

The Soul of Israel

Spiritual Conditions during the Ministry of Elijah

Gregory A. Smith | March 2014

This lesson is a survey of the spiritual conditions that the prophet Elijah faced when ministering, mostly in the northern kingdom of Israel, during the 9th century BC. Insights are drawn from the last several chapters of 1 Kings as well as the first few of 2 Kings. Overall, the spiritual conditions can be summarized in four statements.

Spiritual Confusion Abounds.

Analysis

Just before Elijah enters the scene, the Scriptures inform us that King Ahab's wickedness exceeded that of his predecessor kings. The northern kingdom of Israel had divided from the southern tribes (collectively known as Judah) nearly 60 years before Ahab took the throne. The first king to rule the northern tribes in the divided monarchy, Jeroboam, had set up a worship site as an alternative to Jerusalem and introduced idolatry into the worship of Jehovah (1 Kings 12:25-33; 13:33-34; 14:7-16). Ahab was not content merely to follow in Jeroboam's footsteps. Rather, he set up a temple for Baal in Israel's capital, Samaria (1 Kings 16:31-33).

Ahab's devotion to Baal was no doubt influenced by his wife, Jezebel, who hailed from the land of Sidon to the north of Israel. Merrill explains:

An important example [of Omri's astute diplomacy] is his relationship with Ethbaal, king of Tyre and Sidon (887-856), which eventually led to the marriage of his son Ahab to the Tyrian princess Jezebel. This marriage, of course, would prove to be disastrous to Israel's (and Judah's) spiritual well-being. (340)

Monotheism—belief in one God—distinguished ancient Israel from the cultures surrounding it. Expressing her anger at Elijah, Jezebel said, "So may the *gods* do to me and more also . . ." (1 Kings 19:2). Similarly, when King Ahab resisted the demands of Ben-hadad, king of Syria, the latter responded: "The *gods* do so to me and more also" (20:10).

Israel's departure from Jehovah's prescriptions for worship, begun under Jeroboam, flowered under Ahab and Jezebel:

As though the internal apostasy from Yahweh were not enough, Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonian king Ethbaal, and brought her Baal and Asherah worship into Samaria. For the first time, then, the cult of Yahweh was officially replaced by paganism and not allowed to coexist with it. (Merrill 345)

Jezebel sponsored 850 false prophets—450 for Baal and 400 for Asherah (1 Kings 18:19). This gives some indication of the pervasiveness of false worship in the land (Constable, “1 Kings” 526).

According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Baal is the most common false deity named in the Bible. The worship of Baal was well established in and around Canaan by the time that the Israelites occupied the land. Baalism, being adapted to various locales, was somewhat fluid in its beliefs and practices. Baal’s basic identity was that of “a storm and fertility god” (Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman 339). Baal worship entailed sacrifices—usually sacrifices of animals, but sometimes of human offspring. Priests and cult prostitutes facilitated the rituals (Finley 302). The local adaptations of Baal worship across the region explain the plural reference to “Baals” in 1 Kings 18:18 (Constable, “1 Kings” 526; see also 522).

As for Asherah, she was a significant goddess in Canaanite culture. She was worshiped at “high places” and was seen as Baal’s consort (Finley 301-02).

The war for Israel’s soul led to the use of force. Those who were loyal to Baal and Asherah destroyed the LORD’s altars and killed His prophets (1 Kings 19:10; 19:14). The rivalry between God and the gods is perhaps best epitomized by the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel (18:19ff). There Elijah indicted the people of Israel for “limping between two different opinions” (18:21). Elijah asserted the supremacy of the LORD and called down fire from heaven. This demonstration, following a drought of three-plus years, discredited Baal’s claimed identity as lord of the rain (Merrill 345; Constable, “1 Kings” 522).

Whereas the prophets of the LORD had previously suffered at Jezebel’s hands, the Mount Carmel event compelled the people to acknowledge the LORD as the one true God (1 Kings 18:36-39). Elijah then issued a call for the prophets of Baal to be slain, and this was carried out (18:40). Baal-worshippers remained in power, though, and false worship was not eradicated. Later in the reign of Ahab confusion continued to reign. Generic references to “the Lord” and “God” appear in subsequent narratives:

- “Naboth cursed God and the king” (1 Kings 21:13).
- “Go up, for the Lord [not the LORD] will give it into the hand of the king” (22:6).

These references likely indicate an attempt on the part of Israel’s people to syncretize the worship of Jehovah with allegiance to other deities. This may explain why the Syrian armies could acknowledge the LORD as Israel’s God (1 Kings 20:28), yet also say, “Their *gods* are gods of the hills” (20:23).

Applications

- We may see in our time and place many similarities with Israel in Elijah’s time.
- There is much spiritual confusion.
- In our society we have rival gods, some of which are associated with specific locales (e.g., Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Washington, and Manhattan).
- People may refer to “God,” but it’s not clear that they mean the God of the Bible.
- The sense of one true and living God, with one way of salvation, has been lost.

God's People Persevere in Their Faith.

Analysis

Under the influence of Jezebel's murderous threats, Elijah fled far into the desert. His inclination was to focus on his isolation as a faithful follower of the LORD (1 Kings 19:1ff). However, the LORD revealed that there were 7,000 Israelites who had not compromised their allegiance to Him by worshiping Baal (19:18).

In the census of Israel's tribes that occurred following the Exodus, the ten tribes that would become the northern kingdom of Israel amounted to 493,550 warriors (Numbers 1). If this sort of population persisted in the time of Elijah—admittedly a speculative idea—the faithful would have represented less than two percent of Israel's population.

Though God's people were definitely a small minority, the Lord had not forgotten them. No doubt some who might have been thought to be genuine believers had turned their backs on the LORD. In the face of a similar apostasy in the New Testament, Paul wrote: "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity'" (2 Tim. 2:19).

Among the 7,000 faithful Israelites were some who stood out as God's representatives. There were presumably hundreds of faithful prophets. Though Jezebel had purged the land of many of them, at least 100 were saved through the influence of a godly man named Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3-4; 18:13). Obadiah—not the author of the prophetic book by that name—served in Ahab's household, but by the grace of God he managed to live faithfully. He testified to Elijah that "I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth" (18:12). The author of 1 Kings summarizes his commitment with the statement that "Obadiah feared the LORD greatly" (18:3). In the midst of the worst of circumstances, Obadiah stood for God, even if with a measure of secrecy.

When God met with Elijah in the desert, He directed Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor (1 Kings 19:16). At the end of Elijah's ministry, there were communities of the LORD's prophets in at least two locations: Bethel (2 Kings 2:3) and Jericho (2:5). Fifty members of these communities accompanied Elisha as he followed Elijah to his uptaking (2:7).

Applications

- True believers are often in the minority.
- We may feel more alone than we actually are.
- God not only knows our difficult situation, but more importantly, he knows *us*.
- It is possible for us to be faithful in whatever circumstances God allows us to experience.

Leaders Exert Enduring Influence.

Analysis

Late in the narrative of Ahab's reign, the author of 1 Kings offered this summary assessment of his character: "There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. He acted very abominably in going after idols . . ." (21:25-26). According to Constable, "When Elijah said the king had sold himself, he meant the king had sacrificed his principles to obtain what he wanted, which included a comparatively worthless vineyard" ("1 Kings" 533). In spite of exhibiting some degree of repentance (21:27-29), Ahab persisted in his hardness of heart, as demonstrated in the events that led to his death (chap. 22).

Ahab's evil legacy passed on to his heirs. Two of his sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, sat on Israel's throne. Ahaziah's reign was particularly short and wicked (22:51ff). Ahaziah's evil character is revealed in the narrative of how he responded to being injured in a serious fall. Constable explains:

The king's [Ahaziah's] veneration of Baal can be seen in his sending messengers to Ekron, a Philistine city about 40 miles away . . . , to inquire of a pagan idol whether he would recover. Baal-Zebub . . . was credited with healing powers. Ahaziah sought some prophetic word of encouragement from the oracle of Baal-Zebub. His failure to inquire of Yahweh, the God of Israel, reveals the depth of his apostasy. ("2 Kings" 538)

Using Elijah as His mouthpiece, the LORD testified to Ahaziah that he would not recover from his injuries. After being in office just two years, Ahaziah died, and having no son to sit on the throne, he was succeeded by his brother Jehoram.

Jehoram was not as evil as Ahab. In fact, "he put away the pillar of Baal that his father had made" (2 Kings 3:2). However, his reign is summarized as being evil because he persisted in the error of Jeroboam the son of Nebat (3:3). The disruption of faithful worship that began under Jeroboam continued some 80 years later under Jehoram, as it had under Ahab (1 Kings 16:31), Ahaziah (22:52), and other intervening rulers. Bad leadership has a way of effecting long-term influence.

This situation might have seemed hopeless, except that God was still at work through a remnant of faithful prophets and other believers in Israel.

Applications

- Leaders have the ability to affect the future—for good as well as for bad.
- If we have inherited the consequences and circumstances of others' bad choices, we can, by God's grace, break the cycle.

God Persists in Seeking a People for His Name.

Analysis

The author of the books of Kings presents the LORD as the one true and living God, the only rightful God of Israel. This conviction is expressed in different ways by a variety of characters:

- “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives” (17:1)
- “As the LORD your God lives” (17:12; 18:10)
- “you are God in Israel . . . you, O LORD, are God” (18:36-37)
- “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God” (18:39)

The prophets—especially Elijah—were the instruments that the LORD chose to use to call people to faith in Himself and to work out that faith in righteous living. Given the powerful influence that political leaders wield, it is not surprising that the prophets addressed the spiritual choices of Israel’s kings.

Ahab was the target of several prophets’ ministry. Elijah was the most noteworthy of these prophets (e.g., 1 Kings 17:1ff; 18:1ff; 21:17ff). Unnamed prophets addressed Ahab twice in 1 Kings 20 (vv. 13, 22; vv. 38ff). 1 Kings 22 narrates the story of Micaiah, a faithful prophet of the LORD who boldly spoke God’s word to Ahab in contrast to hundreds of prophets who had told him what he wanted to hear. Other godly people whom God placed in Ahab’s life were Obadiah, a servant in his household (18:3ff), and Naboth, whose vineyard Ahab coveted and confiscated (21:3).

It might seem reasonable to conclude that the prophets had no positive effect on the course of Ahab’s life, and that they accomplished little in the spiritual life of Israel. However, this is not entirely true. Ahab responded to Elijah’s pronouncement of judgment by showing signs of repentance, and though he continued to show hardness of heart towards the Lord, his penitence was enough to delay the fullness of God’s judgment (1 Kings 21:27-29). Constable explains:

God noticed Ahab’s change of mind and behavior. Ahab’s life was deep-dyed with sin, but in response to his self-humbling, God showed him some mercy. The destruction to come on Ahab’s house would not be carried out in his own days but in those of his son Joram Jezebel, however, did not repent. She suffered all that God promised she would without mercy. (“1 Kings” 533)

Elijah’s dealings with Ahab’s son Ahaziah were limited due to the brevity of his reign. The Scriptures do not specify whether Elijah or any other prophet addressed King Jehoram directly, but perhaps prophetic influence had something to do with his rejection of Baal worship (2 Kings 3:2).

The kings of Israel were, sadly, ungodly men who generally exerted negative spiritual influence on their people. But the LORD was still active, seeking a people to be called by His name. A small but loyal cadre of believers in Jehovah persisted through the dark days of Ahab’s reign. The LORD’s pursuit of a people was not confined to the borders of Judah and Israel. Ironically, during the reign of Ahab, when Baal worship was thriving in Israel, God sent Elijah to sojourn in Sidon, the source of Jezebel’s Baal cult. Specifically, Elijah spent time in a community called Zarephath in the company of a widow and her son.

Based on the widow's words and actions, it is reasonable to conclude that she came to faith in the LORD, or at least that she grew in her faith in the LORD, under Elijah's influence:

- "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar . . ." (1 Kings 17:12).
- "And she went and did as Elijah said. . . . 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" (17:15-16).
- "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'" (17:23-24).

Jesus alluded to this widow's story to point out the breadth of God's work—that He will show mercy to those who call on Him, regardless of social and geographic boundaries (Luke 4:25-26). God was at work during the ministry of Elijah to call people to Himself.

Applications

- We need to learn to perceive God's pursuit of the lost and wayward.
- As opportunity presents itself, we should seek to engage others in hopes of spurring them to faith and good works.
- Christ is at work to build his Church, even in improbable ways and places.

Works Cited

- Constable, Thomas L. "1 Kings." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor-Cook, 1985. 483-536.
- "2 Kings." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor-Cook, 1985. 537-588.
- Finley, Harvey E. "Gods and Goddesses, Pagan." *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2000. 301-03.
- Merrill, Eugene H. *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1987.
- Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998.