ELIJAH'S BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISRAEL

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The tales of Elijah may have been drawn from a cycle of texts on his deeds, and whether some of those deeds were magnified in the telling defies strict historical analysis. The Narrator introduces him as *Elijah the Tishbite of Tishbee* [or: *of the inhabitants*] of Gilead (I Kgs. 17:1). Gilead is the highland east of the Jordan River and south of the Kinneret, in the tribal territory of East Manasseh, a region in part agricultural and in part pastoral, remote from the innovations at Samaria. Nothing is preserved of Elijah's ancestry or tribe; not even whether *the Tishbite* is a geographical identification of his hometown or a genealogical one of his clan.

He appears on the scene abruptly, in the midst of a characteristically threatening confrontation with his monarch: *And Elijah the Tishbite . . . said to Ahab, *'As* The Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall in these years not be rain or dew except according to my word'* (I Kgs. 17:1). It is not clear whether Elijah was warning of a drought to come or explaining one already parching the land, but the background for this passage can be imagined. This is a country with few sources of fresh water, with alternating wet and dry half-year periods. If rain comes in its due season and with necessary abundance, springs and streams freshen, crops grow; flocks and herds have drink and pasturage. If not, there is thirst and famine.\(^1\) Rain was so desired that it was regarded as a reward for virtue, and drought so dreaded that it was deemed a punishment for sin (Deut. 11:16-17). No wonder, then, that ways to ensure precipitation had a great place in the religions and rituals of the region.

After Elijah made his announcement to Ahab, he set off on wanderings that took him into Phoenicia, that was also suffering under the drought.\(^2\) There he was witness to the distress it brought, especially to the common folk, and gave succor to a poor widow and her sick child in an episode that shows him as compassionate and benevolent to the unfortunate as he was relentless in prosecution of the mighty (17:9-24). In the third year of the drought, he at
last returned to Israel. There he encountered Obadiah, who was Over-the-Household of Ahab, and told him to inform the king of his presence.

Elijah did not request an audience but announced his presence, as though he expected the King to come to him. Ahab, who could have sent soldiers to fetch Elijah, did indeed go to him. So the ruler and the prophet came face to face, for an exchange that subsumes the very essence of the agon between them, and between their two visions of Israel.

*And it came to pass, at Ahab's seeing Elijah, that Ahab said to him, 'Are you he – the troubler of Israel?' And he said, 'I have not trou-
bled Israel, but you and your father's house, in your forsaking the commandments of The Lord, and going after the ba'alim' (18:17-
18).*

Ahab was not an incompetent, negligent or indolent ruler, unconcerned for the welfare of his realm. He built up its cities, its economy, and its material culture. He brought it to a place of consequence in international affairs and strengthened its military power. He took to the battlefield in person to defend it, and in the end he was slain fighting its enemies. Perhaps he simply did not perceive the value of its moral well-being. Perhaps he thought it advisable to adapt to the modern mores of the day and accommodate the customs of its region. From such a viewpoint, Elijah could be deemed a reactionary who impeded progress by his insistence on strict adherence to an already ancient Covenant; a fanatic, a meddler in affairs of state. To Elijah, the Covenant was the very essence of Israel's being, the mold of its identity, and the keystone of its destiny. Without it, wealth and might and fine buildings were hollow and evanescent. Any leader who set it aside for the easier pursuit of superficial successes would lead it to ruin and oblivion.

It is not known when this confrontation came in the course of Ahab's twenty-two years on the throne, but more likely late then early. It would take time for tensions to build up, as Phoenician cults were established and Jezebel's crimes took their toll. Some of the people were stout-hearted and stood firm for their own heritage. Others had gone over to the Tyrian party, out of self-interest or self-preservation. There would at this pass be some who were waver-ering when Elijah came forth to wage a contest for the soul of the nation.

He gave his orders to the King, and the King carried them out:
'And now, send; gather to me all Israel to Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of the ba'al and the 400 prophets of the asherah, eating at Jezebel's table.' And Ahab sent to all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together to Mount Carmel (18:19-20).

The Narrator of the Book of Kings gives more attention to Ahab than to any other ruler of the Northern Kingdom and many of the Southern Kingdom, yet the picture of his character and his personality is not in focus. One thing that does emerge is the domination of his wife Jezebel, daughter of the King of Tyre-Sidon, a very tiny state but one grown very rich through its far-flung maritime trade. The worst of Ahab's doings are ascribed to her instigation:

Surely, there was none like Ahab, who sold himself to do the evil thing in the eyes of The Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up. And he did very abominably to go after the idols, according to all that the Amorites did whom The Lord cast out before the children of Israel (21:25-26).

Josephus, whether drawing on early Tyrian sources or on his own interpretation, identifies the "idols" with a Phoenician "ba'al [lord, master]," the generic biblical term for a Canaanite/Phoenician male deity. He reports that Ahab patronized a ba'al-cult as a compliment to his opulent Tyrian connections: "Now this ba'al was the god of the Tyrians; and Ahab, in order to gratify his father-in-law Ethba'al, who was the King of Tyre and Sidon, built a temple for him in Samaria, and appointed him prophets and worshipped him with all sorts of worship."

To provide a foreign consort with a shrine for private devotions according to the ways of her native land had a precedent, albeit a disdained one, in the practice of Solomon, but Jezebel's devotions were not private. She maintained in her retinue 450 prophets of the ba'al, and . . . 400 prophets of the asherah eating at Jezebel's table (18:19) – "the asherah" being not the Canaanite-Phoenician goddess Asherah herself, but rather the sacred trees or cult-objects used in her rites. These prophets, presumably brought from Phoenicia, were far more than would suffice for her spiritual needs and eating at her table signifies more than catering arrangements. They were her henchmen in the mission to foist her native deities on her husband's people.
The Israelites who came to the assembly would be the men of standing, the clan and tribal elders acting as representatives of the people as a whole. Elijah addressed himself to them, as though in the coming contest they, not their King, would render the verdict.

Before them on one side stood the prophets of the ba'al, reckoned, perhaps hyperbolically, at 450. (The prophets of the asherah never show up.) Their ba'al would not be one of the local Canaanite godlets known by that title, but a senior deity of Tyre-Sidon, brought to Israel in Jezebel's trousseau. Several ba'alim were prominent in the pantheon of Tyre-Sidon, and the biblical writers did not bother to distinguish among them or specify which among them Jezebel patronized. However, there are two in particular who could have some special meaning and attraction for the Princess of Tyre: Ba'al-Hadad and Ba'al-Melqart.

Ba'al-Hadad is so prominent in Northwest Semitic mythology that in the Ugarit texts he is simply called Ba'al as though the title were a name. His devotees would ecstatically cry out "Ba'al Zevul [Baal is a prince, or Baal is exalted]." The word zevul appears to be a theophoric element in Jezebel's own name, somewhat obscured by the Narrator's transliteration from Phoenician to Hebrew. He was a rain-god, who in Canaanite mythology is killed by a rival god Mot [Death] and the rains cease until he is restored to life. The temporary demise of the rain-god is an attempt to explain the dry periods that sporadically interrupted the regional cycles of winter rain and summer dew, and those who held the common belief that drought was caused by the "death" of the rain-god were driven to keenings recalled by the prophet Zechariah in his simile of a great wailing . . . like the wailing [on behalf] of Hadad-Rimmon [Hadad-the-Thunderer] (Zech. 12:11). If he was the ba'al invoked by Jezebel's household prophets, then it would be a great triumph for them to persuade him to bring down torrents of the long-desired water.

An alternative candidate for ba'al-of-the-day is Ba'al-Melqart [Ba'al King-of-the-City] who was especially esteemed in Tyre as its tutelary deity and thus an apt sponsor for Jezebel's household prophets. His clergy included "Rousers of the God," a post of no function for a god who never slept or died. Since in the regional mythology the underworld was sometimes called "the city", that may have been Melqart's domain, into which he periodically descended and then had to be recalled or resuscitated.
And Elijah came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you hop between two boughs [or: between two clefts]? If The Lord is God, follow Him. If the ba'el, follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I have been left a prophet of The Lord, by myself. And the prophets of the ba'el are 450 men' (18:21-22).

(This plaint about his solitude, which he repeats later in I Kings 19:10, raises questions of the whereabouts of the 150 loyal prophets who had been saved by Obadiah.)

Elijah then challenged the priests of Baal. Both he and they would place a bull on separate altars but would set no fire; they would call on their gods and he in the name of the Lord. And it shall be the god who answers with fire, He is God (18:24). The priests of Baal called out to their god and danced by their altar (18:26), with no result.

And it was at noontime, Elijah ridiculed them, and said, 'Cry out in a loud voice, for he is a god! Perhaps he is conversing, or pursuing [enemies] or relieving himself, perhaps he is asleep and will awaken!' And they cried in a loud voice, and gashed themselves, according to their custom, with swords and with spears, until blood poured on them. And as noonday passed they prophesied until the time of the [afternoon] offering, but there was no voice, no one answered and no one heeded (18:27-29).

The verb for their ungainly performance in 18:26 derives from the root p-s-h [פ-ס-ח] that connotes springing, hopping, or limping, the same verb that Elijah had just used to taunt the assembled Israelites for their clumsy moral jerking. In Israel, both men and women used dance as an instrument of rejoicing and celebration, as Kohelet in his list of opposites contrasts a time to mourn and a time to dance (Eccles. 3:4). But elsewhere in the region mourning and dancing were not incompatible, and along with dances of sometimes wild devotion there were also funeral dances, at times performed in a limping style. Self-inflicted wounds were also common pagan practices linked to mourning, strictly prohibited to the Israelites in You shall not gash yourself in mourning for the dead (Lev. 19:28) and Priests shall not . . . as a sign of mourning . . . gash their bodies (Lev. 21:5), and You are the sons of The Lord
your God, you shall not gash yourselves in mourning for the dead (Deut. 14:1).

If the performance of the ba'al-men was staged for a defunct or moribund deity, they may have been offering their blood not only to show the passion of their grief, but also to revive him with a fresh supply of the source of life. It is doubtful whether there could have been a full 450 men in this chorus line around the altar, but whatever the number their choreography may have been similar to that described by a Roman account of a religious ceremony in Syria:

They began to howl all out of tune and hurl themselves hither and thither, as though they were mad. They made a thousand gestures . . . They would bend down their necks and spin round so that the hair flew out in a circle. They would bite their own flesh. Finally, everyone took his two-edged weapon and wounded his flesh in divers places (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, VIII:27).

Elijah, who had observed the Tyrian cults introduced into Israel and had himself traveled in Phoenicia, would have known which ba'al was patron of Jezebel and her crew, but his jibes in 18:27 are not necessarily a guide to identification. They may be sardonic references to myths about a particular ba'al, or they may be a jumble of pagan myths, a mélange of humanlike activities attributed to various anthropomorphic divinities. His taunt was at reliance on any god or gods who can be preoccupied, or absent, or dormant, or dependent on the antics of the clergy; a mockery of devotees who must not merely adore them but shore them up with magical rituals, lest they lose the power to perform.

Time ran out for the ba'al-men. Elijah had given them every advantage: First turn, first choice of sacrificial beast, a good part of the day for their efforts. They had no excuse for the fiasco watched by the assembled Israelites. Now it was the hour of the late afternoon sacrifice *minhah*, and Elijah came forward. He was playing for the highest of stakes, and he made the conditions so unfavorable for himself that success would be not merely impressive but awesome. And he implored The Lord to vindicate not only His own Majesty but also Elijah's own status as prophet extraordinaire:

*And 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 was broken down. And 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 he built with the stones an altar, in the name of The Lord. And he made a trench, with space of about two measures of seed, round about the altar. And he arranged the wood and cut the bull in pieces and put it on the wood. And he said, 'Fill four jars of 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 went round about the altar and the trench was full of water (18:30-35).

There had once been an Israelite altar on Mount Carmel that had either fallen into disrepair through neglect, or had been wrecked when – as Elijah was soon to charge – 'the children of Israel. . . have thrown down Your altars' (19:14). In restoring it, he took care that all the tribes of the sons of Jacob were represented, including those now in the Kingdom of Judah; another instance of the prophetic tradition clinging to the idea of a single peoplehood regardless of political schism. Invoking the memory of their Patriarchs would stir emotion in the assembly, a reminder of an origin and historic identity so distinct from those of the Tyrian-Sidonians toward whom they had been leaning.

Although the trench was no more than twice the width of a furrow for planting seed, the miniature moat combined with the drenching of the altar and the sacrifice would make any combustion all the more remarkable. At the same time, the water could act as a magnet if there were a streak of heat lightning. Thus far, no word had been spoken about the drought, but there could have been few at the assembly under the long-cloudless sky who were not thinking of it. The precious water streaming from the jars could be both an imitation of the desired rainfall and a display of confidence that the dwindling supply no longer need to be hoarded. It was also a display of contrast between Elijah who poured water which brings life and the ba'al-men who poured blood which brings death.

And at the going up of the [afternoon] offering, Elijah the prophet came near and said, 'Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel, and I am Your servant,
that by Your word I have done all of these things. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, and this people will know that You are Lord God, and You will turn back their heart.' And there fell a fire of The Lord, and consumed the burnt-offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and the water that was in the trench it licked up. And all the people saw, and fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord, He is The God, The Lord, He is The God' (18:36-39).

Elijah now showed no leniency to the defeated Phoenicians, who were quite possibly the very men who had served Jezebel as executioners in the massacre of the prophets of Israel. And Elijah said to them [the people], 'Seize the prophets of the ba'al. Do not let a man of them escape.' And they seized them, and Elijah brought them down to the Kishon stream, and slaughtered them there (18:40).

With the contest decided and the losers dispatched, rain becomes the explicit subject. Up to this point, Elijah had been in command of the action and the center of attention. Only now is it noted that King Ahab had been present himself, permitting the man he had addressed as 'You troubler of Israel' to take charge and even to issue a mass death sentence. The men gathered as witnesses are not mentioned again and had perhaps dispersed, while Ahab and Elijah remained on the mountain, along with the King's charioteer and any other personal attendants he kept with him, and one anonymous man who makes a sudden incongruous appearance as a servant of the solitary and rough-living prophet.

The scene begins with Elijah telling Ahab 'Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of abundant rain.' And Ahab went up to eat and drink (18:41-42). This suggests that the King had been fasting, either with his people or on behalf of them. It was customary for a person or even a community to fast in time of need or peril or distress, or when facing some challenging deed. If Ahab had been fasting throughout the contest on Mount Carmel, it would be as prelude to the hoped for outcome – whether he hoped that the troubler-prophet would fail and be less troublesome thereafter, or that his wife's cohorts would be discredited and excluded from his nation's affairs, or simply that one way or another the drought would at last be broken. The last may be the most plausible, for with the contest over, he was still fasting when he received Elijah's weather forecast.
Be that as it may, the forecast canceled the fast. The sound of abundant rain before any had fallen could be a rustling wind that precedes a cyclonic storm, and while Ahab might now have been taking a picnic repast, Elijah was still in anxious suspense until he was vindicated by a storm cloud blowing in over the Mediterranean. Indeed, he now displayed a nervousness he had never shown during the contest with the baal-men.

And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel. And bowed himself down to the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his nā'ar [boy, servant], 'Go up, please, look toward the sea.' And he went up and looked, and said, 'There is nothing.' And he [Elijah] said seven times, 'Go back [or: He said 'Go back seven times'].’ And at the seventh [time], he [the attendant] said, 'Lo, a cloud . . . is rising up out of the sea' (18:42-44).

With this reassuring sign, Elijah, whether with unwonted solicitude or a touch of sarcasm, advised Ahab that he should leave for home lest he find himself in an open chariot in a heavy downpour.

At the end of this day, Ahab went not to his royal capital at Samaria but to his private family home in the town of Jezreel, some seventeen or eighteen miles from Mount Carmel. Elijah ran before Ahab until the approach to Jezreel (18:46). It was an act of deference to run beside or before the wheels of a royal chariot, but Elijah was no man's lackey. Perhaps in his own moment of triumph he deigned to allot the head of state this much recognition of his rank. Yet, even for a hardy man on a road mostly downhill, to run that distance in pace with a chariot drawn by two good horses hints that the charioteer had been told to hold them in.

Ahab may indeed have been in no great hurry to reach his house, where Jezebel was waiting to hear of a victory by her ba'al-men. Then, her husband finally arrived and delivered his report. And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. And Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'Thus do the gods [to me] and more – surely about this time tomorrow I will make your life as the life of one of them' (19:1-2).

(In the Septuagint rendering of this passage, the message begins, "As you are Elijah, I am Jezebel," a word-play on their own names as epitomes of their causes: "Eliyahu [אֱלִיזָחָאי]" means "My-God-Is-The-Lord." "Izevel" sub-
sumes "zevul [prince]," a title for Ba‘al-Hadad. This remark is not found in the Masoretic Hebrew text, although the play on words would be more comprehensible than in the Greek translation.)

That day's blow to Jezebel was heavy but not mortal. She still had her rank and power and could send home to Tyre for more prophets. Yet, this lone wild man could not be permitted to challenge her with impunity, or encourage others to defiance. Elijah had won the loyalty of the assemblage at Carmel, men who stood for their households and clans. It remained to be seen how long that loyalty would hold, but at this moment he had the people on his side. Ahab had seen that, and could tell her so. To kill him now could provoke such a rage as might shake the throne. That she gave him 24 hours' notice implies that she would prefer his flight to his death, but for that tactic to work the threat had to carry credibility: That is, Elijah would have to believe that if he did not flee at once, she would indeed murder him. He who dared hurl accusations and commands at the King face-to-face, did not stay to confront the foreign consort. He fled, southward into Judah and even beyond it into the desert of Sinai as far as Mount Horeb, the mountain of the Covenant.

The contest for the soul of Israel was not over. Elijah in his dramatic interventions did not crush the Tyrian party, but he denied it a triumph and it henceforth fell into decline.

NOTES
1. Drought and the famine it brings with it are a recurring calamity, a haunting fear, and a dreadful threat throughout the Bible (for example, Gen. 12, 26, 41-45, Ruth 1). Jeremiah describes the ordeal of drought in his time:

   Judah mourns, and the gates thereof languish; . . . And their nobles have sent their little ones to the waters: they came to the cisterns, and found no water; they returned with their vessels empty; . . . Because the ground is chapped, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads. Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass. And the wild asses did stand in the high places, they snuffed up the wind like dragons; their eyes did fail, because there was no grass (Jer. 14:2-6).

2. Josephus equates this drought with the one that the Hellenistic historian Menander found recorded in the archives of Tyre: "Now Menander mentions this drought in his account of the acts of Ethbaal, King of the Tyrians, where he says thus: Under him there was a want of rain from the month Hyperberetmus till the month Hyperberetmus of the year following; but when he made supplications, there came great thunderings" (Antiquities, VIII:18:2). The month here
called Hyperberetmus overlapped the month Tishri on the Hebrew calendar (September-October), the season for the start of the autummal rains.

3. There is no mention in the biblical record of Ahab's crucial role at the Battle of Qarqara in 853 BCE. There, he was one of the most prominent among the rulers of the region who formed an alliance to halt the invasion of that region by the fierce King Shalmaneser III of Assyria. It is likely that it was Ahab's very strong chariot-corps that turned the tide of that battle in favor of the allies. This notable event in the history of the Kingdom of Israel is known only from Shalmaneser's own record of the battle, in the Assyrian Monolith Inscription discovered in 1861 CE.


6. Examples of fasting in times of distress can be found in Judg. 20:26, I Sam. 14:24 ff., Joel 1:14, 2:12, 15. In the Talmud it is cited in TB Ta'anit 14b.

7. It was a royal prerogative for a monarch to have men running in front of his chariot when he appeared before his subjects. When the Israelites called upon Samuel to appoint them a king, he warned that among other royal exactions a king would conscript their sons to run in front of his chariots (I Sam. 8:11). First Absalom and then Adonijah flaunted their pretensions to the throne of their father David by having 50 men run in front of their chariots (II Sam. 15:1; I Kings 1:5). King Bar-Rekob of the little state of Sam'al, in an inscription listing his accomplishments, included "I ran by the chariot wheel of my master the King of Assyria."

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**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

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