

Chapter 3  
Pioneering Persons  
Elijah, the Prophet

In the name of his God Yahweh, and in the spirit of the covenant made by Moses, Elijah the prophet challenged the policies of Ahab the king.

In Elijah's views, Ahab was perpetuating the basic pagan heresy begun in the time of Solomon and espoused by Ahab's own father, King Omari of Israel: The marriage of throne and altar. King Ahab, who ruled in the northern kingdom of Israel from about 869 to 850 BC, approximately 100 years after Solomon had taken over the throne of David, had inherited a wealthy and powerful state from his father Omari, and Ahab was anxious to continue to build the political and economic strength of his nation. One of the methods he employed was to link his kingdom in commercial treaties with other principalities by marrying a princess of the other realm. Accordingly, Ahab went to the sea-coast town of Sidon, an important trading and commercial center one hundred miles north of his capital city of Samaria, and married a young woman named Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonian priest-king Ethbaal. While Ahab was relatively tolerant in matters of religion, Jezebel was not. Her name and her father's were both compounded with the name of their god, the Baal, and Jezebel meant to live up to her name.

Ahab's tolerance was her opportunity and his undoing. Ahab was willing to worship Yahweh if it seemed a politic thing to do, but he did not intend to make such worship normative for all Israelites; if other gods were important to some of his subjects, he would provide for their worship as well. So when Jezebel was added to his family he built a temple to her baal. To Jezebel, however, the worship of baal was of prime importance not only to herself but to all Israel. She immediately began to persecute the priests and worshipers of Yahweh and in the purge, as far as was within her power, she wiped out the worship and worshipers of Israel's God.

Her actions had wide-ranging political and ethical results. In the lands where the baal's were supreme, the king considered himself not only the primary political officer of the state but also the nation's chief spokesman for God. In other words, the king was the absolute ruler, accountable for his policies to no one in heaven or on earth but himself. This was the direction that the Davidic covenant under Solomon's Israel had pointed and under Ahab and Jezebel it came into full focus: The king was both king and high priest, and anyone who attacked the policies of the king was in effect attacking God. It hardly needs to be pointed out that this was contrary to the basic religious faith of Israel. Ever since the time of Moses, Israelites had insisted that the king was not to be thought of as God's infallible spokesman; like all other citizens of the realm, he too was accountable to Yahweh. It was Elijah the prophet who

stepped forth in the time of Ahab to call both king and people back to the ancient sources of their religion, back to the covenant established between God and people at the time of Moses, back to accountability to the living God.

Scriptures tell of three episodes in this critical contest between Elijah and Ahab.

The first took place on Mount Carmel, a mountainous promontory which juts into the Mediterranean Sea thirty five miles due west of the Sea of Galilee and fifty miles northwest of Samaria. Israel, at this time, was experiencing one of the worst droughts in its history; for three dreadful years here had née no rain in the kingdom. Elijah, a native of the village of Tishbe in Gilead, had announced that the drought had been caused by the policies of King Ahab: because of the king's unfaithfulness, Yahweh had withdrawn the dew and the rain. Elijah's very name speaks of his allegiance: "My God is Yahweh" is the precise meaning of the name. His little village was east of the Jordan river, where he had lived a rough, semi-nomadic life on the very edge of the desert. He must have been a strange sight to the cultured people of the land of Israel, clothed as he was in a garment of hair, held in place by a leather girdle around his waist, a man of rugged strength and enormous endurance.

In announcing that the drought came at the hand of Yahweh, he was challenging the prophets of Baal in the very sphere of their power. They insisted that their god was the god of fertility, who brought life to the seed and water to the earth. In issuing his challenge, Elijah was claiming that Yahweh's authority extended over the fertility of the land as well as all other spheres of life. The priests of Baal accepted his challenge, and both sides agreed that the contest should take place on Mount Carmel.

The site itself was significant. It stood on the shores of the Great Sea, a region that the people of Sidon and the followers of baal had claimed as belonging to their god. How dramatic a confrontation it was. On one side stood 450 prophets of baal and four hundred prophets of Asherah. On the other side, alone, stood Elijah. The people of Israel had gathered to witness the confrontation, and Elijah called upon them to make a choice. "How long," he asked them, "will you limp along to two different opinions, like a bird hopping from one leg to another?" He was comparing them to a bird jumping along a branch until it came to a fork, then vainly imagining it could continue its course by putting one foot on one branch and the other foot on the second branch. Said the prophet, the people of Israel wanted to keep one foot in the faith of Israel and the other foot in the worship of baal. But the time had come to make the choice, either to worship Yahweh, God of the covenant, or baal, god of fertility. To Elijah, the questions of religion were basically questions of loyalties and allegiances: to whom will a people give their allegiance?

The agreed-upon purpose of the confrontation between the two sides was to see which god would bring rain—in other words, who controlled the fertility of the land? Each party agreed to perform their respective rites with the understanding that "the god who answers by fire" is God. The prophets of baal worked themselves into ecstatic frenzy as they performed their limping dance around the altar and shouted their ritual cries to baal. As they were doing this,

Elijah stood off to the side, magnificently confident, laughing the baal into meaningless unreality and taunting the fanatic priests with jests: maybe baal does not answer, he suggested, because he is on a trip, or needs to be awakened from his slumber, or who knows, perhaps he had even gone out to the privy. Under Elijah's goading, the prophets of baal whipped themselves into even more frenzy. They were unsuccessful. No rain appeared. These solemn words stand in judgment over their futile efforts: "There was no voice; no one answered; no one heeded."

Elijah stepped forward. He repaired the altar to Yahweh that had been torn down in Jezebel's purge. Then he did a curious thing. He poured water onto the wood and into the trenches around the altar. Did he do this only to make it impossible for fire to appear except by supernatural means? Did he do it to have the water represent the rain that was about to come and, through this act of ritual magic, to imitate the falling of the rain? Then he prayed. Then fire descended from heaven and consumed everything upon the altar, the altar itself, and the water in the trenches around it. The people were so awed by the spectacle that they exclaimed, "Yahweh, he is God!" They quickly condemned to death the defeated prophets of baal and the sentence was immediately carried out.

The climax of the story comes, however, not with the destruction of the antagonistic prophets but with the ending of the drought. Elijah announced to Ahab, "There is a sound of the rushing of rain." The prophet of God sent his servant to look toward the Mediterranean Sea while Elijah himself lay prostrate in prayer; seven times, in fact, he sent him to search the heavens for some sign of rain. On the seventh time the servant returned with the announcement that a storm cloud — "a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand" — was approaching. The storm gathered and the rains descended. Ahab hurried to the Valley of Jezebel, the shortest route from the coast to Samaria, fearful all the while that his chariot might bog down in the mud. Elijah, with the triumph of the day hard upon him, in a mighty burst of exuberant energy ran before the king into the Valley. The issue had been contested and Yahweh had won: he was clearly God of the land and the skies and the seas, clearly the God who provides all things necessary for this people.

Hardly had Elijah won his fiery victory when he was forced to flee from Israel. Jezebel's anger had been roused over the destruction of her priests and prophets, and she vowed to destroy Elijah and all he had stood for in Israel. The prophet travelled forty days and forty nights into the desert to the south. "Forty" is the traditional number of years that Israel journeyed in the wilderness, and Elijah was clearly retracing the steps of that journey. He wanted to stand where Moses had stood when he had established the covenant between God and God's people; he was taking a pilgrimage back to the very sources of Israel's faith, back to the mountain of God, to discover and be discovered by the God who had sought out Moses.

What happened to Elijah on that mountain needs to be seen in the light of what had happened to Moses four or more centuries before. Yahweh "passed by" Elijah and his visitation was accompanied by astonishing natural effects. First Elijah experienced an earthquake, then a wind, then fire, the traditional phenomena that linked Yahweh to this sacred mountain. But for

Elijah, Yahweh was not in these; Yahweh was not merely some god of nature like the baals of Canaan. It was in the awesome silence that followed the storm that Yahweh came to Elijah and with God's presence came a message. Elijah had complained bitterly to Yahweh, "I, I only am left, and I am no better than my fathers." Elijah felt that he alone of all Israelites was zealous for Yahweh, and that he, like his fathers in Israel before him, no longer had the strength to stand up to the paganizing forces surrounding him in his nation. Yahweh's reply permitted none of this self-pity. "Get off your knees," God told the prophet, "and go back to Israel. There are seven thousand left who have never bowed the knee to baal. Go with your message and uphold them in their faith." Elijah had come to the mountain of God to have his faith renewed by the God of the Covenant, and he had not come in vain.

The third episode took place some years later in and around the city of Samaria. Naboth, a citizen of Samaria, owned a vineyard that adjoined the palace of King Ahab, and Ahab wanted to purchase the land in order that he might have more room to expand his house. He offered Naboth very generous terms for the property, but Naboth refused to sell. The vineyard in question was a family estate; it belonged to the whole family, the clan who had passed it down to him from generation to generation as a sacred trust, and he wanted to hold it intact for his sons and his son's sons. He felt that Yahweh was the real owner of the land and that he had called upon Naboth to be a wise steward and administer it for the welfare of the whole community; that by the very nature of the covenant community, land-grabbing and private speculation were ruled out. So Naboth replied to the king: "Yahweh forbids that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." Ahab was upset at this reply, but accepted it as valid. He did not seek to force Naboth to give up the property, but returned to his palace to sulk.

Jezebel, who else, saw him sulking and wanted to know the reason for his displeasure. He told her what had happened and she immediately held before him the claim of the baals. "Are you not the king," she asked? "Cannot you do with your own people and your own land what you desire?" So she set out to secure the land for him. She did in a legal, if not a moral, way. She called Naboth to trial for what he had done. A hearing was held before the elders of the people, and Naboth was seated in the front row as a defendant in the trial. The charge was: "cursing God and the king." Behind the charge was the fact that when Naboth had felt his ownership of the land threatened, he had reaffirmed his ownership by invoking the name of Yahweh and at the same time had appealed to the king to respect his rights. Jezebel tried to destroy his case by bribing two witnesses to say that they had heard Naboth promise in the name of Yahweh to sell the land to the king and that now he was reneging on the promise. Once a deal had been negotiated and agreed upon, and the name of God invoked to seal it, the penalty to fail to complete the agreement was either mutilation or death. By presenting the evidence of the perjured witnesses, Jezebel's case against Naboth was air-tight. The sentence of the elders of Samaria was swift and complete: Naboth and his sons were sentenced to death, and the sentence was carried out. Jezebel was neither the first nor the last to use the systems of justice as a means of securing her own unjust aims. She proudly presented the land to Ahab who moved to take possession of his vineyard.

Jezebel and Ahab had forgotten one man: Elijah the Tishri. As Ahab went to the vineyard to claim it as his own, he found the prophet standing there. On the ground stained by the blood of its rightful stewards, the prophet thundered out the impending divine judgment: “You and your family shall die in your sins.” Ahab was struck to the heart. As David had done in the presence of the judgment of Nathan, Ahab threw himself on the ground before Elijah, penitent before the Lord. Elijah thereupon changed the sentence: Ahab’s shall not die for his sins, but his wife Jezebel should. The Israelite general, Jehu, a Yahwist enthusiast, carried out the sentence: in his brutal palace revolution against the sons of Ahab, Jezebel was cast from the palace window; the horses trampled her body into the ground and the dogs lapped up her blood.

These episodes from the ministry of Elijah clearly delineate the basic conflict between Yahweh and baal. In the land of the baals, the king was permitted to speak for God and he was accountable to no one except the god for whom he himself was the chief spokesperson. In the covenant community of Yahweh, every person was equal before the law—whether the person be rich or poor, king or private citizen—and the whole community was responsible to the sovereign will of God as God’s will was expressed in the laws which had been handed down from the wilderness period and refined by usage in Israel. When this justice was overridden by the powerful people of the realm, Yahweh intervened to defend the weak and the defenseless and to restore the order and solidarity of the covenant community. The confrontation between Elijah and Ahab pointed up the conflict between these two ways of life. Ahab’s problem lay not in the idol that he worshiped but in the value or values it represented; the issue at hand centered around the kind of behavior sponsored by a particular kind of religion. In the religion of Yahweh, all behavior was accountable to the living God. In the religion of baal, the king’s behavior was exempt from this, and he could set his own standards of ethical performance. Seeing the religious problem in this way brings us the basic insight that Elijah offered: the main religious problem of humankind is not atheism but idolatry. The atheist would be one who has no values at all. The idolator is one who has too many values and whose values contradict each other. By such a definition, few are atheists but many, perhaps even ourselves, are idolators; and we need again to hear the basic message of Elijah: “Our idolatries, our over-abundant and contradictory values, need to be regulated by our accountability to the living God who declares, ‘I am your God, you are my people—now act as if you truly belong to me.’”

It is because of this message and the courageous way in which he presented it that Elijah is acknowledged to be the pioneering prophet. He was not the first prophet in Israel’s history but he was the first in the record of Scripture to give himself fully to the message from God

hammered out by Moses. He was, however, by no means the last. Other prophets rose up after him to call the people to return to this covenant with God, and his message became and remained the basic prophetic message of his successors. In this sense, there is something fitting in the report of the Bible that Elijah never died. It was reported that a chariot from heaven came and bore him away. Whatever else the account is saying, it is underscoring the welcome fact that the impact of Elijah was to abide forever among the people of Israel. Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah - these men were able to speak their message because Elijah had spoken first. More than that, the people of the Old Testament began to believe that before God established God's kingdom finally in Israel, Elijah would return to restore all things to God. The very last words of the Old Testament contain exactly that thought. At the end of the book of Malachi comes this statement: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse, says the Lord."

This hope for the return of the prophet continued among the people of Israel; indeed, in New Testament times John the Baptist himself used Elijah as his model. John too, like Elijah, was a son of the desert; he wore clothes like those of Elijah; he ate food which was similar to that of Elijah; and like Elijah he pronounced God's day of judgment and salvation to be at hand. Jesus himself was seen as the successor of this pioneering prophet. In that key event called the Transfiguration, Jesus was changed in appearance before the presence of his disciples, and two men talked with him. One was Moses, the Covenant-giver; the other was Elijah, the prophet, the Covenant-restorer. Then, when the conversation was concluded, the other two vanished and one stood alone: Jesus of Nazareth, the greatest of all prophets, the one who comes to fulfill that covenant for which Elijah was ever so zealous.