

July 20, 2003
The Prophet Elijah

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Elijah was a robust sort of fellow, but this had been a very strenuous day. It began early that morning, when he met on Mount Carmel with King Ahab, two groups of the prophets of Baal, totaling eight hundred and fifty, and an apparently large number of other Israelites (1 Kings 18). This ecumenical convention, which Elijah himself suggested to the king, had a very practical purpose. After forty-two months without rain (James 5:17), a terrible drought lay on the land, and something simply had to be done about it. Elijah suggested a plan for putting an end to the problem, and Ahab was sufficiently desperate to try just about anything.

Elijah proposed that they choose two bulls to be offered in sacrifice, one by the prophets of Baal and one by himself. This recommendation met everyone's approval. The prophets of Baal (with whom, it may be said, Elijah already had a somewhat strained relationship) should have suspected something sly was afoot, when they themselves were obliged to supply Elijah with a bull. He had not brought one.

However, for two reasons, these gentlemen were a bit overconfident. First, Baal was a storm god, who knew a thing or two about rain. Elijah's Lord, on the other hand, had revealed Himself in the desert, where water was scarce. He would not know much about storms, atmospheric conditions, and that kind of thing. Second, the prophets of Baal enjoyed both royal patronage and the advantage of numbers. This would not be much of a contest, they were sure. Moreover, Elijah even agreed to let them go first.

It did not take the eight hundred and fifty very long to cut up their bull for sacrifice, and, while they were doing it, Elijah announced "no fire." They would have to persuade Baal, who was a storm god, after all, to send down lightning to get the flames going. Strangely, no one objected.

They worked hard all morning, trying to draw Baal's attention to the matter at hand, yelling out their prayers, jumping up and down on the altar (Baalism, you understand, was a seeker-friendly religion), and making a general commotion. Finally, they took knives and began to gash themselves (well, so much for seeker-friendly). Somebody declared this had worked in the

past. It was no go today, however.

Elijah appeared to enjoy the show, cheering the Baalists on to greater exertions, suggesting that Baal was perchance asleep, or having a conversation with some other god perhaps, or maybe was on a trip. Elijah encouraged them to yell louder.

Finally, when they were rather worn out by mid-afternoon, Elijah suddenly announced, "My turn!" He jumped up, then, constructed a rather impressive altar, and cut up the second bull on it. Then, he had twelve barrels of sea water dragged up the side of Mount Carmel and poured all over the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal thought this last maneuver was a bit show-offy.

From this point on, everything started to happen all at once. Elijah said a quick two-verse prayer, and abruptly, from a cloudless sky, there fell a bolt of fire that "consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water."

The theological question of the day being thus settled, he had the crowd round up the Baalist prophets, who were promptly marched down the northeast corner of Mount Carmel to the dry bed of the Kishon River, where they were all put to death. Elijah was not a man of half measures. He well knew that this was the very place where Barak's army had defeated the forces of Sisera centuries before.

Elijah himself stayed on the mountain and gave himself to prayer. Notwithstanding that impressive bolt of lightning, after all, there was still no rain! He prayed seven times (three times had been enough to raise a dead person in the previous chapter), and then they saw the first cloud, "small as a man's hand," coming from over the sea. "Better head for home," Elijah said to Ahab, while the sky grew black with clouds and wind. At this point, indeed, Elijah himself jumped up and ran out ahead of Ahab's chariot. The mind's eye may see him even now, this wild prophet with streaming hair, rushing through the thunder and the lightning bolts, running well ahead of the panicking, wide-eyed, panting, galloping horses, racing through the darkness and the rain, all those seventeen miles from Mount Carmel to Jezreel.

Recalling the scene a millennium later, St. James calmly remarked that Elijah "was a man with a nature like ours." I am grateful that James made that point, because, to tell the truth, I think I might have missed it. James himself, I am

prepared to believe, may have been of like nature with Elijah.
As for anybody else I know, well, I am not so dead sure about
it.

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