

## Mt. Carmel and Elijah

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Mt. Carmel is a continuation of the central mountain range, thrusting northwestward into the Mediterranean. This plunge continues beneath the water for six miles. In the time of Pharaoh Pepi I (ca. 2300 BC), the mountain served as a landmark for ancient Egyptian seafarers, who called it "the antelope's nose."

The Upper Carmel, some 12 miles long (20 km.), maintains a fairly steady height of about 1300 feet over sea level.

There are four peaks. The lowest of these, at Muhraka (1540 feet), stands out in contrast with the lower Carmel (ca. 700 feet), which stretches southward from it to the pass by Megiddo. Since the Bible says that Elijah went to the top of Carmel after confronting the prophets of Baal (Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he bowed himself down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. |1 Kings 18:42), and since this peak was the most conspicuous, it attracted the tradition of that event. Today the Carmelites regard their founder as Elijah, first of the prophets and harbinger of the Messianic age, as stated in Malachi 4:5 - "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the coming of that great and dreadful day of Yahweh." The Carmelites repeat the prophetic vocation within a Christian context. The connecting person is Mary mother of Jesus, for they see her openness to God as a Christian form of the ancient prophetic openness. Their Rule was oral at first, but when it was written its core was expressed in the sentence: "Let them remain alone in their own cells, or near them, meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and watching in prayer, unless they are engaged in some other just occupations." Like the prophet Elijah, that is, the Carmelite may withdraw into deep communion with God, but may also emerge to do a piece of work to which God has called him. Among the better known Carmelites are the saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Carmelite monastery of Muhraka (Arabic for "burnt offering") stands here. Its roof affords a view over the Jezreel Plain.

From Muhraka one can see what is meant by the reference to mountains and valleys in Deuteronomy 11: 10-12:

For the land, where you go in to possess it, isn't as the land of Egypt, that you came out from, where you sowed your seed, and watered it with your foot, as a garden of herbs; but the land, where you go over to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys which drinks water of the rain of the sky,

a land which Yahweh your God cares for: the eyes of Yahweh your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year even to the end of the year.

The contest on Mt. Carmel relates to the following passage (Deut. 11: 13-17):

It shall happen, if you shall listen diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love Yahweh your

God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul,

that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, and your new wine, and your oil. I will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;

and the anger of Yahweh be kindled against you, and he shut up the sky, so that there shall be no rain, and the land shall not yield its fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which Yahweh gives you.

These words present the covenant between God and Israel -- and for the first time very much in agricultural terms. The words appear often in Jewish ritual. Pious Jews recite them twice a day. A scribe writes them on a small piece of parchment, which is placed in a container and nailed to the doorpost of the house. This is called a mezuzah.

The notion of divine justice first enunciated in Deuteronomy 11, that God will reward the good and punish the wicked, has been definitive for Western culture.

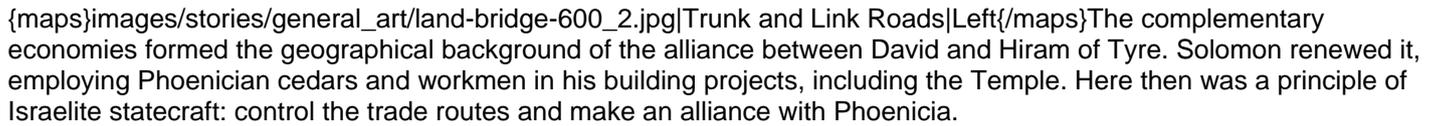
{mospagebreak title=Geopolitical background}

Elijah on Carmel: the geopolitical background (or Why Marry Jezebel?)

In ancient Israel, the key to wealth and power was twofold: to control the roads and to maintain an alliance with Phoenicia. The roads formed the sole land bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe. As for the Phoenician connection: Israel's coast was straight, affording few harbors. To the north, however, the mountains of Lebanon pushed the Phoenicians of Tyre and Sidon against the sea, leaving little agricultural land, while the roots of these mountains formed excellent breakwaters. The Phoenicians became, therefore, the great sailors of the biblical world, opening up and even founding (as at Carthage) the markets of the Mediterranean shore.

Thus Phoenicia's economy complemented that of Israel, and Phoenicia was always its natural ally.

Its natural enemy was Damascus. For the main roads united at the great oasis of Damascus, going on from there as a single highway to Mesopotamia. The economy of Damascus competed with that of Israel for control of these roads (hence the campaigns against the Arameans at Ramoth Gilead, recorded in 1 Kings 22: 3-29; 2 Kings 8:28; 2 Kings 9:1).

The complementary economies formed the geographical background of the alliance between David and Hiram of Tyre. Solomon renewed it, employing Phoenician cedars and workmen in his building projects, including the Temple. Here then was a principle of Israelite statecraft: control the trade routes and make an alliance with Phoenicia.

After the death of Solomon, Israel split into a northern kingdom ("Israel") and a southern one ("Judah"). About 850 BC, the northern dynasty of Omri and his son Ahab tried to renew the key to wealth and power. They repaired the relation with Judah, and they cemented the alliance with Phoenicia through Ahab's marriage to the Sidonian princess Jezebel. The one missing link was the King's Highway, for which this dynasty fought in vain at Ramoth-Gilead.

Ahab's marriage to Jezebel seemed, no doubt, to make good geographical-economic sense at the time. But as any spoiled princess will, when forced to move to the sticks, she brought a few little things with her: "450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (1 Kings 18:19). And here the old "principle of statecraft" encountered something else. That principle depended on control of the roads. But the roads, in turn, depended on the presence of water to drink. And where did the water come from?

In bowing to Jezebel's gods, the people breached the covenant as expressed in Deuteronomy 11:13-17, cited above. God's response, as promised, was to shut up the heavens. The prophet Elijah announced a drought, which lasted three years. Then God commanded Elijah to approach King Ahab and challenge the prophets of Baal to a confrontation on Mount Carmel.

Why Mt. Carmel?

The Upper Carmel thrusts itself between Phoenician territory and Israelite, yet no one lived on it; hence it was a neutral zone, an ideal place for the confrontation between Baal (to Phoenicians the source of rain) and the God of Israel.

Another reason: A drought had afflicted the land. As a mountainous thrust into the sea, Mt. Carmel would be the first to get rain. It receives, indeed, a yearly average of 600 mm. (ca. 28 inches).

But if the Upper Carmel gets so much rain, why was no one living on it in Bible times? In fact, stone-age humans had lived in caves on its western side. Whenever a seafaring people got control (the Phoenicians under Persian rule) or a people from the West (the Crusaders, the modern Jews), its narrow, swampy coast became an important road linking Acco, Dor, and the cities between Phoenicia and Egypt. In the 17th century AD, the Druze founded villages above, but this exception proves the rule: persecuted by Muslims and Christians, they chose places that their more powerful enemies would not want. And the city of Haifa grew up the northern slope, spreading over part of the top in the 20th century. But for most of human history, and certainly in First Testament times, people did not want to live on top of Mt. Carmel. Why?

The varied limestone of the Upper Carmel is full of fissures, the result of a geologically tumultuous upbringing. When it rains, therefore, the water percolates deep into the rock. Not enough stays near the surface for grain. But the Israelites refused to live where they could not grow these three together: grain, grapes and olives: "your grain and your new wine and your oil." (Deut. 11:14; Psalm 104:15, Hosea 2:8. The three are mentioned together many times.)

Grapes and olives can grow on the Upper Carmel, for their roots go deep. Some think that the very name Carmel derives from kerem el, "the vineyard (or olive grove) of God." The mountain is biblically famous for its luxuriant vegetation: Isaiah (35:2) sings of "the majesty of Carmel and Sharon." But grain does not do well here.

{mospagebreak title=Elijah: The Biblical Text}

### Elijah on Carmel: The Biblical Text

1 Kings 18:

1 It happened after many days, that the word of Yahweh came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, "Go, show yourself to Ahab; and I will send rain on the earth." 2 Elijah went to show himself to Ahab. The famine was severe in Samaria.

cb(18,3); 3 Ahab called Obadiah, who was over the household. (Now Obadiah feared Yahweh greatly:

cb(18,4); 4 for it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of Yahweh, that Obadiah took one hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.)

cb(18,5); 5 Ahab said to Obadiah, "Go through the land, to all the springs of water, and to all the brooks. Perhaps we may find grass and save the horses and mules alive, that we not lose all the animals." 6 So they divided the land between them to pass throughout it: Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself.

cb(18,7);

7 As Obadiah was in the way, behold, Elijah met him: and he recognized him, and fell on his face, and said, "Is it you, my lord Elijah?" 8 He answered him, "It is I. Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here!" 9 He said, "Wherein have I sinned, that you would deliver your servant into the hand of Ahab, to kill me?"

10 As Yahweh your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom, where my lord has not sent to seek you. When they said, "He is not here," he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they didn't find you.

11 Now you say, "Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here;"

12 It will happen, as soon as I am gone from you, that the Spirit of Yahweh will carry you I don't know where; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he can't find you, he will kill me. But I, your servant, have feared Yahweh from my youth.

13 Wasn't it told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of Yahweh, how I hid one hundred men of Yahweh's prophets with fifty to a cave, and fed them with bread and water?

14 Now you say, "Go, tell your lord, "Behold, Elijah is here;" and he will kill me." 15 Elijah said, "As Yahweh of Armies lives, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself to him today."

16 So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him; and Ahab went to meet Elijah.

17 It happened, when Ahab saw Elijah, that Ahab said to him, &ldquo;Is that you, you troubler of Israel?&rdquo; 18 He answered, &ldquo;I have not troubled Israel; but you, and your father&rsquo;s house, in that you have forsaken the commandments of Yahweh, and you have followed the Baals.

19 Now therefore send, and gather to me all Israel to Mount Carmel, and four hundred fifty of the prophets of Baal, and four hundred of the prophets of the Asherah, who eat at Jezebel&rsquo;s table.&rdquo;

20 So Ahab sent to all the children of Israel, and gathered the prophets together to Mount Carmel.

21 Elijah came near to all the people, and said, &ldquo;How long will you waver between the two sides? If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.&rdquo;

The people answered him not a word.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, &ldquo;I, even I only, am left a prophet of Yahweh; but Baal&rsquo;s prophets are four hundred fifty men.

23 Let them therefore give us two bulls; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire under; and I will dress the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and put no fire under it.

24 You call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of Yahweh. The God who answers by fire, let him be God.&rdquo;

All the people answered, &ldquo;It is well said.&rdquo;

25 Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, &ldquo;Choose one bull for yourselves, and dress it first; for you are many; and call on the name of your god, but put no fire under it.&rdquo; 26 They took the bull which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any who answered. They leaped about the altar which was made.

27 It happened at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, &ldquo;Cry aloud; for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he sleeps and must be awakened.&rdquo; 28 They cried aloud, and cut themselves in their way with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them.

29 It was so, when midday was past, that they prophesied until the time of the offering of the offering; but there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any who regarded.

30 Elijah said to all the people, &ldquo;Come near to me;&rdquo; and all the people came near to him. He repaired the altar of Yahweh that was thrown down.

31 Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of Yahweh came, saying, &ldquo;Israel shall be your name.&rdquo;

32 With the stones he built an altar in the name of Yahweh. He made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed.

33 He put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, &ldquo;Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood.&rdquo;

34 He said, "Do it a second time;" and they did it the second time. He said, "Do it a third time;" and they did it the third time.

35 The water ran around the altar; and he also filled the trench with water.

36 It happened at the time of the offering of the offering, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, "Yahweh, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel, 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.

37 Hear me, Yahweh, hear me, that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God, and that you have turned their heart back again." 38 Then the fire of Yahweh fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces. They said, "Yahweh, he is God! Yahweh, he is God!" 40 Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal! Don't let one of them escape!" They seized them. Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and killed them there.

Galilee viewed from Mt. Carmel|Left|41 Elijah said to Ahab, "Get up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of abundance of rain." 42 So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he bowed himself down on the earth, and put his face between his knees.

43 He said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea;"

He went up, and looked, and said, "There is nothing;"

He said, "Go again;" seven times.

44 It happened at the seventh time, that he said, "Behold, a small cloud, like a man's hand, is rising out of the sea;"

He said, "Go up, tell Ahab, 'Get ready and go down, so that the rain doesn't stop you.'"

45 It happened in a little while, that the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel.

46 The hand of Yahweh was on Elijah; and he tucked his cloak into his belt and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel.

{mospagebreak title=Epilogue and Comment}

## Mt. Carmel: Epilogue and Comment

Then Jezebel prepared to murder Elijah, and he fled forty days and nights to Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8). Here Yahweh spoke to him, not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a still small voice, telling him to do certain practical things: to anoint Hazael as king of Damascus, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor.

Now Ahab had made an alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, in order better to control the roads. The alliance between the northern and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah, continued --as did Israel's alliance with Phoenicia. These alliances made perfectly good economic sense.

Yet after Elijah was taken up, Elisha, his successor, sent a prophet to Ramoth Gilead on the King's Highway. This prophet anointed the Israelite general Jehu, who stormed down in his chariot and, in a single day, killed Jezebel, Ahaziah king of Judah and Joram, Ahab's son, king of Israel. In short, he destroyed "the system": the basis of wealth and power. Such were the politics of Elijah and Elishah.

But the basis of the basis was the roads. And the roads were roads because of springs. And the springs were there because of the rain. Who, then, gives the rain?

The account of Elijah on Carmel comes as a perfect illustration of the covenant text in Deuteronomy 11:13-17, according to which God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. But everyday life does not always illustrate divine justice so clearly and obviously. Ever since the covenant took this form, the gap that sometimes opens between faith, on the one hand, and ordinary experience, on the other, has posed a major question to people who take both seriously.