

ELIJAH AND JEZEBEL

If we were to ask most Christians alive on the earth today, “What is the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament?” the vast majority of them would reply: “Since the coming of Jesus, we believe in a loving God, and we believe we have everlasting life.” A very strange conclusion to draw, considering the fact that hundreds of thousands of Christians (actually millions) believe in a Second Coming that will cast huge numbers of people into a burning, writhing agony that will never end. Eternal life is not a blessing in such circumstances. The Yahweh of the Old Testament could be difficult indeed under some circumstances. But the Yahweh of the Old Testament is a real pussycat in comparison to the God most Christians say they believe in.

The Old Testament speaks one hundred and seventy-seven times about God as a God of steadfast love. “*Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*” is the constant refrain. God speaks to Abraham, establishes the Covenant, frees the people from Egypt, sends the prophets, leads in battle, protects and defends his people because he loves them. All of it is laced with human interpretations and understandings and assumptions, of course. But the statements many Christians make about the Old Testament confirm mostly that it is one of the many books they have never read or ever pondered.

We should also notice that concepts of “heaven” pre-date written history. Where does God live? Clearly in realms beyond this one! How far back do graves go? And what purpose do graves have if there is no life to come? Concepts of a life beyond this one are to be found in every tradition and culture and religion. Maybe in primitive times, people thought it was only God’s favorites who would be invited into the eternal realms. (Lots of people still say so today.) But the obvious fact is that you don’t put anybody into a grave unless you expect them to come out later on. You are saving and protecting them for what? Have we never heard of the pyramids? (In Egypt from 2600 B.C., and Egypt is far from the only place we find pyramids.) All ancient peoples believed in an after-life of some kind. In Judaism and Zoroastrianism, the concepts are better developed than in most religions. And Elijah went up to heaven in a flaming chariot without even dying. Only a tiny handful of jaded,

jaundiced cynics (in Judaism or anywhere else) have expected this temporal realm to be the only life there is.

So what is the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant? THE LAND! The Old Covenant believes in prosperity and prominence for the Jewish people in this physical realm. The kingdom of David is a kingdom of this world. The “promise” of the Covenant is inextricably mixed with the “Promised Land.” If we keep the Covenant, we will have prosperity and a safe home – in the Land. To this day, a place is kept empty for Elijah at every Passover table in the hope that he will return – and return as predecessor to the Messiah. And what did Elijah do that gave the Jewish people this hope? He killed off all the enemies of Yahweh – all the prophets of Baal (of idolatry and false gods) – and ushered in the Golden Age. The expectation is that right behind him will come the Messiah to establish the Jews as lords over all the earth – from their center in Jerusalem and the surrounding Promised Land.

Have you somehow missed the big message, the big promise, the big purpose the Old Testament proclaims and cares about? Oh there are little gems and happy sayings strewn about here and there, and you can pick them up and apply them to yourself if you wish. The truth is they are not meant for you unless you eventually convert to Judaism and become a son or daughter of the Commandments that activate this Covenant. The big message and the big picture is that the Jews are the Chosen People, and the promises are for them. Even if they are to be “a light to the nations,” that works out best as the nations are drawn *into* Judaism and the way of life it represents. The vast majority of Christians feel the same way about Christianity. God loves everybody, but the only way to really get the blessings and promises is to convert to Christianity so God can reach you and deal with you in a proper and effective way.

Jesus (unbelievably) breaks with familiar Jewish tradition. We very nearly choke on the words, but we must be clear: Jesus does not believe that keeping the Old Covenant will bring us to prosperity and success in this world. Jesus does not believe (unlike nearly all Jewish heroes, prophets, and religious leaders) that if we are faithful enough, God will make us victorious over all our enemies – here in this realm. In one of the greatest scandals in history, Jesus claims Messiahship – yet refuses to be an insurrectionist against Rome. “*My Kingdom is not of this world.*” You must die to everything you want, hope, or cherish here – in order to live for a very different realm, and for a different King. The hopes and

promises we have always trusted will never work here – they cannot work here in this broken, alienated world. But you can “come with me” into a different Kingdom and into a different realm – right now! “Whenever you are willing to trust ME, you can come with me. I have come for you. But you must choose me back.” It is a thing none of us could ever have imagined or dreamed up. Nor can we discover it or live for it by our own determination, wits, or self-will. Jesus comes for us. We can never invent that or make it happen. We are not in charge. On the other hand, if we do not respond to Jesus’ invitation, it is for us as if He had never come.

But I want to talk about Elijah. Understanding Elijah is one of the ways to get a clearer understanding of the Old Covenant and its expectations and promises.

ELIJAH

THE ISSUE: Shall we allow the worship of Baal (and the Asherim) to overrun all Israel and Judah and exterminate the worship of Yahweh?

Nations, kingdoms, cultures fall; they disappear. But so do religions. In Paul’s day, there were temples all over the place for Zeus (Apollos, Athena, etc.), and they were huge, prosperous, and extremely influential. There was not a single edifice built for Christians on the entire globe at that time. Now it’s the other way around. Only, many of the churches we have built are now in serious disrepair – falling apart, getting sold, being abandoned. Just last week I received a letter from the Board of Directors of Pilgrim Pines in Southern California. They have tried everything they can think of for years, but it no longer seems possible that Pilgrim Pines can survive. Christians had once banded together, bought the land, and slowly built a marvelous Christian Conference Camp on the grounds. People from all our Congregational churches streamed to Pilgrim Pines for inspiration, study, prayer, fellowship – and often pooled their resources because of their experiences there, to open up yet further missions and efforts for what they believed was the mission of Jesus. Forty or fifty years ago, the thought that Pilgrim Pines might not be able to survive would have seemed ridiculous and unbelievable. So we are reminded: Nations rise and fall. So do religions, churches, even whole denominations – if the vision is lost, and there are not enough faithful adherents to sustain them.

THE SETTING

At the command of God – and an enormous expense of life – the Israelites have been instructed to move into the land of Canaan and exterminate every man, woman, and child of the “nations” that live there, in order to carve out a place that will be holy and totally devoted to Yahweh. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5, among many other citations.) We don’t like that very much, but it was the way of the entire ancient world, whether we like it or not. It is still the way of a lot more of the world today than we like to admit or notice. Some few among us may have moved past that way of thinking and feeling, but how many of us have? And among those who have, how much of it is because more and more people don’t really think religion is that important in the first place?

By the way, all these people who are going to be killed off are “devoted” to Yahweh. It may not do them any immediate good, from their perspective. But from a Jewish perspective, they belong to God. It may not be very comforting to any of us, but it is nevertheless part of our Jewish heritage. All things belong to God. And while it is understood as necessary to kill off the people who will ruin the Covenant community because they will not cooperate or will not believe in or keep the Covenant, nevertheless they belong to God and God has them covered (in God’s own way, and in another realm). This is not a way of thinking specific to Judaism, by the way. In the Bhagavad Gita, the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, Arjuna is a warrior who grieves over the battle and all the people he has killed and will be killing. But he is comforted by his charioteer – who is Krishna, a god in disguise. The charioteer reassures Arjuna that it is his sacred duty to fight as well as he possibly can. And further, he is reassured that those he kills do not really die. So that makes it okay.

In any case, Jewish people believe that God has promised that if they keep the Commandments, God will bless them, and if they do not, God will curse them. So the fulfillment of all hopes and dreams is dependent upon keeping the Commandments. (Deuteronomy 11:26-32, also only one of many citations.)

Israel has always been too “soft-hearted” to do this right. (As they were again in 1946.) And so, in Elijah’s time, they are in danger of losing it all. Ahab has married Jezebel, a Tyrianite princess expressly against Torah, and the result is that the worship of Baal and the Asherim has become the “state religion” of Israel. And because of Jezebel’s daughter,

Judah will not be far behind. In fact, the Baal movement has grown so powerful and widespread that few think there is any way to stop it now.

Into this scenario comes a “Lone Ranger” from across the River Jordan in Gilead. He speaks for Yahweh and calls for reform, and is therefore an outlaw and in hiding much of his life (like Luther).

THE CONTEST ON MOUNT CARMEL: Four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal – against one prophet of Yahweh.

The deal is that each side will build an altar and prepare a sacrifice, but nobody gets to light the fire. Let the true God answer by igniting the altar fire. The unanswered question is: Who would agree to such a trial?! Anyway, Elijah says, “You have the numbers and the prominence here, you get to go first.” The prophets of Baal dance about, cut themselves, and pray from morning until noon. Elijah taunts them. “Maybe your God is asleep, or off on a journey, or out in back taking a whizz.” But nothing happens. Then it is Elijah’s turn.

Elijah builds an altar with twelve stones (I Kings 18:30), one for each of the tribes of Israel. He makes a trench around the altar (to hold fourteen quarts of water – three and a half gallons). He fills four jars with water and pours them on the offering and the wood. Does it a second time. Does it a third time. So the offering and the altar are totally drenched, and the trench is full of water. Then Elijah prays: “*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. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back to you.*” (I Kings 18:36-37) The next verse says “*Then the fire of the Lord fell*” And when they all look again, there is no bull on the altar. There is no altar, no wood, no stones, no trench, no water left anywhere. And Elijah says, “Does that tell you anything? Does that give you a hint?”

Then Elijah (presumably with the restored support of the people) brings the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal down to the River Kishon and slaughters them there. Most people, I have noticed, don’t like this part of the story. It doesn’t bother them much that Judaism is about to go under for the final count. “So what?” if Baal is the new God in Israel, and Jezebel has killed off all the prophets of Yahweh. One

religion is as good as another anyway, right? Why is Elijah being so snippy and politically incorrect?

In any case, back to our story: It hasn't rained for a long time. That is the promise of Deuteronomy 11:10-17: If you don't stay faithful and keep the Covenant, no rain. But now that Elijah has restored Yahweh worship, he expects rain. So he starts watching the sky toward the west. When he sees a little cloud rising from the sea, he knows the storm is coming. And so Elijah starts running.

The story goes out of focus here for some people. But Elijah knows what is coming, and that he only has one chance to stay alive. Jezebel's wrath will be terrible when she learns what has happened. All the power of Israel's army is still in her hands. The moment Jezebel learns what has happened to her priests, the hue and cry will go out from Jezreel, the capital city: "No matter what it takes, you bring that man to me! I want him now!"

Jezebel's armies will scour the country with urgent determination. They will spread out everywhere to the north, east, and west. They will not think to look south of Jezreel because it will not occur to anybody that Elijah could possibly get there over this terrain – there is no way he could get to the main roads heading south out of the capital city.

So that is Elijah's only chance. He must cover the fifteen miles from Mount Carmel (River Kishon) to Jezreel faster on foot than Ahab can get there in his chariot. Elijah "girds up his loins," the old translations say – that is, he tucks his tunic up in his belt – and runs for his life. Ahab is in his chariot, but it is also starting to rain harder and harder. Though mud slows down the chariot, it is still incredible that Elijah outruns the chariot all the way from Mount Carmel to Jezreel; it will always be considered one of Elijah's miraculous feats. Elijah keeps right on going south, all the way to Mount Sinai. And because he is able to outrun the chariots, Jezebel's days are numbered.

THE PLAYERS

Here are some of the details they never told me in Sunday School.

THE TITLE CHARACTER

Elijah, from Tosabe in Gilead.

THE KINGS

Kings of Israel (the Northern Kingdom): Ahab (reign 869-850 B.C.), son of Omri. Ahab is not approved of in the Bible (which was, of course, written by Yahwists). But he was a powerful and effective king in many ways. He defended Israel against the powerful Aramean Kingdom (Damascus), which he defeated in several battles. He was the first Jewish king to come into conflict with the Assyrian Empire. He put two thousand chariots and ten thousand soldiers against Shalmaneser III at the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. Married Jezebel. Their son Ahaziah (reign 850-849 B.C.) was a pawn in Jezebel's hand.

Kings of Judah (the Southern Kingdom): Jehoram (reign 849-842 B.C.), son of Jehoshaphat. Married Athaliah, the daughter of Jezebel. Their son Ahaziah (reign about 843 B.C.) didn't last long. Athaliah succeeded him to the throne (reign 843-837 B.C.). She was the only Queen Judah ever had.

THE QUEENS

Jezebel, Ahab's wife. Daughter of Ethbaal, king of Tyre. Beautiful, shrewd, and ruthless. Spread Baal worship throughout the Northern Kingdom

Athaliah, Jezebel's daughter, whom Jezebel contrived to marry to the king of Judah (Jehoram) to spread Baal worship to the Southern Kingdom as well. Athaliah is not as famous in our time as her mother, but she was her mother's daughter – ruthless, effective, and completely dedicated to Baal worship. Jehoram reigned for eight years. His son Ahaziah lasted only one year. After his death, Athaliah became the sovereign Queen of Judah. She killed all her grandsons to prevent rival claims to her throne. The result: The worship of Yahweh was being effectively and efficiently exterminated in Judah (the Southern Kingdom) as well as in Israel (the Northern Kingdom). [However, when she killed all her grandsons, she missed the infant Joash, who was then hidden

in the temple for six years. The high priest Jehoiada declared Joash the true king of Judah in the seventh year of his hiding. The guards dragged Athaliah, the apostate queen, from the temple so as not to defile it, and then killed her. (2 Kings 11:1-16) Thus the Davidic line was preserved through Joash.]

THE BACKUP TEAM

Now, if we are to understand what was happening, we must ruin one of our favorite Bible stories (I Kings 19:11-18) by paying attention to its real message and meaning.

And [the LORD] said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice.

That is a passage we love because we stop reading right there. That is, we are enamored of the still small voice. But we have no interest in what the still small voice said to Elijah.

And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." And the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him."

So who is the still, small voice talking about? It talks about three men.

First it mentions Hazael, an Aramean king of Damascus. He murdered Ben-hadad and ascended to the throne. (He was anointed by Elijah to become king (I Kings 19:15) because of instructions by the still, small voice.) Hazael is not a Jew. He is an enemy of the Jews, whom God nevertheless uses to punish the apostasy (the Baal worship) of Israel. It is true that Jezebel was beautiful, brilliant, and effective. But there are still some questions: How is it that the whole Jewish nation allowed Jezebel to lead them into idolatry? Why did they go along with her program to switch from Yahweh to Baal? I mean, can you imagine anybody in our country, and in our time, switching from Jesus to Siddhartha – or Muhammad? Unthinkable.

Next, the still, small voice mentions Jehu, the tenth king of Israel (Northern Kingdom) (reign 843-816 B.C.). He was another son of Jehoshaphat. His dynasty lasted ninety years. In a bloody coup, Jehu killed his half-brother Jehoram (the ninth king of Israel) and directed the killing of Athaliah's son Ahaziah (the sixth king of Judah). Then he had Jezebel herself killed, *and* the seventy sons of Ahab (plus everyone associated with house of Ahab), *and* Ahaziah's forty-two brothers, *and* all the worshipers of Baal in Israel. In other words, Jehu carried out the systematic eradication of Baal supporters (and their temples and idols). (II Kings 8-10)

Third, the still, small voice mentions Elisha (850-800), Elijah's successor, and more than we have time for. But Elisha is seen as the one who completed the war against Baal that Elijah had started.

OTHER CHARACTERS OF INTEREST

Solomon, the last king of a united Israel (reign 971-931 B.C.). He started marrying foreign queens who "turned his heart after other gods." Part of his punishment was knowing that Israel would be divided into two kingdoms when he died. (I Kings 11:1-13)

Naboth, the vineyard owner in Jezreel. Ahab wanted the beautiful vineyard next to his palace at Jezreel, but Naboth wouldn't sell it. Ahab went into a pout, and Jezebel was disgusted with him. "You are the king," she said. "What do you mean he won't sell you what you want?" So she had Naboth murdered and gave the vineyard to Ahab as a present. (I Kings 21:1-19)

DISCUSSION

1.) If someone with Elijah's opinions and purposes came to "your church" today, what would the majority of the members say about him?

Elijah is one of the most famous and best-loved characters in the entire Old Testament. But no one I know in any "liberal church" in our time would want anything to do with any of the beliefs, purposes, or accomplishments of Elijah. Yet in our tradition, Elijah is clearly the fore-runner of the Messiah. Do we not sense some kind of tension here – some kind of disconnect – between *what* we believe and *where* our beliefs have come from?

2.) If you thought that prayer – listening to "the still, small voice" – would result in the deaths of hundreds of people, would you still want to pray as earnestly as Elijah did?

3.) Leaving out the part about killing: Have you ever felt your faith required you to "stand your ground" against a formidable array of people hostile to your beliefs?

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Why bring up real history – and ruin a great biblical story? Well, in part at least, because I think it is difficult to understand Paul's elation in the letter to the Ephesians if we do not know about Elijah and the real hopes of Israel. And Ephesians is the next study coming up for us.