

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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19. Elijah

I. Background

A. United Monarchy

We use the term “united monarchy” to describe the time in Israel’s history when Saul, David and Solomon were kings. It was a united monarchy, they were kings over all of Israel.

B. Divided Monarchy

But following Solomon’s death we move into the time period that is called the “divided monarchy” and we are in 1 Kings 12. After Solomon dies the kingdom splits and the southern two tribes of Judah and Benjamin follow Solomon’s son whose name was Rehoboam and they become known as the southern kingdom, or simply “Judah.” The northern ten tribes follow a fellow named Jeroboam, and they become known as the northern kingdom or “Israel.” The capital of the southern kingdom stays in Jerusalem but the capital of the northern kingdom is the city Samaria, a term that eventually was used for the whole land.

C. Judah and Israel

In other words, the words Judah and Israel mean two different things depending upon where you are in the Bible. But at the time of the divided monarchy, Judah refers to the southern kingdom and Israel refers to the northern kingdom.

Jeroboam has a problem with his new kingdom because all worship is happening in Jerusalem; all the religious festivals are in Jerusalem and Jerusalem is south of the border. Jerusalem is in Judah. What he is concerned about is his people going to that other kingdom in order to worship. So Jeroboam creates two new worship centers. One is in Bethel which is in the southern part of his kingdom just next to the border and the other is in Dan up to the northern end of Israel. This was a big no-no. It is very clear in the Mosaic Law that there’s only one place you worship and that is in Jerusalem. But Jeroboam creates these two new worship centers in Bethel and Dan and then he creates two golden calves and he puts one in each of the worship centers; claiming that these golden calves are the gods that brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. He institutes a religious festival on the same day as the religious festival that they were used to having. He even has his own priesthood. They are not Levites, again another big no-no, but he creates his own priesthood. He gives them fancy clothes so it’s still kind of “feels” like that old familiar religion they were used to worshipping.

II. Syncretism

A. Definition

Jeroboam’s answer to his problem is syncretism. Syncretism simply means the mixing of two religions. It’s a great word to know. And what Jeroboam, the syncretist, does is that he merges the Mosaic religion of Yahweh with the Canaanite religion of Baal and Asherah. Baal is the chief god in Canaanite religion often pictured as a bull and that’s why he made golden calves. He was the fertility god; he was in control of the fertility of

the land; and also human fertility. He was the storm god and so among others things he controlled, so they thought, the rain.

Asherah was his consort, his girlfriend. So Baal and Asherah become the god and goddess of the Canaanite religion and what Jeroboam is doing is merging Canaanite worship with Yahweh worship, with the religion of the true God. It still “feels” somewhat like that old religion. “Yeah, there are things that are different. We’re not in Jerusalem. There are gold calves, we’re not used to that but it still feels the same way.” That’s the power of syncretism and yet in substance Jeroboam fundamentally altered worship and Yahweh, the Lord, simply became another god in the pantheon of Canaanite gods who was subservient to the power of Baal. That’s what Jeroboam, the syncretist, did.

And through the prophet, Elijah, God condemns Jeroboam in 1 Kings 14:8 we read, “Yet you have not been [God says to Jeroboam] like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart doing only that which was right in my eyes.” This becomes the standard of judgment all the way through this time period of the divided monarchy. If the king was faithful to the Mosaic covenant; if he was faithful to what God had revealed in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; if the king was like his forefather, David, then God pronounced blessing and praise upon that king. But if that king compromised; if that king tried to mix the religions of the world with the religion of the Book he was condemned. And it’s interesting, it didn’t matter how powerful and good, perhaps, the king was in other areas. It didn’t matter how he was politically or militarily or socially, none of those things matter to the writer of 1 Kings. The only thing that matters is “were you faithful to the covenant? Were you like David? Or did you try to mix the religion of the true God, Yahweh, with the religions of the land?”

And the message that we get in this one comment through Elijah and all through the Elijah story is that we must not compromise. We must not compromise by mixing the worship of the true God with the worship of false gods. We must not compromise by trying to straddle the fence between religions and gods. We must not compromise by mixing the teaching of the true God with the teachings of the false gods. That is the standard by which kings are judged during the divided monarchy.

B. Rehoboam

The story continues and we read about a series of kings who reigned in Judah. The writer starts with Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, in 14:23 and he talks about how the Judeans build “high places and pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there were also male cult prostitutes” and he concludes: “They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” In other words, in one generation, or perhaps two, they became just like the Amorites that Joshua drove from the land.

C. Asa

Then it goes from Rehoboam to his son, Abijam. It goes from Abijam to his son, Asa. And Asa is actually one of the few good kings during the time of the divided monarchy. In 1 Kings 15:11 we read: “And Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord as David

his father had done." There's the standard of judgment; there's the stamp of approval; there's faithfulness to the covenant. And yet it's interesting as you read on even with Asa, verse 14: "But the high places [places of Canaanite worship, of Baal and the Asherah] were not taken down. Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true to the Lord all his days." Asa is a good guy. He's a good king. And yet, he allowed the syncretism; he allowed the compromise with the religions of the world to continue and he didn't destroy all the high places.

D. Ahab

The author of Kings then turns from the southern kingdom to the northern kingdom of Israel and there's one string of bad kings after another. Starting with Jeroboam the author works his way through five different kings and finally arrives at Ahab. In chapter 16:30 we read this: "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jerobam the son of Nebat, [he did something even worse] he took for his wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal [you hear Baal in her father's name] king of the Sidonian's [they're from Sidon, up north] and went and served Baal and worshiped him. [Ahab] erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he built in Samaria [he actually built a temple to Baal in his capital city] and Ahab made an Asherah. Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him." Syncretism. Compromising and mixing always leads to paganism. It's a slippery slope. Jeroboam always leads to Ahab.

III. Elijah

This sets the stage now for the prophet Elijah. We're somewhere around 870 BC and in 1 Kings 17 we meet the prophet Elijah. Even his name tells us what he's about. The name "Elijah" means "Yahweh is my God." In other words, in his very name Elijah is proclaiming that he has made a choice and that he's not going to worship Baal but he's going to worship the Lord. He's going to worship Yahweh.

The prophet, Elijah, prays that it not rain for three years. There's significance in that because Baal supposedly had control of the weather. But the prophet of Yahweh prays to Yahweh and Yahweh shuts up the heavens so that there is no rain for three years. And then in chapter 18 Ahab, finally, confronts Elijah. Starting at verse 17: "When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?'" Ahab is trying to pass the buck. "This is not my fault. This is your fault." It's like blaming the fireman for the fire. And Elijah answered, "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.'" [When "Lord" is in small capitals that's God's personal name; that's the translators way of saying that they're not translating other names for God, I'm translating the name that he gave Moses at the burning bush, Yahweh. It's a personal name.] Then in verse 19 Elijah issues his challenge: "Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's temple." It is a center of Baal worship. Elijah is not looking for neutral ground. He wants to go into the heart of the enemy's camp and do what he's going to do.

Jezebel was a proselytizer, she pushed Baal religion and she took care of all the prophets. So Elijah says, "Let's get everyone together up on top of Mount Carmel." And then we have the challenge, verse 20: "So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word." Elijah is saying, "Will you all make up your mind! Will you fish or cut bait! Will you park it or milk it! Will you stop sitting on the fence!" Or in the words of Joshua in Joshua 24:15: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Elijah's challenge is that time for compromise is past; that you can't live with one foot in each camp. You have to choose. You can't live with one foot in the worship of the true God and the other foot anywhere else. Whether it's a mixed religion or a pagan religion, you can't do that. You can't straddle the fence any longer, Elijah says.

Then starting at 18:23 he spells out the details of the contest: "Let two bulls be given to us [notice they are bulls; there's a ton of symbolism going on. Let's take something that you associate with Baal.] and let them [the prophets] choose one bull for themselves and cut into pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you will call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of Yahweh, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." So the contest is spelled out. Verse 26 it starts: "And they [the prophets] took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us! But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made.'" I would have loved to see Elijah's face during this three or four hour period. I hope when we get to heaven we get to relive the history of the Bible because I've got lots of questions. I wonder if Elijah was sitting there rolling his eyes. I wonder if he was mimicking them. I wonder if he just turned his head in disgust. I really wish I knew what Elijah was doing during those 3 or 4 hours.

But in verse 27 we do know what he does and he gets nasty. "And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud, [cry louder] for he is a god. Either he is musing [deep in thought] or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'" My Hebrew buddies assure me that the Hebrew for "relieving himself" is extremely crass. Elijah is not suggesting that maybe he is "gone to the bathroom." I'll let you fill in what a real translation would have done. "And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed [notice how long this has been going on] they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered. No one paid attention." You can picture the scene in your mind. Now it's Elijah's turn. So Elijah builds an altar in accordance with the Mosaic Law, clearly in contradiction to Canaanite practice and in fact he cuts a trench all the way around it. He puts the wood on it. He kills the bull and put the dead animal on top of it. And then he has the people douse it with water. He doesn't want anyone to think that just somehow a fire started. So they doused it and doused it and doused it and doused it four times to the point that the trench around the altar is full with water. And then starting part way through verse 36, Elijah says: [And again I'm going to switch God's personal name because my concern is that when you read "Lord" you think it's a word for God in general and it's not. When "Lord" is lower case it's a

personal name so let me switch in his personal name: “Oh Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [Elijah says] 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. Answer me O Yahweh, answer me, that this people may know that you O Yahweh, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” Then notice how quickly God answers him. “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. And when all the people saw it they fell on their faces and said, ‘Yahweh, he is God; Yahweh, he is God.’ And Elijah said to them seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.’ And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon [which runs along the base of Mount Carmel] and slaughtered them there.” Elijah is going to remove any forces of syncretism and compromise that he possibly can.

The story comes to a close by God ending the drought and sending the rain. Yahweh is vindicated; that it is he not Baal who is sovereign over all, including the weather. And as you read on through the book of 1 Kings and into the beginning of 2 Kings you’ll see that there are few other stories, things that Elijah did. Eventually he passes on his prophetic role to his disciple named Elisha. Then Elijah is caught up in a whirlwind in a chariot and is taken home to heaven. Elijah is one of the two people in the Bible who never died.

IV. Elijah’s Message in the New Testament

But that’s not the end of Elijah because the message; the uncompromising message, of Elijah continues throughout the Old Testament and especially into the New Testament. There continues to be an insistence that there be no compromise with the world; that we absolutely cannot straddle the fence. We cannot live with one foot in the kingdom of God and the other foot in the kingdom of Satan, which is this world. Jesus says in Matthew 6:24: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” You cannot serve God and mammon. Mammon refers to that which is material and it has its primary reference to money, but its basic reference is to that which is material, that which is of this world. Jesus says you can’t serve both of them. You have to choose. You have to fish or cut bait. You can’t straddle the fence.

In the book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, Jesus is addressing seven churches that were in the southwestern corner of what is modern day Turkey. And in Revelation 2 he’s talking to the church that was in a town called Thyatira. And listen to what he says to these people: “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. [In other words, you’re growing.] But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food [offered] to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead.” There is no place for theological syncretism. There’s no place to mix false teachings with the teachings of God. When Paul writes to the Galatians he excommunicates; he pronounces an anathema on anyone who preaches salvation through works.

There is no place in the New Testament for the toleration of false doctrine, at all. Go on to chapter 3 in Revelation where Paul turns to another city called Laodicea. And to Laodicea in Revelation 3 starting in verse 15 God says, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

Laodicea is situated between two famous towns, on the one hand is Colossae and the other side is Herapolis. Colossae was famous for its cold water springs. Herapolis is famous for its hot water springs. The water comes out around 140 degrees. What the people in Laodicea did was they created small aqueducts and they brought the cold water from Colossae and the hot water from Herapolis into Colossae. (You can still see the pipes today.) But the problem was by the time the water got to Laodicea the cold water was warm and the hot water was warm. In other words, it was worthless. You couldn't do anything with it and he picks that up and he says, "Oh that you would be cold or hot." Make your choice! But this lukewarm, this being in the middle, this straddling the fence of not being a fully devoted disciple, I will spew you out of my mouth.

The message of Elijah goes all the way through the New Testament. The message that we dare not straddle the fence. We dare not live with one foot in God's kingdom and the other foot still in the world in Satan's kingdom. You know when we straddle the fence sometimes I think we have this sense that this is a safe place to be. "I got one foot in God and I've got the other foot over here where I'm a little more comfortable." And we have this feeling that somehow straddling the fence is safe. But the message of Elijah is that is the single most dangerous place that you and I can go, is to straddle the fence. God says I will not be straddled. I will not be compromised. You may not be lukewarm. There is no place for that in the kingdom of God.

I think of the analogy of a marriage and the beauty of a godly marriage where there is no compromise; where you do not share your spouse and you do not share yourself. But you're wholly and totally committed to the covenantal marriage and how beautiful that is. And yet how ugly marriage can turn when you start to compromise and you start to share yourself and you break your covenant with your spouse. That is why we are called the "bride of Christ;" that's why when you abandon, I abandon, the Israelites abandoned the covenant, they are called whores. Because it's an all or nothing thing. And God demands complete and total covenantal loyalty. He demands that we not straddle the fence, but that we give ourselves wholly to him. He says, "Stop limping around. Make your choice. And it's either me totally, or it's something else but you can't straddle the fence."

First John 2:15 is one of the strongest statements of this in the Bible where the apostle John writes, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." It's a hard verse because the world is beautiful as God has created it. That's what the gospel says. You can't straddle that fence. You either love God or love the world. You can't do both. You can't live with a foot in each camp.

Now the world teaches that we can straddle the fence. The world teaches that you can love God and you can be in love with the world at the same time. And so what happens

is the syncretistic church of today preaches compromise. It preaches compromise with God's holiness. It proclaims the gospel of holiness that does not have the message of loving God and of hating sin. The syncretistic church today preaches that we should be people pleasers and not God pleasers; that we should lower our standards. And when we compromise our standards; when we choose to try to love God and love the world, which of course is impossible. When we try to straddle that fence what happens? Jeroboam always moves to Ahab. Syncretism always moves to paganism. Statistically there is now no discernible difference between the church and the world. The statistics are saying it. In fact, some of the statistics are even higher in the church. And we have ceased, often, to become a light to the world because we look just like the world. Jeroboam always moves to Ahab.

The gospel says that our goal is to be like Jesus. The gospel says that we are to be mature in our faith. That is what is the most important thing. 1 John 3 we are supposed to look like Jesus. So you have verses like Romans 8:28, 29; Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4; that all teach that suffering and pain can drive us to maturity; can drive us to look more like Jesus. And therefore, we are actually to rejoice in our suffering because of what the suffering produces or can produce in us. A hard doctrine. And yet the world teaches that the goal of our life is to be the absence of pain. The goal of our life is that we should indulge in pleasure so you have these two diametrically opposed teachings and what happens? The syncretistic church compromises God's goal for our lives. It preaches a health and wealth gospel that says that God's ultimate goal for you and for me is that we be healthy and wealthy and I don't think cares very much if we're wise. And that pain, rather than something we rejoice in (the clear teaching of Scripture): pain is always the sign of sin and a sign of a lack of faith and a sign of God's displeasure. These people have not read the book of Job.

The gospel says that we are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. (Mark 8:34) The gospel says that we are to be fully devoted disciples, living not for ourselves. We are to deny ourselves. We are to live every day as people who have been crucified to themselves. And we are to not live for ourselves but we are to live for him. Clear teaching right in Scripture. There's no question on that. It's clearly what the Bible teaches. And yet this syncretistic world on the other hand teaches that the only thing that really matters is the unholy trinity: me, myself and I. The world says, "Don't deny yourself. Everything is about you. You're the center of the universe. Don't deny yourself. That's foolishness." And so the syncretistic church preaches the salvation of what is called "cheap grace." That once you get your "get out of hell free" card, you can go and live anyway you want and it doesn't matter. "You don't have to deny yourself. You don't have to take up your cross. Just raise your hand, say the magic prayer and go out and live anyway you want."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, says this about the practice of the syncretistic church of teaching a cheap grace, grace without discipleship: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living incarnate. Costly grace, what the Bible teaches, is the treasure hidden in the field. For the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which a servant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ

for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”
The time for compromise is past. That is the message of Elijah. And it never was more true than it is today. The time for compromise, for straddling the fence, for thinking that we can love God and love this world at the same time is past.
Choose this day whom you will serve. How long will you go on limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.