

Getting Ready to Hear

(Chapter 1)

The united kingdom of David and Solomon split apart in 922 BC (the exact date is debated). The Northern Kingdom became known as Israel; the Southern Kingdom as Judah. Samaria was the capital of Israel; Jerusalem the capital of Judah. Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC.

Worship of the pagan fertility deity Baal—who took different names and forms in the ancient Near East—was a constant threat to both kingdoms. Baal worship was an essential part of the more sophisticated culture the seminomadic Israelites had encountered upon entering Canaan in the thirteenth century BC. Archaeological excavations show that early Israelite life was crude when compared to the sophisticated, aristocratic culture of Canaan.

The subtle and powerful attraction of the Baal fertility cult—especially in the North initially—can hardly be overstated. The mythical stories and practices associated with Baal explained and guaranteed the fertility required for successfully growing crops, raising livestock, and producing human offspring. Baal worship revolved around the cycles of nature. As we shall see, it intimately involved those devoted to it.

One of its most prominent supporters was Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, who reigned over Israel from approximately 869 to 850 BC. During Ahab's reign, the prophet Elijah battled the erosion of Israel's faith brought on by Baal worship. While worshipping Baal, the people also "worshipped" Yahweh. The con-

flict between Elijah and the priests of Baal reached its climax on top of Mount Carmel.

At stake in that contest was the very center of Hebraic faith. Is the Exodus God the Lord of all, or is he not? Does he share deity with other gods, or does he not?

Let's travel with a fictional Israelite farmer and his neighbors as they journey to Mount Carmel. He will explain the attraction of Baal worship and why he and his neighbors mixed the worship of Yahweh with the worship of Baal.

This chapter uncovers the fundamental nature of the Baal Conspiracy.

The pertinent scriptures are Judg. 2:11-15; 1 Kings 18; Ps. 65:5-13; and Zech. 10:1-2. Study Solomon's contributions to the corruption of Israel's faith (1 Kings 11:1-13). Judah was not far behind the Northern Kingdom in adopting Baal worship. See the judgment in 1 Kings 14:21-24. Gomer, who was the wife of the prophet Hosea, personified the Northern Kingdom's incorrigible lust for Baal (Hos. 1:1—2:13).

THE TROUBLER

I see that you are a visitor to these parts. My fellow villagers and I are journeying westward toward Mount Carmel. People from other towns and villages have come. All of us wonder why the *Troubler* has summoned us. Walk awhile with us. I will tell you about my family, my neighbors, and our way of life.

I am Jubal—a ninth century BC small farmer. I live in Israel's highlands. Our village lies within walking distance of my fields. Stone walls mark off each farmer's land. My fields—which actually belong to Yahweh—are hilly and rocky. They have been in my family for generations, part of what our clan received when our ancestors settled in Canaan. Our village forms an enclosed circle. It is located north of Gath-hepher—about thirty kilometers west of the Sea of Chinnereth. Cisterns hewn from the rock, and a nearby stream, normally provide our water. I say, "Normally," for both sources are now dry.

Like some other families in my village, three generations (soon to be four) live under my roof: my aged parents; my wife and I; and an orphaned niece, two unmarried daughters, and two sons and their wives. "Crowded," you say? That is just our way of life.

As you might expect, my aged parents are not able to travel.

My country is Israel, the northern part of what was once the united kingdom of David. But shortly after Solomon's death, the kingdom broke apart. Two countries with two different kings, capitals, and places of worship resulted. But this history is of minor importance when compared with my urgent need to make a crop, feed my family, and pay the king's taxes.

I am sure you can understand why failure would bring disaster. No national "social safety net" exists to break my fall.

JUST "MAKING A LIVING"

Life is hard. Everyone works for family survival—men with their assigned tasks and women with theirs. We work from sunrise to sunset. In seasons of fieldwork, those of us who work the fields and orchards leave home early enough to arrive at daybreak. We return home at nightfall. Sometimes we stay in the fields overnight.

In good times, my neighbors and I produce a surplus—partly because we have learned to adapt to inhospitable conditions. We have cleared forests to gain more land and built terraces to collect rainwater. But even when we accumulate surpluses, King Ahab levies heavy taxes to support his court and building projects.

Our agricultural year begins with plowing, and sowing wheat, barley, and millet. This happens from late October to late December. From late December to late February comes the late sowing of legumes and planting vegetables, such as cucumbers and marjoram. In March, we hoe weeds to be used as hay. From the spring equinox to late April, we harvest barley. This signals the beginning of ingathering. At the beginning of this period, we celebrate Passover. From late April to late May, we harvest wheat and measure grain. This season ends with the

celebration of Pentecost. We harvest grapes and make wine in June and July. Summer fruit such as figs, pomegranates, and dates are harvested from late July to late August. The season of ingathering ends with two months of olive harvesting from late August to late October. The great Feast of Tabernacles comes at the end of the olive harvest.

Then, we begin again.

A few draft animals and some black goats and fat-tail Awassi sheep round out my sources of income and food.

Rain! We are desperately dependent upon regular rains. No watered soil, no harvest. No harvest, eventual starvation, for our storage is limited. It's that simple. Because our river valleys are not suited for large-scale irrigation, my neighbors and I carefully maintain stone terrace walls for retaining water moisture and soil. Rainfall peaks December through February. Normally we can expect about fifteen inches of rainfall per year. There is little room for error.

I should mention that I am fortunate to live in the North and not in the South where the climate is less favorable. The South is a semiarid region where rainfall is negligible. I understand why there is a difference between rainfall in the North and South. I know why my neighbors and I usually enjoy plentiful crops of citrus, olives, figs, and grain. The reason is that we live by an agricultural plan that, until recently, brings the rains. Our kinsmen in the South are much less observant of the plan. So they must bear the negative consequences.

The plan was working quite well until the *Troubler* showed up and began to interfere. In God's name, he began to condemn the plan as sinful. The whole country has been thrown into turmoil. The king and queen are furious. Word is out that Queen Jezebel wants the *Troubler* killed. And what she wants she usually gets.

ORTHODOXY ON DEMAND

I think you will be impressed by our support for the shrines at Dan and Bethel. My neighbors and I regularly worship the God of the patriarchs and Moses. Our rituals are quite impressive. Unlike the people in the South, who have only one temple, the North has two shrines for Yahweh. Jeroboam, our first king, established these religious centers. His purpose was to bolster his kingdom and keep his subjects from worshipping in Jerusalem. Going to Jerusalem would imply the Southern Kingdom's superiority. And it would drain precious money from the North. So to provide religious legitimacy for his kingdom, Jeroboam built one shrine at Dan in the northern sector and another at Bethel on the southern border. Jeroboam also established a priesthood that claimed descent from Moses—not from Jerusalem.

Like our kinsmen in Judah to the south, we regularly participate in the worship of Yahweh. We fulfill three pilgrimage festivals God requires. The spring Feast of Unleavened Bread in which we celebrate our exodus from Egypt comes first. We associate this festival with Passover. It happens at the beginning of the barley harvest. Seven weeks later we celebrate the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. This takes place during the wheat harvest. Then in later October we celebrate the Feast of Ingathering, or Tabernacles.

During the festivals, my family and I purify ourselves as ritual requires. Nothing goes unattended. We renew our covenant with Yahweh. As we make our way to Dan or Bethel, we do a lot of singing and dancing—accompanied by stringed instruments. What a glorious time the festivities offer—much anticipated and now fulfilled.

There's much more. The priests often require us to fast so as to humble ourselves before Yahweh. Added to that, the priests regularly present our burnt offerings on the altars at Dan and Bethel. I know exactly how to contribute to the sacrifices. Believe me, there are offerings, offerings, offerings!

As you can see, over the years my neighbors and I have accumulated an enviable record of observing holy days and festivals. We are pleased. God must be also. At least that's what we always believed before the *Troubler* arrived. He has begun to label us—in fact, almost all of Israel—"idolaters." No one escapes his attacks! Even King Ahab, Jezebel, and the priests are targets of the *Troubler's* condemnation. Given our admirable religious credentials and the effort we put into pleasing the Lord, it's hard to imagine a more ridiculous accusation.

Speaking of trouble—for almost three years, neither dew nor rain has come. For three planting cycles there have been no crops in the fields and no fruit on the vines. Our surpluses are nearly exhausted. Starvation stalks the land. Most of our animals have perished. Those that survive are little more than haunted shadows. No one, not even Ahab's household, has been spared. Even Ahab has been seen foraging for grass to feed his horses and mules.

How disruptive! All our problems began with that *Troubler*.

WHY THINGS GROW

Earlier, I said I know why things grow. Let me explain.

Before the drought, when things were going well, one of the most amazing events of the entire year was watching seeds transform into sprouts, sprouts into tender stalks, and tender stalks into a harvest of wheat, barley, and so on. But first, the rains had to come. Upon that mystery *all* life depended.

Amazing indeed. But my neighbors and I understand the mystery of fertilization—why rains come and seeds eventually sprout. We know how to make sure it all unfolds on time. The explanation and all it involves are the agricultural science of our day. We understand the story behind the science and faithfully reenact it year after year as we plant and breed.

At heart, the explanation for the rhythm of the seasons and the mystery of fertility revolve around the god Baal. He is lord of the storms and rains. He sends the rains that fertilize the seeds. Baal sparks all fertility, thus assuring our survival and prosperity. I have been told that “Baal” means “lord,” “master,” or even “husband.” Different names are used in different places. We call him Baal of the Heavens and Rider of the Clouds because he controls rain and storms.

But you need to understand that Baal doesn’t just wake up one day and decide to send the rains. The science is much more complex than that. Baal’s wife, Astarte (sometimes we call her Asherah), plays a strategic role too. Here is how it all works.

Long ago, the god El and his wife gave birth to many gods, one of whom was Baal. In time, Baal defeated the other gods and became the most powerful. Some of the gods Baal had to defeat were Yamm (god of the sea) and Mot (god of death). Baal was assisted by his sister Anath (goddess of war) and Astarte (goddess of the earth and fertility). Victorious, Baal could now control the threatening sea and storms. He could bring annual renewal and fertility to the earth.

But each year, Mot (god of the underworld) kills Baal. Anath finds and buries Baal’s body. The time in which Baal is dead is winter. Later, Anath kills Mot. Baal is now free to rise from the dead and escape the underworld. He returns to his palace on Mount Saphon and prepares to water the thirsty

ground, fertilize the seed, and restore abundance to the earth. This part of Baal's life parallels the beginning of spring.

Do you understand my explanations so far?

Baal doesn't do all of this by himself. His wife, Astarte, helps him. Each year, after being rescued by Anath, Baal and Astarte engage in sexual intercourse. Houses in my village contain small shrines that display figurines of Astarte. She is nude and usually pregnant. Her hands support and hold out her large breasts. This symbolizes the fertility she offers.

My neighbors and I know that if Baal succeeds in impregnating Astarte, the rains will come and the fields will eventually surrender their yield. Our families, cattle, and oxen will eat and live for another year. Surpluses will be stored and taxes paid. But if Astarte doesn't become pregnant, or if Baal is angry with us, the rains will not come. There will be no crops in the fields and eventually no cattle in the stalls. It's that simple.

It is important for you to understand that success is not left to chance. My neighbors and I—all Israel—play an indispensable role in making sure Baal becomes sexually aroused and that Astarte becomes pregnant. On a seasonal basis, the adult males and females in my family—along with my neighbors—go to sacred places dedicated to Baal and Astarte. These are usually groves in high places. Nearby there are upright stones that symbolize the male sex organ. Sacred poles called Asherim also form part of the shrines. They symbolize Astarte. Under priests' cautious eyes, we sacrifice sheep and bulls in the shrines.

Next, the other males and I engage in sexual intercourse with sacred prostitutes. We do this to make sure that Baal will be aroused and have sexual intercourse with Astarte. While we are doing that, our wives and the other women have intercourse with male prostitutes. They do this to assure Astarte's pregnancy. Unless both things happen, the earth will not be

fertilized, our wives will bear no children, and our animals will bear no offspring. Life rides on our diligence and success.

If our worship succeeds and Astarte becomes pregnant, Baal will send the rains and the earth will bear fruit. Life will be good for another year.

With so much riding on our efforts, we don't need to be reminded to fulfill our sacred duties. Is it any wonder that as we worship Baal, we are often seized by frenzied excitement?

Baal and Astarte are everywhere. In addition to the shrines in our homes, we maintain local and regional hilltop shrines. Conveniently, while at a shrine, we can worship Yahweh, Baal, or Astarte—or all three at once. At least one of our shrines contains an image of a female lover for Yahweh. Rigid distinctions between Yahweh, Baal, and Astarte are unnecessary—even counterproductive.

Some time ago, our science received a boost when King Omri arranged a marriage for his son Ahab. Omri arranged with Ethbaal, King of Tyre (in Phoenicia), for Ahab to marry Ethbaal's proud daughter—Jezebel. The marriage strengthened the relationship between Israel and powerful Phoenicia. Jezebel proved to be a zealous evangelist for her Phoenician deity—Baal-Melkart. She also brought along a large number of Baal prophets and supported them from Israel's public treasury.

King Ahab demanded that I help build a Baal temple in Samaria, the capital city. The temple was for Jezebel's use. Others helped the Baal priests build an altar for Astarte and an image of her. Unchecked by Ahab, Jezebel then tried to destroy all the prophets of Yahweh. She even tore down Yahweh's altars.

DIVINE COMPARTMENTS

If you wonder how we can worship the God of Moses and Baal at the same time, I can explain. It is all a matter of respecting boundaries. Some parts of life belong to Yahweh, and some to Baal. In some parts of life we worship Yahweh; in others we worship Baal. A long time ago, maybe as far back as when our ancestors settled the land, the distinctions were established. They have worked quite well—that is, until that *Troubler* arrived. He has thrown the compartments into confusion.

Here's how all the pieces fit together. Yahweh—the God of Moses and Aaron—is the God of power. As the Divine Warrior, Yahweh marches at the head of heavenly armies. He fought and defeated Pharaoh. He parted the sea and led the Israelites through the desert. Later, Yahweh divided the Jordan River and brought our people into Canaan. This powerful God broke down Jericho's walls and scattered the Canaanites. He is a fearful warrior and the miracle-working God of the desert. In times of national threats from our enemies, Yahweh can be counted on.

But that has little to do with the everyday affairs of life such as receiving rain, growing grapes, and paying the bills. We need a god who can bring order to the small stuff also.

Our ancestors were nomads when Joshua led them into this land. They knew almost nothing about how to make this stingy land productive. They could raise sheep but not melons and barley. They didn't understand the cycles of nature and the fertility of the soil. They had to learn from the Canaanites. That's how they found out about Baal's importance. After a few failed crops, the Canaanite explanation for agricultural success began to make a lot of sense. It dawned on our ancestors that Yahweh is the powerful God of the desert and battles. But some other god must ensure fertility. And that's where Baal comes

into the picture. He is the farmers' and fathers' indispensable friend. Without his aid, we die.

So, you see, in Israel we have successfully divided the regions of life between Yahweh and Baal. If we carefully maintain the boundaries, neither deity will have reason to complain.

THE TROUBLER

But the *Troubler*—a prophet of Yahweh named Elijah—howls endlessly that our arrangement between Yahweh and Baal is blasphemous. He dismisses Baal as just a creation of sin and ignorance. He shouts that we and our ancestors have bought a lie; Yahweh will not comfortably share deity with other gods as the Baal priests claim. We are gross idolaters, the *Troubler* charges. The ridiculous message he spreads—that Yahweh must be *Lord over everything* and that Baal is *no god at all*—strikes us as unhinged from the obvious. Heeding him would leave us with no wheat, no lambs—nothing!

The *Troubler* declares there must be no compartments, no boundaries, in our worship of and trust in Yahweh. He preaches that Yahweh is Lord, not only of the desert but of agriculture as well; not only of “exodus” but of “settlement.” *He is Lord of all life*—even the cycles and rhythms of nature. The whole earth, the *Troubler* proclaims, is the Yahweh's. He alone sends rain and causes the crops to grow. He alone provides the harvest. Confronted by such words, no wonder people shake their heads in disbelief. Jokes about the *Troubler's* sanity abound. When we get to Mount Carmel, I plan to ask him, “How many crops have you planted? How many sheep have you bred?”

Elijah accuses us of worshipping things Yahweh created. “Worship and serve Yahweh only,” the *Troubler* cries in towns and villages. To top it all, he actually accuses us of being dupes

in an ancient conspiracy. No wonder Queen Jezebel wants to sever his head from his body.

THE GREAT CONTEST

We have arrived.

Today, the top of Mount Carmel is covered. Men, women, and children are trying to find a place to stand or sit amid the rocks. Children's faces seem to reflect the apprehension we feel. We still don't know why we are here.

The prophets of Baal are present. What colorful ritual robes they wear—just what we expect from men of such confidence and importance. The rest of us look shaggy by comparison.

In the distance, I see a patch of the Mediterranean Sea framed by two mountain peaks. Facing north, in the distance a bay sparkles before me. Stretching out to the southeast lays the parched Jezreel Valley. Such contrasts!

Suddenly, a cry of alarm goes up from the crowd. "Look," people yell, and point to a strange figure standing atop a knoll. Someone cries out, "It's that prophet! That's him!"

I quickly turn and fix my gaze upon the *Troubler*. How did he get here? I am startled, for he is a mighty frightful sight. He is short and skinny. His shaggy hair falls upon a loose-fitting coat made of rough animal hair. A piece of leather forms his girdle. I say to myself, "Someone should feed him."

Then, a thunderous voice too strong for its frame takes command of the scene. "It's time for a showdown between Yahweh and Baal this day and in this place," the *Troubler* shouts. "Either Yahweh *or* Baal will be Israel's God, but not both. It's time to determine who is Lord of your daily lives as well as your religious feasts."

The questions I meant to ask melt away. I begin to suspect that a contest of epic proportion is about to happen. The *Troubler* has taken charge.

Before anyone can protest, the *Troubler* issues the rules. “We will prepare one sacrifice for Yahweh and one for Baal. The one who sends fire to consume his sacrifice will be the true God. The God who breaks the drought will be the Lord of nature.”

The contest seems humorously lopsided. On one side stand the three hundred confident and colorful Baal priests. The authority of Ahab and Jezebel backs them up. And there stands the *Troubler*—alone and physically unimpressive. You might think the contrast would be intimidating enough to send him packing.

The *Troubler* explains the consequences. Yahweh will either prove that what the *Troubler* has been preaching is true, or he will have to retire from the field in defeat. He must then be willing to share deity with Baal. Defeat will force him to accept the limited responsibility and power assigned to him.

But if Yahweh vindicates the *Troubler*’s message, all of Baal’s claims will go up in smoke. His lie will be forever exposed.

“You go first,” the *Troubler* gestures to the Baal priests. They are ready; they have arranged a bull on Baal’s altar and are organized for prayer.

All morning long they implore Baal to consume the sacrifice. With charged expectation, we wait. Baal will not fail. Fire will fall.

But *nothing* happens. Children complain. They have drunk the precious supply of water their mothers brought. Exposed to the blazing sun, some people faint. We are puzzled. Why is Baal silent?

Since late morning the *Troubler* has been taunting the priests. As their prayers became more feverish, his mockery ac-

celerated. “Maybe your god went off somewhere to think. Perhaps he went down the hill to use the bathroom. Maybe Baal is on a journey. Maybe he is out of earshot. Yell louder. He might be asleep!”

The mockery continues. But Baal is as silent as a tomb.

In the crowd we turn to each other and ask, “Why does Baal tolerate such insults?”

Panic shows on the faces of the Baal priests.

We are horrified. In desperation the priests begin to lacerate themselves. Blood gushes out, covering their clothes, hands, and faces. The spectacle causes children to turn their faces. Women wail. Some men vomit!

Baal is still silent. No fire falls.

In midafternoon, Elijah commands the exhausted priests to “shut up and get out of the way!”

The priests retire in defeat and humiliation.

Elijah calls to my neighbors and me. I feel as though his eyes are fixed *on me*. “How long do you intend to continue your divided loyalties? You are hopping along like birds, trying to put one foot on a Baal branch and one on a Yahweh branch.”

Now Elijah is preparing the altar of Yahweh. We watch in disbelief. First he digs a trench around the altar. Then he arranges the wood. Next he lifts big slabs of raw meat and arranges them on the altar. The smell of bloody flesh drifts over me.

He tells men to pour water on the sacrifice. “More!” “More water!” he yells. Three times Elijah soaks the sacrifice. Water runs down, filling the trench. How did he get that water?

No one can believe what we are seeing. “That fool!” I hear myself yelling. “He has blown all chances for success.”

While we are murmuring, Elijah wipes his hands on his hairy coat, backs away, kneels, and begins to pray. “O Lord, you

are God. Answer so that these sinful people may know that you alone are God. Turn their divided hearts to you.”

No sooner are the words out of Elijah’s mouth than Yahweh answers. Long sheets of fire crackle from the sky. Everyone jumps back, dumbstruck by fear. The fire licks up the sacrifice, wood, stones, and water—all in one holy and awesome gulp. Whoosh! Only ashes, a few pieces of charred wood, and scorched earth remain.

Holy terror fills the air. Some people are crying like babies—including strong men. Some have fallen on their faces. Others have dropped to their knees—heads bowed and covered. Children have been shocked into stunned silence.

Suddenly, I comprehend why Elijah called us to Mount Carmel. I am shocked by Baal’s absolute silence. Now I see those priests in their fancy robes for what they really are: crafty deceivers. All their boasts and claims are lies, and we have been their stooges. There is no God but Yahweh! All who believe otherwise are fools. He can’t be confined to a corner and made to share his deity with others. We the people of Israel must own up to our idolatrous ways, all our divided loyalties. Yahweh is Lord of all, the giver of life, and the source of everything good.

With one voice my kinsmen and I cry out, “Yahweh alone is our God. There is no God but the Lord! He is the Lord of all things! Away with Baal!”

Then Elijah tells us urgently, “Go home. It’s going to rain!” That’s good news for a man whose name—“Jubal”—means “stream” or “creek.”

As I left the mountain, I picked up a piece of charred wood. It has become a memorial for my family and me to what happened there that day.

