

Background Characters in the Old Testament Lesson 11 4Q 2010

The Widow of Zarepath: The Leap of Faith

Sunday

Let's set the setting –

It is 860-850 b.c., Ahab is king of Israel and married Jezebel daughter of the king of Tyre. Under her influence Baal worship experiences resurgence.

The Hebrew noun *ba'al* means 'master', 'possessor' or 'husband'. Used with suffixes, e.g. Baal-peor or Baal-berith, the word may have retained something of its original sense; but in general Baal is a proper name in the OT, and refers to a specific deity, Hadad, the W Semitic storm-god, the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon. ¹

Yahweh was 'master' and 'husband' to Israel, and therefore they called him 'Baal', in all innocence; but naturally this practice led to confusion of the worship of Yahweh with the Baal rituals, and presently it became essential to call him by some different title; Hosea (2:16) proposed 'iš, another word meaning 'husband'. Once the title 'Baal' was no longer applied to Yahweh, personal names incorporating the word were likely to be misunderstood. So *bōšet* ('shame') tended to replace *ba'al* in such names. Thus Esh-baal and Merib-baal (1 Ch. 8:3f.) are better known as Ishbosheth (2 Sa. 2:8) and Mephibosheth (2 Sa. 9:6).²

Baal is a weather god associated with thunderstorms, weather, rain and therefore fertility. At Ras-Shamra, Baal was called the son of Dagan, a fact not easily harmonized with the more general notion that El was sire of the pantheon. Also known as

¹ Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (108). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

² Wood, D. R. W., & Marshall, I. H. (1996). *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) (108). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

Hadd (Hadad), Baal was called ‘the Prince,’ ‘the Powerful,’ ‘Rider of the Clouds’ (an epithet once predicated of Yahweh in the Bible, Ps. 68:4). At Ras-Shamra, Baal’s consort, evidently also his sister, was Anat. Philo of Byblos, a Greek historian (ca. a.d. 63-141), collected additional valuable information about Baal, whom Philo called Zeus. And in Greek mythos Zeus’ wife was his sister Hera. Zeus of course was the god of thunder and lightning.

El - Ancient Semitic name for deity, perhaps meaning “power” (cf. Gn 17:1); used by the Hebrews generally in a poetic sense to denote the true God of Israel. The same word was used for the senior Canaanite god and the god in Ugaritic mythology. The “Il” or “El” of ancient Canaanite mythology (before 3500 bc in the region of Syria) was not as active as the god Baal, who struggled with Death and triumphed over Chaos. But Il was the father god of the Canaanite pantheon. .. El is combined with other adjectives to describe the numerous attributes of God; for example, God Most High (Gn 14:18–24), the seeing God (16:13), the jealous God (Ex 20:5), the forgiving God (Neh 9:17), and the gracious God (v 31).³

El-Shaddai, Bethel, Eliazer, Daniel – all names in Hebrew in which El- was a part.

Back to Baal - The phenomena associated with thunderstorms were closely linked to Baal. Baal was said to appoint the season of rains. Clouds were thought to be part of his entourage. Lightning was his weapon, and it may have been his invention. The windows of Baal’s palace were thought to correspond to openings in the clouds through which rain flowed. Rain was important to Canaanite agriculture, and Baal was consequently a god of fertility—a prodigious lover as well as the giver of abundance.

³ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (413). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

The Ugaritic literature preserves a cycle of myths in which Baal is the protagonist. They link Baal to Mount Zaphon. They tell of his battle against Lotan (Leviathan) and of his struggles against other adversaries called Yamm (Sea) and Mot (Death). The struggle between Baal and Yamm has left its mark on Israelite literature in the form of stories about and allusions to Yahweh's encounters with watery enemies (e.g., Isa. 51:9b-10; Ps. 74:13). Through his struggles, Baal achieves the first rank among the gods. Along the way Baal perishes and revives, providing the Ugaritic literature with stirring themes and dramatic moments.

Baal and Ancient Israel: The cult of Baal was widespread in the Syro-Palestinian world and became the focus of Israelite religious animosity. .. We hear of the cult of Baal in a number of local manifestations: Baal of the Covenant at Shechem (Judg. 9:4); Baal of Peor at Shittim (Num. 25:3); Baal 'Zebub' ('of the flies'; but should Zebul, 'Prince,' be read?) of Philistia (2 Kings 1:2-3); and perhaps Baal of Hamon (Song of Sol. 8:11). Jezebel introduced to Samaria the worship of Tyre's god Baal (1 Kings 18:19). It is not altogether clear whether these local baals were taken to manifest the single great god Baal or whether they were imagined as discrete deities. ⁴

Any thoughts about the context of the day? Do we see how Satan works to corrupt our thinking about God? How he subtly weaves together truths and errors so that one has a difficult time separating them?

If you were an ancient Israelite, without Scripture, might you have had some confusion about God?

If Jesus were not only the name of our Savior, but also the name given to various false gods, would it make it confusing? Do we have any problems like this today, with the true God being confused with false gods in our religion?

⁴ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (84–85). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Thousands have a false conception of God and His attributes. They are as verily serving a false god as were the servants of Baal. Are we worshiping the true God as He is revealed in His Word, in Christ, in nature, or are we adoring some philosophical idol enshrined in His place? God is a God of truth. Justice and mercy are the attributes of His throne. He is a God of love, of pity and tender compassion. Thus He is represented in His Son, our Saviour. He is a God of patience and long-suffering. If such is the being whom we adore and to whose character we are seeking to assimilate, we are worshiping the true God. {FLB 59.8}

Is this the God we worship? Have other god concepts entered Christianity?

Do we gain some insight from ancient Israel's history into how and why the truth about God takes time to eradicate distortions?

Think about when Christ came to earth. While the fertility rights, and human sacrifices and polytheistic local god concepts had been eliminated from Israel's thinking by the time Christ came, had all their distorted ideas of God's character been eliminated?

So, into this setting we find Elijah, a man who knows God and delivers a message to King Ahab, that Baal, the god of thunder, is false and that the true Creator will hold the rain demonstrating the impotence of Baal.

SUNDAY

Read first dark section – “What irony...” thoughts?

Does this mean that famines, storms, pestilence, earthquakes, disasters are from God?

Recently several pastors/theologians have taken strong opposition to our view of God because they claim that God will use His power

to pour out the seven plagues of Revelation in order to punish and destroy. Thoughts?

First, when we compare the character and methods of God versus Satan who uses coercion and force? Remember the history of Satan, how he and his agents always first approach with subtlety, distortion and flattery, but if one is not converted then coercive pressure comes followed by infliction of death.

- Satan's approach to angels and Adam, then Satan's approach to Christ
- The work of the persecuting power in the Dark Ages, missionaries to convert, then coerce, then destroy
- The beast of Revelation, convert, then no one buy or sell then the death penalty

If God is the one who inflicts plagues then what method is being used? What inspired evidence do we have to help us understand?

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ² Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³ "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." ⁵

Consider the Biblical definition of wrath, is letting go, (Romans 1:18-28). Therefore, God's wrath being poured out is God letting go His restraint on evil forces.

"I was shown that the judgments of God would not come directly out from the Lord upon them, but in this way;

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Re 7:1–3). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

"They place themselves beyond His protection. He warns, corrects, reproves, and points out the only path of safety; then if those who have been the objects of His special care will follow their own course, independent of the Spirit of God, after repeated warnings, if they choose their own way, then He does not commission His angels to prevent Satan's decided attacks upon them.

"It is Satan's power that is at work at sea and on land, bringing calamity and distress, and sweeping off multitudes to make sure of his prey, and storm and tempest both by sea and land will be, for Satan has come down in great wrath. He is at work. He knows his time is short and, he is not restrained; we shall see more terrible manifestations of his great power than we have ever dreamed of." Manuscript Release vol. 14, p. 3

Elijah flees to Zerephath and encounters a widow and her son. He asks her to feed him. She only has enough flour and oil for one more cake. Elijah has no food.

Read bottom paragraph, "It's important..." thoughts?

Do we find it hard to reach out and ask for help? Do we sometimes believe that we shouldn't have problems? Or perhaps if others knew of our problems they wouldn't like us anymore?

Read bottom pink section – thoughts?

MONDAY

Elijah was at the river Cherith until it ran dry. While there he was fed, the Bible says by Ravens – thoughts? Some commentators say that he was fed by Arabs:

Elijah was miraculously fed by ravens as he hid from King Ahab (1 Kgs. 17:1–6; some commentators read Heb. *·arbîm* "Arabs").⁶

⁶ Myers, A. C. (1987). *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (874). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

6158 עֵרֵב [‘oreb, ‘owreb /o·rabe/] n m. From 6150; TWOT 1690a; GK 6854; 10 occurrences; AV translates as “raven” 10 times. **1** raven.

6159 עֵרֵב [‘Oreb, ‘Owreb /o·rabe/] n pr m loc. The same as 6158; GK 6855; Seven occurrences; AV translates as “Oreb” seven times. **1** one of the chieftains of the Midianite army defeated by Gideon. **2** a rock east of the Jordan where Oreb and part of his army fell to the Ephraimites. *Additional Information:* Oreb = “raven”.⁷

EGW states:

For a time after appearing before Ahab, Elijah remained hidden in the mountains by the brook Cherith. **There he was fed morning and evening by an angel from heaven.** Later on when, because of the continued drought, the brook became dry, God sent his servant to find refuge in a heathen land. "Arise," he bade him, "get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." {RH, August 28, 1913 par. 1}

After his first appearance to Ahab, denouncing upon him the judgments of God because of his and Israel's apostasy, God directed his course from Jezebel's power to a place of safety in the mountains, by the brook Cherith. **There He honored Elijah by sending food to him morning and evening by an angel of heaven.** Then, as the brook became dry, He sent him to the widow of Sarepta, and wrought a miracle daily to keep the widow's family and Elijah in food. After he had been blessed with evidences of such love and care from God, we would suppose that Elijah would never distrust Him. But the apostle tells us that he was a man of like passions as we, and subject, as we are, to temptations. {3T 288.2}

⁷ Strong, J. (1996). *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.). Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship.

That God who sent the ravens to feed Elijah by the brook Cherith will not pass by one of His faithful, self-sacrificing children. Of him that walketh righteously it is written: "Bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure." "They shall not be ashamed in the evil time: and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied." "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" Isaiah 33:16; Psalm 37:19; Romans 8:32. He who lightened the cares and anxieties of His widowed mother and helped her to provide for the household at Nazareth, sympathizes with every mother in her struggle to provide her children food. {MB 110.3}

Thoughts? Do we find a contradiction here? Some have made a big deal out of whether angels or ravens came to feed Elijah, and because EGW uses both that she is inconsistent and contradicts Scripture – what do you think? What about God using the angels to direct the ravens, like the angel spoke through Balaam’s donkey? Do we really think, if ravens brought Elijah food, that they thought this up and planned it on their own? Do we really think the ravens milled the flour and baked the bread brought to Elijah?

In a time of drought lasting over three years, how hungry would the birds likely be? Do we really think in such a situation some baker was leaving bread around for ravens to steal every day, and then the ravens wouldn’t eat it but every day fly to where Elijah was and deliver it to him? Even if it was real birds bringing it to Elijah would those birds have had been guided by an intelligence? Why not angels? Doesn’t the Bible tell us they are God’s ministering spirits to help us?

After leaving the brook Elijah goes to the widow and asks her for food, she says:

“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil

in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”⁸

Thoughts on her response? Does she sound hopeless?

Elijah responds by saying:

“Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.’ ”⁹

TUESDAY

Read last two paragraphs, “Remember...” thoughts?

Was this foolish from a worldly perspective? I don’t get that concept.

She has suffered years in a drought. She has no husband, no income, no resources. She has spent most of her time scouring the country side for any scrap of food or sustenance. Does she have a real sense of the lack of resources available to her?

From a worldly perspective, what is the likelihood of her survival? From a worldly perspective what is the likelihood of her survival if she eats one more piece of bread?

From a worldly perspective do new possibilities open up to her if she shows kindness to a powerful man? Might his words be true and a miracle happen? Might, he merely be indebted to her kindness and seek to help her out?

From a worldly perspective was it really foolish to help Elijah?

⁸ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Ki 17:12). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

⁹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (1 Ki 17:13–14). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Now, just because we realize there were objective, earthly reasons for her to consider Elijah's request as reasonable, does that remove the possibility she also had faith in what Elijah told her?

Could she have been familiar with the events transpiring in Israel? Might she have heard the reason for the drought? With the "All Points Bulletin" out on Elijah, with the king's men scouring the country for years for him, is it possible she might have heard of Elijah? And if she, having lived through the drought, believed Elijah represented the God who is stronger than Baal, might she not be expected to have some awe, respect and even faith?

Read the bottom pink section – thoughts? Is it likely the woman gave the bread in raw, naked, blind faith or might there have been some reflective reasoning that entered her decision?

Consider our story from last week – didn't the young prophet do this very thing – he exercised raw, naked, blind faith in what a prophet told him – was it a good idea?

WEDNESDAY

Read second paragraph, "Through the prophet..." thoughts?

Why do we feel this way? When Adam sinned what did he do? He ran and hid, why? Was God angry? Was God seeking to punish? Was God his enemy? Why was Adam hiding? Where did the sense of condemnation originate?

What about today? Does God condemn us or does God have compassion? Any evidence?

What about woman caught in adultery – what did God say to her? "neither do I condemn you!"

How many have a concept of God as condemning sinners?

Read third paragraph, “Perhaps...” thoughts? Is it likely her sinfulness caused her to believe God was punishing her or distorted concepts of God, not actually knowing Him?

From the beginning it has been Satan's studied plan to cause men to forget God, that he might secure them to himself. Hence he has sought to **misrepresent the character of God, to lead men to cherish a false conception of Him. The Creator has been presented to their minds as clothed with the attributes of the prince of evil himself,--as arbitrary, severe, and unforgiving,--that He might be feared, shunned, and even hated by men.** Satan hoped to so confuse the minds of those whom he had deceived that they would put God out of their knowledge. **Then he would obliterate the divine image in man** and impress his own likeness upon the soul; he would imbue men with his own spirit and make them captives according to his will. {5T 738.1}

It was by falsifying the character of God and exciting distrust of Him that Satan tempted Eve to transgress. By sin the minds of our first parents were darkened, their natures were degraded, and **their conceptions of God were molded by their own narrowness and selfishness.** And as men became bolder in sin, the knowledge and the love of God faded from their minds and hearts. "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God," they "became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." {5T 738.2}

Thoughts?

THURSDAY

The widow's son has died and Elijah prays for God to resurrect the boy – read first paragraph, “Notice...” thoughts?

Do prophets struggle to understand? Do prophets even understand all there is to know in their own prophecies?

What does this mean in how we relate to prophetic writings?

FRIDAY

Read second paragraph, “By this relation...” thoughts?

What limits God’s working with us? What causes us to be separated from God? Why do our sins separate us from God? Is it because each of our sins makes God angrier and angrier and if we don’t get the blood of Jesus to erase those sins from the records in heaven then God can’t even look at us?

How many used to hear or think something like this?

We are not to regard God as waiting to punish the sinner for his sin. The sinner brings the punishment upon himself. His own actions start a train of circumstances that bring the sure result. **Every act of transgression reacts upon the sinner, works in him a change of character, and makes it more easy for him to transgress again. By choosing to sin, men separate themselves from God, cut themselves off from the channel of blessing, and the sure result is ruin and death.** {1SM 235.2}

Read and discuss question 1 – thoughts?

Read and discuss question 2 – thoughts?

Read and discuss question 3 – thoughts?