

1 Kings 18 — The God That Answereth by Fire — Obadiah's Hidden Hundred, the Question on Carmel, the Drenched Altar, and the Cloud Like a Man's Hand

1 Kings 18: In the third year of drought the word of the LORD sends Elijah to show himself to Ahab; Obadiah, who hid a hundred prophets, carries the message; on Mount Carmel Elijah stands alone against the four hundred and fifty, the fire of the LORD falls on a drenched altar of twelve stones, Israel confesses the LORD, the prophets of Baal are slain at Kishon, and the rain returns behind a little cloud like a man's hand; Elijah's ministry under Ahab, c. 860 BC (scriptural chronology; scholars often say c. 870–850 BC).

For three years the sky over Israel has been a locked door, and the man holding the key has been invisible — hidden at Cherith, then in a widow's loft in Baal's own home country, learning in private what he is about to demonstrate in public. Chapter 17 was the schooling; chapter 18 is the spectacle. That ordering was deliberate, and now it pays off: before God vindicates his word in front of a nation, he has already proved it over a barrel of meal and a dead boy's breath, with no audience but one Phoenician widow. Now the audience is all Israel, gathered on a mountain that drops into the sea, and the question that has hung unspoken over every rainless morning is finally going to be asked out loud.

Hebrew Word Studies

***pasach* (H6452) / *se'ippim* (H5587) (פָּסַח / סַעִיפִּים) — to limp, hop, hesitate — and to pass over / divided opinions, branches vv. 21, 26.** "How long halt ye" — the verb is *pasach*, to limp, to hobble, to hop unevenly from foot to foot; the "two opinions" (*se'ippim*) are literally two branches, a walker straddling a forked bough and lurching between them. And the chapter springs its trap five verses later: when Baal's prophets "leaped upon the altar" (v. 26), that is *pasach* again — the same verb, describing the ritual limping dance of Baal's cult around a fireless sacrifice. Elijah's question was not rhetorical flourish; it was identification. A halting Israel is not neutral between two religions — it is already performing Baal's liturgy, hobbling around an altar no one answers from. But the word has a second edge, and it cuts the other way: *pasach* is the Passover verb — "when I see the blood, I will *pass over* you" (Ex. 12:13, same H6452), root of *pesach* itself. One verb holds both destinies: the limping of the double-minded, and the passing-over that spared every house under the blood. Israel is limping between two gods in the very syllables of its own deliverance. James, the Lord's brother — who knew his Elijah (James 5:17) — wrote the New Testament translation of this verse: "a double minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8), and its cure: "purify your hearts, ye double minded" (James 4:8). The verb asks every reader the same question it asked Carmel: will *pasach* be your limp, or your Passover?

***anah* (H6030) / *qol* (H6963) (אָנָה / קוֹל) — to answer, respond / voice, sound vv. 21, 24, 26, 29, 37, 41.** Trace these two words and you have the chapter's entire argument. The test is announced with *anah*: "the God that *answereth* by fire, let him be God" (v. 24). Baal's side of the ledger: "no voice (*qol*), nor any that answered (*anah*)" (v. 26), then the terrible triple negative — "neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded" (v. 29). Even the people at the start "answered him not a word" (v. 21) — a nation gone as mute as its new god. Then Elijah prays, and the KJV's "Hear me, O LORD, hear me" (v. 37) is in Hebrew *aneni*, *YHWH*, *aneni* — "answer me, LORD, answer me," the chapter's thesis-verb, twice, as the whole prayer's engine. And the LORD answers — not with a voice but with fire, which was the agreed currency (v. 24). Then comes the exquisite final stroke: with the contest over, Elijah tells Ahab, "there is a sound (*qol*) of abundance of rain" (v. 41). The storm god's own thunder-voice, the *qol* Baal's prophets screamed all day to summon, shows up in the evening — obeying Jehovah. "The voice of the LORD is upon the waters" (Ps. 29:3, a psalm many scholars read as a deliberate takedown of Baal's storm titles). The covenant God's self-description held: "Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am" (Isa. 58:9). Every prayer in this chapter got exactly what its god had to give: Baal's worshippers, silence and scars; Elijah, fire and rain.

***rapha* (H7495) / *sabab* (H5437) / *lev* (H3820) (רָפָא / סָבַב / לֵב) — to heal, mend / to turn, turn around / heart vv. 30, 37.** "He repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down" — the verb is *rapha*, to heal, and the Old Testament uses it for flesh, for waters, for nations, and for covenant-breakers: "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:4); "if my people... shall humble themselves, and pray... then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chr. 7:14). Scripture speaks of an altar the way it speaks of a patient, because the altar is the place where the relationship lives, and it has been sick. Pair it with the verbs of Elijah's prayer: "that thou hast *turned* their heart *back* again"

(v. 37) — *sabab*, to turn around, with *lev*, the heart. Elijah does not ask God to impress the people; he asks God to pivot them — and the grammar quietly credits God, not the fire, with the turning. Healing the altar is Elijah's work; turning the heart is the LORD's — and the fire falls only after the first is finished and the second is asked for. It is the same division of labor the Lord announced through Malachi about this very prophet's return: he shall "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6) — the mission the glorified Elijah delivered to the Kirtland Temple in person (D&C 110:13–16). Elijah's whole ministry, from Carmel to Kirtland, is this one card: mend the broken altar, and pray the heart back around.

esh (H784) (עֵשׂ) — fire vv. 23–25, 38. Five times the chapter says *esh*, and the first four are all absence: "put no fire under" (twice, v. 23), "the God that answereth by fire" (v. 24), "put no fire under" (v. 25). The whole contest is built around a deliberately empty firepit — the one ingredient no man is allowed to supply. Then verse 38: "the fire of the LORD fell." Scripture is careful with that phrase; *esh YHWH* is not weather. It consumed Nadab and Abihu when they offered strange fire (Lev. 10:1–2), lit the tabernacle's first offering (Lev. 9:24), and fell on Solomon's temple (2 Chr. 7:1) — the same fire is judgment or acceptance depending entirely on what it lands on. "For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God" (Deut. 4:24), which Hebrews quotes without softening (Heb. 12:29). The Book of Mormon keeps the full range of the symbol: fire as the Spirit's baptism — the converted Lamanites "were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not" (3 Ne. 9:20) — and fire as encircling protection, when Nephi and Lehi in prison stood "encircled about as if by fire... and they were not burned" (Hel. 5:23–24, 44–45), a Carmel replayed as grace: fire that converts three hundred not by consuming a sacrifice but by surrounding sinners without harming them. That is the trajectory of *esh* across the covenant: the fire Israel begged to be spared at Sinai (Deut. 5:25) falls on substitutes — the bullock, the altar, ultimately the Lamb — until the day it can finally rest *on* the saints instead of instead of them (Acts 2:3). The God who answers by fire has always intended the answer to be a gift.

From the Chapter's Architecture

One more wire runs back into chapter 17 and forward into 19. Elijah could stand on Carmel and say "I have done all these things at thy word" (v. 36) because the word had already been proven to him at kitchen scale — a barrel, a cruse, a boy's breath. Public boldness was private schooling, cashed in. But the sequel is sobering by design: the nation that fell on its faces at the fire is nowhere to be found when Jezebel counterattacks, and God will shortly teach his own prophet that the fire was the least of him — "the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kgs. 19:12). Carmel wins the argument. It does not, by itself, keep a single soul. Scripture is honest about that, and we should be too.