

# Lessons from the life of Elijah

## 8. King Ahab, a shepherd of horses and mules (1 Kgs. 18:5-8)

Stephen Whitehouse

*We continue our look at the life of the prophet Elijah by considering his dramatic meeting with Ahab's governor Obadiah as Obadiah went through the land looking for pasture for the king's livestock.*

**T**HE DROUGHT had become so extreme, the supply of water so scarce, the situation in Israel so dire, that Ahab chose to pass through the land, accompanied by his faithful servant Obadiah, in search of grass for his horses and mules. How depressing to see the king of Israel seeking pastures to nourish his livestock, while his own subjects wilted under the searing heat!

### Ahab, the great shepherd of mules

The king commanded Obadiah: "Go into the land, unto all fountains of water, and unto all brooks: peradventure we may find grass to save the horses and mules alive, that we lose not all the beasts" (1 Kgs. 18:5). Notice that Ahab never mentioned once the God of Israel, nor is a syllable uttered concerning his own personal sin, the root cause of God's sore displeasure, the stimulant for the cessation of God's rejuvenating blessings upon the earth (16:30-33).

Herein is found a sobering spiritual lesson: neither warnings nor even dire afflictions are sufficient in themselves, however extreme, to restore the spiritually dead back to life. The writer of the proverb rightly observed: "Though thou shouldest bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his foolishness depart from him" (Prov. 27:22). Remember Pharaoh and his pathetic attitude towards the God of Israel. This proud Egyptian monarch approached Moses in all earnest to abolish each plague as it descended upon the land of Egypt, but as soon as the horror ceased he hardened his heart and defied Almighty God.

Not only did God not occupy any place in Ahab's words, nor did any appreciation of his own personal transgression and sin; his words were also void of any mention of his people. The sovereign's corrupt heart appeared simply incapable of ascending higher than his mules and

horses, higher than the "cares of this life" (Lk. 21:34). Although his subjects were wilting around him, sinking in great pangs of pain and starvation, his mind remained fixed on his livestock. Ahab was indeed a shepherd of Israel, but, rather than guiding his people to better pastures, he much preferred to "find grass to save the horses and mules"! Yet what he should have been searching for was God's favour.

In contrast, consider the ultimate example provided by the Lord Jesus Christ, "the good shepherd" (Jno. 10:11,14), who would later come and guide his flock to "green pastures . . . beside the still waters" (Ps. 23:2). For Christ said of his own flock: "the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out . . . he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice" (Jno. 10:3,4). This is the true King of Israel who would come, and, unlike the weak and decrepit Ahab, would ultimately give "his life for the sheep" (v. 11), even "lay down [his] life for the sheep" (v. 15).

### "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3)

So the king and his loyal servant agreed to divide the land between them, and "Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself" (1 Kgs. 18:6). Departing on their separate ways would obviously result in more ground being covered, but surely this is not the only point the Spirit is making. These two men set out on two different paths and journeyed along dissimilar courses, and from this fact a profound spiritual meaning can be extracted.

The Hebrew word translated "way" here (*derek*) can mean a literal road or journey, but figuratively can refer to a way of life. These two men were morally distinct, utterly dissimilar in attitude and behaviour, following two different courses of life.

The prophet Amos asks: "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (3:3). And what agreement could possibly exist between these two men, one a servant of God and the other in fact little more than an erring assistant of Jezebel? No more than there is between light and

darkness, for “what communion hath light with darkness?”, asked the apostle (2 Cor. 6:14). Ahab walked in gross spiritual darkness; in contrast, Obadiah had been granted “the light of life” (Jno. 8:12). This led to two different courses of life during their natural lifetimes, and will ultimately lead to different outcomes regarding the life to come.

**“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men . . .” (Mt. 10:32)**

What utter confidence Ahab placed in this godly man Obadiah! Though Ahab would have been well aware that Obadiah did not serve Baal, he knew that his governor would serve him in an honourable way, just as the Lord Jesus Christ taught: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:21); as did the Apostle Peter: “Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king” (1 Pet. 2:17). As with Obadiah, such respect and obedience can be rendered without it ever interfering with the worship of God.

Though King Ahab did not share the same faith as Obadiah, yet in him he observed qualities that were pleasing to him, and would be beneficial in his service. Throughout, Obadiah remained faithful, although potentially he was endangering his life. He was not ashamed to be a witness of the God of Israel.

Herein is found a stark warning, for if the followers of Christ are reluctant to witness to their belief before others then the consequences are severe: “For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father’s, and of the holy angels” (Lk. 9:26). But in contrast, the exhortation to all those who are prepared to communicate their conviction willingly is thrilling: “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father Which is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32).

We may well therefore experience hatred and oppression for the Lord’s sake, but let such be no reason for absenting our post, vacating our Divine placement. Our calling has been to provide spiritual light, delivering the light of the gospel to areas of spiritual darkness. The Master himself is described as “the Sun of righteousness” (Mal. 4:2), and says of himself: “I am the light of the world” (Jno. 8:12; cf. 9:5; 12:46); and we are commanded to reflect his brightness: “Let

your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works” (Mt. 5:16).

It is sobering to consider that without the brethren and sisters in the world the true light of truth would be extinguished, leaving only “the darkness of this world” (Eph. 6:12). So let us never put our light “in a secret place, neither under a bushel” (Lk. 11:33), but rather shine forth in abundance the light of God’s truth.

**Obadiah meets the great prophet**

The narrative now continues apace: “As Obadiah was in the way, behold, Elijah met him” (1 Kgs. 18:7). While Obadiah “was in the way”, absorbed in faithful prayer, no doubt, he was met by a solitary figure, the great prophet of Israel. He encountered Elijah literally on “the way”, but what path did Obadiah journey upon spiritually?

Evidently it was the path of discipleship, of duty and of calling, the road of obedience to his Master’s command, even “the way of life” (Prov. 6:23; 10:17; 15:24), the way which leads God’s servants to “the tree of life” in His Kingdom (Gen. 3:24; Rev. 2:7). And, while complying with the word of the king, his earthly master, he was rewarded by meeting the great prophet, a blessing from his heavenly Father.

Surely this act of obedience brings to mind Eliezer, who similarly acted in obedience to his master Abraham’s instruction. This servant journeyed to find a damsel whom God had selected as a wife for Isaac: “I being *in the way*, the LORD led me to the house of my master’s brethren” (Gen. 24:27). Similarly, the Father placed a chosen vessel “in the way” of His servant Obadiah, just as He had done previously with Elijah when he met the widow gathering sticks at the city gate (1 Kgs. 17:10).

Can we imagine the excitement within Obadiah’s thumping breast as he admiringly stared upon Elijah, realising that it was this man who had delivered, through the power of Almighty God, a cloudless sky and a barren land these past years? As soon as Obadiah set his eyes upon the great prophet “he knew him” (18:7), though there is no evidence that they had met before. He discerned immediately who it was.

Was the prophet’s appearance on the scene an answer to the utterance of faithful prayer by Obadiah? Or was it that Elijah’s appearance was so striking, and his fame so wide abroad, that by just looking upon him Obadiah immediately recognised him as the Tishbite prophet? Had his

appearance now reached levels of high notoriety throughout all the land? Would all be able to identify the one who was “an hairy man . . . girt with a girdle of leather about his loins” (2 Kgs. 1:8)?

### The wonderful humility of Obadiah

Observe how Obadiah immediately “fell on his face” (1 Kgs. 18:7) in front of Elijah before a word was exchanged between them. He was able to discern the spiritual qualities of the great prophet, though all he saw was the physical man. This is made evident by observing that the word “fell” actually means ‘prostrate’. In other words, he threw himself down in a state of total submission. It is the same action that Abraham took when God spoke to him (Gen. 17:3), and the same response of Joseph’s brethren when they stood before the prince of Egypt (44:14), aware of the great one in their midst.

But why did Obadiah humbly prostrate himself before the prophet of Gilead? Evidently he knew that Elijah represented the majesty of the God of Israel, and, as such, he was a man to be revered and respected, to be held in the highest honour. This is the character of Obadiah; though he himself succoured a hundred men each day, and personally would have been held in the highest regard, both as a father to these men and as the governor of the house of Ahab, he was still prepared to “humble himself as [a] little child” (Mt. 18:4) before this prophet of God.

Though Obadiah knew in his heart that this was the man, he still could not contain himself from enquiring further: “Art thou that my lord Elijah?” (1 Kgs. 18:7). He was desperate to hear it confirmed from the lips of the man that stood before him. The Septuagint puts light on this statement, and renders it: “Is it thy very self my lord Elijah?”. The original Hebrew for “lord” is *adon*, implying sovereignty and lordship, and is essentially a mark of the utmost respect. Just as did Sarah of Abraham (Gen. 18:12), Obadiah spoke respectfully and fearfully to this most prominent prophet.

Surely, this is an important lesson for us. We have the wonderful blessing of communicating with the God of heaven and earth, even ‘El, the Mighty One, the all-powerful and self-existent God, Who listens attentively and responds in great measure. And if, on meeting Elijah, this God-fearing man Obadiah adopted the title *adon*, “my lord”, then what of us when we approach our heavenly Father in prayer through the me-

diatorship of the Lord Jesus Christ? For the Almighty “dwell[s] in the high and holy place” (Isa. 57:15), yet we stand in “dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27; Job 42:6). So let us “fear the LORD” and “stand in awe of Him” (Ps. 33:8), in awe of His majesty, sovereignty and supremacy.

### All fall short of the glory of God

Here stood this God-fearing man Obadiah, one who had risked his very life in upholding the Truth. He had spoken in such a respectful and reverential way, but how would Elijah react? Would he respond in similar fashion, recognising and appreciating the spiritual qualities of this man from Ahab’s court?

Notice the beginning of Elijah’s reply; if the italics are removed from the text a most emphatic proclamation is found from Elijah: just “I” (1 Kgs. 18:8). Not a word is wasted, not even a syllable. Elijah then continued, “go tell thy lord”. Just imagine for a moment how Obadiah would have felt when he heard Elijah refer to Ahab, this evil king, as his “lord”. Obadiah had greeted Elijah with an opening remark of respect, “my lord”, yet the prophet responded by informing him who his lord was. Had Elijah misjudged the tremendous spiritual qualities of this man? Had he been too hasty in judgement? Is this view confirmed when we bring to mind what Elijah would later declare at Sinai to his God: “I, even I only, am left” (19:10)?

The lesson we sadly draw from this episode is that, occasionally, even the most noble and eminent amongst the servants of God fail to maintain the virtues for which they had once been distinguished: “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

### “Behold, Elijah is here”

The prophet continued by commanding Obadiah that he should inform the king, “Behold, Elijah is here” (1 Kgs. 18:8). Again, the original rendering conveys an abrupt response: “Lo, Elijah”. The prophet’s courage most certainly did not fail him. Though the king had been searching for Elijah, the prophet instructed Obadiah to go searching for the king! How would Ahab feel when greeted by Obadiah with this introduction? Surely this must have created an uneasy feeling in the mind of the king. The Tishbite was now hunting him down!

Thus it was with King Herod and John the Baptist, the one who came “in the spirit and power of Elias” (Lk. 1:17), for “Herod feared

John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy" (Mk. 6:20). Similarly, while the Apostle Paul was a prisoner, Felix the Roman governor trembled before him when he "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (Acts 24:25).

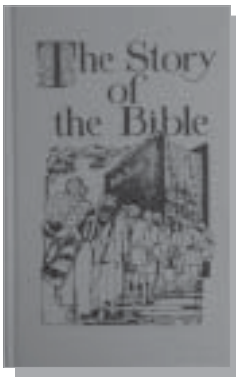
Therefore, applying the lesson to ourselves, let us resolve that we will never shrink from

boldly declaring our discipleship when confronted by those we meet. We should not hesitate fearlessly to "speak forth the words of truth and soberness" (26:25), being assured that "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7).

[\(To be continued\)](#)

## Telling the Bible story

John Nicholls



### *The Story of the Bible.*

A series of eight volumes, averaging about 400 pages each. The first six are already published, volume 7 is expected to be ready by March and volume 8 by the end of the year.

Logos Publications.\*

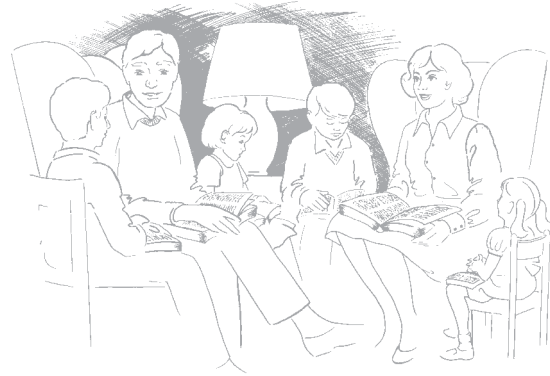
UK Price: £11 per volume plus postage.

**T**HE *STORY of the Bible* was initially a monthly magazine started in April 1956. It later became bimonthly as the pressure of work grew on its author, the late Brother H. P. (Percy) Mansfield. Eventually, in December 1971, after 164 magazines had been published, the fourteenth and final volume was completed.

The magazines were in the first instance produced for the instruction of children, but they became widely read by adults. Copies of the magazine, loose and bound, were sought after, and the reviewer remembers borrowing some of the rare earliest magazines and getting them photocopied. After Brother Mansfield fell asleep in 1987 his son Graeham began to publish the work in book form, and to date six volumes have been completed, with two more to come to finish the New Testament.

Brother Mansfield used his abilities to great effect in both his speaking and his writing, and the Brotherhood has been enriched with his wide legacy of expositions and exhortations. His ability to explain things simply enough for those of young years to understand, and to convey pictures and everyday examples, was a great gift.

The early format of the magazine was based on Brother Mansfield's family discussing the daily readings with him in his study. Using the pen name of Mr. Phillips, but the real names of his children—Peter, Graeham, Ann and Joan—lively discussions are recounted as the main stories and the principles involved are expounded.



### **Mr and Mrs Phillips settle down with their children for daily reading of the Bible**

That these discussions are a true reflection of what really took place in the Mansfield household the reviewer has no doubt, for the different characteristics of the children emerge and seem true to life. Peter delights in finding some inconsistency in his father's explanations, or, best of all, an error. Graeham is more thoughtful, usually agrees with his father and is able to add his

\* Logos Publications, Box 220, Findon, South Australia 5023, Australia; email: ed@logos.org.au. Available in the UK from Sister (Mrs) Carol Middleton, 17 School Street, Dunchurch, Rugby, CV22 6PA. Tel. 01788 811085; email Carol@carolmid.fsnet.co.uk. Available elsewhere from local Logos agents or Logos Publications as above.