

A NOTE ON ELIJAH'S "FIRE FROM YAHWEH"

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N. H. Snaith,¹ H. H. Rowley,² John Gray,³ and a number of other commentators⁴ have pointed out the likelihood that the "fire of Yahweh" during the Mt. Carmel contest (I Kings 18:38) was lightning.

This suggestion is certainly not recent, but it was rejected by some older, more conservative commentators on the grounds that a "natural" stroke "could not have produced such an effect."⁵ In pointing out one of the effects, according to the biblical account, Bahr⁶ says: "To give full expression to the intensity of the fire, it is stated that even *the stones and the ground* were burned." Another common objection to the lightning theory of the origin of the fire is that the story indicates that it was a cloudless day (vvs. 41-44).⁷

On the other hand, with regard to the water poured over Elijah's altar, some rationalistic commentators have suggested "that not water, but naphtha or some such substance susceptible to spontaneous combustion was used. R. H. Kennett went even further and suggested that a burnished reflector was also used. If such hypercriticism is worthy of reply we may object...that the Baal-prophets would be especially vigilant, and would be as much *au fait* with such elementary science as Elijah."⁸

However, a survey of modern knowledge regarding the nature of lightning together with another look at some significant aspects of the Elijah story will indicate to us that the "fire of Yahweh" very possibly was lightning. The above objections, from both the left and right, can be satisfactorily answered by this hypothesis.

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1. *Interpreter's Bible*, III, p. 157.
2. "Elijah on Mt. Carmel," *BJRL*, 43:1 (Sept. 1960), p. 213.
3. *I, II Kings, O.T. Library*, p. 358.
4. So James Montgomery in *ICC*, J. Strachan, p. 688, R. Kittel, p. 148, Skinner, p. 234, H. Gressman, *Die Schriften des Alten Testaments*, II, 1910, p. 262, *et al.*
5. C. F. Keil, *The Books of the Kings*, 2nd ed., VI, p. 249.
6. Karl C. W. F. Bahr, *The Books of the Kings*, Book I, *Lange's Commentary*, 1868, p. 206.
7. "The difficulty here... is that the sky was cloudless. The drought had not yet been broken and it was only after the triumph over the prophets of Baal that Elijah's servant saw the first fragment of cloud on the far horizon. Had the sky been full of thunderclouds, it would still have been a remarkable vindication of Elijah's faith that the flash of lightning fell just at that moment and that it struck his altar and not the altar of Baal. But a flash from a cloudless sky still must have seemed even more remarkable. Indeed, it would seem remarkable to us, and it is not to be supposed that we have rationalized the story and explained the miracle away when we think in terms of a flash of lightning." Rowley, *BJRL*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.
8. John Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

First, the absence of any clouds (vvs. 41-44) need not preclude the possibility of a lightning stroke. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its opening paragraph on the article "Lightning" states⁹: "It is an accepted belief that lightning is a secondary phenomenon brought about by the abnormal meteorological conditions always associated with thunderstorms. However, lightning strokes have been observed on what appeared to be a clear day (giving rise to the expression 'a bolt from the blue') and lightning has also been observed in connection with tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, dust storms and snowstorms."

Generally, lightning can be produced from air turbulence in which two air masses of differing temperature and humidity collide.¹⁰ This condition, of course, occurs most frequently in thunderstorms which involve visible cloud formations and rain, but electrical potential and resulting lightning can be, and is generated by friction of air masses on cloudless days, or even by wind blowing over desert sand. Note that even before any appearance of a cloud, Elijah said that there was "the sound of the rushing of rain" (*kol hamon haoshem*, vs. 41). Apparently the turbulence from the approaching storm was quite perceptible to Elijah.

It is possible, then, that the cool, moist wind from the Mediterranean preceding the storm (vs. 45) swept up the southwestern slope of the Carmel ridge¹¹ colliding at its crest with the hot, dry air from the three-year drought. The lightning could well have resulted from the ensuing turbulence above the altars of Elijah and the prophets of Baal.¹²

It is worth noting that the weather even today on Mt. Carmel is remarkably like that described in the Elijah story: somewhat violent and sudden thunderstorms occur frequently and provide almost the highest total rainfall of any area in Israel.¹³

9. K. B. McEachron and J. H. Hagenguth, "Lightning," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1963 edition), vol. 14, p. 114.
10. I should like to express my thanks to Dr. Allen Edison, Chairman of the Department of Electrical Engineering, at the University of Nebraska for his guidance and clarification on much of the more technical information in this article.
11. "The beginning of the rainy season in Oct. or Nov. is often marked by severe thunderstorms, which result from the rapid rise of the damp air above the still overheated land." Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 50. Note that the Yahweh-Baal contest takes place at the end of a three-year drought (I Kings 17:1 and 18:1).
"In the rainy season the falls are unusually heavy, and are accompanied by thunder and lightning, while the wind comes from the W. or S.W." E. Hull, "Rain," *HDB*, IV, p. 195.
12. Another interesting possibility for the source of this cloudless lightning is described in Schonland (*infra*) where lightning "frequently seen in dry countries" travels as far as thirty miles horizontally in advance of a thunderstorm. "Very occasionally these wandering air discharges turn earthward at their ends and hit the ground." Basil Schonland, *The Flight of the Thunderbolts*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 42. While Schonland's data may be a possible explanation for the events in the Elijah story, it is far more likely that the lightning in this case resulted from the air turbulence over Mt. Carmel caused by the approaching, but unseen rainstorm.
13. The rainfall of Carmel is now about 26.1 inches per year, and it was likely thus for a long period. See Baly, *op cit.*, p. 58, also, fig. 9, p. 42. Note that even the name, "Carmel" (*hakarmel*) means "garden land," or "fruitful land," etc.

Second, it is of special interest that Elijah ordered twelve "pails" *khadim* of water poured over the altar and sacrifice. It is well known that objects which are not normally good conductors of electricity (attractors of lightning), such as in this case—wood and stone—become fairly good attractors of lightning when wet.¹⁴ This fact, coupled with the strong likelihood that the altars were at, or near the top of Mt. Carmel¹⁵ makes the probability of a lightning stroke much greater. It is also well known that "lightning tends to strike, in general, the highest objects on the horizon."¹⁶ Lightning would have a decided preference for the combination of altitude (relative to the surrounding terrain) and the wetness of Elijah's altar.

Third, the effects of the "fire" in verse 38 (the consumed sacrifice, wood, stones, dust and water) are known to be within the power of a lightning stroke. When one bears in mind that "as many as 250 lightning fires have developed in one day" in the states of Washington and Oregon, according to one study,¹⁷ the identification of lightning with the "fire" in the biblical account becomes more likely. One action of lightning upon sand or rocks is to melt it into glass tubes known as "fulgurites,"¹⁸ some of these extending as deeply into the ground as eight feet. Though this is usually confined to *dry* sand or rocks, it nonetheless demonstrates the heating power of lightning. In the case of Elijah's altar, the sudden heat on the exterior of the stones may well have powdered the limestone into calcium oxide (lime), thereby "consuming" them.¹⁹ The puddle of water surrounding the altar would be flashed into steam by a stroke of lightning, as is frequently the case when lightning strikes a sap-laden tree, exploding it. "On occasion lightning can make large holes in soft ground: a crater some ten feet in diameter and one foot deep is the widest so far reported."²⁰

The total result of lightning striking the altar of Elijah may well have been a burning pile of rubble.

14. "The process of the water was not to make the burning of the sacrifice more difficult, nor was it to preclude any charge of sharp practice. It was the ancient method of procuring rain by sympathetic magic." N. H. Snaith, *IB*, III, p. 157. Though if Snaith's suggestion were true, why did not the prophets of Baal use the same technique? Cf. R. Patai, "The Control of Rain in Ancient Palestine," *Heb. Union College Annual*, 14 (1939), pp. 254ff.
15. Note that Elijah took the prophets of Baal "down" (*wayoridem* ▶ *yarad*, vs. 40) to the brook Kishon where he killed them after the contest, and also, that the Baal cults had a preference for the "high places" (cf. I Kings 14:23, *et al.*).
16. E. M. H. "Lightning and Surge Protection," *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), vol. 7, p. 510. Cf. also, C. F. Wagner and G. D. McCann, "Lightning Phenomena," *Electrical Transmission and Distribution Reference Book*. Edited by Central Station Engineers of the Westinghouse Electric and Mfg. Co. (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 3rd ed., 1944), pp. 300 and 322.
17. B. F. J. Schonland, *op. cit.*, 1st edition, 1950, pp. 55f.
18. Schonland, *op. cit.*, 2nd edition, 1964, pp. 62f.
19. The destruction of city walls by invaders by means of fire was common in this area. Doubtless this is the meaning of the fires upon the walls and strongholds in Amos ch. 1.
20. Schonland, *op. cit.*, 2nd edition, 1964, p. 64.

Fourth, it would be particularly important to the writer of this Elijah story (as well as to those at the scene) to note some very prominent elements of nature which were supposed to be controlled by Baal (*viz.*, rain, thunder and lightning), but which were controlled by Yahweh instead. The Mt. Carmel story gains further impact from the suggestion that not only can Yahweh answer and respond to supplication—that He alone is the living God, but also that He is exclusively active in the very areas claimed for Baal.²¹

It is interesting to note the parallel between Yahweh and Baal with regard to their connection with thunder and lightning. From the "Baal Myth of Ras Shamra," John Gray provides us with this translation:²²

Moreover Baal will send abundance of his rain,
Abundance of moisture and snow;
He will utter his voice in the clouds,
(He will send) his flashing to the earth with lightning.

It is stressed in verses 25 to 29 that "there was no voice; no one answered, no one heeded" suggesting that an audible sound (such as thunder and its accompanying lightning²) was not forthcoming from Baal, but that such *did* come from Yahweh. Clearly, Elijah saw the rain as coming from Yahweh (17:1 and 18:1). Elsewhere, the "voice" of God is vividly described in terms of both thunder and lightning (Ps. 29:3, 7-8) as well as in Job 37:2-4:

Hearken to the thunder of his voice
and to the rumbling that comes from his mouth.

Under the whole heaven he lets it go
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.

After it his voice roars;
he thunders with his majestic voice

And does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard.

By virtue of these four reasons shown above, *viz.*: 1) the possibility of lightning resulting from cloudless turbulence above Mt. Carmel; 2) the height and wetness of Elijah's altar; 3) the nature of the "consuming" fire; 4) and the pitting of the alleged ruler of lightning (Baal) against Yahweh, the ruler of all nature—especially the reputed realm of Baal, it would seem quite reasonable that the position of most commentators

21. "Baal's character as the storm god is expressed at Ras Shamra in a sculptured stele of the god as a helmeted warrior in a short kilt, striding into action with a thunderbolt as a spear and a mace uplifted. . . . His stock epithet is 'he who mounteth the clouds.'" John Gray, "Baal," *IDB*, I, p. 328.
22. "Baal Myth of Ras Shamra," *Ugaritic Handbook* 51, V. 68ff, cited in Gray, *I and II Kings*, *OTL*, p. 358.

(that the "fire of Yahweh" was lightning sent by God in response to Elijah's faith) is vindicated.²³

We would hope to conclude that, based on the above information, the story of Elijah's fire from Yahweh is no mere unhistorical legend added to give stature to the prophet, but rather that the somewhat "improbable" details of this account provide assurance of its reliable historicity.

23. The whole question of "miracles" (if needed, this concept is a legitimate one) and their relationship to onlookers' faith and the canon of Scripture is of course, tangential to our present discussion. Suffice it to say that to the mind of Elijah's time, the distinctions of "mediate" and "immediate" acts of God, and "providential" and "miraculous" were not yet discovered. It was a simple matter of viewing an event through the eyes of faith or unbelief. Parallel events to this story are seen in the plagues of Egypt, the exodus, the crossing of the Jordan, etc. For a similar attempt to show the possible physical phenomena involved in a mighty act of God, see Greta Hort's "Plagues of Egypt," *Z. Alt. W.* LXIX (1957), pp. 84-103 and LXX (1958), pp. 48-59. See also my "Cessation of the Charismata," *Paraclete*, Vol. III, Nos. 2-4 (1969) in this connection.