

The Trouble With Elijah III

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The Scripture declares that “Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (I Kings 16:33). He went beyond support for Israel’s calf worship handed down from Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Ahab married Jezebel, became a Baal worshiper and “reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria” (I Kings 16:32). But, God raised up Elijah, endowed with power to call down lightning strikes (I Kings 18:38; II Kings 1:10-12). Elijah helped establish two communities of “sons of the prophets” who survived Jezebel’s purge in Obadiah’s protective cave (I Kings 18:4). One was in Jericho. The other confronted calf worship in Bethel itself.

The prophet Elijah also continued to pursue prophetic forays against Baal worship. The spread of Israel’s state-sanctioned Baal worship to Judah aroused Elijah’s ire provoking a rare letter. Elijah wrote denouncing Jehoram, king of Judah, because he had repeated the “whoredoms of the house of Ahab, and also hast slain thy brethren of thy father’s house, which were better than thyself”(II Chronicles 21:12-15). Further, after Jezebel orchestrated the judicial murder of Naboth, to seize his vineyard for pouting Ahab, God dispatched Elijah to the contested vineyard. There he pronounced judgement upon King Ahab, the new owner, saying, “Hast thou killed, and also taken possession? . . . Thus saith the LORD, In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick thy blood, even thine” (I Kings 21:19).

In Bethel and Jericho, sons of the prophets and their families commonly had difficulty making ends meet. Elijah’s successor, Elisha, was once called upon to prevent bondage of a widow’s sons to her husband’s creditor. Through a miraculous provision of cooking oil the widow was enabled to pay off her husband’s debts (II Kings 4:1-7). Elisha also miraculously helped a prophet recover an ax head lost in the muddy Jordan River after he cried, “Alas, master! for it was borrowed” (II Kings 6:5). Further, anticipating Christ’s feeding of the five thousand, Elisha used a modest offering of barley loaves by a man from Baalshalisha to feed one hundred men with leftovers (Matthew 14:17-21; II Kings 4:42-44). These sons knew how to do without. Nevertheless, it was from these struggling communities that the Lord raised up His prophets proclaiming “Thus saith the Lord” to reprimand kings for their sins and perverse public policy. Under Elijah, the sons of the prophets per force became de facto advisors to reluctant kings and their courts. A prophet denounced King Ahab for his release of the Syrian king, Benhadad, whom the Lord had “appointed to utter destruction” (I Kings 20:42). Later the prophet, Micaiah, warned Ahab about the lies of Zedekiah who headed four hundred prophets of Israel’s calf worship. In chorus, they urged Ahab to “Go up to Ramothgilead, and prosper: for the LORD shall deliver it into the king’s hand” (I Kings 22:12). In keeping with Micaiah’s prophecy (I Kings 22:19-23), Ahab believed their lies and rode off to his doomed battle.

Israel’s trouble with Elijah expanded under Elisha blessed with a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (II Kings 2:9-10). It was also extended in the ministry of the sons of prophets whose successors proclaimed God’s law through the centuries until the time of Malachi. It was the prophets, we are reminded, “Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions . . . turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured . . . had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings . . . They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented . . . Of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:32-38). Amen.