

KINGS : 17-18

Research Paper : THE 309DA
by

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GLOSSARY:

Who Wrote the Book of Kings?..... pg. 2

The biblical history of Elijah and his plight against the prophets of Baal are one of redemption and punishment. Jewish historians typically believe that the record of Elijah's history in the books of Kings was compiled by Jeremiah, while many others suggest its writers are as of yet unknown. According to the scholarly view, many determine that the writing of the book of Kings (as with Joshua, Judges, etc...) are all written within a similar scope and framework that is consistent with the book of Deuteronomy. Many believe that the book of Deuteronomy was written by Moses, but scholars believe that it should not be discounted that an unknown editor could have had a hand in the version we see today. Perhaps even several editors were involved. It is generally suggested that Kings was written just after 586 B.C. (Who Wrote the Bible, <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1986/who-wrote-the-Bible-part-2>)

Chapter 18 of Kings I begins with Elijah in Samaria following a year-long draught in the region. The then current king of Israel, King Ahab, son of Omri, had allowed the land to succumb to worshipping false idols. It was said at that time that many in the northern kingdom of Israel believed the Lord had abandoned His people. As a result, and because God was not in tangible sight to those weak in faith, many began worshipping other gods and false prophets. This was compounded by Ahab's marriage of Jezebel, a Phoenician princess and daughter of King Ithobaal I of Tyre. In Phoenicia, the common religion was that of Baal. As was customary when a King married outside of his religion or culture, the princess would typically bring with her some sense of support for their religion. In this case, temples and sites of worship for the god of Baal were set up throughout the region.

Princess Jezebel was not simply content with allowing the worship of her own religion in the kingdom of Israel, but sought the complete conversion of it's peoples to the service of Baal. King Ahab unfortunately, while still a follower of Yahweh, did little to resist her progression. (A History of God, p.25)

This religion which had befallen northern Israel was of a mostly polytheistic form. Baal, or "Ba'al" simply refers to the name "lord" or "god" in it's true definition. (Wikipedia, Baal, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal>) However, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, the Canaanite religion that was worshiped by the Phoenicians of Tyre and consequently the priests and supporters from Jezebel believed that Baal consisted of multiple primary gods. These gods typically included the god of rain, thunder, fertility, and agriculture. During the time, it was considered quite common for people to support

the gods of Baal. As most Phoenicians were farmers, ordinary people often worshiped the sun god of Baal because it was he who they felt they relied on for a proper harvest and prosperity. Many of the common actions and participations which were included in the typical “worship” of Baal were at great odds with the Covenants that the Israelites had made with God. It was of no surprise that God would consider them extremely heretical. It was with this that God asked Elijah to seek King Ahab and confront the non-believers and Baal supporters, and then and only then would he bring rain to the region and end the drought.

Upon Elijah’s journey to Northern Israel’s new capital Samaria to seek Ahab, he came upon Obadiah. Obadiah was Ahab’s vizier, and was considered the overseer of Ahab and Jezebel’s house. Elijah discovered Obadiah in the midst of a task by Ahab to seek out water and grassy plains to keep their herds of cattle, horses, and livestock alive through the remainder of the drought. Upon seeing Elijah, Obadiah recognized him and shouted out, “*Is it you, my lord Elijah?*” Obadiah must have felt relieved, admonished by his religious beliefs and in many respects, ashamed. Having lived under the oppressive anti-Yahweh rule of Queen Jezebel and Ahab, Obadiah was both nervous and ashamed of his situation. It’s not necessarily known whether or not Ahab knew of his belief in Yahweh. However, considering the present state of affairs, it was in many respects in Obadiah’s best interest to refrain from making his beliefs known, or at the very least, keeping them fairly hidden from his masters. It was with this that Obadiah felt perhaps that he had maybe forsaken the Lord, and Elijah.

In order to seek audience with King Ahab, Elijah asked that Obadiah request the King’s presence for him. Obadiah, of course was rather reluctant. As mentioned earlier, it was not necessarily known if Jezebel or King Ahab knew of Obadiah’s personal beliefs. However, with the King’s temperament, it would most certainly mean that Obadiah would likely be killed for having allowed Elijah to live. The King in every respect blamed Elijah for the three-year long draught that had befallen the northern region. Elijah insisted to Obadiah, and assured him that the Lord would care for him and protect him. As the Bible goes on to explain, Obadiah told Ahab of Elijah’s coming, and he agreed to meet with him. The greeting that Ahab proclaims when first seeing Elijah is “*Is it you, disturber of Israel?*” This is no doubt of course due to Ahab’s belief that Elijah was completely responsible for the drought, and that only through him could it be reversed by his command.

Although Ahab had significant hatred for Elijah, it was probably due to his power over the drought that kept him alive. Others have suggested that perhaps God himself used his divine control over King Ahab to prevent him from killing Elijah on sight. Elijah at least had enough safety to profess his intent to Ahab to reclaim the kingdom to God’s supporters. He asked King Ahab to assemble the mass of the city, four hundred Asherah supporters, as well as all of Baal’s supporters and prophets to the mountain of Carmel. Although not specifically mentioned in the Bible, Mount Carmel is located exactly half-way between Sidon and Samaria. Sidon of course is the land from which Jezebel originates, and it would make logistical sense that Elijah would pick a location that would

be accessible from both sides. It might be prudent to think that many of the people in attendance might have also come from Sidon, and not all from Samaria.

Historians believe the exact location on Mount Carmel that Elijah assembled the people is said to be what is now known as El-Muhraqa, known as the “place of burning”. This location is the third highest peak of Mount Carmel, and is of a natural amphitheater type of layout on a plateau. This would conceivably make for an ideal place for Elijah to display God’s power. This can be further proved through the Islamic texts which place Elijah at exactly the same location, El-Muhraqa. Mount Carmel has been a considerably historical hotspot for archeologists, and is mentioned numerous times throughout the Bible. During much of our early history, Mount Carmel was said to be a haven for people to escape and seek sanctuary. It would make sense then that Mount Carmel might also be the location that Obadiah hid the two groups of 100 (fifty each) of the Lord’s prophets in safety. (Wikipedia, Mount Carmel, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Carmel)

As the people gathered about Elijah, he posed the question to them: “***How long will you straddle the issue? If the Lord is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him.***” The Bible states that there was little response to this. So Elijah proposed a competition and display of power between God and Baal. He stated, “***I am the only surviving prophet of the Lord, and there are four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal.***” Elijah’s challenge was to take two bulls, prepare them, and arrange them on wood. Elijah would do the same for God. Neither would start their own fire, and the sacrifice which was accepted first would be the one which proclaimed the correct god.

Animal sacrifice was quite common in the Bible, and was considered a sign of respect to God. Many criticize the need for animal sacrifices in the Bible since animals are also considered the creation of God. Some suggest that God was indifferent to the sacrifices, and that it was the mere act of support that delighted God. Supporters of this belief often relate to numerous scriptures in the Bible that show indifference, for example in the New Testament (Hebrews 10:14), “***It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.***” Many therefore believe that perhaps animal sacrifice was considered acceptable until the time of Jesus. However, the first recorded example of animal sacrifice goes as far back as Genesis at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. In the story of Cain and Able, (Genesis 4:3-5) the Bible States:

"In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor."

So, it was thought to be of no difference when Elijah suggested the sacrifice of bulls on Mount Carmel as a means for God to display his power, and assert authority over all other false gods. With confidence, Elijah proposed that the worshipers of Baal commence first; they agreed. The Baal prophets prepared the bull upon the wood and began their ritual. The worshipers chanted and called on Baal for hours. The Bible states this went on from morning until noon. Elijah then taunted them, and pushed them to

produce their proof that their god was the god of kings. The Baal worshipers continued and began to cut themselves until their blood covered them in hopes of awakening their god. Short of human sacrifice, the act of cutting was considered a sign of respect and personal sacrifice to Baal. Some Biblical scholars have suggested that there may have even been some human sacrifice involved. As the Bible denotes later in the chapter, all prophets were killed. However if there was human sacrifice, it likely wouldn't have included any of the 450 prophets mentioned. (Baal, The Pantheon, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/b/baal.html>)

Unfortunately for the worshipers of Baal, their god did not respond, nor act according to their chants. Elijah then discounted them and called to the people, "***Come here to me.***" At this point, Elijah repaired the altar to the Lord which had apparently been previously destroyed. The Bible doesn't specifically state why the altar had been destroyed, or for what reason it was on Mount Carmel to begin with. It could be suggested that the altar had been created during the time of King David or King Solomon, and would have likely been destroyed by Jezebel's hatred. Further proof to the actuality of this story as a historical event was the discovery of an altar by archeologists in 1958. This altar was discovered in the same range of El-Muhraqa, so many have concluded that it must have been built by Elijah. This altar is therefore known as the Grotto of Elijah and currently resides under a marble altar in the Convent Church.

This altar built by Elijah was constructed of twelve stones. These stones signified the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob, also known as the twelve tribes of Israel. These tribes are, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. He continued on the altar, made it in honor of the Lord, and built a trench around it. He arranged the wood, and filled the trench with grain. He then cut up the other young bull and laid it upon the wood. At this point, in an attempt to further mystify the people, he commanded that the trench be filled with water. Water would eliminate any fire that might hit the altar, so it was meant to further enhance the greatness of the sign of proof of God. Although this might typically go unnoticed, the region was in a significant drought, so water would not have been as plentiful, certainly not enough water to fill an entire trench. It has been suggested by biblical scholars, and re-enforced by the geography of the land that this water might have come from the Kishdon. This body of water drains the western most part of the plain, and empties into an estuary known as the Bay of Acco. (Mount Carmel, Ancient Sandals : http://www.ancientsandals.com/overviews/mount_carmel.htm) As the Kishdon drains into Acco, it creates several streams that logically would have provided the water with which Elijah poured on the sacrifice and filled the trench.

When the altar and sacrifice were prepared, Elijah stood forward and said, "***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 have done all these things by your command. Answer me, Lord, Answer me, that this people may know that you, Lord, are God and that you have brought them back to their senses.***"

It was at this point that fire rained down from the sky and consumed the holocaust, wood, stones, and dust, as well as the water in the trenches. After seeing this, the people all fell prostrate and screamed “***The Lord is God!***”. It’s been suggested by many that rather than fire, what rained down might have actually been a bolt of lightning that struck the altar and consumed the wood. Under normal circumstances, the mountains were fairly high and the surrounding area very prone to lightning strikes. One such theory by Cheyne and Black suggests that the entire display of power, as well as the apparent end to the drought, are both related to a much larger occurrence. This occurrence they claim to be a very large storm, of almost hurricane proportions with which caused massive rains and that the lightning strike was in fact a result of this storm. Perhaps this storm is simply nothing but an explanation of Elijah’s and God’s actions, instead of the other way around. Regardless of the cause, this experience would have had a profound effect on the people of Israel in attendance. It surely would have caused complete and utter support for Elijah and the Lord, as the Bible would state.

Upon completion of this show of power, Elijah said to them, “***Seize the prophets of Baal. Let none of them escape!***” It was with this command that the people of Israel, with new-found belief in the Lord, chased the prophets of Baal and slit their throats by the brook of Kishdon, killing every last one of them.

This particular part of the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, brings with it much criticism from redactionists. Why, if the Lord considered life sacred and inscribed in the Ten Commandments “***Thou shall not kill.***”, did he then command Elijah and his new supporters to commit a huge act of murder? Why then would he not permit forgiveness and allow them a chance at redemption? Some suggest that the Baal supporters, many of whom were directly responsible for the deaths of the Lord’s followers, were without reproach. They felt that they could not be forgiven for the sins that they themselves had committed; eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. This of course is the oral law given to Moses in the book of Exodus, 21:23-27 in which “***a person who has taken the eye of another in a fight is instructed to give his own eye in compensation***”. (Wikipedia, Eye for an Eye, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye_for_an_eye)

Consequently, the Old Testament includes numerous examples of significant death and destruction by the hand of God. As God is the creator of things, he can also take away. One of the more well known stories of complete destruction is the story of Noah and the Ark. God, infuriated by his creations and the disobedience in the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve, was tempted to completely destroy the land which he had created. It was only then that Noah through the command of God had created the Ark to save the foundation of man and God’s creations from the flood.

Another example of God’s wrath would include the imminent death of the Israelites in the desert after their exodus from Egypt. As Moses was away, the Israelites began to fall into the practice of idolatry. As Aaron requested they bring their gold, it would be melted down and they constructed a golden calf with which they worshiped. God was so furious when He saw this that He expressed His interest in their complete

destruction. It was at this point that Moses reminded Him of His agreement with Abraham and his sons. It was only then that God spared the Israelites.

From before the settlements in Israel, the Jews had continuously disregarded God, time and time again, forgetting and often breaking their covenant with Him. It is with this that many suggest God had certainly been more than fair and reasonable in requesting the death of only the Baal prophets, and not of the entire northern region.

After Elijah had the 450 Baal prophets slaughtered, he then said to Ahab, “***Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of heavy rain.***” Elijah then climbed to the top of Mount Carmel with his servant where he awaited God’s promise of rain, and the end to the three year drought. It’s been suggested that the drought actually lasted three years and six months, as stated in James 5:17 of the New Testament, “***Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.***”

Elijah requested his servant to climb the mountain and look out over the sea (which is believed to be the bay of Acco) and to look for clouds that would signify the coming of rain. He returned stating that he had not seen any clouds. He was asked to go back six more times when on the seventh time he returned stating “***There is a cloud as small as a man’s hand rising from the sea.***” With that, Elijah told Ahab to return to Samaria before the rain began. Although King, Ahab was likely awe-stricken by the show of power from God. Ahab obeyed Elijah’s command and returned to Samaria leaving Elijah unharmed. (Elijah and the Prophets of Baal, <http://www.stempublishing.com/magazines/cf/1892/Elijah-and-the-Prophets-of-Baal.html>) Elijah then escaped with the support and safety of God to Beer-sheba.

Ultimately, we can learn from this story and how it persists even in today’s society. Although we have no immediately perceivable displays of power and rule that directly affect us as a group, we can at least learn from this story that God will only forgive so much before he cleans the slate. Many current believers of God (and Christ) believe in a term called “Rapture”. Rapture is a term primarily in the Christian belief that represents the return of Jesus. It is said that when Jesus returns, only the believers will be saved, and all others will experience the wrath of God. It is said by some to be the complete and utter destruction of the earth for those who are not in God’s graces. Others believe that God will save everything in the end, as they are all his creations.

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