

“Bringing Down Fire From Heaven”

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Text: 1 Kings 18:17-40

The power encounter, or duel on Mt. Carmel, between Yahweh/Elijah and Baal/450 prophets plus 400 other prophets of Asherah (a total of 840—quite the worship team!), came in on the coat tails of a severe, three year drought—which was a judgment on King Ahab for his turning from God and worshipping the Baals. In 18:17 Ahab snarls at Elijah. **“Is that you, O Troubler of Israel?”** **Elijah answers, “I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father’s house have in that you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and you have followed the Baals.”** (v.18) There are two reprehensible charges made against the king: disobedience and apostasy. Then Elijah proposes that Ahab call together also of Israel to Mount Carmel—in addition to all these religious professionals!—for a showdown between the true God of Israel and the pretenders, the false deities of the Canaanite peoples (Baal and Asherah) to ascertain which God is God indeed. Water was scarce—perhaps there was water in the Brook Kishon to fill four waterspouts (v.33), three times! The water soaked the sacrifice and filled the trench around Elijah’s altar. Explanations for these actions vary. Some say it was to elevate the supernatural effect of the fire from heaven (**the fire of the Lord**, v. 38). Others suggest that this dousing was to dissipate any question as to the origin of the fire—there were no coals in the fuel under the sacrificial animals to cause a combustion. It is worthy of note that Elijah did not command fire to fall from heaven. Here is what he said: **Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (Jacob), let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am Your servant and that I have done all these things at Your word.** (v. 36) *Please note that Jesus, God’s Servant, declared the same truth (You are God in Israel.) and declared that He had come to do the Father’s will (I have done all these things at Your word.)* John 12:49-40 come to mind:

49 For I did not speak [a]on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. 50 I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me.”

Add John 5:19:

[19] Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for whatsoever things He seeth the Father doing, the Son also doeth in like manner.

It would not be far-fetched to say that in so doing Jesus was acting in the spirit of Elijah! That’s worth pondering.

Two other instances of fire from heaven come instantly to mind: the question of the disciples over the fate of the Samaritan village which rejected Jesus (**Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven?**) To which Jesus answered, **No, you know not what spirit you are of.** And the second is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 20:24: **Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of heaven.** Same source, different purpose.

Elijah's fire was a fire of consumption, more than destruction. Everything, the sacrifice, fuel, stones and water in the ditch! The false prophets are hustled to the Brook Kishon and slain (in judgment, no doubt) and at last it was time for the rain to commence. I simply point out that for the fertility of the earth to be quickened, of course, it would have to rain!

Bishop Robert Barron (Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minneapolis, Minnesota) gave a commencement address at Hillsdale College (May 13, 2023). With astute audience analysis, Bishop Barron, praised Hillsdale for its dedication to the great Western intellectual tradition as well as to the authority of Scripture. And he connected it to our hunger and thirst after righteousness (or justice). It is as if he would have Socrates (Plato) and Elijah meet on the Mount of Transfiguration! Of course that didn't happen but the intimation is that the Graeco-Roman world intersected on that Mountain with the Hebraic world and conferred on the matter of messianic suffering. And the Socratic choice of theme (the *locus classicus*) was not Epicurean, but lifted from the dialogue of *Gorgias*. Gorgias was an expert in rhetoric. Covering the rules of persuasive speech. "Their concern is not with being truthful or just but rather speaking in such a way that they would appear truthful or just and hence become convincing to others." This posture has obvious benefits for politicians and lawmakers and their intellectual descendants are highly resented in Congress these days. Socrates critiques Gorgias and his students in this way: If rhetorician teaches a politician to do what is unjust, he does that man and his city far more harm than good." Polus, a student, taunts Socrates with wanting the power of life and death over others. No, Socrates says in response. For to put someone to death unjustly is in fact no power at all." . . . "it is better to suffer wrongdoing than to do wrong oneself!" That assertion is one of the best of the pagan world! Calicoes, the other student present in this dialogue, jumps in claiming that what Socrates calls justice "is nothing but the constraints placed on the few strong by the many weak." This is as Nietzschean/Darwinian and Marxist as one could possibly get to be prior to the 19th century! This is the heart of their collective contempt of Christianity. But what Socrates is maintaining is that, as terrible as suffering unjustly is, there is a corrosion of soul that occurs when one acts unjustly *that is far more damaging to one moral structure, or character* than suffering the arrows and slings of injustice, persecution or oppression." Here's the question: What kind of soul will you have?

What kind of person would you choose to be?

Will you be a taker, doing whatever it takes to get what you want?

A "me centered life." Or:

Will you willingly suffer greatly to do what is right regardless? A God centered life? A giver?

Everything else in your life will flow from, your answer to: What kind of soul would you be? Remember Jesus' question: **Do you know what spirit you are of?**

What Plato takes us to philosophically, the Bible takes us to in terms of idolatry versus worship of the one true God. That, of course, is what 1 Kings 18 focuses on. Elijah is proving the supremacy of God in Israel. And God is reclaiming His place in

Israel! Idolatry, the pagan fertility rites of Baalist/Canaanite religion are putatively false—they celebrate as God what is not God at all. All the hoopla, the chanting, the dancing frenzies, the sadistic and masochistic cutting and orgiastic religion (cult prostitution) are great excitement, and entertaining—but it’s all sound and fury signifying nothing. The self-serving, pleasure-seeking has more to do with depravity than divinity, or truth, righteousness, or justice. Elijah leaves little doubt as to what the one true God is into! The Baalists put everything they had into their worship—they were sincere, they were enthusiastic . . . but, sadly, they were deceived! The contest was clarifying. The people were amazed and astounded—Jezebel was infuriated and tormented. Out of her pain of exposure, as a seductress and deceiver she could only threaten revenge and murder. Sure signs of an evil and unhappy heart.

This episode is not even about religion really—not religion as we see and practice it. It is about the world divided between true believers and self-indulgent idolaters. Everyone worships something, we say. Here’s a short list:

- bodily/sensual or sexual pleasure
- fame, or reputation
- wealth, possessions or stuff
- country, family
- gender identity, or confusion

This puts “whom do you worship?”, or “what do you worship?” Right up there with what kind of a soul do you wish to become, or have?

Only when the fondest desire of our purified souls is directed to the infinite God will the fire fall and addiction be avoided. Bishop Barron

Perhaps the better place for Plato and Elijah to come together is at the cross! There we see that divine weakness is stronger than our strength and divine folly wiser than we. There is the supreme instance of “it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it.” When Jesus took upon himself all the sins of the world, he took on all the hatred, cruelty, stupidity, insolence, violence, rebellion, perversion, institutional corruption, betrayal, treachery, murder and denial—yes, I know, this list is not exhaustive, but it is instructive. All that we do, not knowing what we are doing! His soul remained inviolate! Unharmful and unimpaired, he blasted to pieces the cult of “might makes right,” and “we did it because we could.” That is why, with worshipful wonder, we cry out in response: *Ecco Homo*—behold, true man, and God of God. Jesus held in contempt all false objects of all false worship. What He said to our idols was: “No. Not them . . . Me! I am the Lamb. My sacrifice makes the only and all the difference. Surely that is the moment when the fire began to fall.

With every moral act, with every righteous gesture . . . we perform an act that has infinite, definite consequences, ripple effects that last and do not fade. Every loving act generates a wake, a wave of redemptive power! And so we happen to the world—victors, not victims, givers not takers, a source and not a sink hole! Eventually we shall emerge as those who would never worship any other God than

our God, nor bow the knee to any power, or any pretense to power exalting itself.
Freed men worship freely. I only ask that our worship be as true as free, as good as
Jesus. That would be more than enough for me. **Amen**