

Lessons from the life of Elijah

9. Truth versus error (1 Kgs. 18:9-18)

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We continue our look at the life of Elijah by considering the faithful Obadiah's humble response to the curt command of Elijah to tell Ahab that the Tishbite prophet had been found. This led to a dramatic meeting between Ahab and Elijah, in which the prophet confronted the wicked king with his idolatry and its consequences for Israel.

THOUGH ELIJAH DIRECTED short and sharp language to the humble and God-fearing man Obadiah (1 Kgs. 18:8), this still did not dissuade the king's servant from continuing to respect the great prophet. Let us observe the meek disposition of Obadiah as shown in his reply, a most remarkable man in his own right. If only we could always emulate this humble spirit and attitude in dealing with our brethren and sisters!

"As the LORD thy God liveth"

The response of Obadiah is first of all earnestly to ask Elijah: "What have I sinned . . . ?" (v. 9). Obadiah sought explanation from the prophet as to how he had offended God, or indeed the prophet. His anxiety is apparent: ". . . that thou wouldest deliver thy servant into the hand of Ahab, to slay me?" (v. 9). Obadiah was desperate not to return alone, as the prophet's command implied he would have to (v. 8), and so requested that he could be exempt from such a perilous task.

Refusing to be disconcerted by Elijah's words, Obadiah continued in earnest to identify himself with the prophet of Gilead: "As the LORD thy God liveth . . ." (v. 10). He uses precisely the same expression that the widow of Zarephath had previously employed (17:12), and this would no doubt have jogged the memory of Elijah.

The king's governor was certainly now aware that Elijah and the God of Israel were inseparably linked in this course of duty. He knew that Elijah had the power and might of God ready and waiting at his disposal, as though at any time he could call upon "more than twelve legions of angels" (cf. Mt. 26:53). Obadiah fully appreciated that to serve God was to serve His

servant Elijah. And, though this great prophet had spoken to him as if he were a mere servant of Ahab and a wretched follower of Baal (see [previous article](#)), he persisted in being reverent and respectful to him.

What an exhortation! Obadiah did not become easily offended, but appreciated the godly stand of Elijah and sympathised with his cause. Figuratively, Obadiah took on the spirit of Christ, for he abided by the principles that Messiah would later teach: "blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me" (Lk. 7:23).

A most diligent search for the prophet

Obadiah now informed Elijah that Ahab had been hunting high and low for him: "there is no nation or kingdom, whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee" (1 Kgs. 18:10). Ahab had made diligent search and had offered up large bounties for the discovery of this hounded fugitive. The king had spoken to all neighbouring kingdoms; none would have been overlooked, for all had taken "an oath" (v. 10), declaring with great fervour that this pilgrim was not in residence.

We should notice the great sense of urgency being conveyed. For these kings to swear by an oath, it must have been some desperate line of questioning! Yet, in spite of all his diligence, the king of Israel was unable to discover the prophet. God had secured the prophet's safety from all their evil.

The lesson for us all is a most sobering one. It is a fruitless exercise for us to make any attempt to conceal ourselves from our God, for "the eyes of the LORD . . . run to and fro through the whole earth" (Zech. 4:10). But equally futile is it for us to pursue our Maker when we walk willingly out of "the way" of life (cf. Gen. 3:24), unprepared to change our course, utterly unwilling to redirect our heart. Let us take heed.

"The Spirit of the LORD shall carry thee"

Just consider briefly the predicament of Obadiah. He found himself in a most distressing situation, for his earthly master would most surely be enraged if he failed to arrest the

prophet. So Obadiah pleaded with the prophet: "the Spirit of the LORD shall carry [*nasa*] thee whither I know not" (1 Kgs. 18:12).

The Hebrew verb *nasa*' can also be rendered as 'to lift', 'to bear up', or 'to take', and the phrase "shall carry thee" can be literally translated, 'shall take thee up' (see 2 Kings 2:16, where *nasa*' is also used). So Obadiah's belief and confidence was such that he knew that, if it were the will of God, Elijah would be removed from this place and borne up "on eagles' wings" (Ex. 19:4; cf. Isa. 40:31) to prevent him being discovered by King Ahab.

Interestingly, this word can also be used in relation to being 'spared', as was the case when God spoke to Abraham concerning Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:26). Obadiah was confident that Elijah would be spared from the evil hand of Ahab, that he had been Divinely hedged about (cf. Job 1:10).

Not only does this word speak of the saints being protected during this dispensation, before the Kingdom of God is established (cf. Ps. 34:7), it also relates to the age to come, when the children of light will be saved and lifted up for ever. It is to this end that the psalmist prayed: "Save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance: feed them also, and lift them up [*nasa*] for ever" (28:9). It refers to a time when God's people, those who constitute part of His inheritance, are lifted up for evermore, above and out of reach of their enemies.

The great faithful acts of Obadiah

Let it be appreciated that Obadiah uttered such chivalrous words to Elijah, not to promote his own personage, nor to receive any praise or commendation from a flattering tongue, but solely for the purposes of attesting his personal loyalty to the God of Israel, the true Deity, Whom they both faithfully served.

If we closely scrutinise these words of Obadiah we soon realise that he now stood in a state of fear and despair. He simply dreaded the thought of returning to the king empty-handed (1 Kgs. 18:12; cf. vv. 9,14). He thus resorted to focusing on his own tireless efforts, and so anxiously asked Elijah: "Was it not told my lord what I did when Jezebel slew the prophets of the LORD, how I hid an hundred men of the LORD'S prophets by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water?" (v. 13). There is a sense of desperateness in his tone; he was a deeply troubled man. But there was good reason for him

to be distressed, for this was a most dreadful period.

Could not Elijah see that Obadiah was someone who deeply shared the same belief and commitment to the God of Israel? Here was Obadiah, a man showing Elijah the greatest of respect, doting on his every word, observing every syllable uttered forth from his lips. Why could not the great prophet realise this?

The focus and drive of Elijah is evidently on display. Though he was a man of emotion and passion (Jas. 5:17), he was not easily moved. First and foremost were the things of above, fulfilling that which his Father had commanded him to perform. Nothing would sway him or obscure his sight; nothing would "be able to separate [him] from the love of God" (Rom. 8:39).

"As the LORD of hosts liveth"

Elijah's reply was: "As the LORD of hosts liveth, before Whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him [Ahab] to day" (1 Kgs. 18:15). God was most certainly active in working out His purpose in the land of Israel, for it is "the most High [That] ruleth in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 4:17).

It is also significant that Elijah till this moment had adopted a different title of God, constantly referring to Him as "the LORD God", *Yahweh Elohim*, or 'He Who Will Be (manifested)'. But now he chooses the militant title of the Deity, "the LORD of hosts", *Yahweh Tz'vaoth*, even 'He Who Will Be Armies'. Here *Tz'vaoth* refers to the Elohist armies acting in Divine strength on behalf of God's people (cf. Josh. 5:13-15; Ps. 34:7; Rom. 9:29).

Another servant of God, when faced with a similar situation, a giant of the flesh, cried out: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, Whom thou hast defied" (1 Sam. 17:45). David, the young shepherd, did not fear the Philistine, and so with Elijah, for he too was confident that these "armies of Israel" were with him.

So why did Elijah alter his mode of expression? What is the Word emphasising? It was *Yahweh of Armies* Who Elijah earnestly believed would be unleashed upon the wicked King Ahab, the great follower of the enemy Baal. It would not be *Yahweh Elohim*, the Father of the covenant, but instead *Yahweh of Armies*, even with a great "chariot of fire, and horses of fire" (2 Kgs. 2:11) at His disposal.

Elijah earnestly desired that the Almighty would go forth in might and majesty to battle and defeat this wicked king of Israel. Before the prophet stood a wretched man of the flesh, and he supposed that it required God's mighty armies to be dispatched from heaven itself, in order to settle this matter and conquer the tyrant. Elijah's mistake was due to his partial knowledge of God and His Divine and unfathomable methods. For the time being this was the sum and crown of his understanding, but he would soon learn the sobering truth on Mount Carmel.

Elijah and Ahab meet

In response to the prophet's command in 1 Kings 18:8, "Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him" (v. 16). The prophet was not willing to scurry to the feet of Ahab; he was not prepared to show any sense of subservience. So Elijah delays and awaits the arrival of the king, in the knowledge that "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Elijah knew that his God would not fail him. Let us all likewise do the same, "being confident of this very thing, that He Which hath begun a good work in [us] will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

For the three-and-a-half years during which the king and the prophet had not met, persecution and blasphemy had prevailed, and drought had mightily afflicted the land. But the time had finally come, deliverance would be sent. Elijah now stood confidently before the king, he would rescue the children of Israel from this terrible yoke of oppression. And observe two opposing religions on full view, face-to-face, in stark contrast; good versus evil, truth versus error, indeed the mind of the spirit versus the mind of the serpent in all its glory, for all to see and behold.

"Art thou he that troubleth Israel?"

It was Ahab who took the initiative and directly questioned the prophet: "Art thou he that troubleth [*akar*] Israel?" (1 Kgs. 18:17). This was a false accusation by the wrathful monarch, casting upon Elijah the whole responsibility of God's severe judgements. The Hebrew word *akar* can also mean to 'roil water', 'confuse' or 'disorder by agitation', and can refer to the disturbance of a clear liquid so that it becomes muddied. This is exactly what Ahab accused Elijah of doing, disturbing the hearts and minds of Israel. In fact Elijah was agitating the consciences of the peo-

ple through the spoken Word of God, and this angered the king greatly.

Furthermore, "troubleth" shares the same root as 'Achan' and 'Achor'. Now Achan was the one who took of "a goodly Babylonish garment" (Josh. 7:21), or, literally, "a goodly robe of Shinar" (Young's Literal Translation), transgressing God's commandment. And where was the location of Shinar? It was where the Tower of Babel (or 'confusion') was built (Gen. 11:2), the very founding place of "Babylon the great" (Rev. 17:5; 18:2). If anything was causing confusion in the camp, it was not Elijah, but Jezebel and her heathen worship. She was the one intoxicating their minds with lies and deceit.

Concerning this incident with Achan, in response Joshua directly enquired of him: "Why hast thou troubled [*akar*] us? the LORD shall trouble [*akar*] thee this day". Thus Ahab mischievously directed Elijah's mind to the time when Achan greatly "troubled" the camp of Israel and as punishment was stoned, burned and his history buried from all living memory in the valley of Achor (Josh. 7:25,26). Was the king threatening the prophet with the same treatment?

Jacob also applied this word to condemn the appalling acts of his two sons Simeon and Levi in avenging their sister Dinah (Gen. 34:30). Was Ahab therefore falsely accusing Elijah that he had similarly taken vengeance into his own hands, not in accordance with the Divine way, but instead for his own personal fulfilment and satisfaction?

"Thou, and thy father's house"

Elijah immediately responded to Ahab's slander: "I have not troubled Israel; but thou, and thy father's house" (1 Kgs. 18:18). Mark well the unpleasant sound of truth from his lips! There were no words of insincerity, nor any form of men-pleasing, nor "Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11). Instead he chose to be direct, striking the target with the arrow of truth. He did not miss the mark with his most pertinent message.

Thus it was not Elijah, but Ahab and his "father's house", who had "troubled" the land. This spoke not only of the corruption they had specifically brought into the land, but also of the rebuilding of a cursed city, which God had previously forbidden: "Cursed be the man before the LORD, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho" (Josh. 6:26). Judgement fell upon Hiel the Bethelite (1 Kgs. 16:34) because, some 600

years after its destruction by the Israelites, he rebuilt Jericho. But who had allowed such a blasphemous initiative to advance? King Ahab; he was the man!

Notice how similar the language is to that which Nathan the prophet used to reproach King David, after the evil he had brought upon Uriah's household: "Thou art the man" (2 Sam. 12:7). Ahab was "the man" because he had "forsaken the commandments of the LORD" (1 Kgs. 18:18). Therein lies the heart of the problem; Ahab had wilfully thrown aside the Divine yoke and refused to be subjected to the Almighty, the great Sovereign.

"Thou hast followed Baalim"

Though the Law had commanded the worship only of the God of Israel, Elijah could truthfully pronounce to Ahab: "thou hast followed Baalim" (v. 18). The Hebrew for "followed" can be rendered as 'to go away'. How apt this expression

was for Ahab, as well as his courtiers and subjects, for they had all departed out of the narrow way, and entered into the broad way "that leadeth to destruction" (Mt. 7:13). The term "Baalim" (1 Kgs. 18:18) is the plural of Baal, and refers to the many images of the false deity which existed, besides those of numerous other heathen gods (cf. Judg. 2:11,12; 1 Sam. 7:4).

What blasphemy! For Moses had declared: "the LORD He is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else" (Deut. 4:39; cf. v. 35; 1 Kgs. 8:60; Isa. 45:5; Joel 2:27). To Yahweh, the God of Israel, Ahab's idolatry was a gross challenge to His declaration: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut. 6:4). But the kingdom continued in such evil practices with great fervency, and so the Divine hand of judgement would come severely upon it, and many lives would soon be lost in one of the most memorable scenes in the annals of history.

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

From the Editor's postbag

Comments on items received from readers

When Britannia ruled the waves

The January four-page centre spread, "Britain in Bible prophecy" (p. 17), drew attention to Britain's naval power, which was developed over the centuries. A Canadian reader (prior to publication of the article) has forwarded to me details of a book, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*, by Arthur Herman, published by HarperCollins (ISBN 0060534249). Here is what the publisher's website (www.harpercollins.com) says about the book:

"*To Rule the Waves* tells the extraordinary story of how Britain's Royal Navy allowed one nation to rise to power unprecedented in history. From its beginnings under Henry VIII and adventurers

like John Hawkins and Francis Drake, the Royal Navy toppled one world economic system, built by Spain and Portugal after Christopher Columbus, and ushered in another—the one in which we still live today.

"In the sixteenth century, such men as Hawkins, Drake, and Martin Frobisher were all seekers after their own fortunes as well as servants of their nation. But at the moment of crisis in 1588, they were able to come together to thwart Philip II of Spain and his supposedly invincible Armada. In the seventeenth century, the navy became the key to victory in the English Civil War and played a leading role on the world stage in the years of the Commonwealth and

Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate. The navy's dominance allowed England's trade to boom and prosper. It sustained its colonies, reshaped its politics, and drew England, Scotland and Ireland together into a single United Kingdom.

"It was this system that Napoleon had to break in order to make himself absolute master of Europe. And it was the Royal Navy, led by men like Horatio Nelson, that stopped him in his tracks and preserved the liberty of Europe and the rest of the world. That global order would survive the convulsions of the twentieth century and the downfall of the British Empire itself, as Britain passed its essential elements on to its successors,