

# FIRST KINGS

## Chapter 18

### *Elijah Confronts Ahab*

After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, “Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.” 2 So Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. Now the famine was severe in Samaria. 3 And Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly, 4 and when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.) 5 And Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the valleys. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.” 6 So they divided the land between them to pass through it. Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. 7 And as Obadiah was on the way, behold, Elijah met him. And Obadiah recognized him and fell on his face and said, “Is it you, my lord Elijah?” 8 And he answered him, “It is I. Go, tell your lord, ‘Behold, Elijah is here.’” 9 And he said, “How have I sinned, that you would give your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me? 10 As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom where my lord has not sent to seek you. And when they would say, ‘He is not here,’ he would take an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. 11 And now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord, “Behold, Elijah is here.”’ 12 And as soon as I have gone from you, the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where. And so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have feared the LORD from my youth. 13 Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred men of the LORD's prophets by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water? 14 And now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord, “Behold, Elijah is here”’; and he will kill me.” 15 And Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today.” 16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him. And Ahab went to meet Elijah. 17 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” 18 And he answered, “I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. 19 Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.”

**18:1** *third year.* Apparently of the drought. Later Jewish tradition indicates that the drought lasted three and a half years (cf. Lk 4:25; Jas 5:17), but that probably represents a symbolic number for a drought cut short (half of seven years; see Ge 41:27; 2Ki 8:1). (CSB)

Of the drought. More exactly 3½ years (Lk 4:25; Jas 5:17). (TLSB)

*go show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.* Elijah's return is not occasioned by repentance in Israel but by the command of the Lord, who in his sovereign grace determined to reveal himself anew to his people. (CSB)

*send rain.* As Elijah had announced the drought (17:1), so he was to tell Ahab that “the word of the LORD” alone could end it. (TLSB)

**18:3** *Obadiah.* A common OT name, meaning “servant of the LORD.” (CSB)

Lit, “servant of the Lord.” He used his position at court to save “a hundred prophets” (v 4) of the Lord whose lives were threatened by the murderous Jezebel (v 13; 19:10). (TLSB)

**18:4** *hid them by fifties*. Expression of military organization. Cf 1Sm 8:12. (TLSB)

**18:5** The famine did not move Ahab to repentance (contrast Ahab’s response to the famine with that of David years earlier, 2Sa 21:1). But when his military strength seemed to be jeopardized, he scoured the land for food and water (see 10:26; according to the annals of the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III, Ahab had a force of at least 2,000 chariots). (CSB)

*we*. Drought was so severe that the king himself, with a high-ranking official, had to search for grass to “save the horses and mules alive,” which he needed for commercial and military operations. (TLSB)

**18:6** *by himself*. Kings normally traveled with attendants, but the drought may have brought government activities to a standstill. (TLSB)

**18:8** *tell your lord, ‘Elijah is here.’* This action would publicly identify Obadiah with Elijah in contrast to his previous clandestine support of the prophets sought by Jezebel (see vv. 4, 13). (CSB)

The mysterious, true prophet had reappeared. The false prophets had been no help to the king. (TLSB)

**18:12** *the Spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where*. Elijah’s disappearance earlier and now his sudden reappearance suggested to Obadiah that God’s Spirit was miraculously transporting the prophet about (see 2Ki 2:16). (CSB)

Obadiah feared that “the Spirit of the LORD” would suddenly transport Elijah to another hiding place, leaving him to face the king’s disappointment. (TLSB)

**18:13** *Jezebel killed the prophets*. Possibly in an attempt to please Baal so he would send rain. (CSB)

*prophets of the LORD*. Probably members of the communities of “prophets” that had sprung up in Israel during this time of apostasy (see note on 20:35). (CSB)

**18:16** *Ahab went to meet Elijah*. Swallowing his pride, the desperate king sought out the prophet. (TLSB)

**18:17–40** In a trial by fire, Elijah dramatically demonstrated that the Canaanite fertility gods were not in control of nature (vv 20–29), and that the “LORD of hosts” (v 15), Creator of “the heavens and the earth ... and all the host of them” (cf Gn 2:1), was a jealous God who did not tolerate divided allegiance (vv 30–40; Ex 20:5; Dt 4:24; Jsh 24:19). Luth: “Elijah accuses the people of ... doing one thing in their hearts and feigning something else in their work. This is true of every man who is outside Christ” (AE 29:123). (TLSB)

**18:17** *you troubler of Israel*. Ahab holds Elijah to account for the drought and charges him with a crime against the state worthy of death (he calls him a “trouble bringer”; see Jos 7:25). (CSB)

Ahab refused to acknowledge that he had brought on the drought because he had “abandoned the commandments of the LORD” (v 18). Elijah was not the only preacher of judgment to suffer abuse (cf Ac 16:20–24). Luth: “It is a good sign when men condemn us and call us agitators. The Spirit of God is one who strives with men, reproves them, and condemns them. But men are so constituted that they want to have preached what pleases them” (AE 2:20). (TLSB)

**18:18** *You have abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals.* The source of Israel's trouble was not Elijah or even the drought, but the breach of covenantal loyalty. (CSB)

Sinned against the Law of the covenant. Sinned against the blessed confession and promise of the Lord's name. "The godless ... believed they merited the forgiveness of sins, not freely through faith, but through sacrifices by the outward act. Therefore, they increased these services and sacrifices, set up the worship of Baal in Israel, and even sacrificed in the groves in Judah. Therefore, the prophets condemn this belief and war against not only the worshipers of Baal, but also other priests who made sacrifices ordained by God with this godless belief" (Ap XXIV 97 Luth: "The examples of all times teach that the Word of truth and the true forms of worship are despised by the common people.... Perverse teachers are most ready to teach, and the common people are most eager to listen. In this manner the Word and the true forms of worship become lost" (AE 2:243). (TLSB)

**18:19** *gather.* In order to prove to the king that he and his "father's house" (v 18) brought divine judgment on himself and his apostate people, Elijah demanded a convocation of all Israel, including the "prophets of Baal." (TLSB)

*Mount Carmel.* A high ridge next to the Mediterranean Sea, where the effects of the drought would be least apparent (see Am 1:2) and the power of Baal to nurture life would seem to be strongest. (CSB)

Mountain range (15 mi long) that juts out toward the Great Sea. (TLSB)

*eat at Jezebel's table.* Ahab allowed his kingdom to officially sponsor Phoenician Canaanite religion, beyond the state-sponsored worship set up by Jeroboam (12:25–33). Ahab knew about the true faith and recognized Elijah as a true prophet but would not act in light of the truth. Through Elijah, the Lord will force a decisive confrontation.

**18:1–19** Even in wicked King Ahab's presence, God protects Elijah and Obadiah. This is a comfort to Christians, lest we think that God will allow the wicked to destroy us. Our noblest calling in life is to bear witness to the Law and Gospel, proclaiming God's judgment and His grace in Jesus Christ. As we do so, we have Christ's own assurance, "I am with you always" (Mt 28:20). • "Praise to You and adoration, Blessed Jesus, Son of God, Who, to serve Your own creation, Came to share our flesh and blood." Amen. (LSB 692:1) (TLSB)

*The Prophets of Baal Defeated*

**20** So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. **21** And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. **22** Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. **23** Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. **24** And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." **25** Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." **26** And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had

made. 27 And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, “Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.” 28 And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. 29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention. 30 Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come near to me.” And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down. 31 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,” 32 and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. 33 And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.” 34 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. 35 And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water. 36 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God.” 40 And Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.” And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

**18:21** *limping*. The Hebrew for this word is the same as that used for “danced” in v. 26. Elijah speaks with biting irony: In her religious ambivalence Israel is but engaging in a wild and futile religious “dance.” (CSB)

*If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.* Elijah placed a clear choice before the people. He drew a sharp contrast between the worship of the Lord and that of Baal, to eliminate the apostate idea that both deities could be worshiped in a syncretistic way. (CSB)

**18:22** *only one ... left*. At least the only one to stand boldly and publicly against the king and the prophets of Baal (but see v. 4; 19:10, 14; 20:13, 28, 35; 22:6, 8). (CSB)

The Lord’s other prophets were hiding (v 4). (TLSB)

**18:24** *The god who answers by fire—he is God*. Both the Lord and Baal were said to ride the thunderstorm as their divine chariot (see Ps 104:3 and note); thunder was their voice (see Ps 29:3–9 and note) and lightning their weapon (see Ps 18:14 and note). Elijah’s challenge is direct. Cf. Lev 9:24. (CSB) Likely lightning. See note, Jb 1:16. Luth: “God does indeed allow a new word to be taught in order to test us, but He is faithfully at our side, so that no signs are done or that what they have predicted does not come to pass, as He shows in the case of Elijah with the Baalites (1 Kings 18:24)” (AE 9:130). (TLSB)

**18:26** *limped around the altar*. The ecstatic cultic dance was part of the pagan ritual intended to arouse the deity to perform some desired action. (CSB)

*limped*. Perhaps sarcastic, describing their ritual dance. (TLSB)

**18:27** *is musing ... sleeping*. Elijah ridicules, but as he does he shows knowledge of the Baal myths. (CSB)

*relieving himself.* Bawdy sarcasm! Hbr verb used only here. (TLSB)

**18:28** *cut ... after their custom.* Bloodletting rituals to compel their god to action. The bloodletting could have expressed sorrow for sin, or it may have been an effort to move the god to compassion. (TLSB)

*until their blood flowed.* Self-inflicted wounds (causing blood to flow) were symbolic of self-sacrifice as an extreme method of arousing the deity to action. Such mutilation of the body was strictly forbidden in the Mosaic law (Lev 19:28; Dt 14:1). (CSB)

**18:29** *raving.* Indicative of ecstatic raving, in which the ritual reached its climax. (CSB)

Hbr *naba'*; typical term for prophesying but reflexive, “making themselves prophesy.” They stirred themselves into a state of frenzy (cf 1Sm 10:6). (TLSB)

*offering of the oblation.* Likely the evening grain offering (2Ki 16:15). (TLSB)

*no one paid attention.* Dramatic demonstration of Baal’s impotence (see Ps 115:5–8; 135:15–18; Jer 10:5). (CSB)

**18:30** *altar of the LORD, which was in ruins.* It is possible that the altar had been built by people of the northern ten tribes after the division of the kingdom (see note on 3:2) and that it had been destroyed by the agents of Jezebel (vv. 4, 13; 19:10, 14). (CSB)

We are not told at exactly what time and under what circumstances this altar was erected. Cf Dt 12:5. (TLSB)

**18:31** *twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes.* In this way Elijah called attention to the covenant unity of Israel as the people of God in spite of her political division. What was about to happen concerned the entire nation, not just the northern ten tribes. (CSB)

**18:33** *in order.* Elijah was familiar with the proper manner of priestly offerings. (TLSB)

*water.* By drenching the whole installation Elijah showed to all that he was using no tricks. (CSB)

Carmel’s location beside the sea may have allowed the land nearby to receive some moisture, while the interior of Israel remained in drought. (TLSB)

**18:36** *offering of the oblation.* Elijah’s preparations were likely taking place while the prophets of Baal were performing their rituals. (TLSB)

*prayed.* Elijah’s simple but earnest prayer stands in sharp contrast to the frantic shouts and “dancing” and self-mutilation of the Baal prophets. (CSB)

*God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel.* An appeal to the Lord to remember his ancient covenant with the patriarchs, and to Israel to remember all that the Lord has done for her since the days of her forefathers. (CSB)

**18:37** *turned ... back.* In repentance. (TLSB)

**18:38** *fire of the LORD fell.* Likely lightning. Luther noted that Elijah’s sacrifice was consumed by fire as a “true manifestation of the divine mercy which the wretched people needed in order not to be without some light of the grace of God. In the same way the very Word, Baptism, and the Eucharist are our lightbearers today, toward which we look as dependable tokens of the sun of grace. We can state with certainty that where the Eucharist, Baptism, and the Word are, there are Christ, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. Contrariwise, where these signs of grace are not present, or where they are despised by men, there is not only no grace, but execrable errors follow, and men set up for themselves other forms of worship and other signs” (AE 1:249). (TLSB)

**18:40** *slaughtered them there.* Elijah, acting on the authority of the Lord, who sent him, carried out the sentence pronounced in the Mosaic law for prophets of pagan deities (Dt 13:13–18; 17:2–5). (CSB)

Dt 13:6–11 17:2–7 also decree the death penalty on those who entice the Israelites to “go and serve other gods” (Dt 13:6). (TLSB)

**18:20–40** The famous confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal ends with the execution of the false prophets. Their overthrow is a classic example of how God makes sure that truth ultimately prevails. No matter how entrenched and powerful the forces of evil are in the world, God is still guiding history for the good of His people, for their everlasting salvation. • Lord God, how bold the wicked are, yet I know that You will always be with those whom You have brought into Your family by faith in Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)

*The LORD Sends Rain*

**41** And Elijah said to Ahab, “Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.” **42** So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees. **43** And he said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” And he went up and looked and said, “There is nothing.” And he said, “Go again,” seven times. **44** And at the seventh time he said, “Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea.” And he said, “Go up, say to Ahab, ‘Prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.’” **45** And in a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel. **46** And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah, and he gathered up his garment and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

**18:41** *sound of the rushing of rain.* Now that Baal worship has been struck a devastating blow, there is the promise of rain (see 17:1). Significantly, Ahab takes no action—either to carry out the Mosaic sentence or to halt Elijah. (CSB)

With false religion overthrown, rain would come as a sign of God’s blessing. Cf Dt 28:12. (TLSB)

**18:42** *Elijah ... bent down to the ground and put his face between his knees.* Now that the people had confessed that the Lord alone was God, Elijah prayed for the covenant curse to be lifted (see note on 17:1) by the coming of rain (see 8:35; 2Ch 7:13–14). (CSB)

Unusual bow, perhaps expressing special humility. (TLSB)

**18:43** *Seven times.* The number symbolic of completeness. (CSB)

Abiding in prayer. (TLSB)

**18:44** *go down.* From the height of Carmel toward the lowlands of Jezreel. (TLSB)

*rising from the sea. Appearing on the western horizon. (CSB)*

**18:46** *ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.* Divinely energized by extraordinary strength, Elijah ran before Ahab's chariot to Jezreel. This dramatic scene, with the Lord's prophet running before the king and the Lord himself racing behind him riding his mighty thundercloud chariot (see note on v. 24), served as a powerful appeal to Ahab to break once for all with Baal and henceforth to rule as the servant of the Lord. (CSB)

On the king's return to his royal residence in Jezreel, a distance of more than 15 mi from Carmel, Elijah humbly served as his forerunner but ran at a miraculous pace. (TLSB)

**18:41–46** After the 3½-year drought, God sends rain when “[Elijah] prayed again” (Jas 5:18). How powerful is the prayer of a righteous person! May the Holy Spirit dispel our sinful doubts and replace them with the spirit of Elijah, so we confidently trust our Savior. • Like Elijah of old, O Lord, I boldly call upon You in prayer. Keep me and those I love in the safety of Your loving hands. Amen. (TLSB)