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ELIJAH FOUGHT DUKE ON MOUNTAIN TOP

This Drama of Ages Was Staged at Fitting Spot; Sunday School Lesson

The International Sunday School Lesson For September 5 is "Elijah and the Prophets of Baal."—I Kings 18:16-40.

(By William T. Ellis.)

One of the most vivid memories of two journeys around the world is the picture of Mt. Carmel, scene of the dramatic duel between Elijah and the priests of Baal. The place fits the story as a glove fits the hand. God set a great stage for this drama of the ages. The hospitable little company of Carmelite monks, whose simple and even poverty-stricken home is on the very site of the great contest, seemed to me to be favored above most religious communities, even though not a score of travelers in a year climb to their monastery. Tourists are content to drive from Haifa to the northern end of the mountain, which is twelve miles from the scene of the historic contest.

Mt. Carmel, which is twelve miles long, is called "the mountain of a thousand valleys." Recalling the night I spent on horseback, traveling the length of the mountain in the dark, having been delayed by the hospitality of the monks and of a Druse I can well believe that there are a thousand of those slopes which I ascended and descended. The mountain runs parallel to the sea, from Haifa, where the placid and prosperous German pietists have a colony, to the south, ending in a bold headland which holds in review the historic plain of Edraon, and most of the land of Canaan. In all the land of Israel there is no other such natural platform for the enactment of a national drama. Millions of Jews have witnessed the combat between Elijah and the heathen priests, so far as natural facilities were concerned.

Looking down the precipitous sides of the mountain to the east one sees a fertile valley, studded with groves of gray olive trees, where runs the brook Kishon, which for part of the year is dry. Scrub oaks cover the slopes of the mountain itself. Near the top, under the southern brow of the mountain, rushes a great and perennial spring from which was obtained the water to carry out Elijah's instructions.

Three of us stood one Sunday morning on the roof of the monastery, at this "place of mourning," as it is called locally, and one, a minister from Australia, whom we had picked up at Haifa, drew from his pocket a Bible and read the sublime narrative which the Sunday School at this week is studying. The experience was thrilling. The whole scene lay unrolled before us like a scroll. There had stood the drama, crowding to the crest. Somewhere within a radius of fifty yards, the altars had been built, twenty-eight hundred years ago, although the drama seemed to be staged anew for us. Down below was Kishon, whether the false priests had been carried and slain. To the west, sparkled the lovely Mediterranean, and—yes, it was rough water, could scarcely believe our eyes—out of the sea, on a cloudless sky, rose "a cloud the size of a man's hand," such as the prophet had seen. Small wonder that Lawrence and his companions, the British authors, made this mountain top their home; I saw the monument of Mrs. Oliphant in the yard of a Druse home.

The Man of Mystery Reappears Three years had elapsed between the story of last week's Sunday School lesson and the present one. The drought and the famine predicted by Elijah had fallen. The hand of sorrow was heavy on the land. People's hearts had been mellowed by suffering. Many penitent thoughts had been directed to the old days and the old ways, when Israel was loyal to Jehovah. The news that this sorrow had been sent as punishment for idolatry, had run to and fro over the land. Elijah had become an awesome figure in the popular imagination.

As for Ahab, ever prodded by his vengeful queen, Jezebel, he had sought everywhere for Elijah. He could not reason with him, but he could punish him. Might was on his side, if right was not. The fate that he wanted to visit upon the elusive prophet, fell upon the heads of other ministers of Jehovah. Jezebel vented her hate in hunting and harrying priests. Obadiah, the palace steward, a chancellor of the household, a man of God, had hidden a hundred in caves, so that their lives were saved. This character of Obadiah is a study in itself: there are always to be found friends of righteousness and justice ever near the high places of wicked power; there were saints in Caesar's household.

After three years, Elijah reappeared, showing himself to Obadiah when he, like Ahab, was searching for water. The sort of glamor and mystery that had invested the name of Elijah is revealed by the panic that seized Obadiah when he saw the prophet. And when he was bidden to tell the king "Elijah is here," he fell into abject protest, for he feared that the man of God would spirit himself away, and that he would incur punishment. All up and down the peninsula, with his full royal resources, Ahab had sought Elijah, to compel him to take off the "angel" drought; and now to have him suddenly and fearlessly present himself—it was really unbelievable.

King and Prophet Clash Yet so it was, and shortly the skingirt, stern-visaged ascetic from the wilderness was confronting the monarch appalled in royal state. Despite the contrast in appearance, it was easily apparent who was the greater man. So Ahab tried to assert himself by bluster:—"Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" Back to the king's teeth the unabashed prophet hurled the taunt, "I have not troubled Israel, but thou, and thy fathers; in that ye have forsaken the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim."

Diagnosis is the highest art of the physician, and of the preacher and statesman and social student. To tell what is really the matter is most important. A lot of folk, like Ahab, are crying out against the prophets who tell them of their trouble, instead of seeking to remedy the root difficulty. Blaming Elijah is a popular habit. It is easier to criticize the preacher of plain truth than it is to remedy the evil he points out. Some blind Ahab would expel all "social agitators" from our universities and politics and public prints and street corners. That will never end the difficulty. Unjust conditions must be remedied. Killing the physician does not stop the progress of the disease he has diagnosed. The Ahab state of mind merely aggravates the ills it would be rid of. In a minute it was the prophet, and not the king, who was the masterful man. Elijah made Ahab gather the nation—representatively, of course—to Mt. Carmel. He specified in particular the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, and the four hundred prophets of the grove, "which eat at

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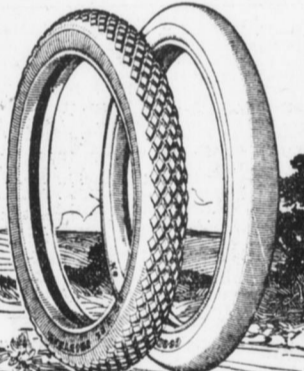
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Jezebel's table—even the prophet could not resist this sarcastic fling at the woman who was his arch enemy. Puzzled, but desperately ready to do what this drought-bringer demanded, Ahab convoked the assembly at the foot of the mountain.

The Challenge and the Test

If artists traveled more we should have a great picture of the scene that ensued. There are few episodes in all history to match it. On a bold headland stood the uncouth but sublime figure of Elijah, his thick, black, unshorn hair streaming in the breeze. Surrounding him, sullen, resentful and mystified, are the priests of Baal, and to one side sits the king, animosity in every glance. Below, in their flowing, many-colored garments are the people, anxiety and expectation written on every face. All eyes are centered on the swart, skin-clad figure from the desert.

Listen: he is about to speak. As he raises his arm, faces bend forward eagerly. Then, in a swelling voice, there rises the eternal challenge, as applicable to-day as it was nearly three millenniums ago—"How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him."

That was fair. The throng received the challenge in silence, but it was impressed. So Elijah proposed a test. He stood alone; the priests of Baal were four hundred and fifty. Let two rival altars be built, each with a bullock upon it. Each party should call upon its god, "And the god that answereth by fire, let him be God." A thrill, a gasp of astonishment, and then the shout, "It is well spoken!" The crowd's sense of fairness was answering. Such a test as this was outside of all tradition and imagination. Instinctively, every one present knew that he had come to a great hour. Here was a tale to tell to children's children.

The Preacher Who Gave Odds Red blood leaps at the spectacle of Elijah on Mt. Carmel. He was all man. No small sanctimoniousness deterred him from jeering at the futile antics of the idolaters, as they leaped and cried and cavorted and gashed themselves, entreating that their sun god would vindicate himself at high noon. The more frantic their antics, the more biting the mockery by Elijah: the hunted dweller in caves was squaring accounts with these luxurious-living palace priests. There is the edge of a razor, the swish of a scourge, the sting of a hornet in Elijah's taunt, "Cry aloud; for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or perad-

venture he sleepeth, and must be awakened."

Cold, unresponsive stood the altar of Baal, with its priests sobbing and wailing about it. The people's patience had been worn thin: the idolaters had been given more than a fair chance. Now comes Elijah's turn. But what is this? He has not only repaired an overturned and moss-grown altar of Jehovah, but he has dug a deep trench about it. Down to the spring he has sent servants, in three relays, for twelve water jars of water, with which he has drenched altar and wood and bullock, until the trenches are filled. People are gazing with popping eyes and bated breath.

Then comes the prayer, a great prayer, freighted with memories of the Chosen People's great past. The man who made that master prayer in public had learned the art in the school of private intercession. Great praying is not mastered in a day. This petition pleaded covenant mercies: it sought the honor and vindication of Jehovah, it offered the petitioner as God's humble servant; and it pleaded for the people that they might again know God. Heavens of brass could not withstand such a prayer, much less a God who is more ready to give than His children are to receive.

Marvel! Mystery! Miracle! Afrighted, the multitude fall on their faces as one man. For with a crash and a crackle the bolt of heaven has descended, and the fire has consumed sacrifice and altar alike, and licked up the last drop of water in the trench. The duel is over. Jehovah has again vindicated Himself. Sounding above the thunders of heaven is the shout of the people, "Jehovah, He is God! Jehovah, He is God!" In natural revulsion, they seize the false prophets, and visit justice upon them at the brook Kishon; while Elijah went further into the mountain top to pray for rain. So full of faith was his prayer that he sent his servant seven times to look for the storm clouds; and then on the horizon above

the sea arose a little cloud, the size of a man's hand; the precursor of a broken God, and God's man, had heaven black with clouds, and a great been vindicated.

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