

Elijah Meets Baal

Elijah Versus the Prophets of Baal

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TO THE READER

This is a short story written by me, Mark Lee Golden. It is based on the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, taken from First Kings Chapter 18:1-40 in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament or Tanakh). The writing is a creative work of spiritual and historical fiction. Enjoy!

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PREFACE

What would it take to show a nation that their god really did exist? What would it take to prove that they had mixed falsehoods in with their faith and finally that their god hadn't changed, but rather they had?

"Wait...wait, a minute! Didn't I mean, what would it take to show the world that God really existed?" or "What would it take to prove to people who don't believe in God or much of anything that - well...you get the picture?"

Understood. Such a line of reasoning makes sense to the modern mind. But back in 850 BC or so, the idea of there being only one God, the Creator, occupied a small place at the bottom of the heap of religions. More on this later.

Before our Information Age and the invention of television, telephone, or computers for mass communication - how would a supposed god accomplish such huge goals mentioned above? "I REALLY EXIST!"

Well, how about under the arena of the open sky and on plenty of available land, sort of like a free concert, show or event? How about something unusual on two stages with a cast of hundreds of skilled, entertaining contestants? Perhaps even the local king and queen would be there to view the happening! Open free to the public, expectations of an audience of over 100,000 and perhaps a god or two would attend - being the main attraction.

Could work, 2,850 years ago. Maybe?

Over 1,000 years before the prophet Elijah was born (approximately 4,000 years for us), the Hebrew patriarch Abraham found himself hand-picked to be the father of belief in only one God. The ancient world believed in a plurality or family of gods. Even in our day, certain people groups hold to that religious idea. Each immortal god operates his or her department of specialized purposes with supernatural abilities. The biggest god tries to preside over the troubling lesser ones. But the (truly holy) idea of only one, all purpose, all powerful, all knowing and everywhere present Supreme Being was new back then – and it remains so for millions in our day! Maybe you are one of them. Believing in such a God is simple, but explaining such a God is impossible.

It is as though countless whirling, buzzing bees locked in a wooden barrel, have unsuccessfully tried to explain God (in detail) for centuries. It's always proved helpful for the explainers and their curious or bored explainees, when a timely miracle happens. This is especially true when the timing of the miracle was foretold by the explainer. Nothing beats that! Nothing ever will.

In the Middle Eastern country of Israel; southwest of the Sea of Galilee and just east of the modern port city of Haifa, Mount Carmel is the name a low mountain range which slopes to the Mediterranean Sea. For such a unique public spectacle mentioned above, the Hebrew god Yahweh tried using his most prominent spokesman and doer-of-deeds, the head prophet of the day, Elijah. This god hoped to prove that his chosen people, the Hebrews were still his own and would always be so. Though the population of Israel committed religious unfaithfulness again and again, this god remained committed to the covenant and oaths both sides agreed on centuries ago.

Yahweh gave Elijah a message to propose a challenge, a duel between himself and a newcomer, the rival god, named Baal. This was a very interesting concept, and totally unheard of.

INTRODUCTION

In his time, Elijah saw spiritual cancer come in many names, but always with the same results and always originating in the heart. Some blasphemous practices could be surgically removed by holy hands and lips, while other cases proved inoperable. Elijah hoped his obedient actions for Yahweh would reform and purify his nation.

Sadly, this moral, immoral, loyal, disloyal, cycle was not new to the Hebrews. 700 years before Elijah, on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land; even then, they chose to mix in the worship of other gods. Soon after arriving in the Promised Land they adopted the religious methods of neighboring cultures, assimilating practices into worship of the Supreme Being. See-sawing loyalty meshed the One God with imagined deities. This sad spiritual arithmetic of addition, subtraction, division and even multiplication continued generation after generation for centuries. Purifying the Hebrews from contamination in order to bless them was Yahweh's main objective.

That's why (what some call) the Old Testament, is a book filled with negative stories and violence. Simply put, the pages record many broken promises and for doing so, promised punishment. An angry, vengeful God? Yes. One example: Patterns such as sacrificing a family's firstborn child on a burning altar – while still alive – to a god that didn't exist. This routine made Him angry, especially when His stated desire was to uniquely bless each firstborn.

Adonai (the Lord) would send prophets to try to turn their lifestyles and hearts back to Him and His handbook of do's and don'ts – the Torah. Given time, plenty of time, like a caring parent...patience and grace finally came to an end. If there ever was a sanctified, safe, in-between zone, the God of Israel never pointed the way to it. Not for the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, no. He felt jealousy toward His chosen people.

Enemies crossed Israel's borders and attacked victoriously. After varying periods of slavery, paying tribute and worse, the Jews would finally repent. Understanding, marked by obedience resurfaced. This activated God to search, select and instruct his secret weapons – ordinary people who desired to learn and serve by leading. Transformation changed men and women's hearts into super-sized servants and in the eyes of others – super-humans. At such times, even Israel appeared to be a super-ior race to the surrounding tribes and kingdoms.

This short story focuses in on one such super-human and one incident.

Brimming with faith and obedience Elijah fearlessly followed His instructions and challenged Israel's northern ten tribes' king, to assemble all the people; made up of Hebrews, half-Hebrews and a number of non-Hebrews (gentiles). Most lived partly loyal to Yahweh and to Baal. This divided loyalty had to end. The audience didn't know it, but each one would face the decision of their lives. A duel of the gods, a duel between two supposed supreme deities! Which of the gods would accept the animal sacrifice prepared for them? Or, would both gods come and accept the animal sacrifices? What if neither god cared, and both didn't showed up?

Was it a coincidence that the meeting for this supernatural showdown took place on Mount Carmel? In the Hebrew language, Carmel means "God's Vineyard." 100 years later, the Hebrew prophet Isaiah wrote of Israel being "His vineyard."

* * * *

The memorable Election Day dawned like any other morning. Before the designated meeting, opinions solidified for some, but far too many people wavered. One's daily ceremonial rituals

meant a vote of loyalty to one god, the other god or both. That was the problem. The immense crowd on that historic day was a mixed one. Most compromised the faith of their fathers with the Canaanite gods and goddesses of the original inhabitants and foreigners. Like Ahab their king, they wavered. Three years of drought caused many a good worshiper, to just give up. Where one's loyalty lay became controversial.

Timidly faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, some strained to live even a shadow of an authentic righteous lifestyle during the recent tumble of political and religious changes. Secretly, 7,000 men and women, having a love and hunger for Adonai – a small amount considering the population – lived faithfully with a fierce enemy. Yet these adherents survived unseen and unheard. Disciples of Judaism lived in fear.

On the throne of the northern kingdom, in the royal city of Jezreel, sat King Ahab, but the true ruler of the land? His wife Jezebel. She was a Canaanite princess and priestess from the city of Tyre. Jezebel's father, Ethbaal was the king of the nearby Phoenician coastal city states of Tyre and Sidon, plus a priest himself. Marriage sealed a desirable alliance supplying mutual trade and protection. Regrettably, Ahab's father, King Omri strayed from Israel's God-given religion and so opened the door for his son to continue in spiritual rebellion.

In Phoenicia, the future queen grew up with a front row seat to splendid and sometimes gruesome religious ceremonies. Ahab's conversion to pagan gods and idols accelerated due to his weak-willed desire to please his royal-born, domineering and crafty wife. Ahab and Jezebel modeled and promoted the worship of various gods and man-made images. This failure ended up leading thousands of Hebrews astray. She insisted that Yahweh's prophets be hunted and murdered, seeking to eliminate Judaism from history. As a result, disloyalty by the Israelites spread in the northern and southern kingdoms. Ahab's reign had been characterized by a period of droughts, epidemics and famines, being God's judgment for his adoption of idol worship and forsaking Jerusalem as Israel's center of worship.

Ahab made Baal, the official state god to be worshipped as the sun-god, storm-god and the god who provided fertility, but the supreme god too. Worshipers prostrated themselves before the representational idol of a bull and kissed it. By Jezebel's influence, King Ahab allowed the priests of Baal to do the unthinkable – human sacrifice, including infants – believing this would help bring military victory, plus fertility for the land, herds, flocks and people. Regrettable superstitions spread to all corners of the land and into people's hearts and minds.

A number of priests came to live in Jezebel's new land. With almost an addictive drive, Jezebel hired upwards of 450 priests, representatives and servants – answerable to her. The new queen utilized the common man's taxes to house and feed her small invading army. She built elegant temples to her gods; submission required. She also made places for the worship and veneration of the Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah, the mother of Baal. This goddess enjoyed the special role of being the wife of god El and the plentiful child-bearer of seventy gods. Wooden images of Asherah sprouted like groves. Jezebel's religious invasion into the northern kingdom included the importation 400 Asherah priests, prophets and servants.

Every Asherah sanctuary supplied male and female prostitutes and large carvings of the male sex organ. If humans were fertilized, then of course, this would help the soil be fertile.

The spiritual poison of deliberate disobedience, which the queen's controlling nature poured into the life blood of the country, required a dose of serious, holy blood-letting. She side-tracked the citizens, manipulating and detouring them into ways their ancient Redeemer God never intended. The Canaanite religion ensnared the Hebrews, leading to spiritual chaos that brought down God's judgment.

In our day, some doubt that the Jewish people are still “His” people. Others are convinced that He rejected them centuries ago. Still others believe that whatever has befallen the Jews, scattered around the globe, the ancient covenants – and promises – are firm and will come to pass. Hard to believe, but today some people of the Hebrew (Jewish) race don’t believe in God or even a Creator. Such think that the Bible and the following story are a mixture of myth and fairy tale woven into history; partly made up and mostly unreliable.

But, the following is based on a true story from First Kings Chapter 18: 1-40 in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

Author’s Note. Dear reader: If you continue and read this story, I promise not to leave you in ancient times. But I warn you – afterwards – your mind might linger in the past.



33AD Northern Israel

As self-pity fills me once more, I'll breathe yet another short prayer. After he did; bent over, panting in pain and dripping with sweat, the man said, "This is ridiculous!"

Azariah, of the tribe of Zebulun, berated himself wiping more sweat before it ran into his eyes once again.

For too long this day I've hunted a runaway lamb. Fun labor chasing one around a small, rock-walled pen at home, but chasing one across the hills of Mount Carmel – now that's embarrassing. If only I was hunting for deer, and failed at that, then I could come back to the village with something of my pride left. Now, besides worrying about neighbors mocking me, there is my wife and then always in the heavens, the Almighty too.

I can imagine Him looking down amused, 'Man versus lamb – who shall win this time?'

Worse yet, the sun will be setting soon and the beginning of Passover. I have no time for these self-mocking thoughts distracting my pursuit. Azariah exhaled a long breath and his head hung low. Reflecting on the reason for the pursuit, he enjoyed a little peace, knowing God purposely made him a Jew.

Azariah's mind also burned with guilt due to optimism born several hours ago when the search started. His browned skin contained a soul in misery. *When I left home I didn't think this would take long. I regret, so regret, not bringing a skin of water or any food. My throat is so dry and I'm weak from hunger. If only I'd brought my eldest son Eliab with me to speed up the search, we'd both be home right now!* Trekking the barren hills, carefully listening, eyes sweeping side to side, his mind wandered.

Something needed to change.

At the top of the ridge he rested beside an arrangement of large uncut stones. Twelve – he knew – everyone knew. They represented the tribes of Israel.

During his rest, the lamb hunter reviewed his knowledge history.

As every Israelite knows, in ancient times, right here, a servant made history for himself...one more time. His name was Elijah, from Tishbe in Gilead. The Almighty used him to express how the current rulers aroused His anger. Why? Because of the continual evil done by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. The prophet pronounced a drought to last for years to come. This led to a severe famine. Due to his obedience to God, the prophet then lived as a fugitive; the crown's number one enemy. He disappeared for over three years, three very dry years. During that time, Elijah eluded a deadly manhunt spanning every middle-eastern nation, using every resource of the kingdom.

Three and a half years passed. Then surprisingly, Adonai asked his servant to go to the royal city of Jezreel and talk with the king. Ahab, in his moral and spiritual near-sightedness blamed Elijah as the maker of Israel's troubles. "You try to heap your guilt upon me, O King? Please keep your humorless folly for your servants and other paid underlings!"

Two strong purposes for the visit lay before Ahab. First, Elijah reiterated the only reason rain had not fallen was entirely due to Ahab and his family's refusal to obey the commands of Adonai in the Torah. An additional side bit of surprising good news: rain is coming soon.

The king's frustration ran deep because of the ineffectual and expensive search for the very same person who voluntarily now stood before him. Impatiently listening, he waited for worthless reason number two. Elijah's unexpected promise of rain actually related to the second item, yet this mysterious connection lay unseen to Ahab for several days. The prophet demanded an appointed day be made for a meeting with the king and queen, the 450 prophets of Baal, the

400 prophets of Asherah – and all Israel was to be invited. Mount Carmel the location.

Was that event seven or eight hundred years ago? Azariah wondered.

More than a mere centuries old local legend or myth, all the Israelis knew the unforgettable story and believed it. Even soldiers of the Roman occupation trekked up here to see the spot, though most came to enjoy the panoramic view of “their” latest territory.

While resting, Azariah pondered that extra-ordinary person, Elijah. Somehow Adonai took hold of that man’s body like an empty wineskin. While in His grasp, God blew His Spirit filling him to almost, well, really...to bursting and even beyond that! But, bursting never came! How else did those miracles happen? Even the schooled men who can write and read say that this day on Mt. Carmel is recorded as fact. The precious scrolls, rewritten afresh for future generations, told all the good and all the shameful stories of our people from centuries past. How welcome Elijah would be now!

Kneeling against one of the large stones of the monument, Azariah closed his eyes and naturally began another attempt to connect with the Creator.

Adonai, listen to me please! A male lamb, one year old, spotless and healthy, that is my prayer. I owned one early this morning; all I want is to have it back. If I fail to find it soon, I will have to return to the village without Passover dinner’s main course. I will have to ask a neighbor if I, my wife Hannah, two sons and three daughters would be ‘welcome’ to share the holiday feast with them. At least Hannah will have the side dishes prepared. If it came to it, these could be renamed ‘contributions.’ This could make the blending of two families for a communal meal more hospitable. I know it’s not an embarrassment to seek a nearby open door. That’s actually an instruction in Your writings of old, but any man, in any age, feels a little less like a man if he cannot provide for his family. Amen.

Azariah raised his head opening his eyes to bright sunshine and hearing scuffling on the hard ground nearby. In a shaded spot, was a lamb, his lamb, munching on a clump of bright green spring grass. Looking skyward, a quick, “Thank you, O Blessed One!” went heavenward. The hunt ended. Standing up in haste, his mind was woozy and skull throbbing from hunger and exhaustion. In a clumsy attempt to get steady, Azariah unsettled one of the sacred stones.

Instantly, motivated by fear, shame and embarrassment, he instinctively glanced around in all directions.

Elijah moved these twelve stones to remake a broken-down Hebrew altar. Each has remained exactly in the same position for hundreds of years. The holy sacrifice! What if someone saw me fumble one of the sacred stones out of position? Azariah’s fear passed. No one saw his accident; just a lamb with one thing on its mind – grass.

He shuddered, thinking of the horrible, long dead, Queen Jezebel and her ordering slaves to push the stones into a messy, unusable pile. Those defiling hands shoved right where later, Elijah’s hands touched, in his holy reconstruction of the Lord’s altar.

The large stone ground against the stone nearest to it. When Azariah shifted the stone back into place, something occurred. At first, he didn’t notice. The exposed portion had been sheltered from the elements for centuries. That scraping let loose a tiny cloud of gray charcoal dust. These molecules still remembered the day of the heavenly fire when they were birthed. Now on an afternoon, hundreds of years later the brilliance of sunlight struck the billowy mass and the dark puff floated into the air and dispersed. Lifting them off the earth, a faint breeze wafted them into the blue. Unnoticed, God’s finger helped this memento be unearthed and then He blew.

The cluster of invisible travelers was sent on an errand in a southerly direction toward Jerusalem. Through the night and into the following afternoon wind carried them across fifty miles of Israel’s countryside to a distinct destination just outside the walls of the holy city.

Azariah noticed the land lacked any history except for the twelve stones. Unfortunately, these can't tell their front-row story, the sights, smells and sounds plus the touch of heavenly fire straight from Adonai's hand. Each stayed just where Elijah placed them, scorched, remaining charred for centuries. For Azariah saw not only a holy landmark but a set of heroic trophies. Baal's rock altar? Nowhere to be seen.

Azariah tied his lamb up so it could continue eating, while in gladness of finding the animal, took a needed long break. Motionless, his eyes took in the view while he rested. *Being alone with God brings joy and goodness.*

Time passed, while Azariah reflected on the ancient altar and the prophetic super-man. Azariah calculated whether he could still make it home for the beginning of the holiday with time to spare. Hannah would be praying for him to find the paschal lamb and hurry back safely. *It will be tight.*

Adonai, when I depart this holy place please speed my feet. This small burden that is mine to carry, please make it as if it were but a feather. Please give peace to my worried wife concerning my whereabouts and that I am returning with our lamb. May our children not be a bother to her in my absence. I wonder if I am being unfair to Hannah by doing this daydreaming? But I don't have any way to contact her. It's a holy day; thinking about our past is good.

He squatted on a nearby boulder recalling the scripture lesson. Surprised at the depth of what he remembered, he relived the story. Picking up a handful of pebbles to toss at nothing, he settled back into the past piecing together historical facts, elaborations and the suppositions. Mostly, remembering these from the traveling teachers, judges or rabbis who had officiated and taught at the local festival gatherings and their synagogue. Such men instructed the community in Jewish law, traditions, performed rituals such as circumcision and would settle disputes.

Annually in the spring a middle-aged rabbi from Jerusalem, of the tribe of Judah, whose name was Simeon, stayed in Azariah's village for at least two consecutive Sabbaths. An impassioned storyteller, truly gifted by the Creator; sometimes he used handy props but also enjoyed acting parts out and used mime. In the portrayal of this ancient, dynamic event, his audiences became so captivated and listened so intently, they felt as if they lived in the story. The rabbi's imagery, expressions and words blossomed afresh in Azariah's mind. Rabbi Simeon's word pictures now came alive again in his weary imagination.

God and His exploits are so much on my heart and mind this Passover; maybe I should have become a teacher instead of a lamb chaser!

* * * *

850 BC Israel's Northern Kingdom

At dawn in the city of Jezreel, in the tribal land of Issachar, King Ahab stood in his bed chamber. Servants busily dressed and adorned royalty. A gold earring, turban style headdress, and beautiful rings with rare gems accented his otherwise plain appearance. Jeweled armbands, necklaces', amulets and talisman of religious significance added to his prideful confidence. He picked up a chain with a pure gold charm in the shape of a bull which was a wedding gift from Jezebel. Ahab felt the weight and tested it in his open hand, by raising and lowering. Moved by curiosity he contemplated his own value to the one who gave the good luck charm.

Patiently, his servants waited for the king to complete his distraction. Ornamented robes of vibrant colors and intricate handiwork lay open held by servants. When the king's eye met the eye of His closest attendant, the man gestured to one in particular. Ahab nodded approval and the striking garment covered quite nice. Again a variety of fine belts lay to be chosen. With a huff he pointed at one. A servant attached it. Everyone in the room gave smiles which only made the king

feel even smaller. In a gruff voice he announced, “Fine, fine, let’s be off already!”

The king readied himself for the trip but Jezebel chose to remain at the palace. She perceived attendance as lowering herself. An accented voice of beauty tinged with abrasiveness explained yesterday, “Our so-called opponent, this foul-smelling Elijah, who dresses in rags, is not royalty. Therefore, I’m not obligated to strain my eyes to even look his way. Why oppress my ears with the gibberish staggering off his impoverished tongue? The onlookers, these subjects of mine, will bore me. Common people! They stink, are ugly, and waste my time begging and pleading for this and that. If I went with you, Ahab, I would insult Lord Baal by listening to these Hebrew fables. I might as well visit a tree trunk and ask its opinion on things.”

She let out a sharp-edged bark. Ahab discerned the burst as poison entwined with laughter. Hearing it, a small part of his character died. At the same time a new area birthed inside. Seeds of his wife’s strong ability to scorn, found fertile soil in the heart. If only he could have also felt the mild hardening and his intelligence dim.

He sometimes wondered about his foreign wife’s behavior. *Does having a self-righteousness attitude apply to her or is self-determination a more accurate description? She requires perfect obedience and performance to expedite meeting her wants and needs – whatever the expense or cost to others beneath her. Maybe demands, is more correct. Those eager eyes seem like nothing will ever satisfy her. She cares about no one but herself. Her craving for inner security or inner peace by power over everyone – including me, is well... hmm. Is she overly-ambitious or just achievement-minded and industrious? Maybe too bossy, certainly the bossiest woman I’ve met in all of Samaria. But, is Jezebel, I hate to think – villainous, an opportunist, or simply opportunity-minded?*

Ahab didn’t like the word manipulation, but witnessed her use of it and often thought she manipulated him – the king! *Did such behavior come with princesses or Jezebel create this herself?* Ahab couldn’t process anymore. Not knowing why, all these musings produced a bitter taste and made his head ache.

While walking on a near her sitting room and with yearning in his voice, he told his wife, “I am leaving now...” He waited for an encouraging response, none came – nothing came. Last minute pleas or words of explanation could be said, but he knew that all such talk drained into a small mysterious hole in her heart, disappearing as if never spoken. He considered the word “opponent” and realized he’d wed one. *If anything came down to a fight, I’m glad she would stand alongside me ‘til the end!* Then Ahab realized he was going to a fight – alone. A foul mood rose up and persisted during the entire trip.

Traversing through the courtyard to the stables, Jezebel’s voice unexpectedly called. Beauty mixed with determination wafted, then pierced the air. “Not the chariot, take the sedan chair palanquin with four of my strongest young warriors!” Ahab looked up to the balconies through the fruit trees, but could not find her. The voice seemed to come from no particular direction; it simply knew where to find him. *‘My strongest young warriors?’ Ours, dear, ours!* Pausing to consider her instruction, *Why? It would be faster traveling by horse. What’s her point?* Perhaps surveying his thoughts from afar, the queen spoke again.

“Order the footmen to tread double-time to get there faster, take an extra team to rotate the warriors, that will help, too. And oh, Ahab, how much more dignified you will look in everyone’s eyes arriving, carried by handsome, muscular servants. Now take the finest covered sedan chair, the one with curtains the color of the Great Sea.” The invisible feminine body voiced nothing else. He took the sedan palanquin.

* * * *

Elsewhere in Jezreel while the sun rose, attendants groomed the bodies of the upper hierarchy of priests and prophets. Ritual washing, total body purification in fragrant water, followed by soft

towel drying. Then spiced oil gently brushed into the hairs of heads and beards. The groomers trimmed and shaped beards to perfection and placed blossoming garlands around the necks. The naked bodies received a sprinkling of flower petal water while the priests recited incantations and made pronouncements in sorcery.

Proudly, the finest colorful ceremonial garments with intricate designs and patterns adorned the servers of Baal Most High. Different ranks and positions wore belts and turbans color-coordinated to the office. A rainbow of bobbing cloth finally exited into the streets. Enthusiasm fueled the steps of the religious flock. They had a job to do. They traveled to war. Horses, camels and donkeys awaited those worthy to ride them. The majority of the clergy walked behind them.

They had all slept well, despite the exciting, wondrous and dutiful celebration. This was Baal's Day! As the procession moved through the city, the citizens inhaled the varied fragrances and jealousy filled their hearts. As they sauntered along, discussion of possible strategies lay on the tongues of the ones at the head of this heathen parade. They chatted, organizing which magic rites, enchantments and duties to be performed by whom.

Days before, the king's messengers reached far into the land blowing ram's horns and proclaimed the required attendance on the appointed day. Inhabitants emptied villages and formed caravans. Israelites traveled from all directions, some in transit for several days, camping when needed. Children enjoyed the break from daily life while most adults grumbled about lost work, livestock and fear of thieves.

When the sun rose on the event site, Elijah came out of a cave which he discovered on past treks through the hills of Carmel. The hilly landscape lay speckled with different colored cloth tents. Tribes arrived, one person, one family, one village at a time. Standing at the cave he smiled and prayed for them though none could hear his words. "Well, alright then!" His jaunt down to staging area was sweet and not spiked by bitter misgivings. Each hand held two ceramic jars filled with hay. The bull followed its master.

A long line of people, carts and wagons filled the road from Jezreel. A lone bull tethered to the back of a cart lumbered along. He squinted at the packed groups of the enemy, who distanced themselves from the common folk.

* * * *

Considering the numbers, Azariah thought this contest an unfair match for a deadly end game. Of all places on Earth, God's eyes focused firm on Mount Carmel. The abilities of our all-seeing Creator and numbers mean something beyond the items we can see and count. The obedient man operated as a single player in an ordained, visual contest, going to the core of honoring our heritage and Deliverer. What a daunting predicament to place oneself in!

Even the prophet's famous propositions hit me square in my own creativity. Our Creator placed special mystical intelligence in that servant's mind. He explained to Elijah His desire for twin stages for the altars of sacrifice; one for each opposing deity's demonstration of force and acceptance of the offering. Cleverly, both sides appeared equal in this rivalry, but there could only be one winning team. One god would arrive and one wouldn't.

Also, as part of this supernatural showdown, the fire that would burn up the sacrificial meat was not to be set by any man. The flame must be unearthly.

Upon hearing both proposals, the opposition, proud and over-confident, agreed. Spokesmen for the Canaanite gods accepted the odd challenge with self-assurance. They must've thought, what was one misguided fool against hundreds of protected priests with real jobs and a real king?

Confidence sprang from a deep well of faith dug in private times of obedient intercession for his nation,

plus conversational prayer and sincere worship. This coolness oozed out of Elijah – so much so, he offered his (and God's) enemies to sacrifice first. The man preferred to idly pass the time and watch.

The majority of spectators simply saw hundreds organized against one probable fool. They said, "If there is a god to be baited into making a brief manifestation, numbers aren't on the fool's side." also "He needs a real god or a real trick to get out of this one! Otherwise, he'll die!"

Upon arrival, the religious underlings started looking for firewood and rocks. Soon, two sufficient piles lay ready for the clergy to assign proper placement and design for the altar. When the distinct location was divined, orders followed. Elijah viewed the procedures with curiosity. *Yes, make a very wide and noticeable altar so your god won't have too much trouble finding it!*

Just what did the Phoenicians do in expectation to win the contest of the gods? For the courtly entourage, fasting began the momentous day, now followed by all out exuberant worshipping. They cheered, applauded, prayed, danced, lit incense, leaped, sang and played music – whatever might please Baal. Each whirled in choreographed circles and shouts of liturgical praises. Elements of sorcery mixed together and unseen hands stirred the party on.

One method of worship these followers believed brought a smile to Baal's face, involved bloody self-sacrifice. They imagined him enthroned, peering down from heaven, chin in palm, while his faithful humans repeatedly slashed and cut their bodies. Surely, their own blood would score notice in the ethereal realms of the gods. Indeed, the area near their altar became heavily two-toned. Splattered bright red blood darkened as it sank into the thirsty, brown dirt.

Azariah remembered Rabbi Simeon acting out this part of the drama as a priest of Baal howling to the sky dancing, using a real (but dulled) knife pretending to slice his flesh. Scared little children hid their faces in their parents' chests and cried. More than one parent said, "It's only a story, he won't hurt himself, no one will get hurt."

Pride securely dwelled in the payroll hearts of this priestly multitude. One priest with a howl in his voice gloated to another, "I tell you, vengeful rage will be redefined today!" The other one glowing spoke up with a broad smile adding, "Soon in a scroll, describing the might of Baal – there will be an asterisk." The first priest asked, "Why?" In answer, "The account of this pitiful duel will briefly mention the failure of a certain over-confident fool of a prophet of the so-called Israelite god Yahweh. The asterisk would lead the reader to see that, 'this false prophet's name is forgotten.'" Both priests shook their heads with dastardly laughter while holding their sides. Others asked what was so funny and the mischief spread.

They had only two persistent veins of thought throughout what unexpectedly turned into a long, slow day. Baal's workforce anticipated the demise of Elijah and with him Israel's religious legacy. Their fantasy must have gone something like this.

After heartfelt worship for perhaps 30 minutes, with ease, Baal would show his care and concern to his waiting followers. Without the aid of man, miraculous fire would suddenly blaze within the altar's wood pile; the sacrificial offering gladly accepted. Amazed followers and new converts would kneel, pledging their lives and service to the fire-starting god. All this would take less than an hour.

After Baal's brief presence, his impish task of fire lighting complete and tens of thousands impressed, the false prophet Elijah would be short-lived trouble. Now the hundred thousand strong Baal worshippers would look at the stupid, lone man. His turn to compete, yes!

Elijah, overcome with ill, sinking feelings and shaky hands, would unnecessarily carve up his bull. Then through uncontrollable fright, quivering arms lay the meat out while muttering worrisome prayers to empty air. But who in the heavens was on his side hearing these prayers? No one.

Being fair for the crowd's sake, Elijah's competitors would permit this necessary but impotent time to pass; perhaps 30 to 60 minutes. But then, without the arrival of even a spark, the encircled man would be overrun, and sacrificed. Talk of the pleasure of draining the life-blood from the trouble-maker filled the air. Lastly, his burning flesh, no doubt, a pleasing aroma to an amused, satisfied Baal.

After that, Elijah's name would survive as the butt of many jokes for years to come. His name... never given to any male children – none that had parents with a grain of sense. Israel's god-less representative? Merely a deteriorating memory, in an unmarked grave.

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But as history records, the cool morning hours faded like the crowd's interest. Then the warm afternoon heat stole energy and anticipation from each person present – save one. As the sun moved across the beautiful blue sky above, people felt cheated and their time wasted. How long would this take?

The pathetic pagan dancing, drummed irony into Elijah's jarred, bored soul. *An outlet, I need an outlet!*

Apparently with God's approval, the prophet let loose some penetrating verbal arrows directed at his busy opponents. Criticism inserted with humor can make a memorable and effective wedding of words. Elijah was inspired and these flings redefined zeal for many that day.

Azariah smirked. Among that quiver of choices, my favorite is, 'Perhaps this god of yours squats and is constipated. Though Baal desires to answer he is unable to attend to your needs until he finally poops!'

What shocking confidence filled that man to bully such a huge unforgiving crowd of enemies!

Rabbi Simeon pretending to be Elijah, acted aloof by looking to the sky with arms outstretched yawning or cleaning his fingernails while sighing or murmuring, "Yes, yes, of course. That big Baal of yours, oh my, what a god he is, my, my!"

Rabbi Simeon also pointed his finger at the imaginary pagans, laughed, hooted and slapped his knees. Azariah chuckled, shaking his head once more.

Once Elijah posed his ridiculous questions and comments, digging into Baal's slow response or being unreachable, many in the tiring crowd become curious, too.

But those Israelites turned pagan, loyal to Canaanite gods, feared giving in to his or her developing doubts and growing suspicion. These solidifying thoughts slowly aroused panic. Obviously, Baal, a supernatural being could read their hearts. Worshippers ended up in a vicious cycle of fear. Worry pushed this along, keeping it spinning with an occasional kick in their symbolic rears. All of which Baal could detect from his perch in the heavens! Superstition was on the move and running wild.

Yet, the opposite of fear affected others. Wives, husbands and children questioned their allegiance. Perhaps worthless, pointless faith described their years of adherence? The Spirit of Adonai began maneuvering throughout the crowd using these doubts to open hearts and minds which the sins of idolatry had shutdown.

Throughout the crowd people murmured to one another, "Whichever god finds the time from his busy schedule to impress us by lighting the sacrificial fire is fine...but what we really need is at least one god who is willing to bring back the rain." Some said, "this whole prophet-versus-prophet contest is all about pride and politics. Give us a god who will end the famine and our allegiance will gladly be theirs!" A third person huffed and said, "Who-ever!"

Hope, which no limits of language, fluctuated in Jew and gentile hearts alike.

Each person had other things to do that day. Many just wanted Baal to reveal his might, showing up Israel's old-fashioned traditions and beliefs. Maybe then he'd let them all go home. Criticizers in the crowd increased – fueled by hunger and thirst. Nobody ever thought it would take this long to rouse one god to give in to a simple appeal from his loyal devotees proving lordship! This embarrassing delay pleased no one and time passed slower and slower. Some kicked at the dirt in annoyance. Like a bad dream, endlessly getting worse.

One impatient man from the tribe of Issachar spoke fearlessly, “I could run up there and within minutes light either one of those piles of wood. Would that make me a god, huh? Huh! Maybe we are all gods?” People nodded without smiling. A few hearers repeated the mocking words and perceived the comical logic. Smiles now bloomed on weary faces.

On Mount Carmel that day, murmuring rumbled through the impatient god-watchers. If both were a no-show, neither of their representatives would easily pacify the disillusionment and anger of a huge mob. Elijah would get the worst of the angst for having picked this duel to begin with.

But Adonai gave Elijah the day's unshakable forecast. Into it, the man entwined his loyalty – easily the biggest, scariest decision of his life. This latest experiment would surely be unforgettable. An otherworldly allure drew him.

No matter what's said of this prophet through the centuries – he really was tough. Surrounded by not only 850 known enemies in a vexed state of extreme humiliation, but also a murderous, frustrated king – that made 851. Not far away his queen waited; whose rumored shred of kindness was yet to be experienced by anybody.

Baal's large entourage of priests and prophets enjoyed the wealth and care provided by royalty. In their competitive hierarchy, they enjoyed a cozy life being protective of position and status. However, that day, that unexpected moment, danger lay plentiful and thick with an ill color running through it.

* * * *

Normally, Baal's priests lit the altar's fire. But now, all pairs of hands hung slack, voluntarily tied. How long would it take for him to do this specific little request proposed by an enemy, which they cheerfully agreed upon?

On stage, after each wave of rallied momentum, a spontaneous meditative interval arrived. Each worshipper considered the same thought, *This surely must be enough for Baal!* Since such doubts remained unspoken, the useless activities began anew. They didn't know that the entirety of all their efforts couldn't manifest even a single, dismal spark.

Frustration grew. Each felt a 'we-are-in-a-losing-battle' attitude. Blood loss helped diminished thinking. They wondered, *just how long and how much more imploring will this take?*

Minutes and hours became a marriage of misery. An unforgettable morning separated sense from duty and now propelled this matrimony toward a long dreary afternoon. All 850 brides secretly craved divorce. As evening approached, a multitude of hungry, disillusioned bastards, born of this parental failure and wedded to fake godship, fed on the only thing that was left to eat – hate.

The mighty, yet intimate God whom Elijah served, turned the prophet's gaze outward and away from the self-impressed, well-paid fools, to the waiting countrymen. This vast crowd caught Elijah's compassion, and his focus on the opponents faded. The special ceremonies and oh, so, coordinated rites...failing his minimal attention.

These were tired, dirty, working folk; their lives occupied with the basics of fishing, farming,

building homes, and raising families. Adonai wanted to add to their time on earth knowing their weary daily labors and also their pleasures. So far, this was no break.

Elijah pondered how to win their lives back to God and profoundly stay there. *'I need to identify with them, draw in my frustrated, divided audience. They have their daily chores—nursing babies (hundreds cried constantly), children to love (thousands now incessantly whined and complained), men who went to work as darkness subsided and sunshine came once more. Workers, who during the heat of the day, only looked forward to a full meal at home, watching their children grow and play, plus a little time with the wife and then to bed.'* His thoughts ran deep. *Adonai wants in to their day, their lives. He has something new, different, with a lifetime of good changes gained by worship and obedience! He is not aloof from the everydayness of which this Earth offers, or confines. His personality, laws and ways have magnetism and benefits. Besides, He is their Maker and the Creator of all things!*

Elijah scanned the wide mass of humanity. Tired of standing, many lay slumped on the rough ground or napped. Fussy babies accented a widespread undercurrent of unpleasant sounds of discomfort. Grinning children chased each other, which brought smiles to some in the tedious crowd. Lucky ones sat under shade trees, which they cleverly staked out and hadn't budged from all day.

Boredom swept all like a plague. Many had no time for gods, especially any absent ones. Not a few, wished for no god, rituals, prayers or rules of any sort. People sneered at prohibitions imposed by a few know-it-alls.

"For what?" one asked.

"To please who?" said another.

"Why chant petty prescribed so-called prayers?" Spat one. "Why the ceaseless repetition - can't they hear us?"

Someone else joined in. "Why forfeit our silver and gold, not to mention the fruits and grain from our hard work in the fields?"

"What vanity to believe that coordinating our free will, to do this or that, obligates the will of these invisible mighty gods?" the speaker threw a rock at a nearby tree and it struck hard.

"Does rousing their questionable benevolence really require our measly obeisance? Or, are we being lied to?" while this one let out his harsh words a foot kicked at a boulder.

Various men, sniffed, grunted and barked these accusations. In nearby circles, women and men's heads nodded.

Across the landscape, other afflicted minds proposed the same ideas. Debates and free-thinking broke out around the temporary encampment. Civil men do think alike and uncivil men think as wild as they please.

"Does any man know it all? Does anybody up front at the altar even know what they're doing? Is worship to any god a total waste of effort? We sing and kneel, doing things this way and that - what for...to protect us from their displeasure, their wrath?"

With arms spread wide and slowly wheeling around, another said in a jaded, peevish voice, "What's sin after all...but how every man lives? Why be pardoned, what good will it do? What's done is done - nothing can undo that, right?"

A woman grumbled, "Who can make sense of religion anyway?"

Criticizing the bustling show at the pagan altar, "If religion requires rites performed in right

procedures, it's clear that after all these hours they haven't gotten it r-i-g-h-t. Have they? Not yet!" Chuckles rose and fell among the listeners.

Someone added, "Seems this pack of priests and prophets placed the key in the lock but after using all their combined strength they can't turn it a twitch. These know-it-alls can't unlock their god's little itsy-bitsy blessing." adding, "Maybe he's even more stubborn than the rest of us put together?" Laughter followed, and wagging faces with feigned stupid expressions, head scratching and sincere questioning looks.

In the teeming mass of fatigued souls, rebellion to pompous religious authority and belief in any divine sovereignty festered and bubbled like sores. Humility stumbled on a rock and fell hard right on its face – while onlookers gawked. Honor endured being kicked, beaten and called foolish names. Faith, bound to a stake – barely survived heartless hours of torture.

Azariah chewed on a new thought much like a cow chews its cud – except his God-given intelligence went into the effort. If Baal had answered his worshippers by fire – then all eyes would be turned toward Elijah and the immediate need to copy. If he did so, well – then what? Many would have been dumbfounded and begun questioning, 'Whom should we follow now?' or 'Guess we need a bigger challenge for these dueling gods to prove who's the greater one.' Azariah let out a chuckle heard by no one except the lamb, who while munching, briefly cocked its head to eye him.

* * * *

On an impulsive, Elijah did what none of Baal's brood expected. Before the time came for a chance at a miracle, he left his sanctified perch. As the pathetic repetitive prayers and howling faded behind him, his head sagged. A long sigh came from deep within. He trod down the slope of the hill and started walking among the crowd. Slowing the pace, Elijah needed to watch not to step on those sitting on the ground close to the front in the tightly packed throng.

Trying to be a simple man, once more – it had been so long – a relaxing casual stride returned. But his status tagged along, causing public attention. Years ago, normal life ended for Elijah and would never return. Being called by the supernatural could only mean an end of the natural.

In between his times of spirit-filled exhilaration, other days were tough. Telling God and confiding in a few countrymen, "It's uncomfortable when people expect me to always speak mystical sayings or perform magical deeds whenever I'm doing the littlest, mundane activities." and, "I've found that the hero of many, may be the friend of only a few." He found the unpleasant strain of loneliness even when surrounded by a multitude of sincere fellow worshippers. Renown followed carrying out orders, especially when the orders came straight from the King of the Universe. This made for a hard spiritual walk. His uniqueness drew the attention of the well-meaning, yet overwhelming. So, he preferred to be alone or live in places where he wasn't known. There he'd try to fit in and live with less tension.

More than once he told God, "It isn't easy being a lead prophet."

As legs and feet cooperated, the eyes saw more than anyone else could. Though shoulder height with most of the men who were standing, his stature, his bearing, and his insight began growing. While mingling among the populace, he knew with every step, the Spirit of Adonai was strong on him.

The Spirit winnowed within the crowd and also overtook Elijah's heart. The prophet's soul filled with life and uncontained compassion as his mind soared with a new unfamiliar breed of understanding. He grew in spirit, rising higher, beyond anyone. Though his physical size remained the same, supernaturally he looked down and into each person. The feeling of standing ten or twelve feet tall was fascinating.

Since he'd met Yahweh, his life changed. Still his, but an added component was not. God

drove that part of him. Elijah liked this, feared it, ran from this and rejoiced in it. Today, he walked in the mystery of it more than any other time.

He sensed sandaled feet on dry ground, but he felt like the only person under a large umbrella, or Jewish chuppah, meandering in the heavy rain drops of drenched, humiliated humanity. Only he remained uniquely dry, undoubtedly by promised holy assurance.

His unexpected appearance caused men to elbow one another, nod his way or point. Dozens of times he heard a muffled, "Hey, take a look." or "It's him!" Startled, quizzical faces beheld someone – different. They couldn't picture themselves sawing a log or harvesting next to him. Men wanted to know such a prophet, be his friend or neighbor, but each one knew that this was Elijah and they were merely "others." Elijah also wanted this feeling of kinship and community, but knew he'd never know it again.

Now, in the crowd his senses also absorbed the ugliness of life. The smell of urine, feces and vomit irritated his nostrils. People dozing, snored aloud, mouths wide open in embarrassing ways. Women whose untimely menstrual cycle arrived with them, tried to hide their strips of soaked red cloth from disapproving, revolting sideways glances.

Several heated arguments caught his attention. Men against men, women against women, unembarrassed husbands and wives yelling about who knew what; parents bellowing at tired, angry, frustrated children who craved to just 'go home.' Women in various stages of pregnancy lay down or waddled after errant children. By the unashamed groans, this trial of a day should have been spent with a midwife in the privacy of their homes.

Following sounds of shouting, men were in the midst of fist fights and wrestling matches. Circles of the bored formed to watch the violent entertainment. One man took a punch to the face, went over backwards and never got up. Other angry souls grabbed rocks and heaved them at their opponents. By the bruises and bleeding, he surmised that well-aimed rocks did their job. After a bout, victors who laid men out proudly raised their fists in triumph. Losers took off running while being taunted mercilessly. Crowds jeered and clapped their hands.

At these hotspots Elijah rested his eyes on fellow man. These men fought for reasons he never questioned. *Squabbles come and squabbles go.*

Walking by two men choking and punching a third man, one of them noticed the prophet and immediately loosened his grip. This got him a swift kick by the outmanned fellow. "Hey, look, look! It's that prophet! Stop it...or he might...might, do something...to us. Stop!" Elijah simply passed them by, no lectures, no punishment or mesmerizing feat.

The grumbling in the crowd revealed the crumbling away of whatever peace and optimism they brought with them in their travels and arrival this early morning. Tempers were short and evidently restraint gone from most.

Stopping again, men sat in close circles involved in games of chance. Gambling killed the boredom quite well. Without looking up at the nearby stranger, one fellow invited him to sit down and join in – if he had something of value. When silence followed, a few of the players looked up at the quiet watcher. Each froze. Elijah smiled and then added, "Perhaps if I had the time, I would. But what I have of value cannot be bought or sold, I hope you know that." Amused, he gave a slight wave and moved on.

Play resumed and chatter began. "Not such a bad guy after all." and "Those prophets like talking in riddles and hope to get you thinking." Another added, "Pompous, if ask me."

The extra tall point of view funneled a mixture of God's wide love and piercing, radiant glory within the prophet's soul. Elijah thought, *I see through men and women. I see what makes them whole.*

Also, what they do to prevent their lives from getting and remaining whole. I'm seeing into individuals, their unique components...what You, Lord have placed directly in them. All of these different souls have Your stamp of approval. You made us in Your image. We can walk back with You and find the way to that wholeness again. You inscribed on the very bottom of these jars of clay, which hold Your gift of life, the number of their days beginning when life started, their birth day.

He didn't feel like a giant Elijah, or over-sized human. More like God gave provided extra-long legs. With such a stalking overview his mind soared with a spirit of almost unlimited understanding. *It must be how God understands and sees us! I am like a junior of His, a son, like a favorite little pet carried under His arm or on His shoulders taking me for a walk to teach me.*

Emotions rose up and overwhelmed the receptive man, until, undone he cried.

Some heard the sobs while only seeing his back; others saw the reddened face tearing up. More women than men saw the look on his face, which was one they could identify with. As each did so, by faith, Elijah knew they instantly gained knowledge of God. He quietly said, "Adonai whispers into many hearts at once!"

Passing by, Elijah touched a few children. One looked up and asked an adult, "Who was that man?" Toddlers in their mother's laps smiled due to his warm stroke. Occasionally, he stooped to look at a young couple with small children. All smiled together in the special moment. Mothers were heard to say, "That man knows God." Confidently, a father said to his daughter, "All that you see and will ever see, God created - even you."

The child giggled, "Abba! Adonai didn't make me - mommy and you made me!" Elijah never saw the warm embrace the father gave his innocent child, nor the words, "Yes, we made you, but it really took all three of us!"

One boy, exuberantly stretched out his arm and said, "Abba, isn't that the brave man from up front? I know he's going to show that big nest of snakes who's really God! Yep, he sure is-just you watch and see!"

When Elijah caught these firm profound words, he choked up inside. Tears formed again. *I am Elijah. I am THAT prophet everyone is talking about! Me.*

Amidst the uneven ground of the meeting place, he heard a wonderful unevenness of celebration and joviality. His ears led him to a place where each ear heard separate inviting sounds. He went to his right. After coming to the top of a little rise he saw the reason.

Dozens of people danced, sang, played flutes, harps, drums and more. They shouted and worshipped in various ways. Liking this, he proceeded to the group. In his spirit, he knew this was his kind of crowd, Yahweh's children. As he approached, tingling rippled up and down his leathery, baked skin. A unique lightness entered into his steps supplying weightless buoyancy which he enjoyed and wanted more. Only a few feet away now, his ears and eyes filled with the beautiful hubbub. A swirling sea of bright faces, skirts flying, laughing mouths of all ages, enthusiastic hands held colorful banners whipped by the breeze slapped the air. Energetic individuals held staffs high with carved symbols of different tribes, each crowned by the menorah.

Revelers noticed the new face. Voices surrounded him. Each verbalized some new treat about God's wonders, majesty, eternalness, creativity, care and unending uniqueness.

Before he made any choice, God's Spirit overcame him. He didn't ask his feet to dance or his tongue to sing praise in a song which he hadn't heard the lyrics or melody before. Nor did he lend his muscles to shake, quake or double him over in fits of gagging hilarity. The Spirit hit him and he subsided. He was a new creature; actually his creature-dom came into full expression. A

created being overrun by His Creator frolicked. New wine, the kind drank in heaven from goblets of mirth poured over his head and he lapped it up. His ears heard voices exuberantly proclaiming snatches of psalms, words of Moses, proverbs of Solomon, songs by Deborah and other women of Hebrew fame.

He felt a tugging at his waist and paid it no mind – *too much going on, too much happening, and so much feeling*. His eyes roamed wide, his senses overwhelmed and blossomed in breaking waves. Tugging, tugging. He glanced down to see a curly headed little boy holding something and his little lips speaking. Elijah smiled down at him and then glanced back to the scene that was now all around him. Tugging continued and lips kept saying something. Elijah gave a wink and that was all. Suddenly, the child smacked one of the prophet's kneecaps and a force flattened him to the ground. At the same moment the prophet realized he lay on the dirt and without understanding why, the boy's laughing face reappeared. Unafraid, the child joyfully slammed down a tambourine on the grown man's chest and pronounced, "You need this! Make music to Adonai!" The boy then plopped down on one of the man's hairy, muscular thighs making it a temporary seat. He raised both little hands high, tilted his small head back and mouthed words the prophet didn't even want to hear. Immediately, Elijah burst out laughing, lying on his back feeling foolish, realizing he was no better or closer to HaShem than a little child, also that he was at the right place at just the right time. In a wide grin his white teeth showed as a beautiful centerpiece in the middle of his dark beard and sun-baked face. He banged and shook the instrument over and over and time left his mind.

* * * *

"The sun is lower, time to get moving." These words seemed distant, yet in his head and spoken from the clouds, all at the same time. At his armpits, two strong men raised Elijah up from his drunken-like state.

"W-h-a-t?" His legs felt for and then found his heels; the flat of his feet searched and then found level ground. Strong arms held him steady. The strangers spoke again.

"Elijah, HaShem has blessed you mightily. But as we said, the sun is much lower than when you first joined us, and the time for your role is near."

"Huh? Who are you?" His grinning mouth asked in a groggy but peaceful voice.

"Do you remember the story of King Saul meeting the company of prophets in Gibeah, written by our prophet Samuel?" A small crowd gathered around listening to the growing conversation.

Elijah grunted, "Yes, of course. Samuel foretold to Saul how he would become like a different person and prophesy right along with the dozens of prophets there. He had a great time. Oh! Oh...I get it." With that Elijah swayed and a few men caught him. "Whoa! The Spirit of HaShem is still strong on me, I...whoa!"

He looked at all the faces staring at him. Some looked familiar. He pointed, "You." to another, "You!" and added, "You're prophets from Bethel, from Jericho and Ramah; from the school of the prophets, right?"

They nodded, "Yes. We are here with our families. We are celebrating our release from captivity and HaShem has blessed our celebration." Now over 400 focused on the special visitor to their party.

"Captivity from what?" Elijah asked.

"Well, it is belated, but since He will have the victory today, we decided to have a reunion out in the open with you! Obadiah hid - ."

Elijah interrupted. "Oh, you're the two groups of 50 prophets he hid in caves, fed and kept safe from the Queen. I was hiding myself." They all had curious looks. "During the drought and famine - which by the way ends tonight - ." They interrupted with joyful shouts. Then he began again, "Adonai sent me to Phoenicia, a town called Zarephath." Heads nodded, they knew of the place. "I've been gone these three years and only heard of your plight the other day from our good friend and palace insider Obadiah." Silence followed. Heads bowed. Husbands, wives (some pregnant) and children held hands, embracing.

Elijah was informed that around him some thought of the deaths of people they knew. He noticed more than one solitary woman stood there and grieved. *Widows!* Others expressed sorrow for the time lost due to the Queen's wicked schemes.

Elijah felt out of place. While he had served Adonai in relative safety and comfort, his fellows suffered and died. He tried to slip away out of the crowd and leave them be, but a few saw his attempt and spoke up. "You don't go to that altar alone. Strong angels are there already, we have seen them readied all morning and more have arrived as the day has grown long." Elijah felt a jolt of the Spirit but stayed on his feet this time. The circle around him made an opening for him to do the will of Yahweh.

Meandering through the multitude he started his way. His persona appeared safe and approachable; others could see that. The prophet tasted living among the community of those of the "school" and knew he would miss being one of that group. Being just a nobody, flat on his back was so good and needed.

He made a good distance when suddenly, here and there, men stood blocking his way. Some tried to get words out of their mouths, but they only sputtered. Then tears ran down their dry, sun baked cheeks. He saw the weariness of sin infesting their lives. Others also stood up, joined in and made a loose crowd around the man.

Soldiers, farmers, fishermen, wives, teenage boys and children knelt. They shuffled into a fan shape, some prostrate. A few men tried to wrestle them back up. Loudly, they said, "What do you think you're doing? You don't bow down to him. He's only a man, not a god." A few said, "He's not a walking idol to be worshipped! Cease your confusion."

Elijah experienced a glad heart.

These loyal folk, manifesting humility and confessing sins are either followers of the God of Israel or instant converts. He moved forward slowing his pace to not step on those lying on the ground in the facedown throng. Throwing back a clarifying statement, he said, "Direct worship to the true God, whom we may serve. I am only here to remind you of His interest in you." He spoke this with a broad encouraging smile and kept moving through the spots of sporadic worship and holy respect. *This is better than fist fights and bickering. Keep it going Lord!* Behind and all around, wails of sorrow mixed with shouts of praise and subdued, private proclamations captured his concentration. *Forgiving sins is God's business, mine is to let them know that Yahweh is near and after seeing and listening, He willingly forgives.*

Time for me to return to my altar and that unsuspecting bull. Elijah made a weaving path through the huddled mass of people sitting near the front. His ears caught the infused interference of the priests of Baal and Asherah once again. *Wasting their time.* "What raw unfit business this is," he muttered.

But before his supernatural eyes and understanding diminished, Adonai surprised Elijah by providing insight into those rebellious men. Uncloaking the now soiled finery of their priestly garb, the prophet saw inside to their bodies, souls and spirits. Hundreds of corrupt men, corrupt in a hundred different ways. His eyes beheld greed, envy, hatred and pride - in distorted impure strengths. Also, their ugly enjoyment in the uncomplicated pressure it took to crush a

tiny scurrying bug, busy on its private errand. Each one sought to crush, groveling, crawling men, seeking aid or redemption. Charity? Lending a helping hand? Lost on this brood, like an indiscernible language.

Within their personalities, they made pockets and niches to keep wickedness handy. Poised to receive more acclaim and wealth, willing to do so no matter what deed it would cost someone else. They daily bathed in ill-conceit and drank from a fountain whose source only spawned such paid middlemen of made-up gods.

Lassoed by a thick rope, bundled, bunched and cinched tight, the 850 men stood helplessly bound. Pulled from their homes and familiar country, they found themselves hauled to Jezreel. Each clutched resentment, regret and annoyance at having been forced to leave Phoenicia. Each servant of Baal looked like colorless ash gray. Eyeless sockets exuded a dim yellowish-gold glow from the center of empty skulls. All lips pressed tight, because Baal wired them shut. The mouths of his servants soon learned not to speak of or for themselves – only of and for him. Demons controlled the speech of these empty shells; the human life gone.

Elijah filled with a mix of curiosity and disgust witnessed horror. Hundreds of Phoenician men and women stretched in a curving line on barren sand dunes. Those who joined at the back of the line held good, honest and sincere beliefs about serving the god. While waiting and the line moved, they started to gain an education – a decidedly unpleasant one. Then, an invisible force compelled them onward. Too late, heels dug into the sand in hopes to stop the motion forward. Each one's life existed on a course of irreversible change. Periodically, movement stopped as one by one each stood face to face with the creature called Baal.

All followers faced forward. At the front stood a being comprised of man, beast and a nature of pure evil. Its back was to the prophet and he was glad of that. So, Elijah stepped closer knowing his presence lay unseen.

The creature grabbed the back of the neck of the next person in front and squeezed tight. With deft handiwork the free hand or whatever extended at the end of the appendage, worked on the poor man's mouth. Like a craftsman or doctor, shiny thread stitched the pair of lips forever shut. During the painful activity each human helplessly flailed his arms while legs buckled. The beastly doctor kept the human upright and head still, until its mission finished. When done, any animation in the man's eyes left. Death had intruded.

Then, holding on by the throat, the "thing" lifted the man up and without looking, effortlessly tossed it aside. Elijah followed the flying human and noticed a heap of fallen souls. The newest addition landed with a thud. Under him lay dozens, all in the same possessed state. All sets of eyes stared at nothing; each remembered little. Elijah stood still not wanting to get any closer and somehow be contaminated. *If they are such then why not I?*

Stunned, he sat down in the sand a good distance away. The process went on. Another man, another toss. Just to maintain sanity and avert his eyes; using a finger, Elijah drew small circles in the sand. He meditated on their state, little by little the evil they had let in to themselves. Eventually this became their own condition, calling it "good." Now, they were trapped, owned, and on a leash. Children no more. Men no more. Possessions.

Overwhelmed he exclaimed, "Yahweh, take me from this place!" The scene dissolved, but the creature perked up its frightening head at the sound of 'Yahweh.' An angry bellow roared but faded into the distance as Elijah fully returned to Mt. Carmel. Feeling like he was caked with wet dung he shook all over not caring what others thought.

He scanned the scene around him. King Ahab sat on a portable throne; an empty one next to it. Elijah's spiritual eyes focused on the missing woman's throne. *Queen Jezebel*. His vision zoomed right to her vacant seat and he sensed her spiritual presence, and shuddered. People in the crowd

watched the gazing man and out of curiosity followed his stare. These watchers returned their gaze to the unmoving prophet – waiting and wondering what his eyes saw and his mind thought. One man said, “He’s a different one alright!” Others kept their tongue. By the chatter, a few discerning ones figured Elijah’s sight went beyond what anyone could see.

Indeed, he could see Queen Jezebel – what she was, and what she was not. She dressed for a party every day. Her wardrobe only included gaudy attire. *Showing off wasn’t second nature for her, years ago it entirely took over. A feminine spectacle made for others to admire and envy, which went far beyond taste and into the garish. Ill fitting lavishness makes her soar, forcing others to feign smiles and produce fear-based compliments. She enjoys knowing the trouble she causes and what liars they become – just because they fear her.*

Streaks of evil displayed in her soul. For her, situations lived as black or white, forcing ultimate defiance in the face of truth if it contradicted her chosen side. After a decision, she set her mind to a task – never getting involved; she “delegated” her deeds, “using” others as the means of accomplishment. Heartless of anyone’s feelings, Jezebel’s eyes gleamed, anticipating goals and purposes fulfilled.

Embarrassing people was a congenital talent. But she learned her skill well by watching her mother rule. Jezebel was a unique woman. She lived her life with nothing to undo and doled out apologies to no one.

She enjoyed knowing, and being, a favorite disciple of Baal.

Elijah cocked his head as he realized her taste for being surrounded by only handsome menservants. *No surprise, really.* But each servant feared and resented her.

He noted no ability for deep thinking and also a mind which held little in it. This helped explain her massacring of the prophets after Elijah’s disappearance. She believed that if all of Yahweh’s workforce were dead, His powers to sustain the drought would also be eliminated. Little did the queen know that in her own court, treason had taken place. Ahab’s official, Obadiah, the manager of the palace secreted his loyal devotion to Yahweh. When the ungodly killing began, he created an underground network to hide and keep fed those 100 prophets. *She never suspected a thing.*

Next, the prophet considered King Ahab and squinted at a small groomed pet dog on a simple leash with a jeweled collar. An unpleasant look saturated the canine. *Not full-blooded, not that one!*

Unexpectedly, he caught a glimpse of Jezebel’s mother, also a queen. Due to a life of unbridled indulgence, she grew enormously fat. This picture implied that all areas of her life overflowed. Therefore – she overwhelmed. Full of herself, she barked orders without consideration for the hearers, doers or finishers and those caught in between. The obese woman trusted no one. She operated by dominance and control, fueled from a deep well lacking in intelligence. The mother, like her daughter lacked any concept of well-being. Though heedless, mindless and dull, she enjoyed royalty with a genuine witless smile. *Gilded nonsense paraded with grand opulence. What foolishness she swaddled her own land in and now it overflowed here.*

The prophet’s body squirmed at these truths and the louse which gave birth to Jezebel. His nearby watchers nudged one another. “Did you see him jump? Just then? Strange.”

He eyed his sacrificial spot, a pile of stones, load of firewood, four jars and that lone animal munching. Before walking the last steps, he glanced at his opponents’ area. The watchers in the crowd saw the prophet’s body suddenly arch back while his head craned upwards and stare at a sight none could imagine.

Taller than the tallest tree he’d ever seen but much lower than the clouds, stood a monster.

Covered with thick, dark gray hair, joined like pointed feathers or in tangles – was a bull, shaped like an upright man. Its chest boasted stout muscles and sickly reddish skin. Only skull, no skin, made up the beast's head. This skull displayed sharp curved horns the size of tree trunks. Teeth built to grind men's minds and swallow their souls, shown bloodied with shreds of recent devourings stuck here and there in between. Lidless, tiny, piercing eyes frightened Elijah the most – though these never noticed him. Below the jaw, a small grove of coarse hair hung down. Giant ears as if from a tortured bat, stretched straight out into points. On fierce hands bony fingers unfolded, spiked with talons. Legs bent in, similar to fanciful hinds of a centaur. Finally, a menacing tail, lengthy as a long bend in a river swathed this way and that.

It strode away. The thing, Baal – never noticed the puny man. The prophet only saw it exiting the landscape. The thing needed to leave. It knew unlike any other day and with what little intelligence it contained, the area was to be abandoned and the puppet men left behind. It sensed something bigger and mightier on its way to keep an appointment. The stench of moral purity and holiness quickened the monster's departure. Like something tangible, disappearing in a fog, the beast evaporated into the blue sky dissolving in the bright sunlight. Gone.

He's headed west, back to Phoenicia, no doubt. Elijah stood amazed and turned to start moving again but his head jerked back towards Baal's vacant space. A single, long bellow from the gut of a wild animal caught in a trap filled the man's spiritual ears. Silence followed.

Unknown to the worshippers on the stage, their increasing weariness only pleased and impressed very present, but hidden supernatural beings – demonic bystanders – not Baal. These demons cared nothing for human beings' pain, but much enjoyed the foolish behavior causing it.

But, the devoted worshippers devotion waned. What about their strong deity shaking the earth while making his awesome fly-by appearance? They awaited the marvel of erupting flames under the waiting wood which should happen any minute now! Any minute, any moment, would do.

It never happened. For the overly worshipped, yet non-existent, supreme and almighty god Baal, time came and permanently went. He failed to blaze away a sacrifice, rejected a challenge, and finally rejected a pack of petty fools, moving like fouled game pieces on a defiled stage. The demons guffawed and doubled over with wicked smiles only they could appreciate.

He heard the last moans and groans proceeding from exploited musical instruments and long-abused throats. A nightmarish mix of delirious droning once meant to be pleasing songs and chants had devolved into lifeless out-of-tune dirges. Half-minded, drunken with fruitless hard labor, the slow monotony was on the verge of breathing its last.

Elijah's stomach could take no more, nausea rose. He waved a hand as if to ward off the variegated, collective evil. *Enough Lord!* Adonai reduced the prophet's vision back to normal and he once again felt on eye-level with the audience.

Glad for this, putting both hands to his head he swept back the sweaty mane of hair. Exhausted, in a loud, yet undemanding voice he asked for a skin of water. His eyes scanned those sitting close by. A woman held one out, but remembering the drought, her husband hesitated then reluctantly passed it up to the man. Elijah slowly poured the entire contents over his weary head. It drooped long and drained. Then a smile burst. Water refreshed the body while Adonai refreshed his soul. He said to the ambivalent man, "Tonight, all water shall be returned to you manifold. Rain is coming—and soon!" Elijah tossed the empty skin down to the stranger and walked away. Upon feeling the lightweight skin, the stranger responded with faithlessness and grunted without shame. He gave a sharp look to his wife. She gazed at Elijah, thinking he had a unique manly mystique, but kept this to herself.

As Elijah reached the sacrificial stage, no tears, no compassion, no love for those lost men

could be found in him or his God. Their time was up. So, he took his warrior stance on the small plot of earth. Time had come for the Hebrew evening offering. A new day began at sunset.

A deep purple cloak silhouetted the nearby hills, trees and far-off clouds.

* * * *

Stirred and whipped up by an accurate reliance, the outstanding super-man came armed with his faith for success.

At that moment, 850 enemies flawlessly hated Elijah. Out of their personal and collective aggravation they peered seeing nothing more than a valueless, over-sized insect, deserving of extermination. Not one of them assumed, not for a single pinpoint of time, that their lone opponent would have any more triumph going for him than they.

In their failing minds and wicked hearts, they thought Baal acted as a god might – refusing to show up for his own higher reasons, not needing to justify nor defend to those beneath and in his service. A god behaved as a god, and of course, must be revered at all times and at any price. They were in the employ of such a one. He still reigned as lord and maker of thunder, lightning, rain and dew. Nothing had changed.

Their fractured measly attempts at praise, dance, and scented rituals ceased. Sweat began to dry, sticking on their reddened bodies. Chests heaved for breath. Dry tongues lolled out of parched mouths onto chapped lips. Puddles of dried vomit dotted the soil. Turbans drooped, unwound or lay scattered. The race done, the finish line distant but all their energy consumed. Few could stand, all wanted to collapse, no one cared. Most lay on the hard ground, thankful that the sun would soon set and its heat forgotten.

The sacrificial bull, cut, sliced and drained of blood hours ago; lay covered with flies, insects, crows and a few other carrion eating birds – a fine feast for the lower class attendees. The baked flesh put off a repulsive smell. The once glassy eyes resembled dry wrinkled grapes.

But rest was short. Elijah, impatient to get God's will done, immediately attempted to draw the enormous crowd. He put to his lips a Yemenite shofar from an African Kudu, nearly three feet long with two graceful curves. To all four directions a separate blast sounded. All the gods heard. Then Elijah shouted, "Come near all of you and listen to me!" Movement towards the staging area stirred. Tired minds followed atrophied, fatigued legs.

Baal's faithful contenders who lay on the ground propped themselves up to see and listen. Pushed to their limits of endurance each found they hadn't yet been fully pushed to their limits of anger or hatred. All unity broken, faithlessness drenched them like a hard rain from a heartless heaven. Shelter from such pelting didn't exist.

The situation of a wearisome, extra long, boring day caused new talk. *"Now we have the loner, the one priest, that prophet or what have you! What can one do which 850 couldn't do all day long? No doubt more ways to irk us and waste our time!"* Most of the droning crowd obeyed and pressed in. Yet, others showed no interest and waited for the foolish religiosity to be over. Those who had fallen asleep were roused, being kicked by a friend or loved one. Some simply waved them off and went back to their dreams.

Before the prophet spoke, many recalled what he cried out as they arrived earlier in the morning, which now seemed like a week ago. He poised a rhetorical question about making a firm choice of loyalty. Hebrews had one foot in vain man-made religions and the other foot in centuries old, traditional God-ordained Judaism. This back and forth hopping remained at the top on Adonai's list of needed adjustments. The symbolic word picture came to life as the listeners viewed two altars. God's people couldn't combine conflicting beliefs without suffering His

judgments. There weren't two truths; why did some think so, hope so and live so?

The faithful wondered if something worse than famine and drought now awaited their nation if fellow Israelites continued to make anti-Yahweh choices. Such hearts pleaded for mercy from God as they had for years. Hundreds praised and prayed out loud for Yahweh to really show up and help their nation.

As the grumbling herd came near, Elijah repaired the altar of Adonai. Years earlier, when the pagan newcomer arrived; knocking down this local altar was one of her first crimes against the Hebrew people.

Elijah wanted them to see the twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel. He arranged these in a formation following the birth order of the tribes. With determination in his voice he firmly stated each name when its stone was put down. A weighty thud and clanks for adjustment confirmed their placement. "Reuben. Simeon. Judah. Dan..." At this point the people caught on to what he was doing and what he would shout next. As he called out, "Naphtali," a hundred voices said the same. When Elijah spoke the name of the tribe, "Gad," a thousand joined. "Asher. Issachar. Zebulun." Each name gained more affirming voices, for all Hebrews knew the order. "Benjamin. Manasseh." When he spoke the last patriarchal tribal name, "Ephraim," a multitude 100,000 strong joined in solidarity ending the list on the final syllable with Elijah's breath. Then silence reigned.

Azariah remembered. I recall Rabbi Simeon's lengthy teaching while performing parts of this lively story. Grunting, the rabbi moved the invisible heavy stones. He rubbed his aching back and stretched while wiping his forehead repeatedly. He finished placing them and smiled, pleased with his work. The villagers called out the names of the tribes like their ancestors.

This verbal unity ignited the jealousy of the exhausted horde of Baal. They never achieved such spontaneous interaction and connection with the crowd.

In the morning, Elijah gathered a sizeable pile of wood. Due to three years of drought, dry wood lay everywhere on the hills. He arranged these in a formation on top of the stones. With a borrowed shovel, he dug a trench several inches deep around the altar. Kneeling and using his hands he cleared out all the loose dirt. He stood up and gave no thought to wiping the dust off his knees. Digging that circle set a precedent, one that was a mystery to all that observed the solitary worker.

I think Elijah's doomed beast munched on this grass, too. Like my little beast, both unaware of their coming fate. Azariah smirked, thinking of his search for his escaped lamb. Having a tethered animal has its benefits!

Interrupting a clump of grass, Elijah tugged the sacrificial animal closer towards its bed of death. He slaughtered the beast while chewing its last. Next, he sliced big pieces off the carcass - in a certain way Adonai must've directed him. Mounds of freshly cut, bleeding flesh lay on the dry wood.

As the blood drained out of the lifeless animal flesh, Elijah had a chore for some men who were closely watching this methodical religious butchering. Pointing, he said, "Hey, you, you and you there, go down to that ravine and you will find a spring of water. Take these with you." In a short time, six or seven panting men returned with gallons of water contained in a variety of jars and large skins. These men felt a new self-importance due to having a working relationship with the well-known prophet.

Once the altar stood prepared for fire, Elijah commanded something ridiculous.

"Now men, you servants of Adonai listen up!" At this, the men stood straighter. "I want you

to pour some water into those four special jars I have provided. After that, pour the contents onto the meat and firewood." The helpers hesitated seeing no rationale in doing so. Yet, they poured as told. They looked at each other sideways with quirky, insecure grins.

Commanded twice more, precious water left the four jars, drained by gravity to some unknown purpose. All pots and skins emptied; each held upside down and not a drop came out. The prophet's impromptu eager helpers, queasy with embarrassment, looked around at each other avoiding the crowd's eyes. Now, they didn't desire being identified with this person of questionable intelligence and bizarre requests. Dousing the firewood produced chuckles and hand signals in the crowd, defining Elijah as a uniquely crazy person.

Murmuring to one another, each helper questioned, "How do you light a fire once you've soaked your supply of wood?"

In his mind Azariah circled back to the rabbi pretending to kill the bull and beginning the labor of butchering it. In the middle, without pausing, he emphasized to the audience, *'However the Creator suggests or directs these special men and women servants of His – this is a mystery to the rest of us – to this day.'*

One of the teens broke the audience's concentration by good-humoredly calling out, 'I'll help you slice up that bull Elijah, just don't make me eat the meat raw!' There were chuckles, but his father's eyes reprimanded and a raised finger shushed him.

On that day, hecklers without fear would've jeered Elijah, the lone man; that's for sure!

"This prophet eats a little too much camel dung each morning!" An anonymous person spoke loudly, getting some laughter. Hoping for an even bigger laugh, someone else pointedly suggested, "Maybe dung is all he has for brains!" Those who heard these jabs turned around and loudly retold the jokes to the people who were too far away to have heard the original hecklers. In a matter of minutes a buzz of sarcasm rippled through the multitude.

Musing, Azariah smiled with firm conviction. They were too soon in making this condemnation!

He heard faint, scratchy words from his own dry mouth. "Time for the evening sacrifice, that's when the miracle happened." He closed his eyes to better recall the following events.

The water spilled and splashed on the altar draining into the trench. The once clear water now stood reddish with blood. Due to the lowering sun, shades of yellow and tinges of orange reflected on the surface. The deceased bull wouldn't have cared; taste for art and beauty weren't in its species makeup.

As the colored ring remained, thousands in the audience pressed closer, most raised to their full height. But no dads lifted their inquisitive toddlers up for a better view. This time held an element of seriousness – not entertainment.

Elijah shouted a proclamation. The startled servers leaned back in reaction to this stern voice. He wanted even the farthest ends of the crowd to hear the words. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods besides me."

Some in the crowd muttered and spat, "Are those oh-so-special-ones preaching at us again?" Others shushed, "Be quiet, will you!"

"You shall make for yourself no graven image, nor the likeness of any created thing, to bow down and worship it. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me – but showing mercy unto thousands who love and keep my commandments." Elijah paused and stared at the

readied altar thinking about Moses hearing the voice of God on Mount Sinai and the life-creating-finger of Yahweh etching those very words and much more, on the two slabs of stone. *Was that 700 or 800 hundred years ago? Sadly, Adonai here we are today, a nation divided and in conflict.*

After making the need for a miracle flame more noteworthy, Elijah prayed with a shout like a trumpet over the mountains. "Adonai, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, let it be known today that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and also that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, Adonai; hear my voice, so that this people may know that you, Adonai, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back to You."

Many strained their ears to hear the improvised prayer. The House of Israel, pagans and believing gentiles saw his impassioned face shining with confidence while steadfastly looking toward the sky. They heard a final instruction, "If Yahweh is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him!"

Those who had clearly heard the prayer would later piece together the exact words and facts of the unfolding day, placing it down in writing.

After the bold prayer ended, those who stood closest – tried to back up. They wanted distance from the curious sacrificial scene and whatever was going to happen next. But they could not step back at all. The inquisitive in the rear now pushed forward. All were hushing each other to no avail. At the end of Elijah's words, all criticism stopped.

Far up in the sky, magical fire shown above that ancient site. Arms rose with pointing fingers. Voices excitedly added, "Look! Look at that! Wow!"

A coincidence? Well...of course. That's what they assumed.

Azariah remembered Rabbi Simeon, with mouth agape, shocked wide-open eyes, a hand flat on his head and one outstretched arm, fingers pointing. Noting to his listeners to emphasize such awe, 'There truly was a beautiful sunset – but it was forgotten. Just above the horizon the planet Venus hung as an ignored, miscellaneous, bright dot. Intrigued villagers looked where Rabbi Simeon pointed to the horizon.

Mildly amused, he waited for the faces to turn back. He followed by an insight from the Torah. "When Moses led our people from captivity and into the desert something amazing happened. Their first night alone and away from the Egyptian task masters, they moved to places unknown to them. They set up a multitude of campfires – Yahweh made His own. The Almighty said, 'Hello there! A big flame, a one very tall, which could be seen for miles! His way of saying, 'Don't worry. I'm here, too!' Every night the pillar of cloud turned into an immense pillar of fire. So, after Elijah's prayer 800 years later, again the Almighty lit up the sky and touched a small patch of the earth with the same message, 'Don't worry, I'm here with you!' Though this particular time, only one brief visit – meant as a reminder."

The spectacular light show captivated everyone. A fast moving rainbow made of fire sprouted flames of unusual colors. No one had ever seen such radiant hues. This astronomical treat redefined awe.

More than a hundred thousand heads craned upward, the amazing streak illuminating their faces. Baal's brood enjoyed the jewel in the sky, marveling as much as anyone. Slowly, eyes lowered a little, the bright mass fell closer to earth. Perhaps this wasn't a meteor shower which would bypass the earth or a beautiful, aimless, celestial phenomenon.

As the spectacle plummeted, observers surmised a distinct destination. One by one, each stood aghast, except the prophet. Each observer recognized this blazing arrow came shot from the bow of a clever and superior hunter. Feeling heat and seeing how the cluster of dazzling brilliance

had a mark – and that it would not miss its target. Of all places on earth, each now knew this destination was right where they stood.

Those in the rear began to flee. Those in the front wished they could.

With the looming fireball appearing to have accelerated its speed and purpose, the tired, sluggish crowd found unexpected energy and scattered. Elijah caught sight of the backs of hundreds of once finely robed, now half-crazed, bloodied, soiled men scurrying – Baal’s “best” who would’ve cruelly murdered him only moments ago.

The fire smashed down upon the planet with a ‘whoosh,’ heard in a mile-wide radius. The flames embraced the site. The wet wood, moist meat and even the challenging contents of the moat disappeared in seconds. Thoroughly amazed, only one man remained stable. Not frightened, he stood by his handiwork. No one remained close enough to hear the happy muttering, “It was You Adonai, it really was You!”

And he was safe.

No one knew what would happen next.

* * * *

The multitude of young and old witnessed a miracle; a designed phenomenon. The fire struck the ground and shattered the faith of many unfaithful and impacted the genuine faith of others.

This supernatural climax woke up all the apathetic, lazy and napping ones; scores of the dizzy and light-headed scurried away. Without much happening for so many hours – now up quick – all were on their feet. Time too, seemed like it galloped. After running and stumbling, the shocked crowd would slow up and then be forced by others to keep moving. “Don’t stop! Get away! Keep going! Get out of the way now!”

Turned faces and strained necks peered backwards as fast-paced feet found footing. Each tried to take in the damage caused by the unexpected streak of heavenly. Only the Hebrew altar showed the impact. Stones, though blackened, remained in formation. A lone figure of a man stood as if waving to someone.

Then the momentum came to a complete halt. Many in the audience of god-waiters fell face-down on the ground. A few, full of fear for their sins, ran and never stopped, gone completely out of sight.

Because of the unforgettable miracle, tens of thousands of eyes closed in prayer. A brief time of silence entirely overcame the crowd. The airy ‘whoosh’ still fresh in everyone’s minds, settled into special places in their memories.

In time, the crowd saw only one place of interest, and one man of interest. Outstretched arms pointed from all directions right at him. Not even a wisp of smoke floated at the altar. Not a hair on his body or his camel skin garb showed singeing. If people dared get close enough to the beaming prophet, they wouldn’t of even smelled burnt...anything! God took it all.

Yes, Elijah stood there erect and firm – at least his feet stood firm. His arms rose to the sky gesturing with vibrant life, waving madly; two index fingers pointed straight up; head bent back as far as it could go, exuberantly shouting, “YES! YES! YES!”

Then Elijah quietly giggled, “It makes you think that God was famished!”

Dozens lay trampled in the mass spree; some on the ground weren’t moving. Not a few children, separated from their parents stood solitarily, or sat wailing in fear. Tears ran down their

dusty cheeks making daubs of mud on the ground. Talk rumbled across the landscape which became an uproar. Adults began to turn to one another with excitement on their tongues. Even in the midst of this growing commotion, thousands were silent, in a holy moment of absorption. They knew now, more than ever, not only was Adonai real, but all the ancient tales true.

Believers falling to their knees one by one grew across the landscape. Their minds undone, unwoven; spirits perked up like a life-giving root, sprouting from their toes and topping out at their heads. Each one's body entered a weak and wobbling state as the power of the super-un-natural stole their human understanding and added this act of frightening grandeur into their soul's knowledge. For many, words sounded useless, their vocabulary vanished.

In the animated swarm, some felt tiny, weak, helpless and worst of all – unnecessary. But instead of walking away, they obediently heeded the prophet's inquiry and his challenge. Hebrews expressed spontaneous praise of God's attributes, while others sought deep repentance; baring their hearts, they begged for forgiveness – some for the first time in their lives. Stimulation by the Spirit of God hovered over the multitude. Pushed on by holy spontaneity, the lifelong faithful recommitting while fresh converts uttered whatever it was they never told God before but, knew now to say. These words richly pleased God.

Across the fields, amazed worshippers stood with heads down and eyes closed; most knelt; husbands and wives as one, without words or eye contact, joined hands. Youngsters stood close to parents, tugging at their clothes. They looked up, trying to catch older eyes for some meaning in the excitement of what happened. For their efforts, many heard, "Shhh! Not now." They saw parental eyes anchored, pondering, processing something only big people knew more about. But other children touched by the roving Spirit of God put enough together. An unnamed stirring stirred throughout the young souls and manifested with smiles, laughter and silly playfulness.

Elijah heard a growing murmur which within moments turned into a roar. So much emotion in the words, "Adonai is God! Baruch HaShem, Adonai is God!" Finding it nearly impossible to stand, he sagged on a nearby boulder and soaked in God's strong presence. "You are King of the Universe, over all the heavens and the earth!"

Here and there girls stood up. They began dancing, clapping and singing songs of worship. Circles of strangers formed, mingling friendly, glad faces. Smiling boys danced in circles of their own, singing warrior songs. All voices sang with a victorious exuberance reminiscent of Miriam, Moses' sister, after Yahweh closed the waters of the Red Sea over the foolish, racing Egyptians, forever putting an end to that nightmarish episode of oppression. Indeed, what a mighty God they served.

Far and near, people lifted lyrics meant to make God smile. The children naturally added a festive element to the dynamic declaration from on high. Their watchful parents smiled, laughed and cried in admiration. Fun songs followed, before the thirsty and exhausted children tumbled, giggling onto the ground of their homeland.

* * * *

At this unexpected juncture, the pagan priests and prophets found room for one prominent new thought – escape!

These dumbfounded losers – on the wrong side of God – understood that this amazing magic signaled a bold and fatal pronouncement. Adonai produced fiery warrants for their immediate arrests. Agony hovered over them and then swept down hard pinning each one to their swagger infested sin.

Did that Hebrew real have a god, a bigger god after all...how ridiculous! They didn't let this potential awakening turn into a life-giving lesson, but deemed Elijah a conjurer, invoking powerful sorcery,

a mere glittering insect bent to annoy and out-smart them. Basted in falsehoods, and sold out to off-base mentality and morality, their twisted hearts rationalized the holy display. The true source and good intelligent purposes of the fiery show remained lost on them. Blind rebels revolted in a blind, fruitless rebellion.

Feeling imminent imprisonment or worse, fist fights broke out in Baal's camp letting out their rage on each other. Unholy prophets and priests wrestled on the ground choking one another. Servants struck masters. Angry words flew, blaming higher-ups – even the king and queen. A few enraged servants went for the high priest whose self-importance meant nothing now. But a few loyal bodyguards still protected him from these furious men. Frantic with ire, those of Asherah's camp moved in a whirlpool of human fear and controversy. Each leaderless knot collided, respecting no one. Stubborn souls harboring dark thoughts and feelings of anguish let them out with vehement passion.

Then the arrests came.

Zealous, Elijah shouted to the captivated audience, "Seize the 450 prophets of Baal. Don't let one escape. Capture these hired intruders and assassins!" Awed, common folk easily overwhelmed and surrounded each stunned priest and prophet. Holding them fast, people found creative means to bind wrists behind backs.

"What of the 400 priests of Asherah, should we bind them, too?" People assumed so, but questioned each other. They decided to finally put the matter to Elijah, who when located, sternly answered.

"Yes, bind them, but Adonai prefers a different course for those troublers of Israel, which He hasn't yet disclosed to me." Elijah wondered about this, but other priorities flooded his mind.

"Separate the two groups of losers." Due to the difference in their ceremonial clothing, this made fast work for the eager helping hands.

The rope used to tether the sacrificial bulls lay on the ground. Snatched up quickly by a couple of ardent Hebrews, the lengths now bound the wrists of the two high priests.

The day long contest concluded with the multitude losing to the 'fool.'

Tens of thousands of eye witnesses heard and saw the highly controversial case closed. The untrustworthy king, queen and absent god had been the defense attorneys. One super-man acted as the prosecuting attorney. One Spirit presided as Supreme Judge. Adonai knew the outcome of the case when the morning's light first shown. The awareness of His creatures' disobedience and the need to act (once more) grieved Him. He didn't delight in the death of the truly wicked or even the near-wicked. But, impatient and watching the hourly addition to their mounting failures; none of Baal's opportunists personally turned to look for repentance and mercy. Not even at this too late hour.

Elijah gave orders to the men who earlier filled the containers with water, telling them, "Locate all the sacrificial knives and blades belonging to these uncircumcised enemies. Find whatever is blood-stained from the pitiful rites done with them, and then follow me to the Brook Kishon."

Smiling once again at being singled out in public, they sped off to the task.

One of them chased up to the fast-walking prophet with information, "These polluters and unclean liars are bound and in two groups as you requested. I thought you would want to know!"

The prophet liked this and slapped the man's back and cheered, "YES!"

The surprised fellow stopped; *he just touched me, Elijah's hand...on me.* "Baruch HaShem!"

sputtered out of his joyful lips.

Soon another of the crew asked the prophet, “What shall we do with the pagans’ weapons?”

In a stern voice and with eyes not looking at his questioner, Elijah replied, “With their weapons you shall kill them.”

The man stopped in his stride. Elijah noticed and turned to face him but said nothing. The man’s face held a grotesque expression. “But, but, I’m a farmer, I till the soil.”

Elijah put one hand on the man’s shoulder and softened saying, “You kill weeds, and slaughter your livestock, don’t you? Today, you and I will do the same.”

The farmer still winced and his shoulders sagged, replying, “Animals do not sin. Men do.” The man calmed down and a little joy welled up understanding he would slaughter alongside the hero of the day, the hero of Israel.

As the man stumbled to keep up with the prophet, his voice stammered, “Yo, Yos...Yosef. My name...is Yosef, from the tribe of Naphtali.” Trying to catch his breath, a needed draft of evening air, he added, “Megiddo. From Megiddo,” and then let out a small whoosh of air.

Displaying a cunning smile Elijah said, “Adonai loves Yosef from the tribe of Naphtali.” Turning to the man, “You are a deer set free.” Instantly, Yosef recalled these very words of blessing originally coming from the mouth of the patriarch Jacob, for his son Naphtali, spoken in Egypt, before the Exodus some 1,200 years ago.

When Elijah eyed this companion and deliberately inserted “you,” the Spirit of God noticeably touched this man. His face became brave, the mouth and eyes confident possessing purpose.

While these penetrating words impacted his spirit, Yosef actually sensed a spark of the holy heat which earlier smacked the stones. While in step, he jumped in place.

Elijah doubled over in laughter; knowing what God did to the man, loving it.

After Yosef walked a few more steps he stopped, and with determination in his eyes turned backwards. Elijah kept moving.

Standing in place, inspired and bold, Yosef yelled, “Guards, make sure each prisoner is bound tight. Double-check right now!” That quick change in attitude made a broader smile on both the prophet and supervising King of the Universe, but Yosef never saw these and didn’t need to. Elijah thought, *did I hear him say ‘guards?’*

The throng traveled toward the Kishon, a dried-up brook which normally drained into the Jezreel Valley. Word traveled about the impending executions. The news wound its way to the ears of the defiant, though downtrodden, prisoners.

Parents halted, deciding whether children should witness the slaughter or go home with their mothers and only the fathers stay. The prophet hadn’t demanded anyone watch.

Mothers and fathers didn’t want little ones to see this – holy or not; they knew nightmares would follow. Boys jumped up and down in order to get their parents’ attention, “I want to see! I want to see!” Girls weren’t so interested and in sluggish ways asked, “Do I have to?” They recalled how their parents regularly slaughtered family livestock, which was enough death for them. Yet, fathers saw this as an educational climax sealing God’s superiority. Debates went on here and there.

On the way, some prisoners made eye contact with each other. But, with hands tied behind their backs, most kept an eye on the trail to keep from falling. Mournful and quiet, they walked

for the last time in their lives.

Depression reigned over the closely watched brood. Concerned, Baal's high priest tried to encourage by saying, "As Queen Jezebel welcomed and fed us at her table, so too, tonight Lord Baal shall do the same." For that, a foot tripped him and the self-righteous man went face down and split his lip. Blood trickled and the thirsty dry ground made quick work of it. After a strong kick from someone else, stumbling up, he walked on. Cackling laughter from the captors filled him with humiliation. Enjoyment, satisfaction of power and closeness to royalty which life at the top of the religious hierarchy brought, entirely ceased. That one kick from a common Israelite made him a nobody; pointless and bereft. Overtaken by feelings of loneliness, gave way to his outer edge of composure. All sensibilities fell out beneath him in tears that were trod on by those who trudged closely behind. Not caring, not thinking well anymore, he halted. Fatal emotions tore until alarm and desperation collided. Unable to, the man worked to hold down panic in his last remaining minutes of life, but he didn't know how to do it. Fear settled into a dark corner of his soul awaiting its prey. The man saw its demonic smile and heard the delighted giggles.

An Israelite pushed the stunned priest forward moving the prisoner closer to death.

Unsure of their fate, only grim thoughts filled the minds of Asherah's defeated servants.

Arriving at the Kishon, Elijah went to the high priest of Baal throwing him face down like a bad thought. He sorted out the hierarchy of priestlings and prophets and lined them up accordingly, forcing them to lie snug, side by side. Each shoulder lay slightly over the river bank. The 450 bodies made up a lengthy arrangement of doomed humanity stretching far downstream. He commanded the servants of Asherah to stand near the feet of their prostrate comrades, forcing them to line up in hierarchal importance for the next round of death.

Commotion compounded as the mass of spectators pressed in. "What's going on? I can't see! What's the prophet doing now? Why are they lying down? Has anyone been killed yet?" This flurry of questions hovered above the thousands of bystanders.

Immediately, Elijah knelt with one knee between the shoulder blades of the high priest and his other knee on the dirt. Without ceremony, prayer or speech, Elijah grasp the mass of hair on the prisoner's head, yanked back, fully exposing the neck. Confidently, he called out "Yosef?" Intuitively, positioned just an arm's reach away - Elijah knew he would be there - without looking, he reached backwards. An ornamented and stylish knife handle landed in his palm; Elijah gripped it. Smiling, *I love it when God guides His own while refreshing their hearts and minds at the same time.*

He never saw the look of the high priest's eyes as the man felt his own blade against his taut skin slicing through, ripping his life away. Elijah felt the body lurch and then in time slowly subside to nothing and so, let the head drop.

Once their leader died, many prisoners lost what little composure remained vainly struggling to get away. But with so many bystanders crowding to watch the executions, the Hebrews simply sat down on the squirming prisoners and literally squashed these frantic efforts. Downstream some of Baal's disheartened said, "I'll serve your Hebrew gods, I swear on Elijah's name, just let me go I'll prove it!" or "Let me live and I will bow down at your idols. Baal means nothing to me now. You were right! I know now you were right, okay?" Such pleas touched a few soft Hebrew hearts, but the vast listeners knew the bleating came from desperate men swearing oaths by hopeless, last breaths.

Asherah's previously, supportive, co-conspirators, stood as a reduced, waiting band of ruffled failures. Of the 400, some knelt and cried; but a few savagely kicked their whimpering fellow prisoners. "Get up! You make fools of all of us." Others thought, *perhaps one god is as good as another! I'd be willing.* This caused many of them to mimic Baal's servants' last minute empty

oaths, promises and appeals.

Elijah nodded to the 30 or so armed helpers and motioned for them to do to the prisoners as he had done to the high priest. Yosef took the lead. As the executioners worked their way downstream the number of living servants of Baal diminished. Below the banks, blood spurted and began to mingle. A fine rivulet of red trickled downstream on the hard, unyielding riverbed. Each of the 450 bodies drained over a gallon from the deep cut at their throats.

Elijah worked with the men and supervised the distasteful labor. But full of life, many times he said, "Their blood is symbolic of the rains that are coming which will soon fill this river once more! Then this red brook shall be only a memory." Cheers went up and rippled through the spectators as the prophecy spread. In the distance, faint choruses of cheers encouraged all who stood close to the execution scene. Near the riverbed, this caused chuckles and smiles at how word-of-mouth news travels.

With thirty men to do the slaughtering, the killing ended in less than half an hour. When only a long line of corpses covered the bank, men with blood-soaked arms and clothing turned to look at the next 400. Elijah saw this and shouted, "Wait! Men of the House of Israel, stop. First bring me the head of the fool who served as Baal's high priest."

Shouting to the crowd he said, "I ask for one of you women to donate a basket large enough to hold a pig's head." adding with emphasis, "You will not see it again." Women's feet made their way towards the front. His eyes scanned the faces and what they offered. Each woman emptied their contents handing items to their accompanying husbands or sons. They all opened their straw baskets, keeping their distance from the great man.

Elijah laughed, "If only we could fill all such baskets with the heads of the dutiful and well-deserving high priests near and far." He asked three women in the forefront to identify themselves.

A small woman with a dark green turban made a half-step forward. "I am Miriam of the tribe of Asher, from Acco." She tried to smile but that too, only made it half way out. She tilted her basket for the prophet to see.

Elijah sized it up and then lowered his face, bending his upper body down in a minor bow. He saluted, sweeping his right arm from left to right. "Good, good! Next?"

The woman stood closer than the last. Dark-skinned and bold, yet the weariness of the long day showed in her droopy eyelids. But when she looked at the prophet noticing his bloodied arms and clothing with that broad smile of his, she appeared faint. "I am...Mikhal...the tribe of Ephraim... t-t-town of Shiloh." She forgot to open the lid of basket.

"Well, come, come, woman of Ephraim let's see!" Bemused, he stood waiting.

Eyes staring, her fingers fumbled at the top of the basket. Elijah quickly peered in and mouthed, *Thank you*. Slightly bowing and again waved his arm in salute for having volunteered. Dazed, Mikhal stood still. So, Elijah pointed at the next woman.

After the last woman's understandably shaky performance, the husband of the third took charge to help. Standing behind her, with hands on her shoulders he proudly stated, "Prophet, I am Gazzam, this is my wife Elisheva, we are of the tribe of Zebulun, from Sarid."

"Fine, let's see what you have?" Elijah glanced and then immediately said, "This will do!" After saluting, his hand reached out taking the basket from her. She smiled at first, then was alarmed to see one of the prophet's helpers come near holding a human head gripping it by the hair.

Elisheva turned away and didn't see it go into her basket.

Elijah let out a call, "I need a runner, a young boy. I have an errand." Elijah paused thinking how to phrase the next part. "He will meet the king. I have a coin to speed him on his delivery."

* * * *

With sticky drying blood on Elijah's arms and feet, the blade's handle almost glued to his hand, he went to the high priest of Asherah. Standing in front of him, Elijah stared hard into the Canaanite's eyes. Asking, "Do you understand me, do you speak our language?" With an accent, the prisoner answered that he did. They stood facing each other while many listened in.

Elijah said, "I lived in your land these past three years in the town of Zarephath, near Sidon. I speak your language quite well. The sea is wonderful; beautiful sunsets, beaches. I swam, fished and even went out on boats to earn some money. Poor King Ahab searched many nations looking for me, yet I was so close, only a few days walk.

"I saw how your people waste their lives in service to vanity and thin air. That disease of ill-hearts and faithless beliefs requiring faithful believing, now pollutes my land. Yet, while in the shadow of the temples, known only to a few, my God did marvelous deeds. He multiplied scarce food making a poor woman well-off and well-fed. He also raised a dead child back from where only the dead walk. But in my own country you and these bloodless corpses busily taught my countrymen fables worthy of drunken storytellers."

Then Elijah changed his tone saying, "Foreigner, I could let you live. Then again, using a sickle I could slice through your flock of goats, leaving them like worthless dung, setting you free, alone, in shame."

In front of the man's face, Elijah fingered the sharp point of Baal's high priest's knife. The blood drew flies. Indeed, the whole area buzzed. It seemed the brook drew almost every fly within 100 miles. Crows landed by the minute.

Indifferently, Elijah told the man, "These 30 servants of mine, these executioners, have tens of thousands right behind them who would take their place in an instant, putting knives to all your throats." The man stood still, awaiting his coming death.

Elijah questioned but began teaching, too. "My name is Elijah. It means, 'Yahweh is my God,' or 'Whose God is the Lord,'" today I chose to live up to my namesake or die trying. Unlike you, I have no other gods or goddesses! My people are twelve tribes, called Hebrews. Our God made the heavens and the Earth and all that is within it. He lives from everlasting to everlasting, having no beginning and no end.

"In order to reveal Himself, He chose one man generations ago, our ancestor Abraham son of Terah, of the city of Ur of the Chaldeans. From those idol worshippers, a new breed of truth worshippers rose. I am one of them.

"By a personal visit of Yahweh to Abraham, this foolish business of serving manmade gods and goddesses ended for him. No longer would he bow down and kiss idols. There is only one God and He does not need to live in temples made by man. Adonai made a covenant and gave promises to Abraham; whose name means 'father of a multitude.'" Elijah paused and jerked his head to one side. Adding with a sly grin, "I believe many of them are right behind me."

The listening man couldn't help himself and glanced over Elijah's shoulders, scanning the multitude.

"Abraham's grandson Jacob fathered twelve sons. I am a descendant of this lineage that began over 1,200 years ago.

“When our ancestors settled this land there were over one million of them. They’d come from years of living in the land of Egypt, until God freed them from slavery. He destroyed that proud and powerful empire of the pharaohs; devastating it with ten horrible plagues.

“Like you, the Egyptians worshipped Creation instead of the Creator. True, some sages have said that the beauty of Creation is a reflection of the face of the Creator. I agree. But my dear foolish prisoner, for all of your kneeling, kissing, lighting incense and prayers – your time would have been just as productive, if you had done so in front of a boulder or a fallen tree branch you found on a path. Are such objects gods? Do they have minds and hearts? Do they see, hear or feel? I tell you, each lifeless bit of nature is as your graven images. Yet, all the days of your lives, you and your brave brood of idolaters have devotedly praised and worshipped what could merely be found on the ground and creatively re-fashioned into an idol.

“Now high priest of the blind, let’s get back to my history lesson. In Egypt, our great leader and deliverer was a man named Moses. Through his obedience God did signs and wonders the earth had never seen before. Afterwards, God laid out many laws and rules to live by, rituals, ceremonies of His design. Those remain until this day.

“In fact today you witnessed a sign and no doubt a wonder and might I suggest, it made you wonder along with all of the dead men here, too? Though, their marveling has ceased, hasn’t it?

“Our God did miraculous deeds for us. Today, stranger, what did you see?” He looked with deep interest into the prisoners eyes. The man stared back without expression. “I’ll tell you. God lifted the pinky on His right hand...that’s all. Later today His hand will move, creating much-needed rain, the precious liquid was sent elsewhere for the last three long years.”

The prisoner stared, listening, placing pieces of cultural history together, but anticipated his death once the lecture ended.

Elijah continued, “These corpses behind us. I could pray to my God and these rebels would all return to life. I’ve seen Adonai do this thing before.”

The man’s eyes went wide processing truth versus fiction. After the events of the day, he settled on the truth, but said nothing.

Before Elijah spoke again, he considered his own small state as but one servant of the Most High, feeling honored, yet humbled and amazed. Confident, he told the pagan something unbelievable. “It hasn’t rained for three years because...God told me to stop it from doing so. Now I, tell you, high priest of emptiness, that when I pray, only then it will pour. Tonight you will experience this. But these miracles are for one reason and one reason alone, to turn the hearts of His people towards Him, even those of Tyre and Sidon who do not know Him yet!”

This was a lot for the man to take in. Of course he’d heard tales and snatches of supposed exploits of the Hebrew god, and found that alcoholic drinks made them more interesting and also most likely untrue.

Elijah took the man’s upper arm and gave a shove forward. They strolled past the row of motionless corpses. The man’s eyes went wild with fear. Lowering his head he looked away. Elijah stopped and gingerly placed the knife’s blade on the man’s far cheek and prodded the stubborn face back. Matter-of-factly stating, “We’re not done viewing your dead companions yet.” Stretching out his arm and pointing with the knife he said, “We can fit you in here, if you like.”

They walked the 1,000 foot long swath of side-by-side dead men. No faces could be seen, each head fallen limp. The two men stayed close to the splayed feet of the corpses and followed the brook downstream.

The large crowd murmured constantly, but only a few could hear Elijah’s words. Rumors started.

Elijah continued his talk and kindly helped the bound prisoner from falling when he tripped a few times. "You believe that Baal represents the Sun and his mistress, your Asherah, the Moon. Well today, I'd say the Sun didn't shine. Now, did it? Soon, dense rain clouds will cover the rising crescent moon.

"So, what did you see today, hmm? I'll tell you. Loss. My countrymen went where they shouldn't have gone and warned not to go. So, we lost good government, good crops, divine counsel, obedience to good laws, our firstborn, plus precious rain and such other valuable things that make life worth living, such as honor, character, justice, security, happiness, love and most of all – the truth!

"Adonai delights in hearts that are humble and delights when they seek His forgiveness and that of others. It's part of what drives Him.

"We are His chosen people. Why? We were chosen to be more blessed than any other nation, tribe or tongue. Why? To be His witnesses and promote His holiness, commandments, statutes, ordinances and to make disciples of all who are not yet in His family. It's His mission for us as a people.

"Moses our great teacher, told our ancestors, 'For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Adonai chose you out of all the peoples on the earth to be His own possession.' We were taught and hold dear, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.'

"You helped our nation lose much due to your ridiculous ideas that gods made by hands are better than the traditions of our forefathers. You! Yes, you, and your shameless queen, that employer of whores, moved this along quite well. She murdered hundreds of holy men and women, prophets much like me. Better folk than myself to be sure, for I knew many of them." Elijah paused, holding back tears but his choking them back caught the prisoner's attention.

"Actually, I would say, much better men and women than me! But, my fine prisoner, by these dead bodies here before us, we are now even. Today we've avenged our fallen brothers and sisters!" Adding, "Queen Jezebel doesn't like competition and really, I don't think she likes herself." The man was taken aback to hear such liberal and critical talk of royalty. Then again, though his remaining minutes be few, he somewhat enjoyed the theology lesson, even though the teacher was fearsome. The man experienced honor and dishonor at the same time, knowing that the Hebrews would gladly fight for the opportunity to stride along and listen to whatever the miracle man said. Yet, he enjoyed and earned this intimate honor by the cost of his life.

"My men here, this army, were birthed in an instant, thanks to you." Elijah added with a glance over his shoulder to the slain, "Oh, and thanks to those, too. Can't forget them, now can we! This brand new people's army would happily slice you up like a fresh sacrificial bull on dry timber. But no, our God has different plans for you."

Elijah stopped and pondered how to end this instructional speech. "Our God is a jealous and vengeful God, yet wants to teach even you," Elijah repeated for emphasis, "you – a lesson for a lifetime – yours, really. It's called mercy." With that Elijah went behind the man, half wanting to slit his throat and half wanting to be obedient. Using the knife, he cut. Due to the sawing action against the binding rope, a slight gleaming metal edge reappeared; the flakes of dried blood fell to the earth with the rope.

Elijah came back in front, and read the look of astonishment. Asherah's high priest realized that Elijah lived with and had been talking of a entirely different nature than his goddess. Also, the god of the Hebrews was capable of anything – everything. What was the insight gained? Their god possessed a unique and attractive heart.

Elijah spoke sternly, "You Phoenicians have trespassed not only upon Adonai and His land but on the plans for His people and you are worthy of death."

Some of those closest in the crowd heard this and passed it on, "He's gonna kill him now!" The word spread.

Through the accented voice, the man finally ventured to speak, "Why then are you letting us go? You have sacrificed Baal's representatives to your god, were they enough to please his appetite?"

Elijah carefully thought this though realizing that this pagan saw the deaths as human sacrifice and probably a normal practice for the Hebrews. Due to his rush of emotions mixed with loyalty, Elijah tightly grasped the pagan's long beard, drawing the face, eye to eye, nose to nose with his own. Answering in a serious tone, yet grinning too. "Because Adonai's face is shining upon you at this moment, and desires you live to be His witnesses. Your friends died for their sins and crimes against my people and Adonai - not because He likes to see men die. Got it?" After staring hard into the man's eyes, he let go of the foreigner's bunched hair.

The man nodded and his eyes went wide once again. Sucking air deep into his lungs; his body went to his full height and then stiffened. He said in a bold, saluting voice, "Your god is God alone, Elijah of the famed House of Israel!"

Elijah handed the reddened knife handle to the stunned man and instantly turned to begin other duties. Looking backwards a stern response affirmed the pagan's confession, "Then serve Him alone!" The prophet hoped the confused but grateful Canaanite wasn't bowing or prostrate on the dirt in worship behind him.

The confounded pagan cut the bonds of the nearest prisoner, handing the knife over, instructing that one to continue doing the same.

* * * *

Elijah stood on a nearby boulder, cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled to the curious grumbling crowd. "God is a merciful foe. These imported goats are being set free. Let us who have Adonai's favor not trifle over 400 hearts..." He glanced at the prisoners and added, "...or throats! Yahweh has numbered these foreigners for uses that are not our business at this time. That's all I know."

Anticipating disputes, he clarified, "How many altars did you see today? Two, not three. The battle this day rested between two gods. But the imaginary, fanciful goddess called Asherah wasn't included. True, she birthed far too many failures for the land of our fathers to hold - 400 to be exact. These co-conspirators of Baal leave with much to think about. Remember God's vineyard, you and I were...are called to be a light to the gentiles!"

Alarmed and confused a number of men grew mad. Some in the group of executioners who had never taken a man's life before were disappointed the killing stopped. Abruptly, there was no use for them. They brushed flies and decided to find water to wash the defiling blood off their bodies.

Elijah finished with, "Go home, for rain is coming! Let their god-less leader do the labor of unbinding his goatlings." As the crowd dispersed, more than a few wondered, but no one dared question Elijah face to face about this unpopular and unexpected decision. Some cursed and shouted taunts at the prisoners. While grinning, a few bitter men went up and punched and shoved some of the still bound prisoners, tripping them. Others threw rocks, jeering, "I guess your waste-of-time pitiful goddess couldn't help you block that stone, could she?" Soon the huge audience drifted off.

Yosef caught up with Elijah and asked, "You have given Baal's knife to that Phoenician, and we slayers are wondering what to do with the other weapons we used. What is your will?"

Elijah paused, *Did he say 'slayers?'* and then smiled. *Those were changed men alright!*

Elijah answered with firm, bleak eyes. "These are unclean spoils of the enemy. Yosef, deer set free, you and your men are to destroy them as best you can. See that no one commits the sin of Achan done at Ai, by pretending to obey but stealing what belongs to Adonai. Burn all the priests' robes and any of their sorcerer's baggage you find."

The 399 pagan servants swarmed around their leader. All had questions. "Why were their Hebrew victors leaving? What did the miracle man promise? Are we really free and why?" The high priest heard all of this, which only compounded his own questions and need for deep answers.

Standing on the same boulder Elijah used, he motioned for quiet and speaking in their native tongue said, "I have much to say to all of you." Absolute silence followed, his flock gave their entire attention.

* * * *

Azariah saw colors edging into the blue horizon of the eastern sky. Returning to the present day, standing up, he tossed his last pebble, ready to leave. He hefted the lamb over his head and around his neck, tightened his grip on the hooves and jogged.

He considered what was important. Why did I spend hours seeking my perfect and spotless lamb, only to bring it home for immediate slaughter and roasting? My family could eat other food instead. Why did Hannah and the children remove any yeast from the house and scour the shelves and floors for any crumbs of leavened bread? Each year the Passover story, handed down by our ancestors is retold by the parents. Retold, why? Wait! If my math is correct, that means 'retold' for at least the 1,500th time!

Moses, pharaoh, hundreds of years of slavery, the ten plagues and finally Yahweh's rescue and His choice Promised Land. I live there or here, now. This is our history, as it was Elijah's too. I chose to honor His Torah, the commandments and this annual living memorial with added rituals designed by our fathers – to please Him. Yahweh is real, that's why!

On his way down to the village he thought of the traditional holiday Seder meal. My children will grow up and teach the Seder meal and the memories of our people to my future grandchildren and so on. 'Why is this night different than all other nights?' will be asked by my descendants whom I will never meet, generations from now, centuries even. He choked up at the thought. What will their names be? Will a son of a son of a son be named Azariah because of me? Hopefully, not just because they needed a family name on the day of circumcision, but because my life was worth remembering!

Family rested heavily on his mind. He also pondered the gods of other nations and wondered how that all worked. So many gods, male, female and babies; how could it be? Such thinking only led to confusion. *I think one God is a lot easier!*

Light continued to fade. To pass the time more memories of Rabbi Simeon's talks were sought out while his eyes traced a downward path leading home. *I do look forward to his next visit. I will tell him how much I enjoy the teachings and how meaningful to me each has been through the years.*

All the children respected the learned man and gaily followed the teacher around the village. In a quaint and warm style, he somehow remembered each of their names, which delighted the ever growing children and their parents. They enjoyed his rhymes, tricks, jokes and endless stories from the Torah. This small roving audience loved theatrics.

To have this guest at your home for a meal wasn't only a delightful blessing but an honor and

an added mitzvah – a good deed for both parties.

Once after the storytelling of Elijah and the prophets of Baal ended, the rabbi shared serious words to his listeners. These focused in on the deeper meanings of that day hundreds of years ago.

Azariah strained to recall.

The rabbi said, “Gods made of stone cannot meet people’s inner or outer needs. They are objects utilized to falsely satisfy the soul and conscience’s inherent need to worship a higher power. We are so small and this world so vast, God put in each of us a need to worship and know our place. Heritage, society, even Creation and one’s internal, universal questions cause a drive to be religious creatures. Adonai placed in our souls the desire to seek and please Him.

“Through the years of a person’s life, incidents happen, good, bad and plenty in between. In our story, the unenlightened pagans – as most still do today – interpret incidents by the character traits of their various gods and goddesses’ different personalities. Yes, we humans are small, a brief vapor upon the land, but we are of some interest and usefulness to the eternal Almighty. Pagan thinking is part right, but mostly wrong.” Here he stuck out an arm, on his hand only one finger showed. Then he raised the other arm with a full spread of fingers. “One does the job.”

“One person with a divine personality is above, not entire families bickering at each other. The truth and possibility of a single King of the Universe surely has been dissected worldwide. Most tribes and kingdoms have split the Creator into differing genders, multiple squabbling immortal persons of specific locales and territorial turfs. They have divided up the original and only God into countless false names, facets and characteristics, piecing together a community of spirits and gods. All are worthless beliefs and indeed blasphemous!”

One man in the audience stood up. All could see by the way he remained silent yet stroked his beard, a sincere question formulated in his mind. “Rabbi Simeon, Adonai sent the prophet to King Ahab in order to arrange a trap, didn’t He?” The man paused as the audience murmured. His eyes kept to the ground while tilting his head a little in each direction to catch the talk. “What I mean is the rain would come, ending the drought, only after the slaughter of the false priests and prophets – only after they died.”

“Go on.” The rabbi enjoyed this.

“So, Adonai, knowing all things, planned for Baal and Asherah’s men to waste their time, exposing their guilt, while He secretly waited to trip them into a trap with a miracle. Right?”

Rabbi Simeon considered this young man and what to do with the provocative theological question. Perceiving the man’s line of reasoning unfinished he said, “Please continue. You have all of our attention.”

The man, whose name was Amnon, added, “I wonder if entrapment occurred. Did the Almighty bait these men into a deadly match, of which only He knew the outcome? Men are not fish to be caught in a net and sold at the marketplace, nor are they deer shot by an arrow for a family meal. I see Adonai luring these hundreds of men into a setup. What do you think rabbi? You have studied much.” He sat back down. All around him mumbling and grumbling followed.

Rabbi Simeon looked at the small audience; he let the talk run its course. Slowly heads turned away from the lively small debates and back to the teacher. He tried to look wise; all expected him to be. The rabbi, who was standing, went over and sat down on a bench beside Amnon. He made no eye contact with the man and in fact kept his back away from Amnon.

Immediately, the rabbi started up a conversation with a man named Zorah, who sat one empty seat away from the questioner. Softly and quietly, the rabbi engaged Zorah in a chat. The

audience wondered if what they witnessed was a rebuff for Amnon's brazen questions. Had the questions offended their guest or perhaps even God? The audience buzzed, louder by the minute. Yet, laughter from the rabbi and Zorah only confused the villagers more. Some started to think the teaching time ended and wondered if they should get up and do...do what? More minutes passed. An irksome atmosphere settled over the people.

As the audience's curiosity continued, their talk died down. They wanted to catch, if possible, what the two were discussing. Only the rabbi and Zorah laughed, and that bothered everyone. Amnon received glares and so stroked his beard even quicker than he wanted. No one in the audience approached the rabbi.

Abruptly, Amnon stood up and stepped around to the jovial men.

Waiting to be noticed he stood still, a few fingers tapping at his lips. Interrupting was awkward with all eyes on him and ears straining to listen. With a pained expression he waited for the two to stop and address him. When that didn't happen, Amnon finally said, "Excuse me, Rabbi Simeon, and ah...hello, Zorah. Sorry to intrude on your revelry. I ah...have one more...ah question, if I may?" He paused.

The rabbi gestured with a hand to get on with whatever it was. "I am puzzled. Did I offend you, was I rude, or are you simply done teaching for the day?"

The rabbi said, "Excuse me, Zorah. Amnon, isn't it? I don't understand, what's the problem? By the way, that was three questions - not one. Please explain."

Puzzlement showed on Amnon's face and redness showed where there wasn't any hair. "Well...ah, you...well you, and then he and...I thought you came to see..." His stammering mirrored the thoughts of many. "I don't know what to think... rabbi, could you please explain why you left addressing the audie...ence. Please! You never said, 'Shalom' or 'good night.' "

"Huh? Excuse me, Zo' I'll tell you the ending later." Then the rabbi stood up and looked around at all the peering eyes waiting for an answer - *the answer*. He turned and saw the lone man who especially seemed lost and slighted. The rabbi stared for a long moment. Chatter began again, but by an upraised hand it immediately ceased. "You have questions Amnon. They didn't!"

Unclear, the man asked, "Who, Rabbi?"

"People who think they know all they need to know and already have all the answers, don't ask questions - now do they? The 850 pagans never asked. They only told." The rabbi was amused, watching the man's face go through a variety of perplexed expressions.

"Zorah and I sat and talked, right next to you, Amnon. That was our business, a private conversation, yet we attracted all of your attention - every one of you! At anytime anyone of you could have approached and asked me, 'Excuse me rabbi, what's going on, are you done teaching or are you going to answer the question about God trapping people?' and on and on. But none dared and in that I purposely trapped you and your attention!" He paused and took a long drink of wine. "Did I plan your response? No. I cannot control all of you, can I? Did I gamble on what you would or wouldn't do? Yes. And you all acted as I guessed, but I didn't make you do a thing...you could have all wondered off and Zorah and I would still be swapping jokes and laughing." He stopped and wandered among his audience while trying to catch each pair of eyes, before finishing his point.

"Now, did Adonai trap or ensnare the pagans or did He know that in their terrible pride, when given the opportunity, they would even chance gambling their lives away?" Again, the rabbi sauntered around the audience, while considering his next statement. "In our story, who really entered a trap?" He paused long for added audience self-questioning. "I think only one person

did. Elijah! Elijah the prophet. Why? His devotion, love and obedience to his God and the God of His fathers – ours too. He surrendered his life in service. The deeper question I have for you, my fine villagers” – this brought a light-hearted atmosphere back – “which came first, his being trapped or his surrendering? I think God’s attractiveness ambushed that man’s heart!”

The rabbi let this simmer in their minds before going on, knowing this was heady stuff. “Isn’t it true at times, that once He catches us we then surrender? Don’t we surrender sometimes before we know He’s going to catch you or me, sensing holiness about to arrive or corner us? Doing so, we honor Him. How? By obedience, sometimes, even when it’s late but sincere, obedience honors. Just like when your own children confess or admit their wrongdoing. Later is so much better than never. Isn’t it?”

Heads nodded. Chattering parents swapping stories of children ‘surrendering when caught’ brought laughter. Rabbi Simeon liked where this conversation went and overhearing these current remarks caused him to bring it home. “Are we not His children? But He is unmoved and unshaken by our foibles and sins. He knows who He is, and, my friends, He knows you – who you are!” The rabbi found Amnon and thrust out his arm, “Even you, Amnon!” The man smiled and sat down, blending in with his companions.

“As the prophet Elijah prayed, not far from here, but so long ago, ‘...that these people may know that You, Adonai, are God, and that you want to turn their hearts back to You!’ Amen. Gods of stone don’t care about you...only about whether they’ll topple over if bumped!” This brought laughter from his audience.

“Only a real God can change the hearts of willing men, forgiving you of your many sins and shortcomings. Only He can refresh, renew and redirect our lives. If you seek with all your heart concerning matters that are in your heart, and shoot for His standard of righteous living – then reward awaits you. Listen, when you are in a trap, yell for help!” Here he stood up on his toes, looked up to the sky and with cupped hands yelled one long wailing plea: “H-E-L-P!”

Catching his breath and bending low he quietly said to no one, “Whew! My age is getting to me.”

Continuing, he added, “Gain knowledge of Him and show honor by obedience. He sees it all. Let the holy words massage your hearts to a position of His preferences as displayed by the rules and guidelines in the Torah. My friends, these show how Adonai Himself would daily behave if He were to live among us in human form, such as you and me!”

The startled crowd sucked in a collective rush of air, eyes widened and baffled heads tilted. The stares were nothing new to the teacher, for he had told these truths to other congregations before. A growing murmur filled the open air place of learning. While sitting in his father’s lap, a child with big inquisitive eyes asked, “But Adonai is (here, the boy sought for the right word) invisible – how could He become a villager?”

A woman looked at her older brother and asked, “Zimri doesn’t one of the prophets write that the day will come when the Blessed One will live among us?” With a hand, he shushed her to ponder the profound possibility.

Another man, Azariah’s cousin Uziah, stood up. The murmuring roar subsided. “Rabbi, will you answer a question, for I am perplexed?”

With a half-chuckle the rabbi replied, “Yes, I will, but I must teach that the Almighty’s communications with mankind usually raise more questions than He is willing to answer. Also, let me state that I will try and answer your question only if your curiosity will not go past mealtime!” Laughter came from all around and quickly ended.

Children remarked, "I'm hungry Abba!" and "Me, too Immah! When are we going to eat?"

Uzziah spoke. "Rabbi, you want us to live as if Adonai joined us here right now? Live like He was in our homes, beside us as we walk in the fields? Live believing that He hears all of our words? That we are never alone or..." hesitating, "have privacy with our wives?" A mix of responses followed that last remark, but Uzziah continued, "How could He know all of us, remembering our names and our children's names and, and...why?"

Heads nodded everywhere. Comments flew as the rabbi simply waited for quiet. The noise fell and all eyes turned back to the teacher.

"I say to you, flock of His pasture, grapes of His vineyard, He even knows the number of hairs on each of your heads!" Unable to hold back the theatrical part of his nature, the rabbi's hands went to work on his hair. He pulled a long lock away from his skull and moved it in front of his face. He took on a determined expression and his eyes squinted and crossed. Using the index finger of his other hand he slowly began to count out loud. "One, two, three..." He then sped up racing to 50, stopped and with rolling eyes, loudly exclaimed, "I give up!" His arms flung wide in exasperation.

Around the gathering, children busily followed his example with their own hair. Some played the game with a sibling. After quickly losing count, they collapsed in fits of giggles.

Rabbi Simeon took in the mayhem and with a pleased look, shouted, "Amen! Let's eat!"

Immediately, one girl named Hadassah, tugged at her father's robe and angrily pointed at her older brother, "Abba, Ephraim keeps pulling my hair!"

* * * *

With darkness taking over the sky signaling the Passover, warm memories of the rabbi's visits evaporated. Azariah chuckled. Sweat dripping down his face and chest, and mad with thirst he shifted the shouldered lamb one last time, finally entering the village. He thought of his waiting wife. *The sun is almost down; Hannah will be so pleased to see me!* In the distance he could see her by the doorway to their home fretting about something. She turned and when their eyes met, her face instantly transformed into a broad unforgettable smile. Hannah raced and said, "You have found our Passover lamb, just in time! Blessed be His name."

He replied, "Baruch HaShem!"

EPILOGUE

The next morning, a light wind blew into Jerusalem from the northern hills of Mount Carmel. The first day of Passover started at sunset the night before.

Outside the gates of the city three men lay flat on a hilltop, one of them smiled. A Roman soldier who knelt beside him spitefully asked, "Jew, what do you have to smile about?"

For hours, he had been whipped, beaten, bound, made fun of, called names, accused of blasphemy, and dragged mercilessly. His body oozed fresh blood onto crusted layers from the night before.

Nearby, he heard angry leaders of the people, a few grieving women plus a shocked teenager weeping. Very close by, were the two other men, also in trouble, yet they had gotten better treatment than he. All three lay on their backs for the moment, but on top of heavy, rough timber that irritated their bare, aching skin.

Only one of them felt, sensed and assimilated the unseen charcoal molecules that landed on their sweating skin. Within that one man, life-giving hope welled up, causing the smile.

The soldier, still leaning over him, was waiting for an answer, "Well, Jew, pig got your tongue?"

The answer came, "Just a fire...I remember starting...a very long time ago."

The Roman smirked, adjusted a skin-piercing, twisted crown of thorns tighter on the man's head and grunted to his men, "Lift this one up. He's ripe and ready!"

