

## I. Rain

### 1. A battle between gods

**Y**ASHAR WAS BORN in Zarephath. He had never crossed the mountains eastward, toward Aram, or set his eyes on Mount Hermon beyond them. So the Carmel Range in Israel, a modest rock ridge at the southern boundary of the Jezreel Valley, amazed Yashar by its size. “These run fourteen miles from Yokneam to the sea,” the prophet, Elijah, told him. “Their summit lies along that line...” He pointed east to west. “...two thousand feet above.”

Yashar swallowed hard, the prophet said *Fear not* and they started up.

What energy Elijah showed that morning, jogging up the mountain’s switchbacks. Yashar’s heart beat hard when they had finished, less from the rapid climb than the sight he saw, the Western Sea glimmering behind the prophet, who had fallen to his knees. Elijah’s hair blew in the wind that morning as he prayed at the top of the world; a world that was about to change forever.

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Dust was everywhere on the mountain. “Healthy trees once thrived on the run-ups,” Elijah told Yashar, “and on this crest, tall grass blew.” He swept his hand along the horizon where cracked earth and rubble ran in all directions. “And the glory of the grass shall be restored. But only after God has his way.”

Yashar inhaled to speak but Elijah raised his hand. “I’ll talk today, son,” he said, “and you shall listen.” He waited until Yashar nodded. “There is a trickle of water that way,” he said, pointing, “in the bed of the Kishon Stream.” He pointed again, in another direction. “King Ahab, his escorts and the priests will come up that slope. More will follow on foot from there and there.”

They soon arrived as Elijah had predicted; thousands of chalky men, most on foot but some leading staggering horses or boney mules, summoned to Carmel by their king to witness a battle between gods.

When Yashar began to bounce with excitement, Elijah, usually the most jovial of men, barked at him. “Fall to your knees and pray beside me,” he said. “Do only as I say, say nothing of yourself. Observe the wonders that shall follow with your heart.”

That seemed odd.

Two wagons, one carrying wood for burning, the other leading bulls, preceded the king to the top of Carmel just ahead of a legion of priests, Queen Jezebel’s men, hopping, cheering and chanting as they marched waving amulets, mocking Elijah as they passed.

Elijah repeated to each who met his eyes, “Your moment, pretty fellow, will come.”

Others on the mountain jeered Elijah too, blaming him for the drought that had nearly killed them all. The king thundered up last in a chariot flanked by bowmen. “Prophet,” he shouted, reigning his team to a stop, “where do you stand?”

“I stand with the God of Israel,” Elijah answered, “as should you.”

Ahab frowned. Even Yashar knew that Ahab had asked a different question. “For almost four years, prophet,” Ahab said, “you have cursed this land with drought.”

“Israel cursed herself,” Elijah said. “God is merciful. I but speak his word.”

“You say,” Ahab said, “but now that you are flushed from your place we will end this thing.”

Elijah had not been flushed from anywhere. He had returned to Samaria according to God’s will to put a dare to Ahab. “Let the God who answers prayer by fire be God,” the prophet had said. “Send and get Israel together before me at Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal who get their food at Jezebel’s table. And make prayers to your god. I will make a prayer to the Lord. It will be clear that the one who gives an answer by fire is God.”

Ahab had agreed. The drought had made him desperate. Hundreds of Jezebel’s priests would face Elijah standing alone. Yashar felt blessed, about to see it unfold.

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“Cut up a bull,” Ahab ordered Jezebel’s favorites. “Lay wood for a fire then bring down fire from the sky.” The men of Israel cheered and so it began. They watched with eager eyes as Jezebel’s men began their hooting magic, certain that the drought would end and Elijah would not escape.

The priests set to cutting, moaning and chanting, *Baal, send down fire, Baal, send down fire*. Yashar had never seen such energy at first but, after several hours of vain effort passed in withering heat, the priests began to fade. Nothing had worked for them. Yashar watched Elijah’s eyes as Jezebel’s so-called holy men flailed about. The prophet looked like a bowman, hunting—sharp-eyed, alert, unblinking—as if the priests weren’t men but prey.

Midday passed, the priests’ failures mounted and Elijah began to mock them. “Give louder cries,” he suggested, “for he is a god, is he not? By chance he is sleeping and yet to be made awake?”

Yashar laughed aloud (but he laughed alone).

The day grew hotter and things turned ugly. Stinging from Elijah’s taunts and Ahab’s impatience, the men of Baal cut themselves with sharp stones, the keen edges of their jewelry and the bright blades of their curved knives. But their spilled blood, torn flesh and tortured cries only served to sicken those who watched.

Finally, deep into the day, Ahab yelled *enough!*

The bloodied champions of Baal dropped to their knees. The gathered sons of Israel, once so hopeful, lowered their heads and some began to cry. Ahab had remained upright in his chariot all morning, ignoring the heat. When it became clear that the priests had failed, the men of Israel demanded that Elijah be put to death so not to waste the day.

“No,” Ahab shouted. “As agreed, it is Elijah’s turn to try to bring down fire. We will honor that and only afterward do what’s best.” The mob cursed Elijah and began to crowd threateningly around him. Yashar fought to stay close to his side. “And when you do fail, prophet,” Ahab said, “your blood will flow worse than these priests’.”

Cheers followed the king's threat but Israel's passion made no sense. If Elijah failed to bring down fire, then rain, as promised, it seemed all of them would die.

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"It is now the Lord's turn," Elijah said. "Baal's priests have cut their bullock. They have laid on wood and put no fire under it as agreed..."

"But they could not work their evil magic to save their stupid lives," Yashar shouted.

He had not planned it; the words sprang from his mouth. When Ahab turned his burning eyes upon him, Yashar thought to run. He was leaning away, in fact, when Elijah cleared his throat, everyone refocused and the scary moment passed.

"No man can summon fire from the sky," Ahab said, "shame upon me for allowing you, Elijah, to raise the nation's hopes. But you too will fail." He pointed at his collapsed cadre of holy men. "And together with these miserable souls you will have proven only that your proposition was impossible."

"Says the king of Israel," Elijah answered. He raised his fist and shook it as he spoke. "Yet I will dress a second bullock. I will lay it upon wood and also put no fire under it. Then I will call on the name of the Lord..." He turned in a slow circle, locked eye-to-eye with the few men brave enough to face him, finishing with these words, "...and the God of Israel will answer my call with fire."

Even as they hissed him, Elijah fell to his knees and began to stack stones. "These twelve for an altar," he said, "according to the number of tribes of the sons of Jacob unto whom the word of the Lord came saying, Israel will be your name."

Even that truth annoyed the others. "We are ten," one answered, "separate from Judah and Benjamin."

Elijah knew that. Everyone knew it. Instead of answering as they railed at him the prophet raised his hand from time to time, working his fingers like a duck bill, quack-quack-quack. How calm he remained while entirely encircled by hate.

Once he had completed the altar, Elijah dug a trench then carved his bull for sacrifice, the heat of day so intense by then that even Israel's insults had faded. Elijah's enemies watched dull-eyed while he worked but Ahab, from time to time, rose to his toes to observe, his eyes betraying an unspoken truth. Every one of those parched and angry men longed in his heart to be wrong. Israel desperately wanted rain, even if by Elijah's hand. The drought had all but finished her.

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Altar built, trench dug and bull carved, Elijah rose and spoke again. "Do you not see, Ahab? Do you not understand, O Israel, how deeply you have offended the Lord your God by turning your backs on him and honoring gods of your own making?"

No one answered. It seemed then that Elijah might cry. "All is misery because of your adultery," he said. "Yet there will come a day when even this dewless calamity will seem to your astonished eyes a blessing, O stiff-necked Israel, if you fail to curb your lusts, shed your idols and repent."

Every man on the mountain looked away, directing his gaze toward the featureless sky. Elijah pointed at the priests. "Behold, O king," he said, "see how your lady's defeated crew..."

"Use great caution," Ahab interrupted, "when you mention my queen."

"Jezebel!" Elijah bellowed as though he could see her. "What will your dark-eyed beauty say, O king, when you return to your inlaid palace and confess that her fools collapsed today, no fire lit, no rain induced despite their self-inflicted wounds?"

Ahab held his tongue. What could he say?

"Who is Baal to you now, O Israel," Elijah asked, "as you stand here lacking spit to swallow? How will you look upon these parodies of holy men, day's end, after I call down fire through the power of the living God?"

"You would be wise to be more polite," Ahab said, his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Your end will go much easier when you fail."

"I am not the issue," Elijah said. "How long will Israel go on balancing between two opinions? If the Lord is God then give worship to him, but if Baal, give worship to him."

Yashar wanted to shout, *Hallelujah!* but this time he held his tongue.

"I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord," Elijah said, "but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Another four hundred dine alongside these each night at your queen's table. Their chants and blood have only stirred the dust. Soon a blast of fire and pouring rain will prove that the God of Israel is merciful and true, putting to shame the puny gods of your lusts and imaginations."

Ahab grunted. The people muttered. Elijah raised his chin. "I ask again," he said, "what, then, will you trinket-worshipping people do?"

Even Yashar lowered his head then. Only three years earlier, he had been no different from the others. Sikarbaal had been his name, meaning *Baal Remembers*. He, as had his father, once honored the same gods that had all but finished Israel.