



Illustrations created with Grok (AI) and reviewed by our team

Elijah on Mount Carmel

1 Kings 18:20–39 · Bloom · Ages 13–19

First Kings 18 is a showdown, and it is staged on purpose. Across Canaan, Baal was worshiped as the storm god who sent rain and lightning. After more than three years of drought, Elijah challenges Baal on his own ground: if Baal rules the sky, let fire come from it. (That background on Baal is historical context, not Church teaching.)

The setting: King Ahab of Israel had married Jezebel, a princess of Sidon, and built a temple for Baal in his capital, Samaria (1 Kgs 16:31–33). Jezebel had hunted down the Lord's prophets (18:4). Most Israelites had not formally abandoned the Lord; they were trying to keep both. That is exactly what Elijah attacks. He tells the crowd they cannot go on hedging their bets, and he demands a decision. The crowd says nothing.

The test: two bulls, two altars, no fire. Baal's four hundred and fifty prophets pray from morning to noon, dancing around their altar. Elijah taunts them. By afternoon they are slashing themselves with blades as part of their ritual, but the sky stays empty. Then Elijah rebuilds the Lord's altar with twelve stones for the twelve tribes, a reminder that Israel is still one covenant people even though the kingdom has split. He drenches the offering with twelve jars of water. At the hour of the evening offering he prays a short prayer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, asking that the people recognize the true

God and turn back to him. Fire comes down and leaves nothing, not even the stones or the water in the trench. The people throw themselves to the ground and confess the Lord as the one true God.

What the Church sees here: the Catechism presents Carmel as a decisive test of Israel's faith, and notes that Elijah's name, which means "The Lord is my God," anticipates the people's cry (CCC 2582–2583). The fire from heaven is a figure of the Holy Spirit, who transforms what he touches (CCC 696). The Eastern liturgies echo Elijah's plea when they ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine, the prayer called the epiclesis (CCC 2583; 1105). And the first commandment is at stake: no other gods (CCC 2112–2113).

Honest questions:

Wasn't Elijah's mocking cruel? It is sharp satire aimed at a false god, exposing how empty an idol is. Christians are still asked to treat people who are in error with love, prudence and patience (CCC 2104).

What happens next? Right after this passage, Elijah has the prophets of Baal seized and killed at the brook Kishon (1 Kgs 18:40). The Law of Moses punished leading Israel into idolatry by death (Deut 13:1–5), and Elijah acted within that ancient covenant setting. The Church teaches today that no one may be forced to believe or be punished for their religion (CCC 160; 2106). We read Elijah in the light of Christ, who rebuked James and John when they wanted to call down fire on a village that had turned him away (Lk 9:54–55).

Does God always answer with fire? No. In the next chapter, an exhausted Elijah meets God not in wind, earthquake or fire, but in something barely audible after the noise has passed (1 Kgs 19:11–13).

Church teaching note

Church teaching: Carmel as a decisive test of faith, and Elijah's name anticipating the people's cry (CCC 2582–2583); fire as a figure of the Holy Spirit (CCC 696); the epiclesis (CCC 1105; CCC 2583 notes that the Eastern liturgies repeat Elijah's plea there); the first commandment and idolatry (CCC 2112–2113); charity toward those in error and freedom of faith (CCC 160, 2104, 2106). Baal as a storm god is historical context, not Church teaching. 1 Kgs 18:40 and 19:11–13 fall outside the retold passage and are cited only as cross-references.

Talk about it

1. Elijah said the people couldn't serve both God and Baal. What do people try to 'keep both' with today?
2. How would you answer a friend who says this story shows that religion makes people violent?
3. Why do you think God answered with fire on Carmel, but later met Elijah in quiet?
4. Catholic connection: read CCC 696. Why is fire a sign of the Holy Spirit?

Key verse: 1 Kgs 18:39. Look it up in your Bible.