

1 Kings 18:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.

Analysis

And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. After three years of drought, Elijah confronts Israel's spiritual confusion at Mount Carmel. The Hebrew phrase *admatay atem posechim al-shtei hase'ipim* (עַד־מַתֵּי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל־שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִים) literally means 'how long will you limp on two crutches?' or 'hop between two branches?' The image depicts Israel's awkward attempt to serve both Yahweh and Baal, hopping from one foot to another without commitment to either.

Elijah's either/or challenge 'if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him' exposes the impossibility of syncretism. The covenant God demands exclusive worship and loyalty (Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Israel couldn't maintain nominal Yahweh worship while accommodating Baalism—they must choose. The verb 'follow' (*lechu acharav*, לָכֹו אַחֲרָיו) means to walk after, indicating complete life orientation rather than mere intellectual assent.

The people's silence—'they answered him not a word'—reveals guilty awareness of their compromise. They knew the truth but lacked courage or will to act on it. Their paralysis demonstrates how spiritual confusion and divided loyalty produce inaction and moral cowardice. The dramatic contest that follows will force

decision: when fire falls from heaven consuming Elijah's sacrifice, the people will cry 'The LORD, he is the God' (v. 39), ending their spiritual limping.

Historical Context

Mount Carmel, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and Jezreel Valley, provided a dramatic setting for this confrontation. Carmel was associated with Baal worship, making it appropriate ground for the contest. Ahab had assembled 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (v. 19), representing the official state religion promoted by Jezebel. The people's presence indicates this was a public showdown between competing claims about ultimate reality.

The three-year drought had created economic crisis and famine (18:2), directly challenging Baal's supposed control over rain and fertility. Canaanite mythology portrayed Baal's conflict with Mot (death/drought), claiming Baal's resurrection brought life-giving rain. Elijah's drought demonstrated Baal's impotence—he couldn't override Yahweh's judgment or provide the rain supposedly under his control. This context intensified the stakes: Israel's survival depended on right relationship with the God who actually controls nature.

The religious syncretism Elijah confronted wasn't unusual in the ancient world. Nations commonly adopted foreign deities alongside national gods, viewing religion pragmatically—why not honor multiple gods to ensure maximum divine favor? Israel's radical monotheism stood against this pattern, insisting Yahweh alone deserves worship and acknowledging other 'gods' constitutes covenant violation worthy of judgment. Elijah represented this uncompromising prophetic tradition.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What competing allegiances or 'gods' tempt you toward spiritual compromise and divided loyalty rather than wholehearted devotion to Christ?
2. How does the call to 'follow' Christ challenge cultural Christianity that treats faith as one compartment of life rather than comprehensive life orientation?
3. In what areas are you aware of truth but paralyzed in acting on it, and what would courageous obedience look like in those situations?

Interlinear Text

וָיָשׁ came H5066	וְאֵלִיָּהוּ And Elijah H452	אֵל H413	כָּל H3605	הָעָם him And the people H5971	וַיֹּאמֶר and said H559	עַד H5704	מֵתָ י H4970
אֶתָּם H859	פְּסָחִים halt H6452	עַל How long H5921	שְׁתֵּי י ye between two H8147	הַסְּעָפִים opinions H5587	אִם H518	יְהוָה if the LORD H3068	
הָאֱלֹהִים be God H430	לֹכּוֹ H1980	אֲחֶיךָ י H310	וְאִם H518	הַבַּעַל follow him but if Baal H1168	לֹכּוֹ H1980	אֲחֶיךָ י H310	
וְלֹא H3808	עָנָה answered H6030	הָעָם him And the people H5971	אֵת ו H853	דְּבָרָ: him not a word H1697			

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 6:24 (References God): No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Joshua 24:15 (References God): And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers

served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

2 Kings 17:41 (References Lord): So these nations feared the LORD, and served their graven images, both their children, and their children's children: as did their fathers, so do they unto this day.

1 Samuel 7:3 (References God): And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the LORD with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the LORD, and serve him only: and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.

Deuteronomy 4:35 (References God): Unto thee it was shewed, that thou mightest know that the LORD he is God; there is none else beside him.

Psalms 100:3 (References God): Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Zephaniah 1:5 (References Lord): And them that worship the host of heaven upon the housetops; and them that worship and that swear by the LORD, and that swear by Malcham;

1 Kings 18:39 (References God): And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.