

1 Kings 16:29-18:46

Limits of the Text

1 Kings 16:29-18:46 is a complete literary unit. It begins with Ahab's worship of Baal and ends with the people turning away from Baal and back to God.

Plot

This is a long section of text; while it could certainly be split into smaller sections for teaching, it all has one coherent plot. It does, however, have multiple resolutions; God performed three distinct actions against the Baal-worshipping Ahab.

- Background – Ahab became king (1 Ki 16:29-30).
- Crisis – Ahab worshipped Baal (1 Ki 16:31-34).
- Resolution #1 – God stopped the rain (1 Ki 17:1).
- Resolution #2 – God protected Elijah (1 Ki 17:2-18:16).
- Resolution #3 – God humiliated Baal (1 Ki 18:17-38).
- Conclusion – Israel turned back to God (1 Ki 18:39-46).

Towards Authorial Intent

The **plot** indicates that God responded to Ahab's Baal-worship.

The **pace** of the story really slows down on Mt. Carmel as the actions of Baal's prophets and Elijah are given in detail. This would indicate that the third resolution was the most dramatic and most convincing of the resolutions.

This story is full of **dialog**. Five times the word of the Lord came to Elijah. What God said to do, Elijah did; what God said would happen happened. This demonstrates that God was a living God, able to communicate with his people and to do what he promised. Elijah's prayer to God indicates that God is still the God of Israel and would not abandon his people to Baal.

God is the **hero** of the story. He stops rains, protects his prophet, and rains down fire from heaven. He is as unstoppable and powerful as Baal is absent and inept. Elijah obeyed God and allowed God to work through him.

So where do these indicators point? The final goal is turn the hearts of the people of Israel from Baal back to God. The means of achieving this goal is to demonstrate the superiority of God over Baal.

External Context

Jeroboam created two golden calves and claimed they were the gods who brought them up out of Egypt (1 Ki 12:28); he syncretized Yahwehism with idolatry. Other kings of Israel walked in his ways (Nadab, 1 Ki 15:26; Baasha, 15:34; Zimri, 16:19). But inevitably the idolatry, particularly Baalism, eclipsed the worship of God. Omri was worse than any king before him (16:25), and Ahab was worse than Omri (16:30). Ahab was so bad that he married a Baal-worshipper, worshipped Baal himself, and created a temple for Baal. At this peak of wickedness, God sent Elijah. In 1 Kings 17 and 18 the gloves come off: it's God versus Baal.

Interpretation

16:29 In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab the son of Omri began to reign over Israel, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. 30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. 31 And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal and worshiped him. 32 He erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria. 33 And Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him. 34 In his days Hiel of Bethel built Jericho. He laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun.¹

Ahab is the second king in the Omric dynasty, the 4th such dynasty in the young, northern kingdom of Israel. Although the nation was as strong and as stable as it had been since Jeroboam's day,² the writer of Kings considered the Omric dynasty in general and Ahab's reign in particular to be an absolute failure, because they brought a marked increase in wickedness. Ahab's father, Omri, sinned more than any previous king in Israel (16:25), and Ahab (874 to 853 BC) sinned more than his father. Worshipping Jeroboam's golden calves was nothing for Ahab. He chose a Baal worshipper for a wife³ and worshipped Baal with her. Ahab and his new wife attempted to supplant Yahwehism with Baalism by building an altar and temple to Baal in the capital city, Samaria, by supporting hundreds of prophets of Baal (1 Ki 18:19), and by eliminating the prophets of God (1 Ki 18:13). Ahab also set up an Asherah and supported prophets of Asherah (1 Ki 18:19); "full-blown fertility rites have come to Israel."⁴

The Phoenician version of Baal was a storm god, one who commanded lightning and brought the rain necessary for crops, thus he was the provider of food for the people. As he had power over the fertility of crops, so he had the power over the fertility of the womb.⁵ The miracles that God would perform through Elijah in the next two chapters were a polemic⁶ against Baal. They were designed to prove by demonstration that Baal was a powerless non-entity and that Yahweh was the only God, and he had real power.⁷

1 King 16:34 seems like an odd, out-of-place verse, but it's actually quite logical. One, it's a statement about the religious climate during Ahab's reign. Polytheism is so

¹ ESV.

² House, 203.

³ Jezebel was the granddaughter of Hiram of Tyre (1 Ki 5:1).

⁴ House, 203.

⁵ House, 210; Davis, 202.

⁶ Dr. Moseley (SEBTS), in his Old Testament notes, defined polemic as a "forceful, aggressive argument against an opposing idea." Much of my thinking in this section of text can be credited to Dr. Moseley's teaching.

⁷ God did something similar against the Egyptian gods with the exodus plagues.

rampant that a man was willing to lose two of his children in order to build a city. It may have been that Hiel offered his sons as child sacrifices,⁸ or perhaps God simply killed them in judgment;⁹ either way, there was no fear of God. Two, it's a reminder that God is still alive and his promises always come true. This verse serves as a transition to God's actions in the next chapter.

At this point the crisis of the story has been reached. The worst king ever in the history of Israel and Judah is reigning. His political alliance has brought stability to the land, but it also brought the unchecked worship of Baal. God does not seem to be around, but he is. "The most sinful of Israel's kings, Ahab, will have to reckon with the most powerful of prophetic interventions, in the shape of Elijah."¹⁰

17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word."

Though this is a new chapter, it flows directly from the previous verses. Here is God's response to Ahab's Baal worship. Without any fanfare or introduction, Elijah the prophet arrived on the scene and immediately began assaulting Baalism. Ahab had made Baal the official god of Israel, but Elijah asserted that the Lord was still the God of Israel; he wasn't ready to concede his claim on this nation just yet. Baal brought rain, but only seasonally, thus it was believed that Baal submitted to Mot the death god each year and died and then was raised back to life;¹¹ Elijah announced that the Lord was the living God who never died and never needed someone to raise him back to life. Baal, the storm god, was supposed to have control over the life-giving rains, but Elijah refuted this by saying God would withhold all rain until he was ready to give it again. This was a direct, frontal assault on the worship of Baal and the first resolution of the crisis.

Ronald Wallace offers a word of encouragement from Elijah's sudden appearance: "For to see...[Elijah] appear thus [i.e. so suddenly] reminds us that we need not despair when we see great movements of evil achieving spectacular success on this earth, for we may be sure that God, in unexpected places, has already secretly prepared His counter-movement."¹²

2 And the word of the Lord came to him: 3 "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4 You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." 5 So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. 6 And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread

⁸ House, 204.

⁹ Davis, 198.

¹⁰ Provan, 130.

¹¹ House, 210.

¹² Quoted in Davis, 203.

and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. 7 And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

Now that his prophet had delivered his message, God immediately sent Elijah away. Why did God send Elijah off? The author of Kings cleverly hides the reason until the next chapter, but we are going to jump ahead and take a look. In 1 Ki 18:3 and 13 we find that Jezebel was systematically murdering the prophets of Yahweh; in 1 Ki 18:10 we find that Ahab was searching nearby kingdoms and nations specifically to find Elijah. Ahab and his wife were out to kill God's prophets, but God pre-empted their attempts and protected Elijah by sending him east of the Jordan.



Elijah's Travels¹³

¹³ Walvoord, 1:522.

As the map above shows, the exact location of the Cherith brook is unknown; presumably it was somewhere near Elijah's hometown of Tishbe, thus an area with which he was familiar. But while the exact location is not important, God's activities while Elijah was there is very important: The ravens fed him. This was yet another polemic; Baal was supposed to be the provider of food through his rain-giving, yet the Creator God is directly feeding Elijah through his creation.

8 Then the word of the LORD came to him, 9 "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." 11 And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." 12 And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." 13 And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. 14 For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.' " 15 And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Having provided for Elijah through one unlikely source, ravens, God would now provide for him through an even more unlikely source, a Phoenician widow. Zarephath was 80 miles away from the Cherith brook; it was a town on the Mediterranean coast located between Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, the homeland of Jezebel and the center of Baal worship.¹⁴ This widow was an unlikely candidate to help Elijah for three reasons. One, she was a Baal-worshipping Gentile, while he was a prophet of Yahweh. Two, she was a widow, the poorest of the poor with little to no means of sustaining herself, much less someone else. Three, the drought had extended even to Phoenicia, leaving very little for anyone to eat, much less a widow.

When confronted with Elijah's request, she responded by saying, "As the Lord your God lives." How did she know he was a follower of God? Did he wear distinctive clothing?¹⁵ However she knew, she also knew something about God: He was the living God. This God wasn't *her* God, but she chose to trust him when confronted with his word spoken by his prophet. And when she did, she saw God work miraculously day after day to sustain her, her son, and Elijah. The irony here is rich: A Gentile in the heart of Baal-

¹⁴ Walvoord, 1:523.

¹⁵ The monks in Thailand typically wear distinctive orange robes.

country is trusting Yahweh, while the Jewish king in the promised land is promoting Baal.

Why did God move Elijah from Cherith to Zarephath? “This miracle of God’s continually supplying flour and olive oil was another polemic (protest) against Baal, just as was the drought. Baal-worshippers believed he was a fertility god, giving rain to make crops grow. But he could not overcome the drought to make wheat and olive trees grow. Only the true God could provide flour and oil in a drought.”¹⁶ House agrees: “The main purpose of this narrative is ‘to demonstrate on Phoenician soil, where Baal is worshiped, that Yahweh has power over things in which Baal has failed.’”¹⁷

17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 And she said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” 19 And he said to her, “Give me your son.” And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. 20 And he cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” 22 And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23 And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” 24 And the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

But then the boy died.¹⁸ This seems to contradict the implication of the never-running-out flour and oil. Why would the boy be sustained by God for all this time and then die? The mother, feeling guilt, believed that God caused the death as a judgment for her previous sins. The text never answers this question, and thus the reason for the death is unknown; however, God’s purpose in the death is clear.

Elijah certainly felt the anguish and despair of the widow, and his cry to God reflected these emotions. Without accusing God of anything, he asked “why?” His question reflected the reality of the drought; he had seen many calamities brought about by it—probably many people in this town had starved to death—and wondered if this was one more. So Elijah prayed and asked God to revive him.

¹⁶ Walvoord, 1:523.

¹⁷ House, 215.

¹⁸ Some argue that the boy was not really dead, but the text disagrees. He had no breath, the woman asked what was the cause of the death of her son, Elijah asked God if he killed him, and life came into the boy again.

Why did Elijah stretch himself out over the boy? The reason is unknown; there seem to be as many guesses as there are commentators. Perhaps it was symbolic; perhaps it brought heat to the body.

God heard Elijah's prayer and answered it; this is the first recorded resurrection in the Bible. The widow's response indicates increased faith in God. The flour and oil was proof that God's word was true, but this was the ultimate proof. What happened to the widow? Did she become a true worshipper of Yahweh? The text doesn't answer this question.

So what is the point of this resurrection? It's not really about the widow per se; it's about God. This part of the story is yet another polemic against Baal. Baal had to submit to Mot the death god each year, yet Yahweh the living God who hears his prophet's voice has power even over death.¹⁹

18:1 After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." 2 So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) 5 And Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." 6 So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

God chose to end the drought, which had lasted for 3.5 years.²⁰ Neither Baal nor Ahab pressured God into this; he chose it out of his own sovereignty. But God wanted Ahab and Israel to know that he alone made this choice, so Ahab would have to be confronted.

7 And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" 8 And he answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'" 9 And he said, "How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? 10 As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, 'He is not here,' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. 11 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here." ' 12 And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the Lord will carry you I know not

¹⁹ Note that this is not a text about Elijah. Some commentators see this text as proof of Elijah's growing power, but he has no power on his own. He simply trusts and obeys God, who works through him. "The child revives because Yahweh hears Elijah's plea, not because of the prophet's prowess. Yahweh is God, not Baal, not Elijah" (House, 215).

²⁰ Ja 5:17.

where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the Lord from my youth. 13 Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the Lord, how I hid a hundred men of the Lord's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? 14 And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here" '; and he will kill me." 15 And Elijah said, "As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today." 16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah.

As Elijah interacts with Obadiah, he learned why God sent him away; Ahab had been looking for him and Jezebel had been killing prophets. That must have given Elijah more confidence in his God and some righteous anger against the king and queen.

Obadiah²¹ was the steward of the king's household and a God-fearer. The author noted that he feared God greatly, which he would have to in order to be working against his master's wife to save God's prophets; to feed so many prophets during a drought and without getting caught was no simple feat. Obadiah knew about the Spirit of the Lord; if the Spirit suddenly protected Elijah once again and sent him off, Obadiah knew his life would be forfeit for giving a false report. Overall, Obadiah was a man to like and admire. He feared God above man, protected God's people at risk to his own life, and obeyed God's prophet when given God's word. His ministry was totally different from Elijah's—behind the scenes instead of front-and-center, quiet instead of confrontational—yet he was just as faithful.

As he prepared to meet the wicked, Baal-promoting Ahab, Elijah exuded a quiet confidence in God. He called him the living Lord of hosts. The Lord of hosts literally means that God is head of the armies. The term was used to refer to God as the supreme warrior, the leader of Israel's armies (1 Sa 17:45), and the one who controls all the armies of all kings. He is a powerful God, and he is alive. With this God by his side, Elijah was ready to face Ahab.

This section concludes the second resolution of the crisis; God had protected his prophet while providing proof that God was powerful and Baal impotent. It also serves as a transition to the third resolution.

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." 20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

²¹ No relation to the prophetic book of Obadiah.

What caused Israel's problems? Ahab asserted that it was Elijah, who stopped the rain. But Elijah saw to the heart of the matter: The real problem was that Ahab had abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed Baal. This spiritual problem had brought on the physical problems.

But trading pointed barbs did not resolve anything, so Elijah proposed a contest, a very public contest between Baal's prophets and himself, Yahweh's prophet. Everyone would see the results and then decide whom they should worship. That Ahab was willing to go along revealed what he really believed about Baal and God.²²

Mt. Caramel was located near the Mediterranean in between Israel and Phoenicia (see map above). Elijah was not only outnumbered, he had conceded home-court advantage; Mt. Caramel was believed to be the sacred dwelling place of Baal.²³

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."

Here is the crux of the matter: Israel was limping between two different opinions. A note in the NET Bible explains that the literal Hebrew phrase "limp around on two crutches" was an idiom that referred to indecision.²⁴ Thus the HCSB translates Elijah's question as, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions?" Israel worshipped Yahweh, but they also worshipped Baal. Wanting the best of both worlds,²⁵ they didn't serve anyone exclusively, but Elijah demanded that they make a choice. Choices should be made not on what one hopes to get but on truth; who is the true God? "Elijah was saying that if One is the true God and the other false they should follow the true One wholeheartedly and forget about the impotent impostor."²⁶ Davis rightly notes the relevance of this issue today: "The existence of the real God is not a detached but a demanding matter."²⁷ Or to use New Testament terminology, Jesus cannot be your Savior if he is not your Lord.²⁸

²² I suppose it might reveal that Ahab was gutless; he doesn't seem to stand up to anyone.

²³ Walvoord, 1:526.

²⁴ This verb was used literally of Mephibosheth in 2 Sa 4:4. It was also using in 1 Ki 18:26 to describe the dance of the prophets of Baal; it seems the author was mocking them.

²⁵ Davis discusses what Baalism purported to offer: crops, kids, and extra sex; everything a farmer wanted (232-233).

²⁶ Walvoord, 1:526.

²⁷ Davis, 233.

²⁸ See John MacArthur and the so called lordship salvation debate.

And to help them make a choice, he suggested a contest by fire. As Baal was the storm god, he should have had no problem sending some lightning down to start a fire.

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.

Elijah gave his opponents three hours in the morning to call on Baal. "At midday Elijah relieved the tedium with some crude mockery, in one breath calling Baal a god and then suggesting some very human reasons for his lack of response."²⁹ As is typical in paganism, Baal was made in the image of man, so human activities such as taking a trip and sleeping and even using the bathroom were ascribed to him.³⁰ But Elijah's mockery didn't discourage them, so he let them go until the time of the offering of the oblation (evening sacrifice), 3 pm, six hours total. By now it was obvious to all that the Baal had failed.

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.

There was an old altar on Mt. Caramel, so Elijah repaired it. Israel should have been one nation, not two, so he symbolically used twelve stones. In addition to the wood and the bull, he dug a ditch that would hold over three gallons of water. "The purpose of this soaking, of course, was to show everyone present that the burning of the sacrifice that

²⁹ Carson, 1 Ki 18:20.

³⁰ Davis, 236.

was to take place was not a natural phenomenon or a trick but was a miracle.”³¹ As Provan dryly notes, “No possibility of spontaneous combustion here!”³² Elijah’s strong faith in God motivated his activity. He expected God to answer even though they were on Baal’s mountain, even though he was out-numbered 450-to-1, and even though his offering was soaked. Furthermore, why did he use so much valuable water in the midst of a drought? He must have been expecting God to send rain as promised.

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.

Elijah’s prayer revealed God’s character. God is faithful; he’s the covenant-keeping God that covenanted with each of the patriarchs. God is jealous; he is the only God in Israel. God is alive; he heard Elijah’s simple prayer. No repetition or self-mutilation required. As Jesus said, “When you pray, do not babble repetitiously like the Gentiles, because they think that by their many words they will be heard” (Mt 6:7 NET). Most importantly, Elijah’s prayer revealed God’s purpose: To turn the hearts of his people from Baal back to himself.

Of course God is God, and so a massive lightning strike came out of the clear sky, struck the offering, and totally consumed everything including the offering, the altar, and the water. God had humiliated Baal and proven forcefully and decisively that he alone was God. This was the third and final resolution of the crisis.

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 story concluded with the desired effect. “In the immediacy of the moment, with fear in their hearts, the people confess ‘the LORD is God!’ They see no validity in any of Baal’s claims at this point and have become, temporarily at least, strict Yahwistic monotheists.”³³ “Their words in v 39 were more than an acknowledgment that Yahweh was the god with power in Israel. The Hebrew phrase (lit. ‘he is the God’) proclaimed him the one and only God.”³⁴ Furthermore, the prophets of the now exposed not-god,

³¹ Walvoord, 1:527.

³² Provan, 138-139.

³³ House, 220.

³⁴ Carson, 1 Ki 18:20.

Baal, were killed in accordance with the Mosaic Law, which required the death of prophets who seduced Israel into serving other gods (Dt 13:1-11).

This text also reveals God's mercy. He was not willing to let his people serve a false god. He demonstrated himself to be powerful, thus giving them an opportunity to confess, repent, and turn back to him.

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.

God first responded to Ahab by stopping the rain, but in 1 Ki 18:1 he promised to send rain. This paragraph concludes the story with God's fulfilling his promise and starting the rain. "Rain is not just rain here but evidence of the Lord's absolute sovereignty over nature and human affairs."³⁵

Based upon God's promise, Elijah told Ahab to eat because rain would be coming, but Elijah went to the mountaintop to look for rain. Davis believes that his posture indicates intense, concentrated prayer.³⁶ As he prayed for the widow's son and prayed for fire, he prayed for the rain to start, thus again demonstrating his dependency upon God. "Yahweh wills to send rain—and he wills that his will come to pass through Elijah's prayer."³⁷ To principlize, "God's will is certain, but he delights to do his will in answer to the prayers of his people."³⁸

³⁵ House, 221.

³⁶ Davis, 243.

³⁷ Davis, 245.

³⁸ Davis, 245.

Three Levels of History

1. Personal history – This is a story about Elijah, a prophet of God, confronting Ahab, a wicked king.
2. National History – This is a story about Israel’s most famous prophet trying to stop the spiritual decline of Israel caused the Baal worship of Ahab and Jezebel.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about God turning the hearts of his covenant people back to himself.

Jesus and the Gospel

This story reflects mankind’s **need for redemption** through Jesus and the gospel.

1. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose? We tend to forget our covenant relationship with God. We tend to want what God offers while simultaneously pursuing what the world offers.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need? God is not only holy but jealous. He demands exclusive worship. The first commandment was not a joke or a mistake. And if his covenant people decide to be pluralistic in their worship, he will move to draw them back to exclusivity.

Outline

This outline is based upon the plot of the story:

1. Ahab turned Israel to Baal (1 Ki 16:29-34).
2. God stopped the rain (1 Ki 17:1).
3. God protected Elijah (1 Ki 17:2-18:16).
4. God answered by fire (1 Ki 18:17-38).
5. Israel turned back to God (1 Ki 18:39-46).

Central Truth of the Story

The author of Kings wrote 1 Kings 16:29-17:46 in order to teach exilic Jews that God turned the hearts of Israel back to himself after Ahab turned them to Baal.

Teaching Outline

God desires and demands the exclusive worship of his covenant people, and so I want to encourage you to worship God exclusively. From our text in 1 Kings, we are going to see three reasons to worship God alone:

1. Worship God alone, because he is Creator (1 Ki 16:29-17:1).
2. Worship God alone, because he is protective (1 Ki 17:2-18:16).
3. Worship God alone, because he is powerful (1 Ki 18:17-46).

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