

## **ELIJAH CALLS FOR A DECISION**

### **Teaching-Learning Resources**

#### **BAPTIST LEADER**

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Thomas McDaniel

**Background Scripture: 1 Kings 16:29–18:40**

**Key Passage: 1 Kings 16:30–33; 18:17–21, 36–39**

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The current lesson, “Elijah Calls for a Decision,” focuses on one of the most important decisions to be considered in Part II on “Decisions That Shaped the Nations’ Future.”

Elijah’s call for decision was made about 850 B.C. It was a repetition of the same call for decision made by Joshua four hundred years earlier: “. . . choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father served . . . or the gods of the Amorites . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

The call for decision to follow Yahweh, the God of Israel (whether it be the call of Joshua or Elijah), has been interpreted usually in terms of the decision for monotheism or polytheism. But in reality the problem was much more complex. At the time of Elijah some “old-time religion” still flourished in Israel. This old-time religion affirmed the existence of many gods, each one responsible for a particular nation. According to this old-time religion, Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the greatest God, and he had so structured the world and its gods. In this structure Yahweh had reserved for himself the nation of Israel.

The biblical record of this old-time religion is limited to the information contained in Deuteronomy 32:8–9:

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When the Most High gave to the  
nations their inheritance,  
when he separated the sons of men,  
he fixed the bounds of the peoples  
according to the number of the sons of God.  
For the Lord's portion is his people,  
Jacob his allotted heritage.

It was in the context of this ancient theology that Joshua and Elijah challenged the Israelites to acknowledge that Yahweh was indeed the God of Israel.

Israel was living in territory which had been previously the land of the Canaanites. This territory, according to the theology noted above, would have been territory under the control of the “sons of God” responsible for Canaan. Specifically, the old-time religion recognized that Baal was one of the deities responsible for Canaan. Joshua's affirmation of faith, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord [Yahweh]” (Joshua 24:15), was a repudiation of the old-time religion. Baal may have been the god of Canaan, but now that Israelites were in the land, the divine authority over the territory was the God of Jacob.

But old-time religion did not die easily, and many Israelites continued to believe that although they were the descendants of Jacob, they had also to serve the gods of the Canaanites since they were living in Canaanite territory. Even if the Canaanites had become few in number, their gods were still there and had to be worshiped.

Elijah's call for decision was a challenge to this traditional belief. Elijah was affirming that the descendants of Jacob were living in the land promised to their fathers. It was no longer the land of the Canaanites and the land of the

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Canaanite gods. It was therefore intolerable that the descendants of Jacob should worship the deities of the now defunct Canaanite kingdoms or the deities of the neighboring nations who had no jurisdiction over Israel. Yahweh's sovereignty had to be recognized in Yahweh's territory!

The real struggle for monotheism (the affirmation that only one God has real existence) came along after the time of Elijah. The clearest affirmation of monotheism and the renunciation of the old-time religion, which believed in the real existence of the gods of the other nations, is found in Psalm 82. It is a short psalm, but it contains sound theology. It begins with the recognition of the many gods who are responsible to Yahweh for establishing justice and righteousness throughout the world. But because of their failure, Yahweh sentenced these gods to die like any mortal being. The psalm concludes with the psalmist's prayer-affirmation that Yahweh is truly the God of the whole earth. (This psalm must be studied in the light of John 10:34–35, in which Jesus clearly recognized that the psalmist spoke of "gods" and not "judges," as some current translations pretend.) In this psalm the old-time religion is given a death blow: the ultimate decision is not which god to follow but whether or not to follow the only real God. This monotheistic faith of the psalmist was boldly reiterated by the major classical prophets in Israel from the time of Isaiah and Amos, whose messages will be studied in subsequent lessons.

Not only was Elijah's call for decision necessary because of a very popular old-time religion, but even the best forms of the Israelite worship of Yahweh were dependent upon Canaanite or Phoenician religious institutions. For example, the temple David dreamed of and the temple which Solomon

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built was a temple [page 25] constructed on a traditional Canaanite model of “church architecture” and built by craftsmen whose religious commitment was to Baal, since they were citizens of the Phoenician city of Tyre. This dependence upon the Canaanites and Phoenicians for material and technical skills in temple construction provided one of the footholds for alien religious traditions to take hold in Israel. When the servants of Baal were the builders of the house of Yahweh, the climate was ripe for religious indecision, toleration, and syncretism.

### **The Biblical Setting**

The political situation at the time of Elijah made the religious problems all the more confusing. Political marriages necessitated religious tolerance. As noted in previous lessons, Israelite royalty did not practice monogamy. The foreign wives and mistresses who served the gods of their fathers were numerous. Some of these alien women were aggressive and “evangelistic” about their gods and religion. They sought to serve their gods by subverting the religious loyalties of Israel.

Moreover, David’s sincere attempt to establish the inviolability of the Lord’s anointed was never adopted in the Northern Kingdom, Israel. In fifty-three years northern Israel had eight kings or contenders for the throne. With the transition of power came much bloodshed. Frequently the bloodbaths were instigated by the prophets of Yahweh who denounced the reigning monarch for the evil he had practiced. The denunciation was followed by the promise that certain death would come to the king and his whole family.

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In this pattern the prophet Ahijah inspired King Baasha to annihilate the house of Jeroboam (1 Kings 15:29). In turn, King Baasha was condemned by the prophet Jehu for his assassination of the house of Jeroboam (16:1–4). As a result of this prophecy, Baasha’s son Elah was assassinated by Zimri, whereupon Zimri became king over Israel for just seven days. But in those seven days he had time to kill every male in the Baasha-Elah family (16:10–15). Zimri committed suicide (16:18), and two new Israelites contended for the throne; namely, Omri and Tibni. In this struggle Omri won, resulting in Tibni’s death (16:22). Omri had a long reign and was succeeded by his son Ahab. But Ahab was eventually condemned to death by the prophet Elijah in very harsh terms: “I will utterly sweep you away, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free . . . . Any one belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat; and any one of his who dies in the open country the birds of the air shall eat” (21: 21–24; compare the similar curse in 16:4).

Such bloody political activity in the Northern Kingdom, encouraged by the prophets of Yahweh, did little to attract people to faithfulness. To be sure, it did create fear—but not genuine faith. The type of faith that thrived was the holy-war religion in which Yahweh was recognized as “a man of war” (Exodus 15:3). Holy war now had been transformed into civil war; but even after civil war, peace was postponed by repeated bloody political purges. (In contrast to this, political transitions in Judah were more peaceful, as one descendant after another sat upon the throne of David.) These political events contributed to the religious ambivalence of the northern Israelites.

**Interpreting the Scriptures**

**1 Kings 1 6:30—“And Ahab the son at Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all that were before him.”**

Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of Sidon. In light of Solomon’s numerous marriages with foreigners and Solomon’s seeking economic and political arrangements with Hiram, king of Tyre, Ahab looked to Tyre’s sister city for similar benefits through a Solomon-type marriage. Ahab’s monogamous marriage appeared rather restrained. But Ahab lacked historical perspective in his failure to see that Solomon’s foreign marriages were not among the wisest things Solomon did. Ahab chose the wrong practice to imitate. The religious and political influence of Solomon’s wives was held in check by the large number in his harem. No one woman could have a significant influence. But Ahab had only one wife, and she became the dominant personality during Ahab’s reign.

Jezebel demanded shrines where she could worship her god and goddess, Baal Melqart and Asherah. But more than this, she attempted to convert by force native Israelites to her faith. Her “evangelistic” style included the oppression and murder of the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:4). Thanks to the religious fanaticism of Jezebel and her subversive ethics, Ahab won for himself the reputation of being the most evil king in Israel. He catered to and implemented his wife’s desires. The king—Yahweh’s anointed in Israel—had yielded Yahweh’s sovereign power in Israel to the Sidonian Baal, to Baal’s consort, and to Baal’s first lady in Israel.

**1 Kings 18:17—“Ahab said to him [Elijah], ‘Is it you, you troubler of Israel?’”**

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As noted above in the discussion on the political situation, the relationship between the prophet and king in northern Israel was frequently marked by hostility. Numerous prophetic curses had resulted in even more numerous cases of the murder of the king and his royal family. Kings did not welcome prophets into the “white house.” It could be deadly. Ahab had little reason to think that Elijah would support him for yielding to Jezebel’s aspirations. He had good reason to think that Elijah would cause him trouble. And indeed, Elijah did *bring* trouble, although he did not *cause* the trouble.

Elijah initiated a devastating drought in Israel (1 Kings 17:1). Through this drought Elijah “troubled” the king and all Israel. It was not a simple matter of inconvenience or discomfort, but economic disaster was apparent. Israel exported much of her agricultural products to the Phoenician cities. The drought ruined Israel’s exports and undermined the entire economy. But behind the economic crisis was a religious issue: Who was God in Israel? Elijah would demonstrate that Yahweh was God not only in the land of Israel but also in the heavens over Israel. Neither the Canaanite deity Baal Shamen, “Lord of the Heavens,” nor the Sidonian Baal Melqart, “Lord of the Underworld,” had power in Israel. [page 26]

The test Elijah planned was a logical one. The need at hand was for rain. The prophets of the several gods who were worshiped should be able to produce rain if their gods were real or really had power in Israel. Many Israelites probably thought that the Baal Shamen, the Canaanite “Lord of the Heavens,” could and would send the rain. Certainly the prophets of Baal thought they had a good bargain. Once Elijah was “converted” by the very test he had demanded, Baal would be god in Israel. Unable to get the gods or goddess to respond, the pro-

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phets of Baal first lost face. The seemingly good bargain turned out to be a “bad buy,” for it cost them their lives! Perhaps out of revenge for the prophets of Yahweh who had been killed by Jezebel, or perhaps just sending the prophets of Baal Melqart, “Lord of the Underworld,” to meet their god in his own domain, Elijah executed all the prophets of Baal and Asherah (18:40).

**1 Kings 18:21—“How long will you go limping with two different opinions?”**

Elijah’s demonstration of the impotence of Baal and Asherah was coupled with a sarcastic admonition to his fellow Israelites. The dancing (which Elijah viewed as “limping”) of the priests of Baal between the altars suggested for Elijah the imagery for his terse question: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” The Israelites had come to Mount Carmel to be entertained, but Elijah’s question shocked them into silence: “And the people did not answer him a word” (18:21). The Israelites had displayed a common human characteristic in playing it safe by taking both sides as long as possible. But playing it safe by worshiping both Yahweh and Baal was not productive; and deliberate indecision was as draining as the drought.

**1 Kings 18:36-37—“O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel . . . that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God.”**

One must note that Elijah does not appeal to the names of Solomon, David, Joshua, or Moses to identify the God to whom he directs his prayers. He appeals to the God of the

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fathers. In doing this, he appeals to the God who had entered into covenant with the people long before they became resident in the former Canaanite territories. The God to whom he prayed had authority over his people regardless of where they were. Although Yahweh was asked to demonstrate the fact that he was God in Israel, he was also asked to reveal himself so that the people (Israelites, Canaanites, and Sidonians) would know that Yahweh was the God. The Revised Standard Version does not include the definite article “the” in its translation, but the Hebrew text reads clearly “the God,” implying “the real or true God.” Thus, the light of monotheism dawned and replaced the darkness of the old-time religion with its national deities. Elijah may have meant only, “Yahweh is the true God that exists for Israel,” but it was a catalyst for stronger affirmations of monotheism by other prophets.

### **Applying the Lesson to Life**

The Christian must admit that this biblical tradition in today’s lesson is filled with activities and attitudes that he or she cannot imitate and dare not duplicate. We can now seed the clouds and possibly end a drought, but we cannot force the heavens to withhold the rains.

In applying this lesson to life, we must be careful to model our actions on what Elijah said rather than what he did. Nor are we free to implement the policy of Jezebel. We can drop man-made fire from the heavens, but we cannot call down fire from heaven. We can be like Jezebel and try to convert others by force or be like Elijah and exterminate our enemies. But we dare not.

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Nevertheless, within the Christian community too many people are still “limping” between two different opinions, trying to play it safe by adopting conflicting loyalties. We know better than to worship Baal or Asherah, but this does not mean we have full faith in God and in Christ, his Messiah. We are tempted too often to follow an old-time religion which affirmed God as “a man of war.” We can’t make up our minds if our God is a warlord or the Prince of Peace. The limping is painful, but we choose to limp. We are caught between the altars of love and hate; between the altars of discrimination and integration. We do a little bit of both, hoping to satisfy everyone. We pray for peace but work for war. We export both wheat and weapons—some for liberty, but more for profit. Our indecision is not with Baal but with mammon. Trying to serve two masters simply extends the drought of justice and mercy.

We can wait for fire from heaven to force us to decide, but we have no assurance that the fire will be God’s gift. It could be man’s self-destruction. Joshua’s time schedule needs to be implemented now, namely, “Choose this day whom you will serve”; and Elijah’s question must be answered in the context of the gospel—“If God is love, if Christ is the Prince of Peace, follow him!” As Jesus healed the lame, he can remove our limping. Yahweh is God! Christ is Lord! Peace on earth! This balm can remove the pain and heal our crippling indecision.