

Elijah: Prophet of Courage

1 Kings 18:5-18

⁵ Then Ahab said to Obadiah, “Go through the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis; perhaps we may find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, and not lose some of the animals.” ⁶ So they divided the land between them to pass through it; Ahab went in one direction by himself, and Obadiah went in another direction by himself. ⁷ As Obadiah was on the way, Elijah met him; Obadiah recognized him, fell on his face, and said, “Is it you, my lord Elijah?” ⁸ He answered him, “It is I. Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.” ⁹ And he said, “How have I sinned, that you would hand your servant over to Ahab, to kill me? ¹⁰ As the LORD your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my lord has not sent to seek you; and when they would say, ‘He is not here,’ he would require an oath of the kingdom or nation, that they had not found you. ¹¹ But now you say, ‘Go, tell your lord that Elijah is here.’ ¹² As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of the LORD will carry you I know not where; so, when I come and tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have revered the LORD from my youth. ¹³ Has it not been told my lord what I did when Jezebel killed the prophets of the LORD, how I hid a hundred of the LORD’s prophets fifty to a cave, and provided them with bread and water? ¹⁴ Yet now you say, ‘Go, tell

your lord that Elijah is here’; he will surely kill me.” ¹⁵ Elijah said, “As the LORD of hosts 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 When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” ¹⁸ He answered, “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.”

Theme Statement

Obadiah’s rescue of one hundred prophets from the murderous rampage of Jezebel provides one of two examples of service to the Lord found in these verses. Elijah, the “troubler of Israel,” furnishes an example of an alternative method of ministry.

Exploring the Word

Three characters appear in this portion of Elijah’s storied ministry:

Ahab. If Ahab’s royal father, Omri, was the worst king of Israel until his time (1 Kings 16:25), Ahab far exceeded his sire’s record for faithlessness. Together with his Sidonian wife, Jezebel, Ahab abandoned Yahweh and embraced the worship of Baal and Asherah (1 Kings 16:29-34). Indeed, Jezebel sought to eliminate Yahwism completely by murdering prophets throughout the land (1 Kings 18:4, 13).

Obadiah. Obadiah officially served as the major-domo over Ahab’s palace. As his name and actions indicate, however, Obadiah was a “servant of Yahweh” who “revered the LORD greatly” (18:3). Secretly resisting Jezebel’s pogrom to eliminate Yahweh’s prophets, Obadiah hid one hundred prophets in two caves and provided rations for them.

Elijah. Elijah's name means "my God is Yahweh." He appeared before Ahab in ninth-century Israel with the announcement of a prolonged drought (1 Kings 17:1). The Lord subsequently ordered Elijah to go to a remote eastern wadi, presumably out of Ahab's realm, and then to a Sidonian village, Zarephath. In both locations, Elijah miraculously received bread and water. In the drought's third year, Yahweh commanded Elijah to appear once more before Ahab (18:1).

1 Kings 18:5-15 Obadiah finds Elijah

After three years of drought and famine, Ahab's horses and mules were starving. The king divided the land in two and ordered his servant Obadiah to scout half the land in search of even a trace of grass growing near a spring or wadi (18:5-6). Ahab's unconcern for the people is striking. Horses mattered because, as military weapons, they secured his throne even against the sort of populist revolt that had raised his father to the throne (1 Kings 16:21-22).

Unbeknownst to Ahab, Yahweh had dispatched Elijah with news that the Lord would end the drought (18:1). Now, Obadiah happened upon Elijah. He may have recognized Elijah from the prophet's previous encounter with Ahab or because of his distinctive garb (2 Kings 1:8).

Obviously, Obadiah was anxious not to be murdered by a king whose authority was threatened by failures in national policy, problems with his leadership, and a potential collapse of the military power that underpinned his government. Obadiah was also concerned to remind Elijah of his lifelong reverence for Yahweh, not to mention—although he does!—how he rescued one hundred of the Lord's prophets, provisioning them with bread and water.

With a solemn oath matching Obadiah's, Elijah promises to remain and to meet with Ahab (18:10, 15).

1 Kings 18:16-18 Ahab finds Elijah

In due time, Ahab found Elijah. The king's "Is it you . . . ?" (18:17) echoes Obadiah's earlier greeting (18:7), but the king dubbed the prophet the "troubler of Israel."

Elijah, however, recognized that the actual "troubler" of Israel was Ahab himself. Ahab's unreserved embrace of Baal and Asherah was the root cause of all trouble and disturbance in the land. Ahab had forsaken the Lord and the commandments, resulting in a catastrophe for his nation.

The Word Today

In their own way, both Elijah and Ahab were correct in seeing each other as the source of the nation's problems, the "troubler of Israel."

Elijah understood that Ahab's decision to abandon Yahweh and to construct a cultic center for Baal in Samaria would end in disaster for king and country. The Lord stopped the rain, but it was Ahab's actions that precipitated the cursed drought.

On the other hand, Ahab accurately indicted Elijah. From Ahab's perspective, his royal word should be law, his power should stand unquestioned, and his decision to turn his people to worship Baal and Asherah should be obeyed. His tools were violence and murder. Ahab rightly perceived that the "troubler," Elijah, diametrically opposed the abuse of royal power, especially as it led to national apostasy. Ahab knew that Elijah and Elijah's Lord jeopardized his kingship, his authority, and—with the drought—his nation's existence.

Elijah was a "troubler of Israel."

Elijah was, however, in good company. Jesus also was a troubler of Israel. Jesus challenged the authority of a

religious establishment that had become both oppressive of the populace and guilty of supporting the repressive military and economic power of Rome. Jesus invited his followers into a beloved community, faithful in their relationship with God and each other. Jesus opposed all forces that subjugated people and made them suffer, especially the forces of disease and hunger. Jesus refused to accept any authority over God, a fact that threatened religious leaders of his day and that troubled even Rome.

I believe that the church is summoned to be a national “troubler” as well. Ought not believers be troubled and troubling when we encounter leaders who urge us to idolize things that are not God? Should we not be troubling when leaders act or legislate in ways that ignore or harm the poor and vulnerable? Should we simply accept the permanence of racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, and other forms of oppression? Ought we not confront those for whom no part of creation is safe from economic exploitation and destruction? Should we not trouble authorities—and be troubled ourselves—by the fact of homelessness and hunger in our nation and in the world? How can we not be troublers for those who demand cheap goods while insisting on unjust and exploitative labor?

To paraphrase the text: “When Ahab saw the church, Ahab said to the church, ‘Is it you, you troubler of the nation?’” God help us all to be so troubling!

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. How comfortable are you with conflict? Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing “not at all.”

Exploring the Word

1. Jot down three adjectives that describe Ahab.
2. Was Obadiah a traitor? Explain your answer in one to three written sentences.
3. Who was more courageous, Obadiah or Elijah?
4. How did Obadiah and Elijah each accomplish what God wanted?

The Word Today

1. Obadiah rescued one hundred prophets and provided them safe sanctuary because their lives were endangered. Learn about how present-day efforts of refugee and immigration services embody the biblical mandates to care for endangered people.
2. Obadiah provided Yahweh’s rescued prophets with food. Feeding the hungry has been a part of the faith community since the beginning (see Mark 6:35-44; Acts 6:1; James 2:15-17). Check those of the following efforts that you or your congregation support.

	Personal	Congregational
House a food pantry		
Contribute to or volunteer with local food pantry		
Support Bread for the World		
Include inserts/items about hunger in worship folders		
Receive special offerings for hunger relief		
Support the hunger appeals		

Prepare meals for community		
Offer educational programs about hunger		
Support Meals on Wheels		
Support No Kid Hungry, Share Our Strength		
Other		

Closing Prayer

Lord, enable us to be your troublesome ambassadors wherever your people are threatened or your loving will is opposed. Show us how better to feed and shelter those who are endangered, whether near or far. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.

Further Study

Matthew 17:1-13; John 18:28-40; Romans 13:1-8

Daily Readings

M. Mark 9:2-8

F. 1 Kings 19:1-8

T. Mark 9:9-13

S. 1 Kings 19:9b-15

W. 1 Kings 18:1-4

S. 1 Kings 18:5-18

T. 1 Kings 18:20-26,
30-33, 36-39

Memorization

1 Kings 18:18

[Elijah] answered, "I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals."