

Choose the One, True God

DAVE BAST

Elijah, greatest of all the Old Testament prophets, was called to serve God during a time of real crisis. Even though Israel had the worst of kings, Ahab, and the land was experiencing an unprecedented drought, the main problem facing the people was neither political nor economic nor ecological. It was a faith problem. Make up your minds, thundered Elijah. If the Lord is God follow him, but if Baal, then follow him. How long will you go limping between two opinions? Well, many people today, as in Elijah's time, are attracted to religious syncretism, and the prophet's ancient question is still relevant. We will ask that same question today on Groundwork. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are in the second program now of a projected four programs around the life and ministry of Elijah – Elijah the Tishbite, as he is introduced in I Kings 17; about whom we know very little, personally. We don't know anything about his background, as we pointed out in our first program. He sort of appears out of nowhere, steps onto the stage of Bible history and off we go. It starts out with his announcement of judgment, really, on the northern kingdom, and King Ahab; the judgment of a drought.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we saw that from I Kings 17 in the first program. The judgment of God comes in the form of a drought. God takes care of Elijah, brings him to a place, ultimately, called Zarephath, where he lives with a widow and her son for a while; but eventually he is going to come back to Israel. He is going to be looked for by Ahab, and so forth; and he is going to have this confrontation that we are going to see on today's program, from I Kings 18; but as we do that, we have to remember the other major, major thing we said in the first program, which is that the religion in Israel at this time... Now, we are in the northern kingdom, the ten tribes, ruled now by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. It is a religious mess. It is a mishmash, an amalgamation. What we call *syncretism*, which is the word for combining multiple religions, or taking bits and pieces like it is a cafeteria approach... Take a little bit of this religion, a little bit of that religion, a little bit of that one; mash them together, and now you have a new faith, which is, obviously in Israel's case, not the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it literally is a mash-up. That is what they call the technique that is popular today in electronic music, where you take two different songs and kind of mash them together and play them simultaneously. Well, that is what happened in Israel. It started out under their first king, Jeroboam, as worshipping the true God, but in the wrong way. He set up alternative shrines. He made images of this god to kind of localize and focus peoples' attention. That is what the second commandment addresses. It says don't make idols and think that you are worshipping God when you are worshipping an idol; but then it got much more severe, as the religion of Baal came in; especially under the influence of Ahab's wife – his pagan wife, Jezebel – who brought with her a whole bunch of prophets of Baal; and in this case, now, the people of Israel are either going outright to Baal or they are trying to hang onto a little bit of the worship of Yahweh, Israel's God, and

combine it with this fertility religion of their pagan neighbors; it is a very familiar problem, unfortunately, even today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so if you had asked many... not all; we will find out later there are many true-blue believers in Yahweh, the God of Israel – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – but, for a lot of people in Elijah's day, if you said to them: Do you want to worship Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or do you want to worship Baal, their answer was: Yes; we will worship both, thank you very much. You know, we don't want to choose. We are going to kind of bring them together and, you know, a little God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a little Baal, a little Asherah; put them all into the same pot and make a big, religious soup out of it; and that is our faith. Elijah knew that would never do. Maybe things are not always as obvious today as they were in Israel in terms of blending our religion with other beliefs, but there are subtle forms where this happens even today in the Church sometimes.

DAVE BAST

Well, in Israel, probably the form it took was that people would continue maybe to recite the prayers and maybe even remember and read the stories of the Exodus, but then they would also go to the local shrine and offer a little sacrifice there to get some success because, like all pagan religions really, the worship of Baal was a fertility religion. It was meant to help you prosper – to get more animals – that they would give birth, and your flocks and herds would increase...

SCOTT HOEZEE

More crops.

DAVE BAST

More crops and babies when you needed them – children. So, that is sort of the form that it took; and I think today some have referred to what they call a cafeteria approach to spirituality or to faith or to religion. You kind of go down the line and take what looks good to you, you know. You are not going to take the Bible as a whole – you don't take the whole thing, but you: Well, I like the Golden Rule; I like a little bit here from the New Testament; I like some of the sayings of Jesus; I like Jesus as a great example, but I don't want the exclusive; I don't want the hard.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A great example of that came out about thirty years ago. A team of sociologists published a book called *Habits of the Heart*, and they profiled a number of religious seekers, including this woman named Sheila, who lived in California, and she took a little Christianity, a little Judaism, a little Hinduism, a little Buddhism, a little New Age stuff, and she kind of concocted her own faith, and she even called it Sheilaism. Sheilaism was Sheila's own little faith that she had put together all by herself; and that happens today, but it also can happen that we can say we worship God and we go to church and we are Christians, but then we end up adopting some of the consumerism of our culture, and some of the way we view our money has got more to do with capitalism than the Gospel. There are all kinds of subtle ways by which we can blend our faith in with other customs, other ideas, that ends up watering down the true faith.

DAVE BAST

You know, Thomas Jefferson famously made his own copy of the New Testament by using scissors and paste...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he cut out the parts that he liked and he threw away the rest. Well, that is a form of syncretism. The way Elijah confronts it is dramatic and staggering, really, and we are going to look at that story in just a moment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are in I Kings 18, even though we haven't read any of it yet on this program; but we are about to see one of the biggest clashes – one of the biggest, most dramatic stories in all of scripture, as wicked King Ahab, backed up by his even more wicked wife, Jezebel, have been promoters of this syncretism, this mashing together of Israelite religion with Baal and Asherah worship and tawdry sexual practices, no doubt, in this fertility cult that was left over from the Canaanites, of course. So Ahab has been looking for Elijah, Elijah is finally going to come and get right in Ahab's face, and the challenge is issued and promptly accepted.

DAVE BAST

Right; this is the story of Elijah and the confrontation with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel in the northern part of the kingdom of Israel, and we pick up the reading at I Kings 18:16. So, Obadiah... now, Obadiah is a minor character. He is a servant of Ahab's whom the king has sent out to look – track down – look, I want to get ahold of Elijah – and Obadiah finally comes: Please, let me find you, Elijah; and Elijah: No, I am ready to meet the king. So, he sends Obadiah back to meet Ahab, and told him, ^{16b}and Ahab went to meet Elijah, ¹⁷and when he saw Elijah he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?"

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁸"I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied, "but you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals. ¹⁹Now, summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel, and bring the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table." ²⁰And so Ahab went throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. ²¹Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions?" (Or the other translation: "How long will you keep limping between two options?") If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him."

DAVE BAST

^{21b}But the people said nothing. ²²Then Elijah said to them, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left; but Baal has four hundred fifty prophets. ²³Get two bulls for us. Let Baal's prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood, but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood, but not set fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord, the God who answers by fire. He is God." And all the people said, "What you say is good."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there is the set up for this dramatic confrontation on Mount Carmel. I love the line that you read a minute ago; so Elijah says: How long are you going to keep limping between two opinions? Pick a god and serve him; and then this line: The people said nothing. They have nothing to say. They don't want to pull the trigger; they don't want to make a decision, which is very telling. So, here is the contest: Two altars, two bulls – two cows – for sacrifice. No fire from our side; no matches. God – Baal or Yahweh – has to set fire to this altar; and now the action begins.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who is going to come through?

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is great. It is pretty clear cut, isn't it? The God who answers by fire, that is the one who is real; and the people say: Yup, that sounds good. At first glance, it looks like a completely uneven contest, doesn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I mean, Elijah points out: I am alone here. I am the only one left. What we learn, in fact, is that Jezebel has hunted down the Lord's prophets in Israel and has killed most of them, and others are in hiding or they have fled. So it is one...this is like high noon in the old West, you know; one good man against the whole gang. There are four hundred fifty prophets of Baal, Elijah by himself. Beyond that, Baal was believed to be the god of thunder and lightning. He was the lord of the clouds. So, this ought to be right up his alley, right? All he has to do is send one of his little bolts down and ignite the sacrifice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Picking up the reading now again from I Kings 18, referring now to all those prophets and all the other people who were Baal worshippers: ^{26b}Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, "Baal, answer us," they shouted; but there was no response. No one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made, ²⁷and at noon Elijah began to taunt them. "Shout louder," he said. "Surely he is a god; perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling, or maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened. ²⁸So they shouted louder; they slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. ²⁹Midday passed and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. There was no response; no one answered; no one paid attention. (I love the text here, it just drills it in.)

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; it is a masterfully written story. So you get the picture. Not only do they outnumber Elijah by four hundred fifty to one, not only is their god supposedly the god of the thunder and lightning, but they get first crack at it. So they prepare the sacrifice, and they begin to pray, and as they are praying, they go into a kind of frenzy, and it is typical of sort of orgiastic fertility worship. It is the worship of the people of Canaan, which often involved, to us really, amazingly bad, reprehensible practice; but these guys are dancing around and they are screaming and they are crying out; and they cry out from morning until noon, it says, and there is no response.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I always picture Elijah sitting off on the side... In fact, I think in a sermon once I said: You know, picture Elijah sort of in a lawn chair under an umbrella sipping a drink with a little umbrella in it, maybe; just sort of watching this spectacle, bemused at how pathetic it is; and then eventually he cannot resist, he has to taunt them. He makes fun of them. You know: Maybe he is asleep or could he be in a meeting? He might be in a meeting; in fact, there is some indication actually, this translation doesn't have it, but the old translation said: Perhaps he has turned aside, which was a metaphor for saying: Maybe he is going to the bathroom.

DAVE BAST

Yes, he is out in the outhouse, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So he cannot resist it – he cannot resist it. This is going nowhere fast; no response, no one answered; no one paid attention. There is no god on the other end of this prayer line.

DAVE BAST

Here is an interesting point, and this is characteristic in this story: One of the major responses, especially of the Old Testament, to the idols of the surrounding nations is to laugh at them – to make fun of them. These are big, scary gods; they demand human sacrifice often; these pagan tribes would sometimes throw their children into a fiery furnace to appease these gods, and prophets of the Old Testament said the best thing to do is laugh at them because they have no existence. They are not real. If there is anything to them, it is demonic and it is contrary to the living God. You don't have to be afraid of them if you know the God who is real.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. Sometimes laughter and derision, as you say, Dave; in the Psalms, too, that God is in heaven and he laughs and he mocks at these puny gods. It reminds me of a story from during World War II when Winston Churchill was actually giving a speech to the Parliament in Ottawa, Canada; and Hitler had said the week before that they would very soon ring Britain's neck like a chicken; and Churchill is making that speech in Parliament and he paused at just the right moment and he said: Some chicken! And everybody roared with laughter; then he said: Some neck! And they roared even louder, just laughing Hitler into derision; and this is sort of what is happening here.

DAVE BAST

So the prophets get more and more frenzied, and eventually they start to gash themselves. They take knives and spears and they cut themselves until the blood flows...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, anything to get Baal's attention.

DAVE BAST

But the thing of it is, it is not how hard you pray that makes the difference, it is to whom you pray; and if you pray with all your might to a god who isn't real and who has no power, it is not going to help you; but now it is Elijah's turn, and he is about to pray in a very different way, as we will see.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and the second of four programs that we are doing on the prophet Elijah. When last we were with our hero, as we might say, Dave, Elijah is on Mount Carmel having a showdown with four hundred fifty priests of Baal who have spent the better part of twelve hours crying to Baal to send down fire onto the altar they built. Absolutely nothing has happened, and so now, the story's climax.

DAVE BAST

And it is majestic: ³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come here to me." They came to him and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel." ³²With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord and he dug a trench around it. ³³He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood. ³⁴"Do it again." He said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. ³⁵The water ran down around the altar, and even filled the trench.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁶At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed, “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷Answer me, Lord; answer me so these people will know that you, Lord, are God and that you are turning their hearts back again.” ³⁸And then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice: the wood, the stones, the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench; ³⁹and when all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God!”

DAVE BAST

Amen. Wow, what a great story! You notice Elijah’s careful preparation. So, he begins by rebuilding the altar of the Lord, and he chooses twelve stones, which in itself, Scott, is a provocative act because this is in the breakaway kingdom, and they only have ten tribes. Judah and Benjamin have remained faithful to the line of David; but Elijah is going to remind them: No, the people of God really are unbroken in a spiritual sense. There may be this political division, but there are twelve tribes. There always have been and there always will be. And so he builds with these twelve stones, and then he says: Now, I don’t want you to think this is some trickery here or that I am a religious charlatan who is going to fake this. They not only arrange the sacrifice, but he digs a trench around the altar and he says: Go get some water... not sure where they got it, given the drought conditions...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Pour it over the altar...pour it over the wood; and they pour it and pour it and pour it until the whole thing is soaking wet and the trench is even filled with water.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The deck has been stacked against Elijah all day. It was four hundred fifty to one in terms of the prophets. Four hundred fifty prophets praying instead of just one man praying; and now Elijah stacks the deck against himself even more. He soaks the whole thing with water, and then he prays in such contrast to the frenzy that we have seen all day long – hour after hour – maybe as long as almost twelve hours of religious frenzy from these people; and Elijah is just very, very quiet...

DAVE BAST

And notice, it is the time of the evening sacrifice, the writer says, so it is...

SCOTT HOEZEE

According to God’s Law at that time.

DAVE BAST

And in Jerusalem; so there again, he is corresponding to the worship of the true God in Jerusalem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he prays very simply. He just prays that God’s glory will be revealed and that he will vindicate that there is a God in Israel, and that Elijah is his servant. Elijah is not in this just for himself, of course, but Elijah’s name means My God is Yahweh, and he is saying: Look, that is my name. I have staked everything to you, so prove me right here; and God, of course, does come through with such dramatic fire that we are told the stones and the dirt get consumed. I mean, I don’t know what kind of fire can lick up a stone and melt rock, but this one did. This wasn’t just, you know, God flicking a Bic and lighting the thing... No, no; he left a crater in the ground on this one. This was more than definitive.

DAVE BAST

And the people are awed, as well they should be. The second part of Elijah's prayer also comes true. He not only prayed that God would bring glory to himself and reveal his true nature – that he is the real God – but that the people's heart would be turned back to him; and so, at least for a little while...I don't know how long it is going to last...there is a genuine repentance, a genuine turning to the Lord on the part of the people. You know, again, this is clear, as clear as a story can be, to emphasize probably the major theme of the Old Testament with respect to God and the idols. There is only one God. There are not a whole bunch of them and you take your pick. It is not a cafeteria. One God is real. One God is alive. The others are useless, senseless, helpless things. They cannot hear when you pray to them; they cannot do anything; and know for sure that it is the God of Israel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Really, this dramatic and unique...this one-time kind of event on Mount Carmel is dramatic and unique in scripture; and yet, there is a sense in which this is still going on today. We said earlier in the program that syncretism, this drive to sort of mishmash together all kinds of different religious beliefs from all kinds of different faiths, that is still around; and therefore, so is the relevance of Elijah's question: How long are you going to keep limping between two opinions? How long are you going to be wishy-washy on the ultimate question of the universe, and that is: Who is the one true God? Make up your mind; and I think people everywhere kind of need this confrontation. We are in a day where we want to go along to get along; everybody wants to be nice to everybody; we will respect everybody's opinion; all religions have some truth to them; there is no one truth; no one God; all paths lead to heaven...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Elijah wants to shake us up and say: No.

DAVE BAST

Yes; or even the thing that you hear today so often, that God has many names. Yes, there is only one God. Well, of course there is only one God. There is only one God who is real. Does he have many names? Is the god of these different religions the same being? Are we all praying to the same god? You know, again, that is a big question and I don't want to give a kneejerk answer; but I think that what this story suggests is that the God of the Bible is the God who is real; and he has made known himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. He has made it known by fire falling from heaven. The fire that flashed when Jesus was raised from the dead; the fire that danced as tongues of flame on the heads of the apostles when the Holy Spirit came. Really for us, the key question isn't: Is that person god? Is that person... are they praying to the same god? The key question is: Is Jesus God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because if Jesus is God then follow him and him alone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

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