

“A Man of God”

An Introduction to the Minor Prophets (4)

Texts: 1 Kings 17:1-24; Matthew 17:1-13

He appears on the scene unexpectedly, possessing the miraculous ability to close or open the heavens so as to bring drought or abundant rain. We know very little about his background and origins, but he is best known for his confrontation with prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. He comes as a new Moses who raises the dead. He confronts the apostate king of Israel, Ahab, and his Baal worshiping wife, Jezebel. He is taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, and the last two verses in the Old Testament (Malachi 4:5-6) speak of his re-appearance as the sign of the dawn of the messianic age and the coming of Jesus. He appears with Moses and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and is mentioned frequently in the New Testament as the forerunner of the Messiah. He is truly a remarkable man. I am speaking, of course, of the prophet Elijah.

We will continue to establish background for our series on the Minor Prophets, as we take up the account of Elijah, one of the so-called “non-writing” prophets sent to Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Elijah’s ministry is recounted in 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2. He appears during the reign of Israel’s sixth king (Omri), who took the throne about 885 B.C., approximately 50 years (a full generation) after Israel’s civil war with Judah (our subject last time). His name means “YHWH is my God,” which is fitting since his ministry to Israel centers around his prophetic call for the people of Israel to renounce the Canaanite fertility and weather god, Baal, and return to the proper worship of YHWH the Creator of all things and the Redeemer of his people. Along with Enoch—the man who walked with God (Genesis 5:21-24)—Elijah was taken up into heaven without dying, pointing ahead to the ascension of Jesus and the catching up of believers on the day of Christ’s second advent.

Before we survey the life and ministry of Elijah, it would be helpful to briefly survey the three points of background we have established so far in our series on the Minor Prophets. First, what roles do God’s prophets play in redemptive history? Recall that Moses is the preeminent Old Testament prophet and is the model for all those prophets who follow him, except that YHWH speaks to all other prophets in dreams and visions, but he speaks to Moses as a man to a friend. God’s prophets are preachers of God’s words given them by YHWH. They are not primarily predictors of the future—although they do address things about to happen in Israel while at the same time predicting a messianic age far off in the distant future. These prophets function as God’s process-servers, announcing to Israel that the verdict of the heavenly court is in—the curses threatened in God’s covenant with Israel established through the giving of the law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20) and renewed with Israel before the people entered the promised land (Deuteronomy 28-34)—are about to fall on God’s disobedient people. These prophets have the difficult task of declaring that God’s long-suffering patience with his disobedient people has come to an end.

Second, the words YHWH gives to his prophets echo the words of blessing and curse Moses spoke to Israel on the plains of Moab nearly seven hundred years earlier. The Sinai covenant is administered as part of God’s gracious covenant (promised to Adam and established with Abraham). But the ten commandments reflect the blessing/curse principle of God’s covenant of works originally made with Adam in Eden. If YHWH’s people obey the terms of God’s covenant, he will bless them above all other nations. Should they forsake the true and living God, ignore his commandments, and serve the gods of the Canaanites (Baal), then the threatened covenant curses will be dispensed from the heavenly court.

Third, those prophets whom God sent to Israel appear after the civil war which divided the united kingdom of David and Solomon into a Northern Kingdom (Israel), and a Southern Kingdom (Judah). From the time of Israel's split from Judah, Israel and the northern tribes are in a spiritual free-fall. The founding king of the northern kingdom (Jeroboam I) was a man of self-interest who had no concern for either YHWH or his covenant. As we saw last time, Jeroboam's legacy of forsaking YHWH was the norm in Israel. We read in 2 Kings 17:22-23, after separating from Judah, "*the people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day.*" God's prophets are sent to announce that God's people have broken his covenant and will face its curses—drought, famine, disease, defeat at the hands of their enemies (the Assyrians in 722 B.C.), and then finally, exile from the promised land.

Elijah suddenly appears a generation after Jeroboam I. Israel's worship of YHWH looks more like Canaanite worship of Baal than it conforms to the stipulations in God's law about how YHWH is to be worshiped. Many among the northern tribes have inter-married with Canaanites, and they see nothing wrong with worshiping YHWH as well as local Canaanite gods or even Baal (syncretism). The kings who came after Jeroboam were no better than Israel's founding king. They sought to make treaties with pagan empires to the north—again in violation of God's law. Many of the poor, needy, and aliens living in Israel are ignored or mistreated—some terribly. When they cry out to YHWH for help, he hears their cries and sends Elijah to confront Omri's successor Ahab, and his grandson, Ahaziah, who ascended Israel's throne after Ahab's death. In succeeding generations, YHWH will send the prophets Amos (whose prophecy we take up next time), as well as Jonah and Hosea to announce to Israel the final covenant curse—defeat and exile—is imminent.

We will survey the biblical account of Elijah—a prophet whose prophetic credentials are confirmed by miracle working power. We begin our survey with our text, 1 Kings 17:1-24. No background is given, as the author of Kings, bluntly states, "*now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'*" We only know that Elijah was from Tishbe, which is a village in what is now Jordan in the tribal land of Gad. His name may actually be a title, "YHWH is my God," since from the minute he is introduced we know that he is YHWH's prophet challenging the authority of Baal, the Canaanite weather-fertility God. Elijah's ministry is exercised in the form of "ordeal combat," (or a trial by ordeal) when the one who wins is judged to be right (like that of David against Goliath). In this case, God's champion (Elijah) will engage in combat ordeal with Baal and his devoted worshippers. Elijah will show that Baal does not control nature, YHWH the creator does.

When Ahab came to the throne after the death of Omri, he sought further political alliances because he no longer regarded YHWH as Israel's protector. He married the infamous Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tyre, the powerful Phoenician city to the west. Jezebel was a devoted Baal worshiper and helped spread, then enforce Baal worship throughout Israel. Ahab's daughter Athaliah married the current king of Judah, Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram. That the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel sought alliances with each other after their bloody civil war is not a sign of reunion, but of military weakness and spiritual decline. Neither kingdom took much regard for their covenant with YHWH, a sign their collective hearts were far from him, even if they still paid lip service to him in their worship. Elijah's declaration to Ahab that God's judgment has come upon Israel is the first indication that a combat ordeal between YHWH and Baal was about to begin, the outcome of which is never in doubt.

To establish Elijah's credentials as a prophet sent from YHWH, the account in 1 Kings opens by

describing YHWH's call and Elijah's encounter with the widow of Zarephath and her son. We are told in verse 2, that *"the word of the LORD came to"* [Elijah]. In the following verses (2-4), Elijah is given very specific instructions: *"Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."* YHWH will provide his servant with both food and water during the drought YHWH sent.

Elijah obeys YHWH's instructions. *"So he went and did according to the word of the LORD. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook. And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land."* Drought is one of the specific judgments upon Israel of which Moses had warned in Deuteronomy 28, hundreds of years earlier. When Elijah's ministry gets underway, we are told in verse 8, *"then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah], 'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he arose and went to Zarephath."* Zarephath is a coastal city to the north of Tyre, in the Phoenician region of Sidon. A well-known center of Baal worship, it was outside of Israel's tribal land.

When Elijah *"came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.'" Elijah traveled a great distance to Zarephath and is hungry and thirsty. "And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.'" The widow's poverty and need becomes immediately apparent. "And she said, 'As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.'" Living in Sidon, the widow is not a Jew but knows that Elijah is from Israel and that he serves YHWH. The drought has depressed the local economy terribly and she is barely eking out her own survival. She has nothing to give the prophet.*

We read of Elijah's response in verses 14-15. *"And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" We can but wonder at her reaction to Elijah's words, but she put hospitality over her own family's needs. "She went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days." YHWH confirms to her that Elijah is his prophet. "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah." We begin to get the sense that Elijah is a new Moses, since it was during Israel's wandering in the wilderness that YHWH supernaturally provided his people with manna from heaven to eat. This also prefigures Jesus feeding the 5000 in the wilderness.*

But the provision of food does not prevent family tragedy nor a reaction arising out of fear and superstition. We read in verse 17, *"after this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, 'What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!'" The widow's reaction is to mistakenly assume that Elijah's presence in her home brought about this terrible calamity, the "holy man" exposing her sin. The combat-ordeal between Elijah and Baal moves from the weather to life itself.*

Elijah said to her, *"Give me your son." And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. And he cried to the LORD, 'O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?'" Elijah*

does not understand God's purposes. The Lord spared this woman and her son by providing them food preserving their lives. Now the boy dies? Despite his uncertainty, we read in verse 21, "*then [Elijah] stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, 'O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again.'*" The outcome proves that YHWH is the Lord of life. "*And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.*" YHWH raised the child from the dead, just as Jesus will do with the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17). "*And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, 'See, your son lives.' And the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.'*" YHWH is Lord over all things, not Baal. YHWH is merciful to this woman and her family. Baal cannot help her.

As the Elijah story continues to unfold in the next chapter (18), he confronts king Ahab. We read in 1 Kings 18:1-6,

After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth." So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria [a region in Israel]. And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) And Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals." So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself.

Obadiah who believed in YHWH, hid God's prophets from Jezebel. As Ahab's servant, he must remain loyal to his master, but he also serves YHWH. He's torn when he encounters Elijah, setting up the next phase of ordeal-combat. According verses 7-8, "*as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, 'Is it you, my lord Elijah?'*" And he answered him, "*It is I. Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'*" If Obadiah does as Elijah commands, Ahab will kill him. Obadiah struggles to know what to do. "*And [Obadiah] said [to Elijah], 'How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me?'"* Elijah is a wanted man. Ahab plans to kill him and even now is hunting him down. Obadiah tells the prophet, "*as the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord [Ahab] has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, 'He is not here,' he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here.'*" Obadiah knows Ahab's mind, as well as what is at stake—his life, as well as Elijah's.

He tells Elijah, "*and as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth. Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred men of the LORD's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? And now you say, 'Go, tell your lord, 'Behold, Elijah is here'; and he will kill me.*" If Elijah evades the search, and the king cannot find him, he will turn his wrath on Obadiah.

Elijah tells Obadiah not to worry, but to do as the prophet commands. As we read in verses 15-16, "*and Elijah said [to Obadiah], 'As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.'*" So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him what Elijah had said. Ahab went to meet Elijah. The outcome reveals how far into sin and unbelief Israel has fallen. "*When Ahab saw Elijah,*

Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?'” Ahab sees the divinely-credentialed prophet of YHWH as a threat. Ahab has turned from away YHWH, and is likely unwilling to go against his wife, Jezebel, who was busily employed using royal power to put YHWH’s servants to death. This sets up the great combat ordeal between Elijah as the prophet of YHWH, and the prophets of Baal.

Elijah issues a challenge as recounted in verses 18-19 of 1 Kings 18. Elijah answered Ahab, “*I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel’s table.’ So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.*” Game on. Ahab sees this as a golden opportunity to rid himself of YHWH’s chief prophet and to finally shake off the remnants of the worship of YHWH and the covenant which condemned Baal worship.

In verse 21, Elijah issues a challenge to the people of Israel and to the prophets of Baal who were serving both Ahab and Jezebel. “*And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word.*” The people, it seems, were in stunned silence and will wait for the outcome before deciding. “*Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.'*”

The rules for the ordeal-combat are set. “*And all the people answered, 'It is well spoken.'* Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “*Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.'* And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, ‘O Baal, answer us!’” Baal, the weather god, could have sent a bolt of lightning and ignited a fire. “*But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.*” So much for the great Baal who could not answer his people as they danced around his altar in worship. Limping is Elijah’s sarcastic description of their ritual dance.

We learn in verses 27 and following, that “*at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'* And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.” Baal is silent and does nothing, now proven to be but a mere figment of human imagination.

In verses 30-35, Elijah demonstrates for all to see that YHWH is the true and living God.

Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to me.’ And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, “Israel shall be your name,” and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” And he said, “Do it a second

time.” And they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time.” And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

By wetting down the entire area, Elijah ensures no human intervention in what comes next (vv. 36-40).

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

YHWH is the victor of the combat-ordeal. He Lord of life who raises the dead and opens the skies. Creator of all things, he alone can bring the fire of judgment. But where is Baal? Where is his power over the weather? Why is he silent and powerless? Ahab, Jezebel, and all of Baal’s prophets have been exposed as the rank idolators and covenant breakers that they are. The result is recounted in vv. 41-46.

Elijah said to Ahab, ‘Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.’ So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” And he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go again,” seven times. And at the seventh time he said, “Behold, a little cloud like a man’s hand is rising from the sea.” And he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.’” And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. . . . And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah.

YHWH is Lord and holds the victor’s crown. The imaginary Baal and all his followers are embarrassed and defeated, his prophets put to death under the sanction of Jewish law.

The story of Elijah continues to unfold in the following chapters as he flees into the wilderness to escape the wrath of Jezebel, angry over the death of her prophets. Elijah mourns Israel’s ongoing devotion to Baal. We read in 2 Kings 2:8 that Elijah parted the Jordan River (recalling to mind Moses parting of the Red Sea) and appointed Elisha as his successor—recalling Moses’ choice of Joshua. The Elijah story ends in 2 Kings 2:1-12, with the account of Elijah walking with Elisha, but is taken up into heaven by a chariot of fire and a whirlwind. Elijah will not taste the sting of death. It is not accidental that the two Old Testament figures who appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (in our New Testament Lesson from Matthew 17) are Moses and Elijah, especially when we learn that Elijah did not die. This also explains why the Old Testament closes in Malachi 4:5-6, with the prophecy written some 400 years after the ministry of Elijah to Israel, “*behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*”

Who is this mysterious Elijah to come who heralds the coming of the Messiah? What application is there for us as the people of God? We can answer both questions by reminding ourselves that the New Testament opens with the ministry of John the Baptist, whom Jesus identifies as the greatest of the Old

Testament prophets. John announces that time has come for Israel to repent and seek her Messiah—his coming is near. From the time of Elijah on, Jews expected that the prophet would return to usher in the messianic age. When John the Baptist appears in the wilderness proclaiming that judgment is at hand, it is no wonder why the Jews ask Jesus if John is Elijah. John the Baptist is the Elijah to come.

Elijah came to Israel in the days of Ahab to call the wicked king to repentance and to demonstrate YHWH's triumph over Baal, and therefore all Canaanite gods. As we will see in the coming weeks, the prophet Amos plays a similar role, arriving on the scene shortly before Israel's fall to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. But in the ministry of Elijah—truly a man of God—we see YHWH's power over all things—from the weather to life itself. We need not see widows miraculously fed, or their sons raised from the dead. We do not need to see fire come down from heaven at our command. YHWH has already proven himself to be the only true and living God by taking to himself a true human nature in the person of Jesus, who fulfilled all of God's covenant demands in his own perfect obedience, then taking away all the covenant curses by suffering and dying for our sins, and then winning the final combat-ordeal with the Devil when Jesus was raised from the dead.

This is how we know YHWH is the Lord, and that all of the Baals of our own age are nothing but the figment of people's sinful imaginations. We know this to be true because YHWH has given proof this in the obedience, the cross, and the empty tomb of Jesus. Jesus is the greater Elijah and he is the victor!