

Sunday, 29 May 2016

Elijah and Religious Truth



1 Kings 18:20-39

At this point in in 1st Kings, King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel, have been on a mission to introduce worship of foreign gods into the culture of Israel. And not only introduce it, but make it dominant and even suppress the worship of Israel's God. This is an incredibly dark time for Israel. Elijah announced that God was going to cause a drought because of Ahab's disobedience. Baal was believed to be the god of rain. The drought was to declare that the God of Elijah had power over the rains, not Baal. So the drought has been ongoing for 3 years. Things have become desperate. Now Elijah has arrived on King Ahab's doorstep and has asked him to call a meeting. He tells him to call the people of Israel to Mt. Carmel and to come with the prophets of Baal.

They meet and Elijah declares the reason for the meeting. The people of Israel haven't consciously rejected God, but they have also been worshipping Baal. They have been thinking they can have it both ways. Elijah tells them they have to pick.

It's amazing how there really isn't anything new under the sun. The people of Israel, under the leadership of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, are developing a pluralistic society. People can pick the bits they like from the religion of Israel and the bits they like from the worship of Baal and have the best of both worlds. You could talk to many people in our society, even in our churches and find that many people hold this attitude about spirituality. There are many who just pick a little from here and pick a little from there, just to cover their bases and to cater to their own taste- to find a spirituality that "fits" them. Many don't want to commit, and prefer to sit on the fence so they don't have to defend a decision one way or the other. It is a very modern western way of thinking. There are many paths to the top of the mountain. We should just accept all religions as equally valid.

Here comes Elijah, and he's saying something very counter-cultural, for his own time and for ours. Elijah says they (and we) have to pick. That seems very intolerant- even arrogant. They weren't against the God of Israel, they just also wanted to include worship of Baal. They want to play on both sides, but you can't do that with integrity with the God of Israel. We read Jesus say in Revelation 3:16, "because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth". They won't commit. Like many German Christians during WW2 who held the illusion that they could be both Christian and still hold to the values of Nazism. They weren't overtly denying God after

all, they were just including this other thing as well. ... All of us are inclined towards some kind of idol. And as Christians we often want to hold it alongside God. It could be social standing—having the right house, or boat, or vacation. It might be some image of success. It might be some political agenda. It can even be family. Our world is full of idols that compete with God. And we feel okay with them because we aren't necessarily denying God, we just want to hold onto these other things as well. And we tell ourselves it's okay because everyone else does it. We don't want to be extreme. We don't want people to think we are strange.

Elijah is a lone voice. Elijah is the only prophet of Yahweh, and there are 450 prophets of Baal. They have the support of the king and queen, and the people seem to have bought into the government program to introduce Baal worship. Elijah is a lone voice speaking against the political powers and against the social norms. Elijah, was very counter-cultural.

There is a modern notion that says all religions are really the same. They all have the same destination and they all do the same thing. I'm sure you've heard people say, "the religions are all different paths up the same mountain". ... Or they say, "the religions are really all blind people trying to describe an elephant. One feels it's leg and says an elephant is like a tree. Another feels the trunk and says an elephant is like a snake. Another feels the ear and says an elephant is like a fan. Another feels the tail and says an elephant is like a rope. All of them are right in a way, but none of them sees the whole elephant." Many in our society think it's arrogant for religions to say they have the truth and these images of the mountain and the elephant are

examples of how these people see religion, if they are open to religion at all.

The problem with those images is that they are hypocritical.[\[1\]](#) They are used to point out that religions don't have any real ultimate truth, but the images themselves claim to have some kind of ultimate truth. One religion is walking it's path up the mountain and can only see its own path, but the person who is telling the story about the multiple paths up the mountain is in the all-seeing position of seeing all the paths and their destination, when no one else can. Why can that person claim ultimate truth, but none of the other religions can? Isn't that just as arrogant? Besides that, what do you get when you get to the top of the mountain? God? Is it the Triune God of Christianity? Or do they arrive at the tope to find thousands of Hindu Gods. or maybe there is no God, as many Buddhists believe, and instead find release from the suffering of existence in nirvana (which isn't heaven, By the way). So the person telling the story about the paths up the mountain also has the audacity to claim to know what is at the top- that it is one thing- when all the religions claim to have something very different as their goal.

Or take the story about the blind people and the elephant. All the religions are said to be blind. The only person who claims to have full sight and can see the whole elephant is the person telling the story. They are the ones with ultimate truth who can laugh at the foolish blind people groping around to describe the elephant. The person telling the story is claiming to know a truth they claim no one else has. Isn't that arrogant though. It is even worse because it is under the guise of being tolerant and open minded, when really it denies the other religions the ability to

see the big picture, but claims that knowledge themselves.

So really it is an illusion that you don't have to make a decision- that you can sit on the fence. Elijah makes this plain. He says they have to choose. But how do you decide? Elijah proposes a contest between the two gods. They will prepare two sacrifices on two altars. Elijah says, "you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God " (18:24).

Elijah tells the prophets of Baal to go first. So they get the altar and the sacrifice ready but they don't light the fire. Instead they call on Baal to set the fire to the sacrifice. They are on top of a large hill, and they are probably calling for lightning. They call on Baal's name morning until noon, dancing around the altar. But there was no answer.

Elijah comes out at noon to mock them, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." In the Hebrew, the "wandered away" might be translated as implying he has stepped away to use the bathroom. Elijah, is really laying into them. But, the prophets of Baal tried even harder, crying out and cutting themselves until they were covered in blood. Working hard to do the right dance, say the right words, manipulate their god into doing what they want. But, still, there was no response.

Isaiah imagines a kind of contest as well in Isaiah 41:21-29. Speaking of idols he says, "Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that

we may be dismayed and terrified. Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you. ... Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind” (23-24, 29).

In Deuteronomy we read God saying, “Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection! ‘See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me” (Deut 32:37-39).

The idols we worship ultimately will let us down. For some alcohol is an idol that promises to numb the pain of life, but it ultimately enslaves us and creates its own pain. For others, pornography is an idol that promises a sense of intimacy or escape, but it ultimately enslaves and doesn't follow through on what it promises. Some worship the idol of youthful beauty that promises you don't have to age, but it is ultimately a lie and will let you down after you have sacrificed thousands of dollars. Or maybe the idol of financial success has promised you that people will look up to you and you will feel like you have spent your life well and that you can have all the toys you want, but then you become ill, or you have sacrificed relationships serving the idol of success, or maybe it has caused you to take irrational risks in sacrificing for that idol. Like the prophets of Baal, you do the dance and you shed your blood, but it doesn't follow through on the promise. Human beings are made for worship. We will worship something, whether we know it or not. Like Bob Dylan sang, “You're gonna have to serve somebody,/ It may be the devil or it may be the Lord/ But you're gonna have to

serve somebody.”

After the prophets of Baal are done then it is Elijah’s turn. Elijah repairs the altar of the God of Israel that had been damaged. He repairs the altar with 12 stones- pointing to the 12 tribes of Israel. He digs a trench around the altar and he asks them to soak the altar and the sacrifice with 12 jars of water. This will make it harder to fire to light and there will be no doubt left in their mind about how the fire was lit. As Elijah prays, he calls on the God of the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. This is the God who has been with them as a people. The God who has given promises to these Patriarchs. This is the God who led their people out of Egypt and endured their grumbling and disobedience in the wilderness.

God answers with fire. And the fire burns so hot it consumes everything, even the stones. The contest has been won. The people fall down on their faces and admit that the God of Israel is the true God. And after this the three year drought ends. The contest lets the people know that it is not the Baal of the rain storm that brings the rain, but the God of Israel.

We aren’t to put God to the test like this. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness he responds that we are not to put the Lord to the test (Matt 4:7; Deut 6:16). Elijah was operating under the direction of God. This wasn’t Elijah manipulating God to prove himself in the way Elijah wanted. However, God does give us reason to believe. One way we can do this kind of contest in a modern way is to hold up the various worldviews. Hold up the atheistic materialist worldview (that says what you see is all you get), against the Buddhist worldview, against the Christian

worldview, etc. Which one makes the most sense of life? Which one is most livable? Which one has the most potential to create beautiful lives? Which one seems most grounded in truth? Which one seems to be grounded in history? For example, we might look at the resurrection of Jesus as being a kind of historical possibility we can test. The resurrection confirmed that Jesus was who he said he was. Jesus was a real historical person.

It is counter-cultural to claim to have any kind of spiritual truth. But, it is really the only intellectually feasible way forward. We have to make a decision about how we are going to live. If we decide for one way we are denying another way. As Jesus said we cannot serve both God and money (Matt 6:24). This is a principle we see over and over in scripture. As we discern an idol in our lives we should carefully put it to the test. And when we see that it can't stand up to God and can't fulfill what it promises we should have it destroyed so that we can follow the living God whole heartedly.