



**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Scripture Text**  
 by Lorin L. Cranford  
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**God Calls Elijah**  
**1 Kings 18:20-40**



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In this third lesson under the theme "Is God Calling?" we explore the life of the prophet [Elijah](#). The scripture passage for the study is [1 Kings 18:20-40](#) and centers on Elijah's experience on [Mt. Carmel](#) with the prophets of [Baal](#).

**I Context**

Since we are dealing with a narrative text, consideration of the context has considerable importance for correct interpretation of the passage of scripture.

**a. Historical**

The *external history* of 1 Kings is similar to that of 1 Samuel studied in the preceding lesson. John William Wevers, in "First Kings," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach) has a helpful summary: "The books of Kings were originally one book, the last of the Former Prophets. In fact the 4 books of the Former Prophets (i.e. Josh., Judg., Sam., Kings) were composed as a single history of Israel from Joshua's conquest of Palestine down to the Exile, and its division into various books was probably only for convenience. The division of Kings into 2 was introduced by the LXX but was not accepted in Hebrew until the text was printed." The Deuteronomistic history perspective dominates the writing viewpoint as Wevers explains, "The D historian wrote history from the point of view of the D Code. Central to its cultic demands was a purified cult at a single national sanctuary, viz. the Jerusalem temple. Before the building of the temple the historian expresses no criticism of Solomon's sacrifices at Gibeon (13)—though even here he has Solomon return to Jerusalem to stand before the ark and offer sacrifices at the end of the story. Once the temple is standing, however, he condemns out of hand all pre-D shrines outside Jerusalem and holds worship at such places to be illegitimate. He judges every succeeding reign by its fidelity to the cult of the central sanctuary."



## Looking southeast from Mt. Carmel



Regarding the *internal history* of our passage, let's begin with a summary of the life of [Elijah](#) in order to better understand the setting of chapter 18. Of the many that I've looked at in preparation for this study, that done by Mark W. Chavalas in "Elijah" [[Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#) (Bible Study Tools)] is very helpful:

**Old Testament.** Elijah of Tishbe was a lone figure from the remote part of Gilead east of the Jordan. One of the better known characters in the Old Testament, he also made an impact on later Judaism and on the New Testament writers. A contemporary of the Israelite kings Ahab and Ahaziah (874-852 b.c.), Elijah represented a class of prophets who were normally not associated with any sanctuary or prophetic guild (but see 2 Kings 2:3-7). He challenged Ahab, whose policies were designed to replace the Israelite idea of kingship with the ancient Near Eastern concept of monarchy and royal law. Elijah defended Yahweh's sovereignty over history and justice, as well as over false gods (1 Kings 17-18).

The stories of Elijah (known as the Elijah cycle) dominate much of the latter half of 1 Kings (17-19, 21) and the early chapters of 2 Kings (1-2). The chronological order of the cycle is uncertain, making the course of Elijah's life obscure. The cycle was incorporated into the theological history of Israel and Judah, without which our knowledge for the reign of Ahab would be almost unknown. It contained six separate narratives that included several anecdotal stories about Elijah's life that may have circulated independently among his disciples in the northern kingdom. All but the last were concerned with the clash of Baal and Yahweh. Elijah appeared to vindicate the distinctive character of the people of God when their identification was threatened by Ahab's liberal policies. He also answered Jehoshaphat's question (2 Kings 3:11) and sent a letter to Jehoram (2 Chron 21:12-15).

Elijah appeared on the scene without warning, introduction, or genealogy (1 Kings 17:1) to deliver an oracle to Ahab announcing a drought, presumably a punishment for defection to the Baal cult. Afterward, he returned to Zarephath where he was miraculously sustained (1 Kings 17:17-24). God then chose a Gentile believer (the Phoenician woman of Zarephath) to shame his people and to rebuke Jezebel, Ahab's Phoenician queen, showing that there was a Yahwistic believer in her own country. The unending water supply shows that God—not the king—

was the dispenser of the water of life. Chrysostom said that Elijah learned compassion in the house of the widow so he could be sent to his own people. Yahweh did not just intervene at critical times in the affairs of people, but was now accessible to believers in the ordinary affairs of life (1 Kings 17:12).

Three years later there was a break in the drought and Elijah was successful in ending Baal worship at Carmel. The Baal priests were not completely destroyed; they actually continued on past the end of the Ahab dynasty, until the time of Athaliah of Judah (who was related to Ahab's royal house). Elijah helped Israel understand that Yahweh guided the fortunes of the nations; even the Baal cult was under his control. Yahweh, not Baal, had the power of life and death, and was the giver of rain and good things. The Carmel story showed a reminiscence of the change of political and religious sovereignty from Tyre to Israel. Israel was not truly syncretistic; Baal or Yahweh would be king, but not both (1 Kings 18:21). Ahab was not wholly Baalist; his family bore Yahwistic names, and he consulted with Yahweh after the encounter with Elijah (1 Kings 20:13-15,22,28). The Tyrian cult of Baal Melqart may have been a pseudo-monotheistic movement that precipitated this struggle. Israel now saw the mediation of God's will in history and the interpretation of his divine will.

Elijah's success was merely temporary; he fled to Mount Horeb (although this may not be in chronological order) to escape Jezebel's wrath (1 Kings 19). Here, the small voice of God was in direct opposition to the noisy and primitive sounds of the Canaanite deities, which pointed toward a more spiritual and transcendent concept of Yahweh. The theophany in 1 Kings 19 is similar to Exodus 33:19, and like the story of the widow, may show that God is to be found in the daily affairs of humans, rather than in supernatural phenomena.

Like Amos in a later period, Elijah showed an astute social concern, emerging as a leader with strong ethical ideals (1 Kings 21). The Naboth incident shows a social dimension in the clash between Israelite law and Canaanite kingship. By appropriating Naboth's land as crown property, Ahab was out of his jurisdiction. Inalienable land in Israel was in principle hereditary, although Yahweh was the true owner. In this position, God demanded the rule of law and justice, and watched over ethical and legal morals. Elijah, whom Ahab saw as a blood avenger (v. 20), is introduced with dramatic suddenness only at the end of this section, confronting Ahab for taking possession of the vineyard. The king was indicted for infringing on two of the ten commandments that were recognized as the basis for society: murder and forcible appropriation, both capital offenses. The curse concerning Ahab was not literally executed on him, however, but on his successor. This may have been because of his repentance, but probably was due to the Hebrew idea of the extended self, taking for granted the cohesion of life and liability between generations. Ahab's dynasty ended because of the Naboth incident, not because of the Baal struggle. Later, Elijah protested Ahaziah's appeal to Baal-Zebub, the local god of Ekron (2 Kings 1:9-15; Josephus called this god "the lord of the flies," as did the Ras Shamra texts). Elijah was here described as a hairy man with a shaggy cloak, evidently the insignia of a prophet (2 Kings 1:8).

The translation of Elijah into heaven occurs in an anecdotal section concerned mainly with Elisha (2 Kings 2:1-12). Elijah was associated with the prophetic guilds in Bethel, Gilgal, and Jericho. He did not bequeath his staff to Elisha, but his cloak, which had a spiritual not a magical power. Elisha desired a double portion of Elijah's spirit, a stipulation in Hebrew law whereby the eldest son received his share and was equipped as the true successor to his father. The whirlwind and sudden disappearance of Elijah, with the addition of a theophany, emphasize God's presence in the incident.

In later Old Testament prophetic tradition, Elijah was associated with the day of the Lord (Mal 4:5-6), and was soon to be sent by God on the behalf of the people. He was described as similar to the messenger in Malachi 3:1 (which also may have been an allusion to Elijah, since both prepared the way for Yahweh). The purpose of Elijah's coming was either to pacify family quarrels (Mal 2:10-16), culminating in a new social order, or to restore the covenant relationship.

**Later Jewish Tradition.** Elijah was prominently featured in popular legend and theological discussion of eschatological expectation during the intertestamental period. The reason for this may be his enigmatic rapture in 2 Ki 2:11 (the reward for his zeal for the law, according to 1 Macc 2:58, ; which fostered the idea of his sinlessness), and the prophecy of his return in Malachi, which nurtured the idea of him becoming a messianic figure from the heavenly kingdom who came to purify the priesthood. He was said to be an intercessor for Israel in heaven, a heavenly scribe who recorded the Acts of men, and who had an eternal existence (Ecclus 48:1-14).

**New Testament.** The New Testament, which mentions the prophet nearly thirty times, shows the influence of the late Jewish tradition of Elijah being the forerunner of the Messiah. The expectation of Elijah's return occurs frequently in the Gospels (Matt 17:10; Mark 9:11). Many were convinced that either Jesus (Matt 16:14; Mark 6:15; 8:28; Luke 9:8, 19) or John the Baptist (John 1:21,25) were the expected prophet. Although John denied that he was Elijah, he wore the prophet's style of clothing (a mantle of camel's hair and a leather girdle Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6). Moreover, Jesus said that John went forth as Elijah in spirit; he was thus the symbolic fulfillment of the prophet's mission (Matt 11:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 1:17).

Although the tradition that Moses and Elijah would appear together in the last days was not to be found in rabbinic Judaism, both of these Old Testament characters were present and spoke at the transfiguration of Jesus, testifying to the importance of the impending events as eschatological (Matt 17:3-4; Mark 9:4-5; Luke 9:30, 33). Some have seen the two as representing the Law and the Prophets, which were now both considered to be subservient to Christ.

Jesus' prayer on the cross with the opening words of Psalm 22:1, "Eli, Eli" (My God, My God) was either misunderstood or willfully misinterpreted as a petition for help to Elijah (Matt 27:46-49; Mark 15:34-36). Jewish lore identified Elijah as a helper in time of need, and since Elijah did not come, Jesus' petition was considered a failure. The church, however, did not accept this figure of Elijah; only Christ himself would be called on in stressful times.

Various events of Elijah's life are alluded to in the New Testament. James uses Elijah as a powerful example of a supplicant (5:17), relying on Jewish tradition, which credited Elijah with a reputation for prayer (although this is not specifically mentioned in 1 Kings 17-18). He also describes the passage of time of the drought in 1 Kings 18:1 as three and a half years (cf. Luke 4:25; Rev 11:6). James attempts to refute the Jewish tradition of the sinlessness and eternal nature of the prophet by stating that Elijah was a man "just like us." His prayers were effective because he was righteous.

Jesus used the story of God sending Elijah to the widow of Zarephath to show that the Gentiles were not to be excluded from salvation (Luke 4:25-26). Later church tradition takes the two witnesses of Revelation to be modeled after Moses and Elijah (Rev 11:3-6). They were given the power to shut up the heavens and to bring the fire of judgment like Elijah in 1 Kings 17-18 (cf. Mal 4:5; Eccles 48:1-14). In a similar vein, Jesus rebuked the sons of Zebedee for wondering whether they should call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village (Luke 9:54).

Paul uses the rabbinic model of Elijah and the idea of the remnant of Israel in Romans 11:2-5 (see 1 Kings 19:10-18). Just as Elijah became aware that a remnant of true believers still existed in Israel, Paul understands that there was still a sacred remnant of Jews who were elected by grace.

Our passage comes as a [part of the challenge](#) to the priests of [Baal](#) on [Mt. Carmel](#).

## b. Literary

The literary context of this narrative in chapter eighteen stands as a part of the Elijah stories in 1/2 Kings. James M. Eiford, "The Books of Kings," *The Old Testament Writings* (iPreach) has a helpful outline that helps us see the context of chapter eighteen better:

- I. Solomon Becomes King 1 Kings 1—2
- II. Stories About Solomon and His Reign 1 Kings 3—11  
*The Building and Dedication of the Temple* 1 Kings 6—8
- III. The Division of the United Monarchy 1 Kings 12
- IV. The History of Israel and Judah as Separate States 1 Kings 13—2 Kings 25
  - A. **The Elijah Stories** 1 Kings 17—19, 21; 2 Kings 1—2
  - B. The Jehu Rebellion 2 Kings 9—10
  - C. The Fall of Israel 2 Kings 17
  - D. The Reforms of Hezekiah in Judah 2 Kings 18—20
  - E. The Evil Reign of Manasseh 2 Kings 21
  - F. The Reforms of Josiah 2 Kings 22—23
  - G. The Fall of Judah 2 Kings 24—25

Our passage (under IV. A. in above outline) is a part of the ministry of Elijah after the division of the Israelites into the northern and southern kingdoms. The setting is the northern kingdom during the reign of [Ahab](#) (871-852 BCE) at the capital city of Samaria. Ahab's wife, [Jezebel](#), had introduced her native Phoenician religion, the worship of [Baal](#), into Israelite tradition with disastrous consequences both spiritually and morally. In chapter eighteen [Elijah](#) challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest on [Mt. Carmel](#), a major center of Baal worship and near the modern city of Haifa, to determine which deity is the true God and the one to be worshipped by the Israelites. As such this



narrative stands as one of the pivotal stories in this ancient history of Israel.

## II. Message

The internal structure of 18:20-40 divides itself naturally into three segments: vv. 20-29; vv. 30-35; and vv. 36-40. We will follow this structure in our study.

### a. Baal's prophets efforts, vv. 20-29

#### NASB

20 So Ahab sent a message among all the sons of Israel and brought the prophets together at Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word. 22 Then Elijah said to the people, "I alone am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. 23 "Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire *under it*; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire *under it*. 24 "Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, He is God." And all the people said, "That is a good idea." 25 So Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose one ox for yourselves and prepare it first for you are many, and call on the name of your god, but put no fire *under it*." 26 Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, "O Baal, answer us." But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. 27 It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to

#### NRSV

20 So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. 21 Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." 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 number four hundred fifty. 23 Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. 24 Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" 25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." 26 So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. 27 At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." 28 Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with

#### NLT

20 So Ahab summoned all the people and the prophets to Mount Carmel. 21 Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, "How long are you going to waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!" But the people were completely silent. 22 Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only prophet of the LORD who is left, but Baal has 450 prophets. 23 Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. 24 Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!" And all the people agreed. 25 Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood." 26 So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal all morning, shouting, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced wildly around the altar they had made. 27 About noontime Elijah began mocking them. "You'll have to shout louder," he scoffed, "for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or he is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or he is asleep and needs

be awakened." 28 So they cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. 29 When midday was past, they raved until the time of the offering of the {evening} sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention.

swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. 29 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.

to be wakened!" 28 So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. 29 They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no reply, no voice, no answer.

### Comments:

Verse twenty sets the stage. Ahab had responded to Elijah's challenge to settle the issue of Elijah's upsetting ministry in the northern kingdom; see 1 Kings 18:17-19 for details: "**17** When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?'" **18** He answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals. **19** Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." What was bothering Ahab more than anything was that over three years previously Elijah had proclaimed a severe drought over the land ([1 King. 17:1-7](#)) and it had begun to cause economic distress in the northern kingdom. After some 3 1/2 years Ahab met Elijah and condemned him as a trouble maker for the people of Israel. The contest on Mt. Carmel grew out of that encounter.

[Mt. Carmel](#) was a major stronghold for the worship of Baal in ancient Palestine. Baal, as the supposed god of the storm, was worshipped on this mountain where the warm currents of the Mediterranean Sea blew in moisture that kept the fertile farmlands to the east, especially the [Plain of Esdraelon](#) along the river Kishon, toward the Sea of Galilee able to produce substantial crops and thus wealth for Ahab.

Thus Elijah set up the contest in the backyard of Baal so-to-speak. A decisive victory by Yahweh over Baal here would leave no lingering doubts about who was really God. The 450 prophets of Baal substantially outnumbered the one prophet of Yahweh, Elijah, thus "stacking the odds in favor of Baal" further. Additionally, Elijah gave them first shot at demonstrating the power of their god.

Verses 25-29 describe the efforts of the Baal prophets to get their god to come down and consume the offering upon the altar. As the god of the storm Baal would surely hear the prayers of his prophets and honor their request with a bolt of lightning to strike the altar and consume the offering with fire. But from early morning until late afternoon they cried out to Baal with growing frantic and desperation. But nothing happened; no answer came from the god of these prophets. What a public embarrassment, since the king and a large segment of the Israelite people were watching to see what would happen.

What can we learn from these verses? For one thing, the phoney gods that people worship today are just about as powerless as Baal was in ancient Israel. The appeal of Baal worship was to celebrate the fertility of the land. This not only falsely gave ancient Israelites but other ethnic groups in ancient Palestine as well a sense of the validity of this god when they had good harvests from their fields during the year. But because of its fertility emphasis the worship of Baal involved sacred prostitution as well. The Israelite males could go to church and shack up with a sacred prostitute as a part of their worship. The inherent immorality and destabilizing impact of this approach to worship was disastrous to the family structure of ancient Israel. To make matters worse, there seems to have been an effort to identify Baal with the God of Israel, since Baal meant "Lord" and one of the major names of Yahweh was also "Lord." Much like the confusion today of the Muslim use of the term God for Allah in the English speaking world, as though to say that Islam worships the same deity as does Judaism and Christianity. Nothing could be further from the truth! The god of the Muslims is no more real than those of Buddhists and Hindus.

Devotion to anything but the true God of Abraham represents idolatry, and thus stands condemned in scripture. These so-called gods are creations of human thinking and have no spiritual power beyond what humans can ascribe to them in their minds. In a modern day religious pluralism that closely resembles the ancient polytheism, the ancient Jewish - Christian insistence on monotheism, the existence of only the

one true God, is no more popular today than it was then. But it is just as necessary today, as it was then.

### b. Elijah's preparatory actions, vv. 30-35

#### NASB

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD which had been torn 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 had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." 32 So with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD, and he made a trench around the altar, large enough to hold two measures of seed. 33 Then he arranged the wood and cut the ox in pieces and laid *it* on the wood. 34 And he said, "Fill four pitchers with water and pour *it* on the burnt offering and on the wood." 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 The water flowed around the altar and he also filled the trench with water.

#### NRSV

30 Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First 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 with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. 33 Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." 34 Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, 35 so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

#### NLT

30 Then Elijah called to the people, "Come over here!" They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. 31 He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, 32 and he used the stones to rebuild the LORD's altar. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. 33 He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood. Then he said, "Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood." After they had done this, 34 he said, "Do the same thing again!" And when they were finished, he said, "Now do it a third time!" So they did as he said, 35 and the water ran around the altar and even overflowed the trench.

#### Comments:

Verses 30-40 now describe Elijah's turn to call upon his God to do what Baal was unable to do. They divide themselves into two segments: preparatory activities (vv. 30-35) and the worship of Yahweh (vv. 36-40).

John William Wevers, "First Kings," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach), has a helpful summary of vv. 30-35:

*Now Elijah's turn has come. As the people gather about, he prepares an altar. It is not clear whether this is a new altar (vs. 32a) or an old altar that has been ruined, possibly through Jezebel's fanaticism (vs. 30b). In any event vs. 31 referring to twelve (rather than 10) tribes is a much later insertion hardly appropriate to a N Israel story. To avoid any trickery the sacrifice and the altar are thoroughly drenched with water. Some have suggested that this was a magical rainmaking ceremony, but rather it is evidence of good faith.*

Also, Choon-Leong Seow, "The First and Second Book of Kings," *New Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach), is helpful in his comments on these verses:

*For his part, Elijah begins by repairing the Lord's altar, which had been destroyed. The impropriety of setting up an altar for the Lord outside of Jerusalem is momentarily forgotten as Elijah restores the altar to vindicate his God in this contest. Twelve stones are used to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, thereby recalling the unity of the tribes before the monarchy (Josh 4:3, 8-9, 20) — indeed, the time of Moses (Exod 28:21; 39:14). That act symbolically represents Elijah's claim of authority over against Ahab. Around the altar, the prophet digs a trench that has the capacity for two seah-measures of seed.<sup>67</sup> Wood is piled upon the altar, and the sacrificial bull is laid upon it. Then Elijah gives instructions to have the entire setup thoroughly drenched with water—twelve pitchers in all.*

What can we learn from these verses? The power of faith is one important lesson. Elijah had no doubt but that God would honor his actions and his request. Thus, he sought to demonstrate the supremacy of God over Baal in a very public manner. Elijah trusted in his God and was convinced that he was following the lead of God in his actions. His willingness to make himself vulnerable before the whole nation for the sake of his religious convictions is commendable.

Also, Elijah asserts the demand of God for exclusive devotion. As Prof. Seow in the *New Interpreter's Bible* summarizes,

At the heart of biblical faith is the demand for allegiance to only one God. For most people who are already in the community of faith, however, the challenge is not theism per se, for few would deny God outright. Rather, the greatest challenge lies in faithfulness to one God and no other; it lies in the willingness to trust that one God, even in times when other alternatives seem more practical, more immediately relevant, or more popular. Human needs and wants are so great that there is always the temptation to keep one's theological options open to hedge against the possibility that our God may not adequately provide for our needs. Polytheism allows one to so hedge, but that is not the case with the religion of Moses (see Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7), after whose ministry Elijah's own is modeled. For Elijah, then, 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 other 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).

### c. Elijah calls upon God, vv. 36-40

#### NASB

36 At the time of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and 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 heart back again." 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 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." 40 Then Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

#### NRSV

36 At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so 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, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." 40 Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

#### NLT

36 At the customary 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." 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 ditch! 39 And when the people saw it, they fell on their faces and cried out, "The LORD is God! The LORD is God!" 40 Then Elijah commanded, "Seize all the prophets of Baal. Don't let a single one escape!" So the people seized them all, and Elijah took them down to the Kishon Valley and killed them there.



## Comments:

Verses 36-40 describe Elijah's worship of God, God's answer, and then the aftermath of the people and the execution of the prophets of Baal. Important to the larger story, but beyond the scope of our immediate study, is the following pericope of vv. 41-46, which describes the end of the 3 1/2 year drought as a consequence of the experience on Mt. Carmel.

Once again we turn to the helpful summary of Prof. Soew in the *New Interpreter's Bible*:

Thus ensuring that any fire that comes upon the altar would not be accidental, Elijah calls upon the Lord as the God of Israel's ancestors. Accordingly, the Lord's fire consumes not only the burnt offering, but also the water-drenched wood, the stones, the dust, and even the water that is in the trench. The people are duly awed, for they fall down in worship and acknowledge that it is the Lord who is God, echoing Elijah's name ("The LORD is my God," v. 39). Elijah orders that the prophets of Baal be killed in the Kishon Valley, where Israel's judge Deborah had battled and slain the Canaanites long ago (Judg 4:7, 13; 5:21; Ps 83:9).

Also those of John William Wevers, "First Kings," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (iPreach):

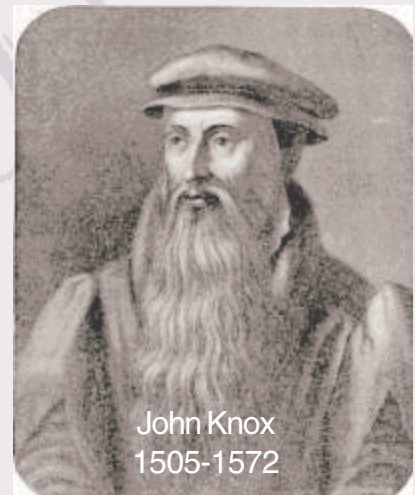
*18:36-40. The crucial moment is at hand. Elijah prays. Suddenly God's fire falls from heaven. God has spoken; the sacrifice, even the stones, and the dust, are consumed. Awestricken, the people render their decision: Yahweh is God. It is foolish to try to rationalize the story by calling the fire lightning. The whole point is the miraculous intervention, which to the Hebrews was the way God acts. In fact, in view of vs. 44 it could not have been lightning at all. In the flush of this dramatic denouement Elijah has the idolatrous prophets, all 450, slain.*

The dramatic answer of Elijah's God to the request to demonstrate his power and superiority over Baal was overwhelming to the people. Their response was simply, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God" (v. 39, NRSV). Elijah's response then was to order the execution of all 450 prophets of Baal. It indeed was a dramatic victory for the worship of God that day on Mt. Carmel. This is a part of the reason for the continuing popularity of the reference to Mt. Carmel. For example an internet Google based search of the phrase '[Mt. Carmel](#)' turned up 768,000 hits.

What can we learn from this final section of the passage? One thing that comes through loud and clear is that our God is alive and well. Whenever He may choose to do so, He can demonstrate His presence and power in remarkable fashion. That day on Mt. Carmel was one of those times, and God made His presence known in ways that couldn't be denied. The people acknowledged it. But one shouldn't stop reading at verse forty. Although Ahab saw this demonstration of God's power, he did not turn the country away from Baal worship. When Jezebel found out what had happened on Mt. Carmel, she swore that she would kill Elijah ([19:1-2](#)). Amazingly, Elijah's courage crumbles before the wrath of this woman and he flees to the south for his life ([19:3-18](#)). In those times when evil seems to be gaining the upper hand everywhere we look, we need to remember Mt. Carmel and be reminded that God is still all powerful and able to defeat evil.

But also, in the larger context of the continuing episodes in the Elijah narratives, we need to take heed lest a mountain top faith not hold up to the challenges of the dark valleys of life. Fear of other things and of people can most certainly undermine our confidence in God to sustain us in times of trial. Elijah had to learn this the hard way. May we profit from his lessons!

On my tombstone some day -- a long time away I hope -- will be the words of a later courageous follower of God, [John Knox](#), (1505-1572) the Scottish preacher who withstood Queen Mary of Scots: "I pray that I may fear God so much that I dare not fear any man!"



John Knox  
1505-1572