eat and drink, for there is the sound of a heavy rain.” ⁴² So Ahab went off to eat and drink, but Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.

⁴³ “Go and look toward the sea,” he told his servant. And he went up and looked.

“There is nothing there,” he said.

Seven times Elijah said, “Go back.”

⁴⁴ The seventh time the servant reported, “A cloud as small as a man’s hand is rising from the sea.”

So Elijah said, “Go and tell Ahab, ‘Hitch up your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’”

⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds, the wind rose, a heavy rain started falling and Ahab rode off to Jezreel. ⁴⁶ The power of the LORD came on Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel.

Who really is this God whom we worship? That is the question now. That was the question nearly three millennia ago on the slopes of Mt. Carmel.

Every time I come to this story it is a treat; it just seems wrong to abridge it. So, you get the whole thing in the lengthy passage above.

This is the big game. Everything is at stake. It is the Super Bowl! Just imagine how well this story would play on big screen televisions – the camera zooming in on the duel at the 50-yard line. Of course, this is one contest where the outcome is known before it ever starts – but let’s not jump ahead to the ending.

The big game

After telling King Ahab that YHWH was bringing a drought, Elijah has spent considerable time hiding from Ahab. First, in a dry creek bed. And then with a widow and her son. Now, after three years, the time has come for Elijah to return to Ahab and confront the idolatrous king a second time. God has told Elijah that he is going to make it rain, but that isn’t what Elijah tells Ahab. Elijah simply tells the king to assemble 450 prophets of Baal and 400 hundred prophets of Asherah¹ on the slopes of Mount Carmel.²

While the king is busy rounding up all the prophets of Baal and Asherah, Elijah goes straight to the people with a simple, yet profound, proposition: “If YHWH is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” This is to be a contest and the people will have to choose between these two rival gods . . . or so it seems.

So the crowds assemble. I picture stands of cheering fans. Most shouting fervently for Baal to march down the field to triumph. A few brave souls keeping their fingers crossed for YHWH. Even then, it was pretty hard to root against the king’s favorite and Ahab was most assuredly on team Baal. The rules of competition are clear. Whichever God can light a bonfire first wins.

¹The numbers here alert us to the fact that across the ancient near-eastern religions various prophets and priests were common. Here, these many hundreds of prophets are the mouthpieces of this pagan god and goddess.

²Mt. Carmel is just northwest of modern-day Haifa in northern Israel.

And, to make a long and well-told story shorter, Baal is a complete no-show. The altars³ are built. The wood for the bonfire is made ready. A bull is cut into pieces and laid on Baal's stack of wood. Then Baal's prophets begin to chant all the right words. Nothing happens. No Baal. Even when Elijah heaps scorn on them, all they can do is dance faster, even scourging themselves in an attempt to make Baal show his face. Perhaps, Elijah asks with derision dripping from every word, Baal is napping or has taken the afternoon off. But all those forlorn prophets can do is redouble their efforts. But nothing . . . no Baal, no fire, just a bunch of bloody, exhausted, and hoarse guys wondering why the team bus never got there. As the writer puts it, "As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response." You almost feel sorry for them. No voice. No answer. No response. What a pathetic performance by the mighty Baal.

But then it is Elijah's turn. He asks the crowds to gather around and pay close attention. His altar is bit of a mess after the morning's activities. So he straightens it up and lays out twelve stones, signifying the twelve tribes of Israel. He cuts the bull in pieces and lays it on the wood. Then, he builds a trench around the altar and asks that water be poured over the wood. Then he has water poured a second time. You can bet the folks are looking at him thinking he has lost his mind. And then Elijah asks for a third dousing. By then, the wood is completely soaked and the trench is full.

Then, at just the right moment, Elijah steps back, implores God to do God's thing and BOOM, the wood bursts into flame. The soaked timbers have been transformed into a raging fire. There will soon be barbecued bull for all. The people, surely astounded by this display, fall on their faces saying and repeating: "The LORD [YHWH] indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God."

And now comes the time of reckoning. Elijah orders the crowds to seize the prophets of Baal and Asherah. They are all killed. What is to be done with King Ahab?

Elijah keeps it simple. Ahab better hurry down for the mountain, for the rain is coming. YHWH has stopped the rain for three years and now the time has come for life to return to the land. As Ahab races away in his chariot, YHWH strengthens Elijah so that he is able to beat Ahab to the gates of Jezreel where Queen Jezebel awaits her husband's triumphal return. What a surprise she is about to get . . . but that's another story.

One God or many gods?

The real power of this story is lost to us unless we know that until this period in their history, the Israelites were not monotheists. That is, they didn't think there was only one God; they believed that there were many gods, including those named YHWH, Baal, Asherah, and others. Yes, of course, the Israelites at their best understood that in YHWH they had the best God on the block, but they still believed that other gods, other deities, existed as well.

Thus, when Moses tells the Israelites that God commands his people that they are to have no other gods -- for YHWH, the LORD God, is a jealous God -- he means just that. No chasing after the other gods that the people believe actually exist. Though Elijah lived hundreds of years after Moses, the people still believed in the existence of other gods at the time. And we can bet such beliefs existed among some of the Israelites for long after the days of Elijah.

So, when the people gather excitedly on the side of Mt. Carmel for this great showdown, Baal is a complete and utter no-show. Not just a poor or out-of-sorts appearance, Baal is nowhere to be found. Why? Because THERE IS NO BAAL! There no other gods to be found anywhere. No greater deities. No lesser deities. There is only

³This is all done in the context of a religious sacrifice. Thus, the wooden bonfire is an altar and an animal is to be sacrificed on it.

one god and that God is YHWH, the one who rescued his people from Egypt and who will yet rescue all of creation from the clutches of sin and death.

The Israelites didn't just worship the best god around, they worshipped the one and only Lord God. The Creator. The Maker. The Giver of Life.

And for us?

We in the west increasingly find ourselves in cultures that see Jesus as one expression of divinity amongst many. But it is essential to understand the historic, orthodox Christian claim.

We've claimed for two millennia that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Seeing him is seeing is seeing God. He is God. And if we are right about this, then, of course, how could one claim to know God and yet deny Jesus. He is not merely one of the great prophets. He is not merely a great teacher and rabbi. He didn't come merely to show us a better way of living. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God, the God of Abraham and of Moses. He is the full revelation of the God who lit the bonfire on that long ago afternoon. Jesus has revealed much to us about God that we would not know without Jesus.

Our claim about Jesus is far too unique to fit with other belief systems. He is not merely a path to God; he is God! Could we be wrong about this? Of course. Elijah could have been wrong. But he was not and neither are we Christians. We believe that Jesus the Galilean was truly resurrected on that Sunday morning nearly 2,000 years ago and that belief changes everything. This isn't some philosophical or metaphysical concept that can't really be tested. Our claim about Jesus can be examined and evaluated alongside other historical claims such as the claims that Julius Caesar conquered Gaul and George Washington was the first president of the United States.

This dramatic story of Elijah and the priests of Baal reminds us that, truly, there is only one God. This is the God whom we gather to worship each week and who became flesh, suffered, and died for our sake and the sake of the whole world.

There simply are no other gods . . . of any sort.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Go back over the story again. Take the time to read it slowly. Why do you think the writer spends so much time with this? In what ways are you drawn into the story? Is there enough detail to put your imagination to work in the story? Were you surprised at any point in the story? What do you think it was like to be a part of the crowd that day?
2. In his reflections on this story, Choom-Leon Souw⁴ writes:

“For Elijah, there can be no theological compromise, we have to choose to be on one side or the other. In this perspective, *not* to choose is already to choose an alternative other than the way of the Lord. It is not only in genuine polytheism that such a threat exists, however, for even people who do not believe in the actual existence of other gods might have equally pernicious delusions of alternative powers. Jesus called attention to one such alternative in his generation, pointing out that the command to love God allows no other allegiance: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matt. 6:24, NRSV)
3. Souw points us to wealth as one possible power to which we could give our allegiance. What are some of the other earthly “principalities and power” which demand our allegiance? How do we stay faithful to one true God and Lord in the face of these pressures? In what ways, is this story a word of warning for us?

⁴From his commentary on 1 and 2 Kings in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1999.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Exodus 2:1-6 God's people are to have no other gods, plain and simple. Much later, they will learn that there are no other gods.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Deuteronomy 6 God's people are to be loyal to YHWH. Some of this chapter will seem very familiar to you. Jesus and others draw on it.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 5 A confrontation between the Ark of the Covenant and a statue of the pagan god, Dagon. Guess who wins?!</p>	<p>Thursday, Isaiah 44:9-22 The silliness of the peoples' obsession with idols and notions of other gods.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 8 This may take a couple of readings. Paul is asked whether it is ok to eat meat that has been sacrificed to a pagan god. His answer is yes, for there are no such gods. But he urges the more mature believers to be sensitive to the feelings of the new believers, who may feel that eating such meat violates their consciences.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

