

If the Lord is God, Follow Him

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



The Holy Prophet Elijah appears, with no introduction, at the beginning of the seventeenth chapter of First Kings (III Kingdoms in the Orthodox Study Bible.) We see that Elijah certainly is a prophet by the way he speaks God's word, but we also see that he is both the beneficiary and the performer of miracles.

The miracle from which Elijah benefits saves his life. It's a time of famine, and God tells him to go to the brook Cherith that flows into the Jordan, and drink water from the brook. God says, "I shall command the ravens to feed you there."

When the brook dries up, God prepares Elijah to perform a life-giving miracle for someone else, telling him to go to Zarephath, where a widow will take care of him.

Elijah finds the widow, who readily gives him a cup of water. But when he asks for bread she tells him that she has so little that she and her son will probably soon die. Elijah prophesies that the Lord will furnish her with flour and oil. Just as he promises, "the bin of flour was not used up and the jar of oil did not run dry."

But the widow's son dies, and she bitterly confronts Elijah: "You came to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son." God answers Elijah's plea to restore the son's life. With that, the widow is able to say, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

As God's prophet, Elijah does much good, but he must also confront evil. When he meets King Ahab, Elijah reminds the king that he has forsaken the worship of the true God and followed after the false gods, the Baals, of his wife Jezebel. He has thrown the people into uncertainty, which Elijah challenges: "How long will you be undecided between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him, but if Baal, follow him." Then Elijah shows in spectacular fashion that God triumphs over all false deities. Victorious, he orders the execution of all 450 of Baal's prophets.

Events like this execution make some see God as brutal, even murderous. But this alien religion of Baal—powerfully patronized by the queen, Jezebel—had moved "into the very heart of Israel, contaminating and corrupting the people from one end of the Northern Kingdom to the other" writes Norman Podhoretz in his book "The Prophets". The Old Testament shows us that God protects His people and His truth, sometimes by destroying unrepentant, dangerous and arrogant enemies like the prophets of Baal.

Troparion - Tone 4

An angel in the flesh and the cornerstone of the prophets,
the second forerunner of the coming of Christ,
Glorious Elijah sent grace from on high to Elisha,
to dispel diseases and to cleanse lepers.
Therefore, he pours forth healings on those who honor him.

Elijah appears to the disciples at the Transfiguration. He is alive in Christ, as we will be if we overcome the temptation to let ourselves be "undecided between two opinions," and follow the Lord because He is God.