

# 1 KINGS 18

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## **18:1–4**

Obadiah's name means "servant of the Lord." It's more likely the prophets Obadiah saved were part of a group of righteous people, similar to and possibly the same as the "sons of the prophets" mentioned in 2 Kings 2 or the "company of prophets" mentioned in 1 Samuel 10:5. Aside from these and other brief mentions of this group, we don't know a lot about them, what they did, or how someone joined them. Later Elijah said he was the only prophet left, so either Jezebel eventually found these hundred other prophets, or they were not prophets in the same way Elijah was. It's probable that when the text refers to "sons" it means "children" since Hebrew doesn't make a distinction between the two. By calling themselves "children of the prophets" this group might have been indicating they followed the Lord's prophets unlike other Israelites at the time who did not. This fits with later practices of Jews like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and more modern Hasidic, Haredi, or Orthodox Jews who also distinguish themselves from others.

## **18:5–6**

This passage is reminiscent of Abraham and Lot dividing the land in Genesis 13. Although Abraham and Lot divided their land because "their substance was great" (Genesis 13:6), Ahab needed to do so for the opposite reason. Another possibly coincidental comparison is that Abram's house governor was named Eliezer, which means "God's helper"—very similar to Obadiah's meaning of "servant of the Lord."

The indication here that Ahab, king of Israel, had herds and apparently lived near them shows us that kings of Israel were more like chiefs of a tribe than like medieval monarchs with a palace or castle. The "house" Obadiah governed was a group of tents and animals.

### **18:7–19**

Baal was a Canaanite sky god similar to Zeus or the Mesopotamian Hadad. The name Baal means “lord, master, or husband.” “Baalim” from the verse 18 is the plural of Baal, indicating other false gods. Within the Canaanite pantheon Baal had a father named El and a wife or consort named Ashtart or Asherah. When this passage and others refer to the “prophets of the groves,” they are translating the name Asherah as “groves.” Asherah was a fertility and earth goddess worshiped in connection with trees. Both times it is used in verse 19, the word “prophets” in Hebrew is masculine-plural, indicating that the group consisted of either all men or mixed men and women.

### **18:20–21**

Elijah asked, “How long halt ye between two opinions?” instead of just telling the people they shouldn’t worship Baal. The question implies that the Israelites were switching back and forth between religions. *Syncretism* is a modern term describing the practice of combining religious beliefs. For example, ancient Greeks traveling in Canaan might hear a description of Baal, a sky god who creates rain and lightning, and assume it is the same as their god Zeus with a different name. Some Israelites were possibly assuming a connection between Baal and Jehovah to justify worshipping Baal.

### **18:22**

Asherah’s four hundred prophets may not have been part of this trial even though they are mentioned earlier.

### **18:23–25**

This repetition might indicate that two versions of this story were combined into one. Repetition in Genesis, sometimes with variation in the accounts, is the foundation for the documentary hypothesis, a scholarly theory that the five books of Moses are composed of multiple different accounts edited together as one account.

### **18:26–27**

Elijah’s mocking represents Baal as more human than god, having human needs, and implies that Jehovah doesn’t have those same limitations. In fact, we’re told in Psalms 121:4, “Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”

## **18:28**

As part of Israelite animal sacrifice, the priest would take the animal's blood and sprinkle it on the altar. Blood was a significant part of the sacrifice, as Leviticus 17:11 says, "For it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul." Luke described Jesus's sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane as "drops of blood" (Luke 22:44). Animal sacrifice was common to all religions in the ancient Near East, but the rituals varied—some peoples drank the blood of the animals, a practice specifically forbidden in Leviticus 17.

That the priests cut themselves "after their manner" indicates this self-mutilation was a typical practice for priests of Baal. The Hebrew word here translated as "lancet" in most other places is translated as "spear." It doesn't make logical sense for the priests to have cut themselves with spears or even spearheads, so the lancets were possibly some other sharp implement. The author of this text didn't need to describe what type of blades the priests used, yet we are given two types. Sometimes in the Bible lists of two or more are the result of archaic words the author wanted to explain. The best example of this in the King James Version is in 1 Samuel 2:14, where four different words for an item of cookware are mentioned: pan, kettle, cauldron, and pot.

## **18:29–31**

The twelve stones represent the twelve tribes as indicated; they also reflect the twelve stones brought out of the Jordan River by Joshua to commemorate the children of Israel crossing the Jordan on dry land. There may be an intentional connection between the stopping of the Jordan River and the stopping of rain.

## **18:32–34**

Four barrels of water poured three times makes a total of twelve barrels—matching the twelve stones of the altar.

## **18:35–39**

The repetition of the phrase "the Lord, he is the God" implies the people may have been chanting it. (Whenever the King James Version has the word "Lord" in all-caps, the underlying Hebrew word is Jehovah.) Elijah's name literally means roughly the same concept as the phrase but in reverse. His name means "God is Jehovah": *el* for "God" and *jah* as a shortened form of "Jehovah." It's almost as if the Israelites were chanting Elijah's name. Names in the Hebrew Bible frequently point out an attribute of or significant event for the person named. In this case, this moment fulfills Elijah's name and was his greatest triumph.

## **18:40**

The total number of prophets present was either 450 or 850 depending on whether Asherah's prophets were there. If we read this literally, Elijah personally killed each one. There are a couple of things to consider about this. First, we already know that many of Elijah's fellow prophets or followers had been killed by representatives of Jezebel, likely these prophets. Then there are the logistics involved in mass executions. It's highly likely that either Elijah did not personally kill all 850 or that there were not actually 850 prophets. The number may have been exaggerated by a later writer who either didn't know the actual number or just wanted Elijah's story to be more impressive. As another example of exaggeration, verse 20 implies the entire nation of Israel was present at Mount Carmel to witness these events.

It is obviously dangerous to pick and choose what we want to believe out of the scriptures, but in this case and some others within the Old Testament, it seems too unreasonable to take the stories literally in every detail. There are many examples of exaggeration in stories from our time, even those about events in the not-too-distant past. For example, many western states in the United States inflated their reported population numbers to qualify for statehood. The scriptures generally focus more on the truths instead of the facts. This story tells the truth about monotheism and the consequences of unrighteousness. Whatever factually happened can only be approached with, at the least, another account of the same story.

## **18:41–44**

This chapter has multiple repeated actions: twelve stones for the altar, three times pouring water on the altar, and here seven times looking at the sea.

## **18:45–46**

Finally, the chapter concludes with the end of the drought and the minor miracle of Elijah running faster than a chariot the twenty-five miles to Jezreel. Without minimizing this miracle, in an age of primitive road construction, a human could take a more direct route while a horse-drawn wheeled vehicle would need to go around various obstacles.

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