



THE DAYS OF ELIJAH

LESSON 2: JEHOVAH VS. BAAL (1 KINGS 17-18)

Elijah's "showdown" with the prophets of Baal and Asherah is perhaps the story of the prophet we know best. If we were to travel to Israel and scale Mount Carmel we would even find a statue commemorating the event. And while Elijah's faithfulness to Jehovah remains an example for us to follow, this account is about the triumph of Jehovah over all other gods, in this case over Baal. Recall from the introduction that Ahab was not necessarily trying to replace the worship of Jehovah with the worship of Baal, rather he was bringing Israel more into the mainstream of religious practices of the day. Ahab was instituting a syncretic system where both Jehovah and Baal would be worshiped. But Jehovah will tolerate no rivals, so the people were instructed to choose where their loyalty would reside: "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (1 Kings 18:21, NASB95)

BAAL

The term "baal" has the meaning of "lord" or "master". Thus, the word is translated as "owner" (Exodus 21.8), "lord" (Isaiah 16.8) and even "husband" (Proverbs 12.4) in the Scriptures. As a generic term it could refer to any god, including Jehovah. But of course, it is best known to us as the name of a Canaanite deity. This deity appears under many names in the Scriptures, sometimes affiliated with a particular location (Baal-Peor in Numbers 25.1-9), sometimes representing a different culture (Chemosh of the Moabites, Numbers 21.29), and sometimes referencing a specific attribute (Baal-Berith in Judges 8.33 meaning "Baal of the covenant").

Israel had given its allegiance to Baal numerous times in her history. While traveling toward the Promised Land, they had been seduced by Moabite women to worship their idol (Numbers 25.1-9). Throughout the period of the Judges, Israel would turn away from Jehovah to worship the Baals (Judges 2.11-13; 3.7; 6.25-32; 8.33; 10.6). While the people put their Baals away during the days of Samuel (1 Samuel 7.2-6), the temptation to serve Baal would remain.

Much of our information regarding Baal comes from excavations at the ancient city of Ugarit. It's important to note that Ugarit was a city in Syria, so their beliefs regarding Baal may have some differences from Canaanite beliefs, but it would seem they were mostly in line with each other. They worshiped a pantheon of gods including:

- El, the head of the pantheon.
- Dagon, father of Baal and best known to us as principle deity of the Philistines (Judges 16; 1 Samuel 5).



- Asherah, fertility goddess and consort of El.
- Baal. "As the storm god and bringer of rain, Baal was recognized as sustaining the fertility of crops, animals, and people. His followers often believed that sexual acts performed in his temple would boost Baal's sexual prowess, and thus contribute to his work in increasing fertility." (Lexham Bible Dictionary)

That Baal and Asherah would be the principle gods worshiped by the Canaanites is due to their association with agriculture and fertility. In a society dependent on rainfall and the fertility of both the ground and livestock, these "gods" would have constantly vied for the affection of any people, including Jehovah's people.

At Ugarit, a series of myths regarding Baal were found. Of particular interest for our study of 1Kings 17-18 is the myth of Baal and Mot. "Although Baal could withstand virtually anyone, he could not resist Mot, the god of death. Baal recognized that fact and once in Mot's grip, he died. The other gods were grief-stricken and dismayed. Since Baal was a storm god, there was no more rain, and the longer he remained dead, the longer the drought. Mot did not listen to anyone's pleading except to make impossible demands. The minor god Athtar receives the chance to replace Baal as king of the gods, but refuses the position after he discovers that the throne is too tall for his feet to touch the ground. Anath then visits Mot, hacks him into tiny pieces, and sows them all over the countryside. As new life emerges, Baal is revived." (Lexham Bible Dictionary) Some believe this myth reflected the alternation of seasons on an annual basis, but it may be that the story was meant to explain longer periods of drought. "from time to time the rains may not have come, and periods of drought would disrupt the regular pattern of the seasons. Perhaps the story of Baal and Mot was intended to reassure the worshiper that if occasionally Mot appeared to have the upper hand over Baal, nevertheless Baal would indeed return, and Mot would not prevail forever." (Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books)

THE LORD, NOT BAAL, IS GOD!

Everything in 1Kings 17-18 is meant to impress upon the reader that Jehovah, not Baal, is the real god. We naturally dwell more on the sensational showdown on Mount Carmel, but God's power and Baal's impotence are seen in the opening verse: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'" (1 Kings 17:1, NASB95)

1. The rains and dew were part of a consistent cycle in Canaan. The "former rains" would fall between late October and early January, while the "latter rains" would fall between April and early May. Furthermore, the annual rains were part of Jehovah's blessing to His people (see Deuteronomy 33:28), but would be withheld when Israel broke her covenant (Deuteronomy 11:16-17; 28:23-24).
2. Ahab and Jezebel had led Israel further into apostasy, forsaking sole allegiance to Jehovah in order to accommodate worship of the storm god Baal. Jehovah responded not only by punishing the disobedience of His people, but by proving Baal to be powerless! "By withholding rain, Yahweh is demonstrating the power of his kingship in the very area of nature over which Baal is thought to have jurisdiction. Announcing this beforehand to Ahab is the means by which Yahweh's kingship and power are being portrayed. If Baal is the provider of rain and Yahweh announces that he will withhold it, the contest is on." (IVP Bible Background Commentary)
3. We will cover 1Kings 17:2-24 in a future lesson, but these verses demonstrate Jehovah's ability to provide for His people (Elijah) and for the nations (significantly, Zarephath was

in Phoenicia the homeland of Jezebel). Jehovah could do what Baal could not! As you read 1Kings 18, these notes may help illuminate the text and emphasize the magnitude of Jehovah's victory over Baal.

- Vs. 3, Obadiah's name means "servant of Yahweh"
- Vs. 4, Jezebel's slaying of Jehovah's prophets does not necessarily mean that she and Ahab were trying to eradicate the worship of Jehovah. Rather, as these prophets would have resisted the cult of Baal, their death was necessary to institute the new system of syncretic worship.
- Vs. 5, contrast Ahab's actions with those of David when Israel faced famine (see 2Samuel 21.1). "His priority need was fodder for his military forces, including the horses to draw the two thousand chariots he was to contribute to the allies fighting Assyria." (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)
- Vs. 17, Ahab may have viewed Elijah as having incurred the wrath of Baal, thus resulting in the drought.
- Vs. 19, Mount Carmel may have been chosen for a few reasons. It rose 1600 feet above the sea, thus providing a broad view of the Jezreel Valley. It was a lush region, but it would have also experienced some affects of the 3 year drought. Finally, it formed part of the boarder between Israel and Phoenicia, making it the perfect location for this contest between gods.
- Vs. 23, note how Elijah allows the Baal prophets the choice of ox. Every action is taken to avoid the risk of fraud.
- Vs. 24, "The people believed Baal to represent the sun-god also and in their epics thought he rode the thunderclouds and sent lightning (as did the Hebrews the Lord, Pss 18:14; 104:3-4)." (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)
- Vs. 27, perhaps Elijah's taunts relate to the myth of Baal and Mot. Had Baal left his house for the underworld? Was he possibly dead?
- Vs. 28, "The practice of self-inflicted wounds to arouse a deity's pity or response is attested in Ugarit when men 'bathed in their own blood like an ecstatic prophet'. In mourning this was forbidden to the Hebrews (Lev. 19:28; Deut. 14:1)." (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)
- Vs. 29, Baal is completely impotent. Note Jeremiah 10.5.
- Vs. 30, we don't know why there was an alter of Jehovah on Carmel. Perhaps it had become a place of worship once the kingdom divided.
- Vs. 31, the 12 stones would represent the 12 tribes united in worship (see Joshua 4.2-5)
- Vs. 32, each "measure" would have been the equivalent of 11 quarts.
- Vss. 36-37, contrast Elijah's simple prayer with the ravings of the Baal priests (vss. 26-29). Also note that not only does Elijah pray that Jehovah would respond, but that the people may turn back to Him.
- Vs. 38, "In one passage from Ugarit, Baal states, "I understand lightning, which not even the heavens know." (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) Baal



could not respond with fire from heaven, Jehovah could!

- Vs. 40, "As a result of this contest, the petition of Elijah is heard (the sacrifice is consumed), Yahweh sends rain (the drought ends), and the warfare with Baal is concluded (prophets are slain), with Yahweh having demonstrated himself superior to Baal in Baal's own terms." (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) Note that death was the punishment for false prophets (Deuteronomy 13.5,13-18; 17.2-5).
- Vs. 41, the Kishon would swell and flood during periods of heavy rain. Thus, Elijah instructed Ahab to leave. Also, the instruction to "eat and drink", i.e. feast, would be significant in that the drought was coming to an end.
- Vs. 45, "Rainfall in the Holy Land typically occurs only when storms push their way across the Mediterranean Sea, usually accompanied by strong winds and dramatic clouds. There is no better location at which to experience these storms than the summit of Mount Carmel. The Canaanites attributed the power of such storms to Baal, as in this passage from the Baal Cycle at Ugarit: 'Baal (can) send his rain in due season ... shout aloud in the clouds ... shoot (his) lightning-bolts to the earth.'" (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)
- Vs. 46, Jezreel was 27 kilometers from Mount Carmel.



TAKEAWAYS

The first of the ten commandments was, "you shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20.3). This wasn't an invitation to worship other gods so long as Israel placed Jehovah first. No, Israel's God would tolerate no rivals; their allegiance must be to Him and Him alone. And God has not changed! "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Matthew 6:24, NASB95) Many today pledge allegiance to the Lord, but their days are filled serving their own lusts and bowing down to the gods of our time (power, money, relevancy, etc.). Jehovah tolerates no rivals, we are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22.37).

Elijah and Obadiah were part of the few who remained absolutely loyal to Jehovah during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel. But the episode on Mount Carmel showed that even though God's people may be in the minority, those who remain faithful will stand vindicated. "For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed—for our testimony to you was believed." (2 Thessalonians 1:6–10, NASB95)