

ELIJAH

A MAN LIKE US

DAVID ROPER

Elijah: A Man Like Us
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Chapter One

The Worst of Times, The Best of Times

*We seem to see our flag unfurled
Our champion waiting in his place
For the last battle of the world,
The Armageddon of the race.*

—John Greenleaf Whittier

It was the best of times, or, depending on your outlook, the foulest and most depraved.

Israel's fortunes had seldom looked better, and yet—the man at the helm of state was none other than the childish and fiendish Ahab.

King Ahab was brilliant, daring, charming, and rich—everything but true. His Hebrew name suggests “God is a close relative,” but his life belied his name. According to Israel's historian, he did more evil in the sight of the Lord

than any other man (see 1 Kings 16:29–34), and he did so as the pawn of his shady lady, the infamous Jezebel.

Ahab married Jezebel as a matter of political convenience. He wanted to consolidate his position vis-à-vis Phoenicia, Israel's rich and illustrious neighbor to the west. Phoenicia enjoyed wealth and luxury on a scale unprecedented in the ancient world. Her colonies dotted the Mediterranean, her navies ruled the seas, circumnavigating Africa and trading in far-off exotic places. Phoenicia's name was a byword for affluence and influence.

Ahab wanted a piece of the action.

He got it.

And undoubtedly more than he'd bargained for.

By taking the young and beautiful Jezebel as his wife, the son of Omri earned a lasting place in Israel's history books. As the biblical writer put it: "He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat [who joined Israel to idols], but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him" (1 Kings 16:31).

In taking a foreign wife, Ahab was following the example of his illustrious forefather Solomon, who entered into numerous royal marriages for all the wrong reasons.

King Solomon . . . loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." (1 Kings 11:1–2)

Ahab, however, carried Solomon's folly a quantum leap further. Though Solomon's exotic wives brought their

gods with them and the king compromised his faith by capitulating to their demands, his brides (at least) never tried to force their idolatry on the people of Israel.

Jezebel, however, was made of sterner stuff.

This crafty, unscrupulous woman came from a long line of monstrous tyrants. Her father was the cruel and vicious Ethbaal, who murdered his way to the throne of the city-state of Sidon by assassinating his brothers. He was the child of his bitter and pitiless religion and, according to Menander, a Greek writer, its high priest. His name, "Eth-baal" says it all: Taken at face value it means, "(I'm) with Baal."

Jezebel's name is also associated with the worship of Baal and was probably taken from a line in a Phoenician poem:

Where is Baal, the Overcomer?

Where is the Prince, the Lord of the earth?

The question, "Where is the Prince?" in Phoenician is *iy-zebel* and was the name given to Jezebel, the Sidonian princess. She too was a consummate Baal worshiper.

When the Phoenician moving van backed up to the palace in Samaria, Jezebel moved in bags, baggage, and Baals. From that day forward, there would be no doubt as to who wore the royal pants in the family. Ahab was utterly dominated by this unprincipled woman.

One ancient writer characterized Ahab as an example of one who, though he had been a witness by day to Elijah's character and God's faithfulness, "yet by night drank the poison of his wife Jezebel's vicious persuasion." Some men, it seems, will be just as wicked as their women want them to be.

Jezebel was an unusually ardent missionary of the Baal cult. She established a Baal site at Jezreel, Israel's summer capital, supporting its 450 priests out of her own purse. Then she induced her addle-brained husband to build a huge temple in Samaria, large enough to house great crowds of idol worshipers (see 2 Kings 10:21).

Groves, shrines, and temples of Baal and his lovers—Anat, Astarte, and Asherah—began to dot the landscape, while Yahweh's altars were ground into powder. The land was filled with Jezebel's lascivious priests and the temple prostitutes who plied their trade on every street in the nation.

Jezebel's reign was characterized by an overt and pervasive hatred of Israel's God. She poisoned the minds of the people with lies and false teaching generated by her prophets and then, intoxicated by her animosity, moved on to more unmistakable means of suppression: She began systematically "killing off the LORD's prophets" (1 Kings 18:4).

The anointed prophets were hounded without mercy.

The schools of the prophets were boarded up.

Many perished.

Others hid "in caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:38).

Brave Obadiah was able to save only a few of his brother prophets by secreting them away in the network of limestone caves around Mount Carmel. Out of all Israel, only seven thousand men and women refused to bow the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). But even these were so paralyzed by fear the nation hardly knew of their existence.

Baalism became Israel's state religion.

Baal worship was the most degraded religious system ever devised—and Phoenician Baalism was the worst of the

lot. It's thought by some scholars that the Phoenician coast was settled by the refugees from Sodom and Gomorrah who fled the Valley of Sidim when their cities were destroyed and who brought with them their depraved culture.

The Phoenician version of Baal worship was deemed evil even by other pagans. When the Romans—hardly paragons of virtue themselves—encountered Baalism at Carthage, a Phoenician colony, they were utterly grossed out by it.

Literature from this dark culture abounds. A number of years ago, a Syrian peasant accidentally plowed up a flagstone that covered a subterranean passageway leading down into a burial chamber. Subsequent excavations unearthed a large library with inscriptions in various Near Eastern languages, including a new Semitic language now known as Ugaritic. The language was deciphered and the texts were translated. Much of the writing is comprised of erotic poems describing the racy escapades of Baal and his consorts. As a result, we've come to learn more than most of us would ever care to know about the theology and morality of that horrible religion.

The poems are beautifully crafted—yet filled with images and fantasies of a degraded and brutal culture. Without a doubt, Baal worship went hand in hand with appalling violence. Underlying the sophistication of the literature lie tales of murderous rage and frightening cruelty.

In one text, Anat, in a bloody, misanthropic spree, massacres a gathering of male guests whom she invited into her house. After the slaughter she “fastens [their] hands to her girdle”; plunges “knee-deep through their blood; hip-deep through their gore.” Then “her liver swells with laughter; her heart swells up with joy.”

In another poem, in a wild fit of rage she shouts at her father El:

*With the might of my [strong] hand
I will smash your heart;
I will make your gray hair flow with blood;
The gray hair of your beard with gore.*

And then there's that other aspect of Canaanite culture—one captured in the Old Testament writings as well as in the secular literature of that day: it was awash in sexual aggression and perversion. Some of the poetry is little more than hard-core pornography with an emphasis on lewd sensuality, deviant eroticism, and group sex. Much of it celebrates Baal's potency:

*Baal makes love to a heifer in Debir
A young cow in the fields of Shimmat.
He lies with her seventy-seven times—
Yea, he [copulates] eighty-eight times—
So that she conceives
And bears a child.*

Myth, in ancient times, gave rise to ritual. The Canaanites acted out their poetry in seasonal ceremonies or cultic dramas, believing these enactments would produce rain and promote fertility. They were dramas with a distinct purpose: They represented a mechanism by which men and women could manipulate the gods.

In the spring, priests and priestesses mated to insure the fertility of soil, beasts, and women. There were more couplings in the fall to express gratitude to the gods, more at the winter solstice to strengthen the fading sun. When it came to conjugation, any old season would do.

Baal worshipers engaged in a catalog of sexual deviancy—polygamy, polyandry, prostitution, adultery, fornication, rape, incest, homosexual partnerships and casual gay encounters, pederasty, and bestiality.

In some instances, the priests of Baal performed the rituals vicariously as representatives of the people, but at other times the people themselves shared in the ritual, participating in all the lusty capers of the priesthood.

Jezebel presided over this cultural revolution, freeing God's children from their moral inhibitions and sexual hang-ups, broadening their minds, stretching their consciences, and justifying every intolerable act in the name of tolerance.

By her teaching, she led Israel into the most venal and corrupt idolatry and sexual immorality. The nation sank deeper and deeper into the shadows and edged nearer and nearer judgment.

But God is never at a loss. He provides for every eventuality. When things look most dark and dangerous, when evil men and women have done their worst, then God can begin. And he usually begins in a very small place by preparing a very obscure person.

Elijah was that person.

Elijah was God's solution to all the evil that Ahab and Jezebel had unleashed in the land.

But what of our day? What of the culture in which you and I find ourselves in the declining days of the second millennium? As Yogi Berra would say, "It's *deja vu* all over again." The same images that polluted Israel resound in our culture. What terrible times we live in; what awful shame. As Jeremiah said, we've forgotten how to blush (Jeremiah 6:15).

It was Bob Dylan who told us, "The times they are a-changin'."

He was never more right.

Listen to Dartmouth professor Jeffrey Hart, in a recent speech reported by the *Wall Street Journal*:

A great many things happened all of a sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case, I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today abortion is commonplace in America. Demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard-core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmas time, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly, all of that fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were for the most part discreet. Suddenly, we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed upon an unsuspecting nation?

You have but to look at our culture to realize that it's perishing.

We have broken with our traditional and spiritual past and find ourselves stumbling and lurching into a new Dark

Age of uncertain and bewildering character. There is a growing sense that nothing is true and everything is permitted. "The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men" (Psalm 12:8).

Evil, morbid influences lead us into ever-deepening confusion—a clutter of distortions, half-truths, bald-faced lies and an addled notion of tolerance that demands we accept everyone's version of truth. There is no final standard; everything varies according to the weather.

G. K. Chesterton once observed that morality, like art, consists of drawing a straight line. Now no one knows where to draw the lines! Once there were boundaries and absolutes. Now, traditional concepts of human sexuality and public decency have warped so radically and thoroughly that *no one knows* what is fine, uplifting, and good.

Who knows what sexual preferences are preferable?

Is teenage sex okay?

Is it good for Heather to have two mommies?

Is Daddy's new roommate okay?

There's no way to heal our confusion, no final authority.

Once we believed in civility and courtesy and compassion. Now we live in an age of cold brutality and insane sexuality where anything goes. We've lost those values and virtues that once prevented us from pandering to our darker instincts.

Raunch, hate, and brutality proliferate. Degraded images and fantasies are pumped into our homes and into the public arena at an astonishing rate, a staple theme of movies, television, and books. Foul-mouthed, misogynistic "gangsta" rappers talk about dismembering women and "offing" cops. "Hypocrisy, betrayal and greed have unsettled a nation's soul," a *Time* writer observed.

All our doing without God has finally undone us.

Traditional values such as valor, duty, compassion, responsibility, and integrity are considered quaint today. The *Washington Post* noted: “We have reached a state where common decency is no longer common.” We’ve come a long way, baby, but, as the Grateful Dead used to say, “What a long, strange trip it’s been.” We have pushed ourselves to new levels of personal and social wickedness. All our doing without God has finally undone us.

We are living in what many have described as a post-Christian era. That doesn’t mean there are no longer many Christians around; there may in fact be more true believers than ever before. Post-Christian means that *Christian faith no longer plays a role in shaping public opinion and policy*. Christian assumptions and commitments, once widely held, no longer have the presence and impact they formerly had.

When was the last time you attended a theater and heard a dialogue informed by biblical presuppositions? When was the last time you read a book that reflected even remotely the notion that we are unique human beings created in the image of God and dearly loved by him?

Spend a day at Stanford University or the University of California at Berkeley and see if God competes in the war of ideas in either of those arenas. No, he has been marginalized, disappearing from public debate like “the last fading smile of a cosmic Cheshire Cat,” as someone has said.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevski wrote that “if God does not exist, everything is permissible,”

which is precisely where we are these days. When God is gone, anything goes; everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes. And when anything goes, “being is beggared,” as Emily Dickinson observed. There is no meaning and nothing to live for anymore.

Every true heart feels that emptiness. Underlying a glossy veneer of surface success yawns a black, cavernous void. “What has all our going for the gusto got us?” men and women ask. “Why do we feel so empty and guilty and sad?” Malcolm Muggeridge wrote of our times, “We press on . . . seeking happiness ever more ardently, and finding despair ever more abundantly.”

Once again, behind the deceit that informs our culture lies “Sabbathless Satan,” working relentlessly to overthrow humanity—to poison our minds and imperil our bodies. Concocting scientific, technical, political, erotic fantasies, he knocks on the door of every heart proclaiming with provoking, cunning voice:

There are no rules . . . Try it once. It won't hurt . . . Why not? Everybody else is doing it . . . Give it up. You're going to give in anyway . . . There are no consequences . . . Go for it. You DESERVE a little pleasure . . . If it feels good, do it . . . C'mon Virginia, why wait? . . . You only go around once—go for the gusto . . . Look out for Number One . . . You shall not die . . . You can be like God!

Satan is a gentleman, Bacon told us, a charming fellow with immense power, subtlety, and thousands of years of experience. His chief aim, of course, is to injure the God against whom he rebels. To accomplish this, Satan misrepresents the Creator to his creatures, always attempting to frustrate his good purposes for them and hopefully—in the process—break the great heart of God. Satan promises us

the world, but as Milton said, “All is false and hollow; though his tongue drops manna and makes the worse appear the better reason.”

Once again, God is not at a loss.

When things look most perilous and impossible, he is preparing his final solution. You and I are that solution to all the evil that people, principalities, and powers can do. Though you may be only one of teeming millions on this earth and though you may believe you do not count, God says, “You matter and you can make a difference.”

That’s what this book is about: You can make a difference! So you’re not a major player. So you have no political clout or power base. So you’re not a Christian quarterback, a converted rock star, a multimedia personality, or a multimillionaire.

You can be a catalyst for change.

You can be used to arrest the spread of corruption in your community.

You can be a source of light in your dark corner of society.

You can be the means by which some part of our crazy world is brought into sync.

We are all designed to be of incalculable use to God.

We are all designed to be of incalculable use to God. He planned our usefulness before time began. “We are God’s workmanship,” Paul insists, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Perhaps it will be a visible role; more likely it's concealed and hidden. It could be that your entire life will find its meaning in one person whom God wants you to touch in some significant way—or in one event in which he yearns to make himself known.

I do not know what God will do with you and me, but I know this: When we stand before our Lord someday, we will then know that our lives have not been without meaning. “No one is without a divinely appointed task,” John Ruskin said, “and the divine means for getting it done.”

The Christian world is fascinated nowadays with politics, marketing, management, psychology, and other earthly endeavors, all of which have their proper time and place, but all of which can be nothing more than substitutes for doing things God's way and may amount to little more than puttering. The forces that inveigh against us are not subject to human devices.

The apostle Paul wrote that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

The powers of which he speaks are not the strongholds of human evil but the far more insidious and dangerous forces of Satan's underworld.

I recall a message Francis Schaeffer gave in which he envisioned a hypothetical American scientist on an overseas flight who found himself seated next to a rice farmer from a Third World country. During the flight, the two men struck up a conversation and began to quiz one another on their beliefs.

The engineer subscribed to Jesus' teachings—the Sermon on the Mount, no doubt—but he was not a

Christian. He was a humanist and a naturalist. He believed that there is nothing beyond what we can discern with our five senses and that only those things that can be empirically verified are true.

The rice farmer wasn't a Christian either; he was an animist. He believed in an unseen world beyond this one, inhabited by good and evil spirits. Schaeffer asked, "Which of the two is closer to the truth?"

The animist, of course, was thinking more "Christianly" because he believed in the reality of two worlds—one material and one spiritual. He knew that what you see is not what you get, that above and beyond this world is another realm, inhabited by immaterial beings linked to this world and profoundly influencing it.

**It does little good to rail and rage
against those whom the Devil has
cruelly blinded and deceived.**

There is simply no such thing as "secular" society. Behind every human power is the power of darkness. Paul says clearly that our struggle is not against human beings but against the spiritual powers that control them. Men and women who embody evil are not the enemy. They are the *victims* of the enemy, "taken . . . captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). It does little good to rail and rage against those whom the Devil has cruelly blinded and deceived; we must rather do battle with the Devil who has deceived them.

Life is like a Punch and Judy show. When the puppet villain puts in an appearance, we can tongue-lash him and

hurl rocks at him or take him out with a club. But what have we accomplished? The man behind the curtain will simply place another puppet on the stage and begin to pull the strings again. Far better to go behind the scenes and take out the puppeteer!

Paul writes, “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish [demonic] strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:3–4).

God has supplied us with the means to get *behind* the puppet-show curtain—to reach behind the scenes. These are not the schemes of human endeavor but the infinitely more powerful strategies of faith: prayer, proclamation, personal righteousness. These are the mechanisms that bring the infinite power of God into play. These are the devices that make a difference.

These are the worst of times and the best of times. Paul put it this way: “[Make] the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15).

We read this verse as though Paul is enjoining greater effort because the days are short, but that’s not what he’s saying at all. He’s rather insisting that evil days are days of *opportunity*. The more evil our culture becomes, the more opportunities there will be to put to God’s intended use.

A few years ago, I came across an unexpected statement in the Bible—part of Paul’s debate with the Athenian philosophers:

From one man he [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so

that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:26–28)

Paul's premise is that God controls human history—permits the rise of nations, determines their geographical boundaries and orchestrates their fall—in order that women and men may reach out for God. History is his story, which he writes for the world's salvation.

Even the forces of evil are used in such a way "that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God" (Isaiah 37:20). God permits wickedness to run its malignant course, allowing (though never condoning) the appearance of the so-called monsters of history—Adolph Hitler, Idi Amin, Nicolae Ceausescu, Saddam Hussein.

The Almighty reins in his power for a time, allowing evil tyrants to make their plays, upsetting men's and women's well-ordered lives, presenting them with dilemmas beyond their ken, shaking what can be shaken so that men and women will seek him and reach out for him and find him. Evil brings pain, but it is the genius of God to bring good out of evil. He works *everything* together for good (Romans 8:28).

Perilous times are times of unparalleled opportunity. Those who know God must not fear them. They should

**Perilous times are times
of unparalleled opportunity.**

rather buy them up, making the most of every opportunity to show their faith and to share it *because* the days are evil.

“Carpe diem,” we say nowadays: “Seize the day.” The saying has become so popular and proverbial that most people are surprised when they learn that the phrase has been around for a long time and originated with the old Latin poet Horace:

*Cut back long hopes. Even as we speak, envious time
Flees: seize the day, trust little in tomorrow.*

Horace was advising a friend not to run out and try to conquer the world but to do the small yet truly significant things that need to be done every day—the duty of the present moment.

“But,” you ask, “how will I know when my moment has come? How can I integrate and focus my life on that one duty that God has for me today? The world has a thousand necessities. Issues clamor every day for my attention. What will keep me from being manipulated by every cause and craze?”

God will let you know.

Our usefulness is his business not ours.

“Anyone can find out what will happen,” Aslan said to the children as he shook his great mane. “Get up at once and follow me. What will happen? There is only one way of finding out.”

—C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*

Seeing Deeper

1. To really understand the conflict between Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah, you need to get a feel for each personality. With just a few minutes of reading—and a sheet of

paper for notes—you can develop a fascinating profile of each character.

- a. Who was this King Ahab? Describe him from what you learn in 1 Kings 16:29–33; 18:7–14; 21:1–16, 25–26; 22:30. How would you characterize him?
 - b. Who was Jezebel? We know the name so well. How did she earn such a reputation? Read 1 Kings 16:31; 18:4; 19:1–2; 21:7–15, 25; 2 Kings 9:22. How was she different from Ahab?
 - c. Who was this Elijah the Tishbite? What do you know about him from reading 1 Kings 17:1–2, 19–24; 18:21–24, 36–37; 19:1–3; 2 Kings 1:10–15; 2:8.
2. From what you read in this chapter—and what you recall from other sources—what do you know about Baalism? What parallels do you see in our culture today?
 3. The author states that “men and women who embody evil are not the enemy. They are the _____ of the enemy.” What does 2 Timothy 2:24–26 tell us about their condition? about how to respond to them? How closely does your view of non-Christians parallel that view Paul instructed Timothy to take?
 4. The author took us to Ephesians 5:16, which says, “[Make] the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil” (not, because the days are short). He said, “Evil days are days of unparalleled opportunity.”

Consider the situation Elijah was facing and the real possibility that he would be killed. How could evil days be considered days of opportunity?

Think back to your last time of intense stress (maybe you're in the midst of it right now). In what sense could this time be viewed as God's "day of opportunity" in your life?