

# Lessons from the life of Elijah

## 15. "He arose, and went for his life" (1 Kgs. 19:1-3)

Stephen Whitehouse

*Previously, Elijah stood as a colossus of faith, empowered by God, bringing fire down from heaven, slaying the prophets of Baal and being answered by rain. But now the prophet is filled with fear and terror, and deserts the nation. Though he had previously challenged four hundred prophets of Baal, he now flees from the threat of one woman! This sorry episode reminds us of the infirmities of man, and how infinitely inferior we all are to the perfection seen in the Lord Jesus.*

**A**FTER THE MARVELLOUS manifestation of the power of the Almighty described in 1 Kings 18, it would be expected that, not only would the children of Israel return to the worship of the God of Israel, but also Ahab and his wicked wife would be converted. But this was far from being the case, as we shall see.

### "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done"

For Elijah, all the waiting and strained suspense was over. The king had sped home to Jezreel through the violent rain, and had hurried to speak to his imperious consort to inform her of the unfolding events of the day. But what would he say? Would he tell her of the victory of Yahweh and the impotency of Baal? No. Instead, "Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword" (1 Kgs. 19:1).

Surely we can imagine the verbal exchange between these two godless characters. No doubt Ahab described Elijah's mocking of Jezebel's prophets, and how subsequently they had become a sight of ridicule and mockery. He would also have claimed that Elijah had deceived the people with an ingenious deception, by some fraudulent means, in bringing fire from heaven. And then, vexing his wife further, he would have told how the children of Israel had fallen on their faces and reacted in united chorus: "The LORD [Yahweh], He is the God; the LORD [Yahweh], He is the God" (18:39).

Let it be noted that the words Ahab uttered to his wife were all deliberately selected, every last

one. He certainly knew how to fuel her anger and hatred! Was Ahab's conscience such that he found himself incapable of persecuting a fellow Israelite, but, being so well acquainted with his wife's ambition, he knew, on receiving the news, that she would be driven on to slay this man herself, as she had the other prophets of God (18:4)?

Firstly, notice that Ahab makes no mention of the prophets of Baal, since he was desperate to convey to his queen that her representatives were, unmistakably, the only genuine prophets on the mount that day. He therefore firmly positioned himself in her camp, with her false religion and practice. Secondly, and more important, there is a most obvious omission, namely that of Yahweh Himself, from his entire erroneous account. Though Ahab had been a witness to all the most wondrous events on Carmel, he chose to deprive Jezebel of the most critical details, preferring to deceive and provide a false account.

Again, in the actions of Ahab we are reminded of the strong hold that Jezebel had over her weak husband. Indeed, he was one "whom Jezebel his wife stirred up" (21:25). The revelation of God had made no impression upon him, and, like Pharaoh after witnessing the plagues descend upon the land of Egypt, "he hardened his heart" (Ex. 8:15). The Apostle Paul informs us that there are those who "[do] not see fit to acknowledge God" (Rom. 1:28, RSV), and Ahab was of such.

Thus nothing had changed with Ahab. Just remember how on meeting Elijah the king had previously asked, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" (1 Kgs. 18:17). He was totally impervious to the fact that his own wickedness had brought the dire condition upon the Land. Neither God's judgements—the lengthy drought and famine—nor His blessings—the refreshing rain—turned the king to the God of Israel. Even now, Ahab was still preoccupied with "all that Elijah had done" (19:1).

### "Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah"

Do not overlook that Ahab knew only too well how his wife would respond on hearing the alarming news: "Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and

more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time" (v. 2).

Her pride had been seriously wounded, and, just as a mother robbed of her children, she reacted in the only way she knew, in bloodthirsty revenge. She was uncontrollable; her feelings knew no limits; nothing now said could possibly console her. She wanted blood, the prophet's blood. In her own mind she would have much preferred that the whole nation had starved from drought than that God's prophet should emerge triumphant before the people, bringing great rain.

So angry was Jezebel that she made a vow to "the gods" (v. 2), Baal and his consorts (*cf.* 18:18). But what strength had Baal? He had already proved to be most ineffective! She had vowed and sworn the prophet's death within the day. She was utterly incapable of inflicting a blow upon Yahweh directly, so she would vent all her anger on His most holy servant.

Now under Jewish custom vows were common practice. Remember the vows uttered by Jacob (Gen. 28:20), Jephthah (Judg. 11:30), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:11) and Absalom (2 Sam. 15:7). But through the evil practices of the northern kingdom, initiated by Jeroboam, followed by his successors and now fiercely promoted by Jezebel, Israel had adopted the religion of the surrounding nations in praying to the gods (1 Kgs. 20:10). No longer were vows made in the Name of the Elohim of Israel, but instead in the name of false religion itself, Baalim.

In every sense the message issued by Jezebel was meant as a challenge. She pitched herself and her deity against Elijah and his God. Can this contest be seen in the meaning of their names: Jezebel, 'Baal exalts', against Elijah, 'Yahweh is my God'?

The queen was so incensed, so irate, that immediately after hearing of the gruesome death of her devout prophets the message to Elijah was angrily despatched. Within this letter she carefully described her murderous intentions. She made it evidently clear that, though he may have silenced her husband on Carmel, she would still have the last word. Of interest, Jezebel can also mean 'Baal is husband to'. Her earthly husband, Ahab, may have succumbed to Elijah, but her spiritual husband, Baal, would not suffer the same humiliating fate.

But was she prepared to face the prophet alone, like her husband? No. Though she chose to ignore the power of God, she certainly was not ignorant

of it. Rather, she preferred to send a servant to announce her imminent sentence upon Elijah.

**"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are" (Jas. 5:17)**

Before we closely scrutinise the weak response of Elijah, let us keep in mind that the prophet was simply a man, made of flesh and blood, subject to the human condition as we all are: "Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are" (Jas. 5:17). Though he was most certainly an individual who demonstrated immense bravery and valour, besides deep humility and godliness, he was nonetheless, like ourselves, someone who also suffered from disappointment and rejection.

The record now painfully states that, when Elijah saw Jezebel's determination to kill him, "he arose, and went for his life" (1 Kgs. 19:3). There was no Divine direction as to whither he should go; there was no "word of the LORD" as before (17:2,8; 18:1). Hitherto his course had been Divinely marked out, but now his course was obscure, his steps uncertain.

Yet who of us can dare imagine the emotions of Elijah at this low moment? He must have wrestled with his fear after hearing the queen's intentions, knowing that Jezebel had "massacred the prophets of the LORD" (18:4, NKJV).

Surely Elijah felt profound disappointment. He had hoped that the day of Carmel would have had a lasting affect upon the people, hopes certainly evident in his prayer: "Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that Thou art the LORD God, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again" (v. 37). After the excitements of the day this intimidating message from the defiant Jezebel would seem like a severe blow to his aspirations. He would be utterly disheartened, totally downcast, on receiving this news. It was at this moment that he lost his faith.

Here observe a profound lesson. Elijah's eyes were set on the evil queen, and his mind was too occupied with her threat; it was "when he *saw* that, he arose, and went for his life" (19:3; *cf.* v. 10). Needless to say, Elijah should have been meditating upon the firm hand of the Almighty's deliverance. It is the prophet Isaiah who rightly testifies: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid . . . He also is become my salvation" (12:2); "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in Thee" (26:3). The great prophet further stated: "he that believeth shall not make haste" (28:16).

The actions of Elijah severely contrasted with those of Elisha, his successor, who, on finding himself in a similar predicament (hearing that the king of Syria had sent a great host against him), said in faith, "Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them" (2 Kgs. 6:16).

But let us not overlook the fact that Elijah was an exceptional pillar of faith, a chosen vessel of the Father. The sobering truth is that a mere human weakness, however small and insignificant it may initially seem, if not overcome by the Word, can expose and bring to error even the greatest of God's servants.

The Scriptures continually warn us that we should "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Do we remember Lot, who "lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where" (Gen. 13:10)? And after viewing this lush ground, what did he decide? "Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan . . . and pitched his tent toward Sodom" (vv. 11,12). And we all are aware of what soon ensued at Sodom (19:24; cf. Deut. 29:23; Lk. 17:29).

Similarly, what about the twelve spies after they had surveyed the Land? What did they report back to Moses? "And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Num. 13:33). And we recall Peter who, when seeing Jesus walking on the sea, left the ship and walked towards him; but, "when he saw the wind boisterous", his eyes focused on the turbulent waters, his faith became troubled and "he was afraid; and [began] to sink" (Mt. 14:30). And what was the response of Jesus? "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" (v. 31).

### The Divine hand of providence

But there is another way of looking at what happened. Elijah was given ample warning of Jezebel's murderous intentions on his life, such are the providential ways of God. Does this not remind us of the account of the wise men, who, when visiting Jesus, were "warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod"? And how, obeying the heavenly message, "they departed into their own country another way" (Mt. 2:12)? What about the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, informing him to "take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt" because of the impending danger, "for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him" (v. 13)?

A further similarity is found in the incident in Paul's life when, after he had declared Christ in Damascus, "the Jews took counsel to kill him". But their evil intentions were made known, and so "the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket", and he fled to Jerusalem for safety (Acts 9:23-26).

Returning to Elijah, the situation must have been a difficult one to assess. He must have wondered whether the message, which had been so imprudently sent, was a warning for him to flee, sent from God. He surely would have brought to mind the words of God when he had faced potential danger in Ahab's court: "Get thee hence . . . and hide thyself" (1 Kgs. 17:3). Was the prophet supposing that he might do so now, that again he should get him thence and hide?

Evidently this time round there was no Divine instruction, and, instead of waiting patiently, he now took his life into his own hands. Elijah's reaction was impetuous, and so he deserted his post of duty and responsibility and fled into the wilderness.

### Elijah flees to Beersheba

So Elijah escaped from Jezebel and "came to Beer-sheba, which belongeth to Judah" (19:3). The prophet fled south, some ninety miles, and arrived at Beersheba (cf. Gen. 21:31; 26:33), on the fringe of the desert, the southern boundary of the Land.

Now that he was beyond the boundaries of Ahab's kingdom, surely he would be safe from danger. Unfortunately, Judah was ruled over by Jehoshaphat, whose son had married the daughter of Ahab (2 Kgs. 8:18). Thus the house of Jehoshaphat was closely allied to his enemy (cf. 1 Kgs. 22:2-4). Beersheba would not serve in providing safe asylum for Elijah; this was no sanctuary. He would have to advance further into the desert.

But was it for security alone that the prophet absented his station? Or did he enter the "great and terrible wilderness" (Deut. 1:19; 8:15) because God had made a covenant in Horeb (5:2; 29:1)? Were the prophetic words of Moses the Law-giver now ringing in his ears: "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken" (18:15)? Did he sense that he was destined to be a second Moses, raised up to enforce the Law, continuing the work of Deity as Law restorer? If so, how natural that Elijah fled into the land of Midian, to which Moses had fled, the place where God had "talked . . . face to

TONY BENSON



**The partially reconstructed ruins of ancient Beer-sheba, the place to which Elijah fled initially from the wrath of Jezebel.**

face [with Israel] in the mount out of the midst of the fire" (5:4)!

When the prophet finally "came to Beer-sheba" he "left his servant there" (1 Kgs. 19:3). The prophet, desiring to be alone in isolation and solitude, and anxious to spare his servant from the journey ahead, pressed forward unaccompanied.

Elijah would certainly have recollected the journey of Abraham, as he ascended Moriah, and how he had assured his two servants, "Abide ye

here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). And let us remember that Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, preferred to leave his disciples behind while he went to pray and be alone with his Father. And what did Jesus say to Peter, James and John on finding them sleeping? "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch" (Mk. 14:34).

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

## Religious hatred

Trevor Maher

*Brethren and sisters living in the Western world have long enjoyed freedom of worship, but is this freedom under threat from new legislation? We have to be prepared to follow the faithful examples of those in the past who preached the Truth despite opposition from the authorities.*

A GREAT DEAL of publicity was given earlier this year to the case of a schoolgirl who attended Denbigh High School in Luton, and was excluded from school because she insisted on wearing a *jilbab* (head covering), which was not allowed under school regulations concerning school uniform. The girl held the Muslim faith, and argued that she had a right to "manifest her religious beliefs" in this way. The matter went to court, and ultimately the law lords who heard the case agreed with her. This legal

decision will have far-reaching implications in relation to a school's ability to determine its own 'uniforms policy'.

Another, much broader, question is raised, though, by these events. Who decides in future what is an authentic manifestation of a religious belief? The decision of the court was described by the pupil and her family as "a victory for Muslims who wish to preserve their identity and values despite prejudice and bigotry". What seemed like a normal everyday rule concerning school uniforms had become in the minds of these people an act of "prejudice and bigotry", a form of religious hatred.

In December 2004 a violent demonstration by large numbers of Sikhs in Birmingham over a play's portrayal of their faith caused the play to be cancelled. They were offended, claiming that the play mocked their faith (even though it