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## Israel and Judah: 22. Evil Kings of Israel

by David Sielaff, February 2017

Read first the accompanying [Newsletter for February 2017](#)

Israel and Judah: 22

Evil Kings  
of  
Israel

**THE SITUATION:** Following the order of texts in the books of Kings and Chronicles, in this article the focus is on four kings of the northern Kingdom of Israel only during the long 40+ year reign of their contemporary “good” King Asa of Judah. Great disruptions takes place during a period of 12+ years, with usurpers rising one after another. The kingdom of Israel began with Jeroboam I, founder of the first dynasty, followed by his son Nadab who ruled for two years. He was assassinated by Baasha who ruled for 12 years. Baasha’s son Elah reigned — but not for long.

The books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings tell about the kings of Judah and Israel from the point of view of the prophets of God.<sup>a</sup> They try to return the people to exclusive worship of YHWH. The texts in this article present that prophetic perspective. Israel’s kings disobeyed. King Baasha of Israel was told through the prophet Jehu:

**“Anyone belonging to Baasha who dies in the city shall the dogs eat; and anyone belonging to him who dies in the field shall the fowl of the heavens eat.”**

• 1 Kings 16:4

**TEXT: *Elah Ascends to the Throne of Israel***

### 1 Kings 16:8–14

<sup>8</sup> In the twenty-sixth year of Asa king of Judah, Elah son of Baasha became king over Israel in Tirzah for two years. <sup>9</sup> His official Zimri, chief of half the chariots, conspired against him, while he was in Tirzah drinking himself drunk in the house of Arza who was over the household at Tirzah. <sup>10</sup> Zimri came in, smote him and put him to death in the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah; and he reigned in his stead.

<sup>11</sup> It occurred as he became king and as he sat on his throne that he smote all the house of Baasha; he let remain to him [1] neither a man-child [2] nor his kinsman redeemers [3] nor his associates.

<sup>12</sup> Thus Zimri exterminated all the house of Baasha according to the word of Yahweh that He had spoken against Baasha by means of Jehu the prophet, <sup>13</sup> because of all the sins of Baasha and the sins of his son

<sup>a</sup> The books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles often tell the same stories from the point of view of the Temple priests of Judah.

Elah with which they had sinned and with which they had caused Israel to sin by provoking Yahweh Elohim of Israel to vexation with their idols of vanity.

<sup>14</sup> The rest of the affairs of Elah and all that he did, are they not written on the scroll of the annals of the days of the kings of Israel? [end text]

**Verse 8.** Elah ruled for only 2 years. Tirzah was the capital of Israel since Jeroboam made his residence there. Tirzah was a Canaanite city (Joshua 12:24) known for its beauty in Solomon's time (Song of Songs 6:4).

**Verse 9.** Zimri was a respected and trusted military commander who murdered his sovereign. He was able to approach Elah, knowing that he was drunk and unable to defend himself. Arza was likely a co-conspirator.

**Verse 10.** Josephus, the Jewish historian, gives us additional information about the circumstances of Elah's murder, although we have no way of verifying these extra-biblical points underlined below:

**“... for when he was at Arza, his steward's house, he persuaded some of the horsemen that were under him to assault Elah, and by that means he slew him when he was without his armed men, and his captains, for they were all busied in the siege of Gibbethon, a city of the Philistines.”**

• **Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 8:308**

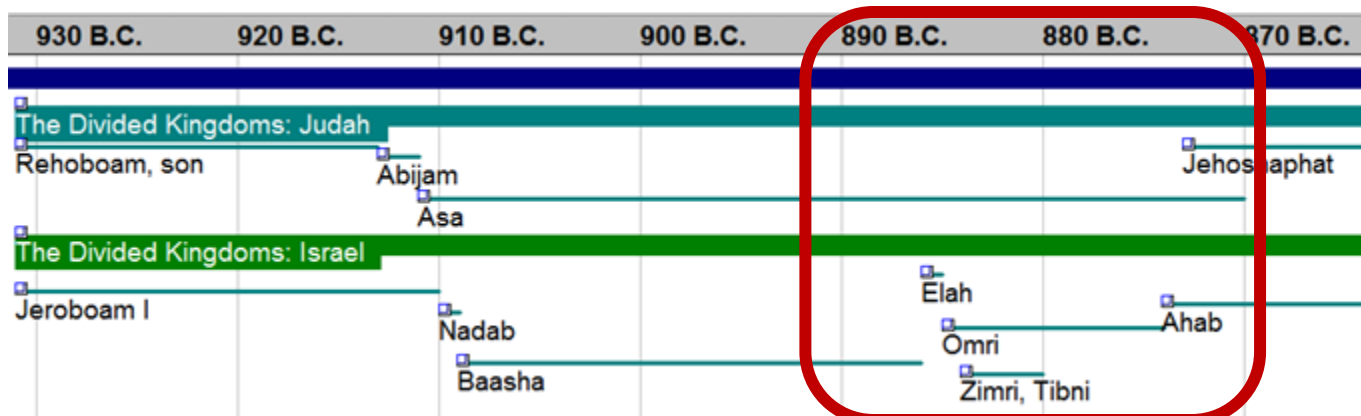
**Verse 11.** There is a colloquial phrase that is hidden in most English translations. “... **neither a man child**” in Hebrew is translated literally and correctly in the King James Version as “**one who pisses against a wall.**” This may be a crude way to say Elah's family and friends were crude people. The New American Standard Bible and the NET Bible translate it similarly. Killing Elah was not enough, Zimri thought it necessary to remove every relative and possible supporter of Elah.

**Verses 12–13.** The writer of this record comments that Elah's death fulfilled the prophecy by the prophet Jehu presented in 1 Kings 15:32–16:7, including verse 16:4 quoted above. Elah's death was also a warning to Israel that dynasties of evil kings do not prosper. God warned Jeroboam and his son Nadab to worship YHWH alone. When they disobeyed God wiped out their royal family line. God warned Baasha and Elah, who also disobeyed, and their dynasty was eliminated. The warnings were not heeded and the kings had their dynasties cut off by God for their disobedience, primarily for mixing worship of other gods with worship of YHWH.

**Verse 14.** For a final verse the story returns to Elah, giving the formulaic words about the lives of kings, telling the reader where further information can be found.

### Sequence of Events

Below is the same timeline of the period from last article, “[Israel and Judah: 21. Good Kings, Bad Kings.](#)”



(Timeline from BibleWorks, dates are approximate)

## ***TEXT: Zimri Usurps the Throne of Israel***

### **1 Kings 16:15–20**

<sup>15</sup> In the twenty-seventh year of Asa king of Judah, Zimri became king for seven days in Tirzah, while the soldiers were encamping against Gibbethon of the Philistines.

<sup>16</sup> When the soldiers in the camp heard it said, **“Zimri has conspired and also smitten the king,”** then all Israel made the chief of the military host, Omri, king over Israel on that day in the camp. <sup>17</sup> Now Omri and all Israel with him went up from Gibbethon and besieged Tirzah.

<sup>18</sup> It came to pass when Zimri saw that the city was seized, that he entered the citadel of the king’s house, burned the king’s house with fire over himself so that he died <sup>19</sup> because of his sins with which he had sinned by doing what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, by walking in the way of Jeroboam and in his sin which he had done by causing Israel to sin.

<sup>20</sup> The rest of the affairs of Zimri and his conspiracy with which he conspired, are they not written on the scroll of the annals of the days of the kings of Israel? [end text]

**Verse 15.** Israel has been at war with the Philistines and wanting to conquer Gibbethon since the third year of King Asa of Judah. Gibbethon means “lofty place” or “height,” often such a place is a good location for a fortress:

**“Baasha son of Ahijah of the house of Issachar conspired against him; and Baasha smote him [Nadab] at Gibbethon of the Philistines, while Nadab and all Israel were besieging Gibbethon. So Baasha put him to death in the third year of Asa king of Judah and reigned in his stead.”**

• **1 Kings 15:27**

<b>Year of Asa, King of Judah</b>	<b>War against Philistines; murder of an Israelite King</b>	<b>Sieges of Gibbethon; subsequent events</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> year of Asa	Baasha murders King Nadab (Jeroboam’s son, ruled 2 years) beneath the walls of Gibbethon besieged by Nadab and army.	Siege unsuccessful, Baasha rules 24 years. Baasha’s murder of Nadab fulfilled God’s prophecy to terminate Jeroboam’s dynasty.
27 <sup>th</sup> year of Asa	Zimri murders King Elah (Baasha’s son, ruled 2 years) at Tirzah while the army under Omri besieged Gibbethon.	Success of siege not known. Omri leaves siege with army, kills Zimri (ruled 7 days). Prophesied end of Baasha’s dynasty fulfilled.

For some reason Gibbethon is the center of events involving the murder of two Israelite kings. The biblical texts do not tell us what happened to the city of Gibbethon or if it ever was captured by Israel.

**Verses 16–17.** The military at the siege under Omri their commander desire to revenge the death of Elah, and they chose Omri to be their king.

**Verse 18.** The city of Tirzah had no defenses, but it did have a defensive citadel, a fortress. This citadel was the house of the King of Israel. After most of the city was captured, Zimri knew his situation was hopeless and he committed suicide. When the city was conquered and the citadel surrounded, Zimri ceased to rule as king. He burned the citadel and the palace, with himself in it. The king after him would not have a palace. Though he ruled only 7 days. He never repented for his treason, so far as we know.

**Verses 19–20.** The writer of this portion of Kings says specifically that Zimri’s death was due to great sins against YHWH and great evils against the people of Israel. In those 7 days he murdered Elah, his extended family, and all his friends, any who might seek revenge (see verse 11–12).

Israel’s kings that followed were worse than Zimri in ignoring Israel’s covenant with YHWH.

## ***TEXT: Omri Fights for the Throne as King of Israel***

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### **1 Kings 16:21–28**

<sup>21</sup> Then the people of Israel were apportioned in two halves. There was one half of the people following Tibni son of Ginath, to make him king, and the other half following Omri. <sup>22</sup> But the people following Omri held fast against the people following Tibni son of Ginath. Tibni died, and Omri became king.

<sup>23</sup> In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri became king over Israel for twelve years; in Tirzah he reigned six years.

<sup>24</sup> Then he bought Mount Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver, and built up the mount. He called the name of the city that he built, Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the lord of the mount.

<sup>25</sup> Omri did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, and he caused more evil than all who had been before him. <sup>26</sup> He walked in all the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat and in his sin with which he caused Israel to sin by provoking Yahweh Elohim of Israel to vexation with their idols of vanity.

<sup>27</sup> The rest of the affairs of Omri, what he did, and his masterful deeds which he performed, are they not written on the scroll of the annals of the days of the kings of Israel?

<sup>28</sup> Omri lay down with his fathers and was entombed in Samaria; and his son Ahab reigned in his stead.<sup>b</sup>

[end text]

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**Verses 21–22.** Omri’s rise to the kingship is disputed. No explanation is given as to why some supported Tibni as king, and others supported Omri. Little is known about Tibni, and he was not recognized as being king, as Zimri was for his short reign. Be assured there is a great deal of intrigue and fighting that is not stated. It ended when Tibni died. Surrounding nations did not take advantage of this period by attacking Israel, so far as we know.

**Verse 23.** Omri took sole reign over the Kingdom of Israel in the 31<sup>st</sup> year of Asa of Judah. This war of factions lasted four years (compare 1 Kings 16:15–16 with verse 23).

**Verse 24.** Omri did what David did with the land for the Temple, he purchased it. He made it his new capital city and reigned from Samaria after 6 years of his 12-year reign.<sup>c</sup>

**Verses 25–26.** A moral judgment is given by the authors about Omri and his evils and sins he committed. In fact, he did **“more evil than all before him.”** If Omri did worse than Jeroboam, whose golden calves were the chief objects of idolatrous worship, in Ahab’s time were connected with Baal. Josephus comments:

**“Now Omri was in no way different from those kings that reigned before him, but that he grew worse than they, for they all sought how they might turn the people away from God, by their daily wicked practices; and on that account it was that God made one of them to be slain by another, and that no one person of their families should remain.”**

• **Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 8:313**

**Verse 27.** He also did some unstated “masterful deeds” such as building the new capital.

**Verse 28.** Omri is buried in his new capital city, just as King David was buried in Jerusalem, also called the City of David.

Omri ruled 12 years in all — 4 years in Tirzah during his struggle with Tibni, and 2 years after, for 6 years total in Tirzah. Omri transferred his court to the new capital of Samaria where he ruled for another 6 years. Samaria grew to become a great city until its final destruction by the Assyrians around 721 BC (2 Kings 18:9–10). There is no indication that he died by violence.

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<sup>b</sup> For a long period Omri’s name became attached to the Kingdom of Israel in the records of one Assyrian king ([Tiglath-pileser III 44](#), 17–18 and [Tiglath-pileser III 42](#), 15'b-17'a. This will be explained more when we come to the time toward the end of the Kingdom of Israel by Assyria.

<sup>c</sup> At a later time the entire northern Kingdom of Israel was often called Samaria, after its capital city.

*TEXT: Ahab Begins His Reign as King of Israel*

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**1 Kings 16:29–34**

<sup>29</sup> As for Ahab son of Omri, he became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah; and Ahab son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years.

<sup>30</sup> Ahab son of Omri did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, worse than all who had been before him.

<sup>31</sup> So it came to pass (as if it was lightly esteemed by him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat) that he took as wife Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians.

Then he went to serve Baal and worshiped him. <sup>32</sup> He set up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal that he built in Samaria. <sup>33</sup> Ahab also made an **Asherah pole**. Thus Ahab proceeded to do more to provoke Yahweh Elohim of Israel to vexation than all the kings of Israel who had been before him.

<sup>34</sup> In his days Hiel the Bethelite rebuilt Jericho. At the cost of Abiram, his firstborn, he laid its foundation; and at the cost of Segub, his junior son, he set up its double doors, according to **the word of Yahweh** that He spoke by means of Joshua son of Nun. [end text]

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**Verse 29.** Chronological data announces a new King of Israel. Omri's son Ahab ascends the throne (in Asa's 38<sup>th</sup> year ruling Judah).

**Verse 30.** Ahab was more evil than his father Omri (who was worse than all Israelite kings before him). Ahab also sinned purposely to offend YHWH (see verse 33).

**Verse 31.** The very act of Ahab marrying Jezebel is presented as evil and rebellion against YHWH. He married her because she was a royal princess and an enthusiastic pagan worshipper of Baal (likely herself a priestess), and had the further benefit of bringing a likely alliance between Israel and the Phoenician city of Sidon, north of the Israelite kingdom on the Mediterranean coast.<sup>d</sup> The fame of Jezebel's evil is reflected in the mention of her name as a type of a false prophetess in Revelation 2:20. Was Jezebel also a prophetess?

**Verse 33.** Ahab deliberately provoked YHWH. Thinking YHWH was a lesser deity, Ahab diminished YHWH's influence in Israel. He built an Asherah pole.<sup>e</sup> God has plans for Ahab that will not end well.

Apparently the evil history and ends of Israel's kings and dynasties had taught nothing to Ahab, or to most of the people of his kingdom. Why not? It was because in spite of the political disruptions and wars, the northern kingdom has been stable, prosperous, and growing its economy and population. God had not yet punished them with famine and catastrophic military defeat. That will come in the future. In spite of shattered dynasties, Jeroboam ruled for 22 years, Baasha for 24 years, and Ahab will reign for 22 years.

**Verse 34.** This strange insert at the end of the chapter presents three people: Hiel, his firstborn son Abiram, and his second son Segub. When it says "**at the cost of ...**", two possible meanings can be understood. First, perhaps the sons died during the construction as the curse of Joshua 6:26 stated. Second, and more likely, the two sons were ritually sacrificed by their father Hiel. Abiram was murdered when the foundation was laid, and Hiel entombed his son's body within the foundation. Later, Segub was sacrificed when the structure was completed.

In pagan religious thought, the sacrifice was intended to cancel the curse so Jericho could be rebuilt. The "**word of YHWH**" and the reference to Joshua 6:26 is eerily specific:

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<sup>d</sup> Sidon was the second city of the Phoenicians, Tyre was the most important, prosperous, and powerful.

<sup>e</sup> The Israelites were forbidden to make an Asherah pole as told in Judges 3:7–8:

**"The sons of Israel did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh. When they forgot Yahweh their Elohim and served the Baalim and the Asheroth, the anger of Yahweh grew hot against Israel, ..."**

Later, Gideon, the young judge of Israel, was told how to deal with an Asherah pole in Judges 6:25:

**"It came to be in that night that Yahweh said to him, 'Take the young bull, the bull that belongs to your father, that is, the second-born young bull of seven years; demolish the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah pole beside it.'"**

Gideon did as YHWH commanded. Apparently an Asherah pole was some sort of a large phallic representation carved from wood.



**“Joshua adjured them [the Israelites] at that time, saying, ‘Cursed be the man before Yahweh who should rise and would rebuild this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his inferior son shall he set up its double doors.’”**

YHWH’s curse pronounced by Joshua was fulfilled by Hiel and his two sons. We do not know why this is mentioned, except to be an example of a great evil resulting from Ahab’s and Jezebel’s idolatry.

**“The restoration of this city as a fortification, upon which Joshua had pronounced the curse, is mentioned as a proof how far ungodliness had progressed in Israel; whilst the fulfilment of the curse upon the builder shows how the Lord will not allow the word of His servants to be transgressed with impunity.”<sup>f</sup>**

Next, a new person is introduced to the story, Elijah the prophet, a man used by God to confront a powerful king and queen. It begins with a completely different focus.

### ***TEXT: Elijah the Prophet Fed by Ravens***

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#### **1 Kings 17:1–9**

<sup>1</sup> Elijah the Tishbite, the prophet from Tishbe of Gilead, said to Ahab,

**“As Yahweh Elohim of Israel lives, before Whom I stand, There shall not come in these years night mist or rain, except at the bidding of my word.**

<sup>2</sup> Then the word of Yahweh came to him [Elijah], saying,

<sup>3</sup> **“Go away from this place, and you will turn yourself around, eastward. You will conceal yourself by Wadi Cherith that is adjoining the Jordan. <sup>4</sup> It will come to pass that you shall drink from the wadi, and I have enjoined on the ravens to sustain you there.”**

<sup>5</sup> So he went and did according to the word of Yahweh; he went and dwelt by Wadi Cherith that is adjoining the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> And the ravens were bringing him bread and flesh in the morning and bread and flesh in the evening; and he was drinking from the wadi. <sup>7</sup> Yet it came to pass at the end of some days that the wadi dried up because no downpour had come on the land.

<sup>8</sup> Now the word of Yahweh came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup> **“Arise, go to Zarephath of Sidon; and you will dwell there. Behold, I enjoined on a widowed woman there to sustain you.”** **[end text]**

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**Verse 1.** Elijah the prophet is a major biblical figure whose influence extends to the four Gospels, and the epistles of Romans and James.<sup>g</sup> Elijah (in Hebrew “Elijahu”) means “YHWH is El,” or “YHWH is God.”<sup>h</sup>

Elijah announces to King Ahab that God will impose a drought upon the land of Israel. This will show

<sup>f</sup> Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 161.

<sup>g</sup> Matthew 11:14, 16:14, 17:3–4, 10–12, 27:47, 49; Mark. 6:15, 8:28, 9:4–5, 11–13, 15:35–36, Luke 1:17, 4:25–26, 9:8, 19, 30, 33; John 1:21, 25; Romans 11:2; James 5:17 (where the famine is also said to be 3½ years).

<sup>h</sup> For a complete understanding of the work of the prophet Elijah in relation to others, read Dr. Martin’s article, “[The Elijah to Come](#).” It shows that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD John the Baptist was an Elijah-type personality. Though John performed no miracles, John 10:41. Jesus Himself said John was the greatest of the prophets, Luke 7:26–28:

**“But what have you come out to perceive? A prophet? Yes, I am saying to you, and exceedingly more than a prophet. This is he concerning whom it is written, ‘Lo! I am dispatching My messenger before Thy face, who shall be constructing Thy road in front of Thee.’ For verily I am saying to you, A greater prophet, among those born of women, than John the baptist, there is not one. Yet the smaller, in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”**

A third Elijah-type personality is yet to come on the world stage and will likely be one of the two witnesses. Note Malachi 4:5–6:

**“Behold, I will send to you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and advent day of Yahweh. And he will restore the heart of the fathers to the sons and the heart of the sons to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth to its doom.”**

Ahab that YHWH is powerful and is in control of His creation, and even of His land and people.

**Verses 2–4.** This text reads as if YHWH told Elijah to hide, yet He specifically says Elijah shall have water for the present to drink. Ravens<sup>i</sup> bring Elijah food while he is in hiding. This seems to indicate that Elijah was being sought for and his life is in grave danger.

**Verses 5–6.** Elijah obeys and his life is sustained, but he must be wondering, what is going on? He was a fugitive, but he must have felt safe because of God’s care. But why did God have him go through all this?

**Verses 8–9.** Elijah was probably wondering what to do next, when YHWH told him to change location to a Gentile land to hide himself. There is no reason to think the widow was an Israelite.

### ***TEXT: Elijah, the Widow, and Two Miracles***

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#### **1 Kings 17:10–24**

<sup>10</sup> So he [Elijah] arose and went to Zarephath. When he came to the portal [gate] of the city, behold, there was a widowed woman gathering sticks together. He called out to her and said, **“Oh, procure a little water for me in a vessel that I may drink.”**

<sup>11</sup> When she was going to procure it, he called out to her and said, **“Oh procure a morsel of bread for me in your hand.”** <sup>12</sup> She replied,

**“As Yahweh your Elohim lives, I have no ember cake, save a palm-full of meal in the jar and a little oil in the cruse; and behold, I am gathering a couple sticks together. When I come home, I will prepare it for me and for my son; we will eat it, and then we will die.”**

<sup>13</sup> Elijah said to her,

**“Do not fear. Go, do according to your word. However first prepare for me a small ember cake from what you have there; and you will bring it forth to me. Yet for yourself and for your son you shall make it afterward. <sup>14</sup> For thus says Yahweh Elohim of Israel,**

**‘The jar of meal, it shall not be exhausted, and the cruse of oil, it shall not abate until the day that Yahweh shall give a downpour on the surface of the ground.’**”

<sup>15</sup> So she went and did according to the word of Elijah. She ate, she and he and her household for many days. <sup>16</sup> The jar of meal, it was not exhausted, and the cruse of oil, it did not abate, according to the word of Yahweh that He had spoken by means of Elijah.

<sup>17</sup> It came to pass after these things that the son of the woman, the possessor of the house, became ill; and his illness came to be exceedingly unyielding, until no breath was left in him. <sup>18</sup> So she said to Elijah,

**“What have you against me, O man of the One, Elohim, that you came to me to remind me of my depravity and to put my son to death?”**

<sup>19</sup> He replied to her, **“Give me your son”**; and he took him from her bosom, brought him up to the upper chamber where he was dwelling, and laid him on his couch.

<sup>20</sup> Then he called to Yahweh and said, **“O Yahweh my Elohim, will You also bring evil on the widow with whom I am sojourning, by putting her son to death?”** <sup>21</sup> He measured himself on the boy three times and called to Yahweh and said, **“O Yahweh my Elohim, I pray, let the soul of this boy turn back within him.”**

<sup>22</sup> Yahweh hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the boy turned back within him, and he revived. <sup>23</sup> Elijah took the boy, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and gave him to his mother. Then Elijah said, **“See, your son is alive.”**

<sup>24</sup> And the woman replied to Elijah, **“Now by this I know that you are a man of Elohim and that the word of Yahweh is truly in your mouth.”** **[end text]**

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<sup>i</sup> A raven is a black bird common in Palestine, larger than a crow, intelligent, and trainable. They eat carrion, and are unclean (Leviticus 11:13, 15; Deuteronomy 14:12, 14). “Raven,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Bibleworks edition, 1997).

## Jesus Mentions Elijah and the Widow

After Jesus was tempted by the devil, He went to Galilee and began His ministry (Luke 4:14–16). When Jesus came to His hometown synagogue of Nazareth, He read from the scroll of Isaiah. He told the audience that the words of Isaiah’s prophecy was being fulfilled by Him at that moment in their presence. They marveled at His words but rejected them (Luke 4:16–23). Then Jesus briefly spoke about the incident of Elijah and the widow as an example of His rejection by the people of Nazareth:

**“Verily, I am saying to you that no one who is a prophet is acceptable in his own country. Now of a truth I am saying to you, that many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when heaven is locked for three years and six months, as a great famine came to be over the entire land, and to none of them was Elijah sent, except into Sarepta [Zarephath] of Sidonia, to a widow woman.”**

• **Luke 4:24–26**

Jesus then spoke about a different incident involving the prophet Elisha (Elijah’s student) in 4:27, and the crowd tried to kill Jesus (4:28–30). These were His people; He grew up around them. Astounding. It is not surprising that King Ahab, and particularly his wife Jezebel, want Elijah dead. Back to the verse analysis.

**Verse 10.** Zarephath was a town where metal ore was smelted and worked into copper, bronze, and iron implements. Elijah must have wondered why he was being sent there to be “sustained” by a widow woman. YHWH had a purpose for him and the woman. It was for her to help him, to sustain him, and for him to help her, but he did not realize that yet. The widow was so poor that she gathered sticks from the ground around the gate of the city for a little bit of fuel. First he asked her to get water for him to drink.

**Verse 11.** Surprisingly (to me at least), she did exactly as he told her. Then he asked her to bring him **“a morsel of bread.”** I wonder what she thought at that moment. It must have seemed to her that this stranger was being unusually demanding.

**Verse 12.** She explains her meager rations, her situation of poverty, and her expectation for herself and her son to die soon. She says an oath, **“As Yahweh your Elohim lives,”** which indicates she recognized him as an Israelite and that she also worshipped YHWH. (Elohim was their common term for “god” or God.)

**Verses 13–14.** **“Do not fear!”** Elijah instructs her what to do, and tells her why — **“it shall not be exhausted”** because YHWH has spoken.

**Verses 15–16.** She has nothing to lose. She trusts YHWH and obeys Elijah’s words. This is also surprising. I read this passage thinking it was herself and her son living together, but it says **“She ate, she and he [Elijah] and her household ...”** implying others beside her son and herself.<sup>j</sup> So not only was she a poor widow, not only did she have a son, but she had others (at least one other) living with her as well as Elijah. All were sustained by God through the drought, that not only affected Israel, but also Phoenicia to the north, near the great trading city of Sidon. The drought apparently covered a vast area.

**Verse 17.** After this miracle lasting several days, another miracle occurred involving Elijah, the widow, and her son. Not only were they sustained through the drought, but God had additional acts of grace for all of them. The son becomes ill and stopped breathing. That meant he died.

**Verse 18.** The woman accuses Elijah of being against her. God brought Elijah into her life to save her and her son from famine and drought, only to have her son die. She connected Elijah’s presence with her son’s death. She accuses Elijah and says he **“put my son to death.”** YHWH set this situation up for an example. She was holding her son, mourning.

**Verse 19.** Elijah took action and **“took him from her bosom.”** He carried the son’s body up to a second story room. The phrase **“where he was dwelling”** probably meant the chamber where Elijah was staying.

**Verse 20.** He called out, asking YHWH why did this happen? Elijah admits that YHWH put **“her son to death.”** Elijah asks God, **“will You also bring evil on the widow,”** in addition to the evil drought? No, He won’t.

<sup>j</sup> The Greek Septuagint is explicit, **“she and he and her children ate”** (1 Kings 17:15). However, she was only fearful that she and her son would die. Who were the others in the household? Extended family? Servants? If so, they also would likely die.



**Verse 21.** What Elijah did next was not a medical procedure, so as the text tells us. Elijah **“measured himself”** on the dead son three times, calling to YHWH praying for **“the soul of this boy to turn back.”**

**Verses 22–23.** YHWH responded to Elijah and the son lived again. He carried the son down to the widow, his mother. The apostle Paul noted this incident of faith in the Book of Hebrews chapter 11. He wrote, **“women obtained their dead by resurrection”** (Hebrews 11:5), also referring to Elisha as well as Elijah.

**Verse 24.** The widow acknowledges Elijah is a man of God, but more importantly she acknowledges the authority and power of YHWH. We hear no more about the widow or the son.

### ***TEXT: Elijah, Ahab, Obadiah; a Challenge to Prophets of Pagan Gods***

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#### **1 Kings 18:1–20**

<sup>1</sup> It occurred after many days, in the third year, that a word of Yahweh came to Elijah, saying, **“Go, appear before Ahab, for I shall indeed give rain upon the surface of the ground.”** <sup>2</sup> So Elijah went to appear before Ahab. Now the famine was unyielding in Samaria, <sup>3</sup> and Ahab had called Obadiah who was over the household.

As for Obadiah, he had come to fear Yahweh exceedingly. <sup>4</sup> It occurred when Jezebel cut off the prophets of Yahweh that Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them by fifties each in caves, and had provided them with bread and water.

<sup>5</sup> Now Ahab said to Obadiah,

**“Come and let us pass through the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis. Perhaps we shall find some grass and keep horses and mules alive so that we may not have more of the beasts cut off.”**

<sup>6</sup> So they apportioned the land between them to pass through it. Ahab, he went by himself alone in one direction; and Obadiah, he went by himself alone in another direction.

<sup>7</sup> Obadiah was on the road, and there was Elijah to meet him. Obadiah recognized him, fell on his face and said, **“Is this you, my lord Elijah?”** <sup>8</sup> He replied to him, **“It is I. Go, say to your lord, ‘Elijah is here.’”** <sup>9</sup> Yet he [Obadiah] asked [Elijah],

**“In what am I at fault that you are giving your servant into the hand of Ahab to put me to death?”**

<sup>10</sup> **As Yahweh your Elohim lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. When they said, ‘He is not here, then he adjured that kingdom and that nation that it could not find you.’** <sup>11</sup> **And now you are saying, ‘Go, say to your lord, Elijah is here.’**

<sup>12</sup> **It will come to pass when I shall go away from you, then the spirit of Yahweh itself may carry you to a land that I do not know. When I come to tell Ahab, and he should not find you, then he will kill me. As for your servant [me, Obadiah], he has feared Yahweh from his youth.**

<sup>13</sup> **Has not my lord been told what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of Yahweh? I hid some of the prophets of Yahweh, a hundred men, fifty by fifty men in caves; and I provided them with bread and water.** <sup>14</sup> **And now you are saying, ‘Go, say to your lord, Elijah is here.’ Then he will kill me!”**

<sup>15</sup> Yet Elijah replied, **“As Yahweh of hosts lives, before Whom I stand, today I shall indeed appear before him.”** <sup>16</sup> So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him; and **Ahab ran to meet Elijah.** <sup>17</sup> It came to pass as Ahab saw Elijah that Ahab said to him, **“Is this you, the troubler of Israel?”** <sup>18</sup> Elijah replied,

**“I have not brought trouble on Israel, but rather you have, and the house of your father, because you have forsaken the instructions of Yahweh, and you went after the Baalim.** <sup>19</sup> **Now send and convene to me all Israel at Mount Carmel, together with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are eating at the table of Jezebel.”**

<sup>20</sup> Then Ahab sent word among all the sons of Israel, and he convened the prophets at Mount Carmel.

[end text]

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**Verse 1.** The “**third year**” of the drought is meant. YHWH’s statement refers to the drought. God “**shall indeed give rain**” to relieve the famine. Elijah was with the ravens for 1 year and in Zarephath for almost 2 years.

**Verses 2–3.** Elijah went to speak to Ahab while the famine continued. Ahab sent for his trusted Obadiah (whose name means “worshipper of YHWH”) who was in charge of affairs for the royal palace. Obadiah feared YHWH, which was unusual for an Israelite living in that idolatrous kingdom. It seems that Obadiah hid 50 prophets in each cave.

**Verse 4.** Jezebel “**resolved upon exterminating the worship of Jehovah, and sought to carry out this intention by destroying the prophets of the true God**” (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 170). To “**cut off**” is a figure of speech meaning “to kill,” used the same way toward the end of verse 5 referring to beasts.

**Verse 5.** It seems that Ahab cared more for his horses and mules than for the people who were his subjects. The horses and mules were indeed valuable military assets, but he did not personally and actively search for water for people, but for animals.

**Verse 6.** Ahab and Obadiah went in two directions in their search for water. They likely had staff people with them.

**Verses 7–8.** Obadiah met and recognized Elijah who tells him to inform Ahab where Elijah is waiting to meet the Israelite king.

**Verse 9.** Fearing to do what Elijah wanted him to do, Obadiah began a long speech, asking in effect, “How am I at fault? Are you trying to get me killed?”

**Verse 10.** Ahab searched through many nations and kingdoms seeking Elijah, promising punishment if they do not report on Elijah. Ahab apparently desired to kill Elijah.

**Verse 11.** You want me to tell my king where you are? is what Obadiah likely said.

**Verse 12.** This prophesied what actually happened. The spirit of YHWH did carry Elijah to another land for safety. Fearful that Ahab would kill his valued servant, a protector of God’s prophets, he uses the phrase “**from his youth.**” Obadiah speaks of himself in the third person, describes his long faithfulness to YHWH.

**Verse 13.** Jezebel was a bloodthirsty killer of those who supported YHWH. She murdered the prophets of YHWH (verse 18:4). Obadiah secretly protected as many as he could because it was the right thing to do. Furthermore, Obadiah was a man of action, not just talk. The 100 prophets were hidden and provisioned with food and water at great personal risk, under Obadiah’s protection, even as he and Elijah were talking.

**Verse 14.** Ahab was a killer. Obadiah knew Ahab would kill him for betrayal of his king by hiding the prophets of YHWH. Such was the relationship Ahab had with the man who ran the affairs of his royal palace.

**Verse 15.** Elijah swears an oath (“**as YHWH of hosts lives**”) promising Obadiah he will meet with Ahab.

**Verse 16.** Obadiah probably thought, okay, if Elijah wants to kill himself, I will do as he wishes. Obadiah told Ahab, who “**ran to meet Elijah.**” Perhaps he thought to kill Elijah, perhaps to beg Elijah to intervene on behalf of his kingdom (or more likely on behalf of his horses and mules).

**Verse 17.** Ahab confronts Elijah, accusing him of being “**the troubler of Israel.**” Such was his delusion, thinking the truth-teller and God’s messenger caused the drought.

**Verse 18.** Elijah comes back at Ahab, telling him his sin caused the evils of drought and famine.

**Verse 19.** Elijah makes a challenge to confront 950 pagan prophets. However, later we will read that only the 450 prophets of Baal showed up. There is no mention of the “**400 prophets of Asherah.**” They probably remained with Jezebel in the capital.

**Verse 20.** Ahab ordered “**the sons of Israel**” (mostly meaning the army) and the prophets of the pagan Israelite cult to gather at Mount Carmel. It is possible that thousands witnessed the spectacle (18:21–22, 39).

### **Who or What Was Baal?**

The term “baal” means “lord” or “possessor.” When it refers to a particular being, it is capitalized, “Baal.” Originally the term was used properly manner and was even applied to YHWH, but later it took on a sinister meaning because it began to be connected to a spirit entity, a pagan deity with the name Baal.

Later, the writer of Second Kings (probably Isaiah, as Dr. Martin understood), summed up the entire history of the northern Kingdom of Israel. Note what general idolatry, and specifically Baal worship, involved:

**“They forsook all instructions of Yahweh their Elohim; they made molten images for themselves — two calves — and made an Asherah pole, and they bowed themselves down to all the host of the heavens, and they served Baal.**

**They caused their sons and their daughters to pass through fire and divined by divinations; they practiced augury [another form of divination] and sold themselves [prostituted themselves] to do what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh to provoke Him to vexation.”**

• *2 Kings 17:16–17*

“**To pass through the fire**” was not just “waving” the victim toward the fire, it literally meant that the sacrificial child was burned alive. Human sacrifice to Baal was not unusual. In fact it was done later in the southern kingdom of Judah by Baal worshippers in the time of Jeremiah the prophet.<sup>k</sup> God pronounces the same indictment against Judah as He did against Israel in the earlier time of Ahab and Elijah.

The sins and evils done by the people of all Israel are the same in the time of Moses, the time of Joshua, the times of the judges of Israel, and most all kings (and the people!) in the northern and southern kingdoms, throughout the history of the people of Israel:

**“<sup>4</sup> Because they have forsaken Me and are making this place foreign and are fuming incense in it to other elohim that they have not known, they or their fathers or the kings of Judah, and they have filled this place with the blood of innocents,**

**<sup>5</sup> and because they have built the high-places of Baal to burn their sons with fire as ascent offerings to Baal, which I did not instruct nor even speak of, nor did it come up on My heart,**

**<sup>6</sup> therefore, behold the days are coming, averring [declaring] is Yahweh, when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or the ravine of the son of Hinnom, but rather the ravine of killing.”**

• *Jeremiah 19:4–6*

Furthermore, Baal was also closely connected by Jeremiah with Molech (alternately spelled Moloch)<sup>l</sup>:

**“They placed their abominations in the House over which My Name is called, to defile it.**

**And they built the high-places of Baal which are in the ravine of the son of Hinnom, to have their sons and their daughters pass through fire for Molech (which I did not instruct them, nor did it come up on My heart), to do this abhorrence that it may cause Judah to sin.”**

• *Jeremiah 32:34–35*

The abominations were placed to defile both the ritual purity of the “House” (meaning the Temple) as well as to diminish and defile YHWH’s name and authority before the people of Judah. The second statement by God through the prophet Jeremiah is expressed in one sentence because it is a single complete thought.

Elijah’s confrontation with the pagan priests goes to the next step.

### ***TEXT: Elijah Confronts the Pagan Prophets on Mount Carmel***

#### **1 Kings 18:21–29**

<sup>21</sup> Elijah came close to all the people and said, **“How long will you go on skipping to and fro between the two opinions? If Yahweh is the One, Elohim, go after Him. If Baal is, go after him.”** Yet the people answered him not a word.

<sup>k</sup> The northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians over 120 years before Jeremiah’s prophetic writings.

<sup>l</sup> Learn about Molech from Dr. Ernest L. Martin’s article, “[Lingering Idolatry in the Temple of God](#),” and my articles “[Idolatry and the Sons of God](#),” and “[Idolatry and Gods Punishment](#).”

<sup>22</sup> Then Elijah said to the people,

**“I am left as a prophet of Yahweh, I by myself alone, while the prophets of Baal are 450 men.**

<sup>23</sup> **Now let them give us two young bulls; and let them choose for themselves one young bull, cut it in pieces and place it on the sticks; but they should not apply fire.**

**I myself shall prepare the other young bull; I will put it on the sticks; but I shall not apply fire.**

<sup>24</sup> **Then you will call your elohim by name, and I myself shall call Yahweh by name. And it will come to be: The One Elohim Who shall respond with fire, He is the One Elohim.”**

All the people answered and said, **“Good is the word which you have spoken.”**

<sup>25</sup> Elijah said to the prophets of Baal,

**“Choose for yourselves one young bull and prepare yours first, since you are so many. Then call your elohim by name, but do not apply fire.”**

<sup>26</sup> So they took the young bull which one had given to them, and they prepared it. Then they called Baal by name from morning until noon, saying, **“O Baal, answer us!”** But there was no voice, and there was no one answering. Yet they were skipping about the altar that one had made.

<sup>27</sup> It came to pass at noon that Elijah trifled with [mocked] them and said,

**“Call with a loud voice (for he [Baal] is an elohim)**

- **in case he is in meditation, or**
- **in case he had to turn away, or**
- **in case he has been on the road;**
- **perhaps he is sleeping and shall awake.”**

<sup>28</sup> So they were calling with a loud voice; and they slashed themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until blood poured out over them. <sup>29</sup> It came to be as noon passed that they feigned themselves prophets until the time to offer up the approach present. But there was no voice, there was no one answering, and there was no attention [or, no one attending]. [end text]

**Verse 21.** Elijah challenged the assembled crowd, who hoped to witness a spectacle. He gave them a simple choice to make — worship YHWH, not Baal. They wanted to worship both. No one answered him.

**Verse 22.** Elijah said he was the only prophet of YHWH present at this confrontation against the 450 prophets of Baal. God will act, and act decisively. The prophets honoring Asherah do not seem to be present.

**Verses 23–24.** The superior deity will react with fire like in Leviticus chapter 9. The choice seems fair to all. Elijah has the same conditions as the Baal prophets. All agree to the conditions. Today we would call this a “reality show.” Remember, everyone present was obliged to worship YHWH only (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

**Verse 25.** One important condition of the test is that no fire is to be put on the sacrificial “meat.” They are to call their god Baal to cause the fire.

**Verse 26.** It is surprising to us that the priests of Baal agree to those conditions; they act as if they expected Baal to act on their call for fire to come down on the sacrifice. Perhaps Baal acted in the past in some supernatural manner.

For the audience, the test was not just whether fire comes down, but whose elohim is stronger to [1] cause fire to come on the sacrifice, and [2] prevent the other elohim from causing fire to come down.

**Verse 27.** Elijah makes fun of the Baal prophets.

**Verse 28.** They cried out to Baal, they added their own blood to the sacrifice by cutting themselves (**“according to their custom”**) for hours to supposedly draw down Baal to hear and act on their behalf. Perhaps they would have been happy to use Elijah as their sacrificial victim rather than injure themselves and spill their own blood. This is another reason why idolatry, and these men, were so dangerous.

As you will read in the next episode, the chief sponsor of the priests of Baal was Jezebel, wife of King

Ahab. She wanted Elijah dead, and soon. She probably would have preferred to have him as a sacrificial victim. She was not present at Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal; she remained at the palace.

Understand that ancient people were not stupid. If rituals did not work, they stopped doing them. The acts that the priests of Baal did, were done because they had strong expectation that Baal (or some image) would appear or make its presence known, and that fire would in fact come down to light the parts of the sacrifice. They anticipated their actions would bring results. If there was no response from "Baal," there was a good reason. The true reason "Baal" did not appear or do anything was because he or it was as nothing compared to YHWH.

**Verse 29.** They "prophesied," but their prompting did not yield any response. Two of the last three phrases of this verse repeat from verse 26, but now the phrase **"There was no attention"** is added. It means that "there was no one attending" or "there was no one home" in our modern expression.

### ***TEXT: Elijah Confronts the Pagan Prophets on Mount Carmel***

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#### **1 Kings 18:30–46**

<sup>30</sup> Now Elijah said to all the people, **"Come close to me!"** When all the people came close to him, he mended the demolished altar of Yahweh.

<sup>31</sup> Elijah took twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob to whom had come the word of Yahweh, saying, **"Israel shall be your name."** <sup>32</sup> With the stones he built an altar in the Name of Yahweh, and he made a trench round about the altar, enough for housing two **seahs** of seed. <sup>33</sup> He arranged the sticks, cut the young bull in pieces and placed it on the sticks.

<sup>34</sup> Then he said, **"Fill four jars with water and pour it on the ascent offering and on the sticks."** Now he said, **"Repeat it."** And they repeated it. Yet he said, **"Do it a third time."** So they did it a third time. <sup>35</sup> Thus the water ran round about the altar, and even the trench, it filled with water.

<sup>36</sup> When it was time to offer up the approach present Elijah the prophet came close and said,

**"O Yahweh Elohim of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that You are Elohim in Israel and I am Your servant and that by Your words I have done all these things.**

<sup>37</sup> **Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me! Thus this people may know that You, Yahweh, are the One, Elohim, and that You Yourself will turn their heart around back again."**

<sup>38</sup> Now the fire of Yahweh fell and devoured the ascent offering and the sticks, the stones and the soil, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. <sup>39</sup> When all the people saw this, they fell on their faces and said, **"Yahweh, He is the One, Elohim, Yahweh, He is the One, Elohim."**

<sup>40</sup> Then Elijah said to them, **"Grab the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape."** So they grabbed them, and Elijah brought them down to Wadi Kishon; there he slew them.

<sup>41</sup> Elijah said to Ahab, **"Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of the rumble of a downpour."** <sup>42</sup> So Ahab went up to eat and to drink.

As for Elijah, he ascended to the summit of Mount Carmel and crouched prone to the earth and placed his face between his knees. <sup>43</sup> And he said to his lad, **"Now go up and look in the direction of the sea."**

He went up and looked and said, **"There is nothing whatsoever."**

Yet Elijah replied, **"Turn back, seven times."**

<sup>44</sup> It came to pass at the seventh time that he said, **"Behold, a thick cloud, small as a man's palm, is ascending from the sea."** So he [Elijah] replied, **"Rise up; say to Ahab, 'Hitch up your chariot, and go down that the downpour may not restrain you.'"**

<sup>45</sup> It came to pass then and there that the heavens sombered themselves with thick clouds; and with the wind came a great downpour while Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. <sup>46</sup> The hand of Yahweh, it came on Elijah, so that he tightened his waist and ran ahead, before Ahab, until you come to Jezreel. **[end text]**

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**Verse 30–31.** Elijah wanted everyone’s attention. He mended the altar of YHWH with 12 stones. This altar of YHWH was likely from before the Temple was built (Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary*, 174).

**Verses 32–33.** He built a new altar in YHWH’s name, and skewered the pieces of cut-up sacrifice on one of the 12 sticks apparently for roasting. A “**seah**” is a measure of land for sowing.

**Verses 34–35.** He asked for water to be brought from a stream or well and pour it over the altar, sticks and meat. He had them repeat the water pouring 2 more times, with the water running into the trench he built around the sacrificial area.

**Verses 36–37.** Elijah prayed for YHWH to acknowledge what he had done to prepare for the acceptance of the “**approach present**” sacrifice, a gift to a deity.

**Verses 38–39.** YHWH heard, a miraculous fire came down (as in 1 Chronicles 21:26, 2 Chronicles 7:1), everyone was stunned, people fell on their faces, and repeatedly confessed YHWH was God.

**Verse 40.** Elijah ordered the people to seize the prophets of Baal, take them to the nearby Wadi Kishon, and slay them as God’s punishment for idolaters and false prophets (Deuteronomy 17:2–3; 13:13ff.).

**Verse 41.** Elijah spoke directly to Ahab, who is first mentioned here. Were Elijah’s words “**Go up, eat and drink,**” intentionally a tongue-in-cheek comment? He then talked about “**the sound of the rumble of a down-pour,**” not a drizzling rain, or a steady rain, but a downpour. Remember, in 1 Kings 18:1 YHWH said to Elijah, “**Go, appear before Ahab, for I shall indeed give rain upon the surface of the ground.**”

**Verse 42.** Ahab did what Elijah instructed. He was likely afraid of Elijah at that moment. Elijah truly spoke for YHWH. Elijah went to the top of Mount Carmel and abased himself before YHWH and prayed.

**Verse 43.** Elijah had an unnamed “**lad**” who he sent to look out on the horizon and report what he saw. There was nothing at first, or for the second to sixth time he came to Elijah to report.

**Verse 44.** Then a small dark cloud appeared. In this instance “a dark cloud on the horizon” brought good things. Rain was coming and Elijah warned King Ahab, leave now or be stuck here with your chariot.

**Verses 45–46.** The wind brought a heavy downpour of rain and Ahab left quickly and “**went to Jezebel.**” Elijah somehow was very energetic and ran ahead of Ahab’s chariot (which may have been bogged down), and went to Jezreel. We pick up Elijah’s story next time. Elijah is protected, Ahab and Jezebel are judged by YHWH.

## Conclusion

During the 40+ year reign of “good” King Asa of Judah, the northern Kingdom of Israel went through 7 different kings: Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Tibni, Omri, and Ahab. With these changers in leadership evil events happened: tremendous disruption because of assassinations, civil strife, wars with Judah, religious murder, and now droughts and other disasters. According to the writers of the Kings narratives, all these are due to religious apostasy and rebellion against YHWH.

What prevented the people of Israel from going south to Judah where stability and reform occurred? Probably not many did so because Judah was a more straight-laced society (relatively so, compared to Israel and certainly compared to ours today), even though they were just as willing to worship gods besides YHWH.

Ahab puzzles me. He was warned by Elijah about the drought. He was told the reason for the drought. He did not change any of his actions to cause the drought to stop. It does not say that God hardened his heart as God hardened Pharaoh’s heart in the time of Moses in Exodus. Ahab continued his idolatry, continued his violation of YHWH’s covenant with the people of Israel and with Ahab, who was an Israelite king bound by that covenant individually and representing his corporate kingdom as its ruler.

I wonder if the drought was halted because of the faithfulness of Ahab’s servant Obadiah, who saved many lives through his own actions, yet he is never mentioned again in the Bible. He comes onto the stage, plays his righteous part, and departs.

Elijah is the obvious hero who does not personally suffer, but is under threat of death throughout his time in the history of King Ahab and his lovely wife Jezebel.