

THE MIRACULOUS RAIN

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In the third year of famine, the word of God came to Elias: "Go and show yourself to King Achab. I will send rain down on the land again." At the same time Achab said to his steward Abdias: "We will each go through the whole country, and search around all the riverbeds and springs for grass to keep our horses and mules alive."

On his way the steward Abdias met the prophet. On recognizing him he bowed down to the ground saying: "Are you really my Lord Elias?" "Yes, I am he," answered Elias. "Go to the king and tell him I am here again."

But Abdias became very frightened. "The king is greatly enraged against you," he said. "There is not a race or a realm to which I have not been sent in search of you. And if I tell him now that you are here, he will kill me. And you know that I have been a God-fearing man from my youth." To this Elias replied: "As the Lord of hosts is a living God, I mean to meet Achab this day."

So Abdias went and announced to the king: "Elias is on his way to you." Thereupon Achab set out to meet Elias, and when he caught sight of him he called out: "So it is you, the man who brought this misfortune on Israel!"

"No, it is not I, but you," replied the prophet, "who is to blame. For you have neglected the Lord's commandments and adored false gods;. But now send out messengers and gather all the people on Mount Carmel. And the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal are to be there too." So Achab sent his messengers out and mustered all Israel on Mount Carmel.

And that same morning the prophet Elias appeared before all the people and cried: "For how much longer will you waver between two sides? If the Lord is the true God, follow him. But if Baal is the true God, then follow him!" And the people stood before him and answered not a word. Then Elias continued: "Here I stand alone, the only servant of the true God left. All the others have been killed. And there stand the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal. Bring us two bullocks to sacrifice. Let them choose one of them, and prepare it for sacrifice, and lay it on the wood, but without kindling the wood. And I will prepare the other bullock and lay it on the wood, but not light the fire under it either. You then, priests of Baal, call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of my God. And let the God who sends down fire to burn the holocaust be acknowledged as the true God!" And all the people answered with one voice: "That is just!"

The priests of Baal now put up an altar and prepared the victim. And they danced without ceasing around the altar calling: "Baal, hear us!" But no voice came, nor any answer. When midday came, Elias began to mock them. "Cry louder!" he advised. "Perhaps your god is busy, or gone out for a walk; or perhaps he is asleep." At this they shouted as loud as they could, and in their frenzy cut themselves with swords and knives, as was their custom, until they were covered with blood. But evening came on, and still no voice or answer had come to them.

It was now the time when the evening sacrifice was being offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. "Come up close to me!" Elias bade the people. And he took twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of the Chosen People, and built an altar to the Lord. Around the altar he made a trench. Then he piled the wood high

on the altar, and laid the victim for the sacrifice upon it. After this, he ordered twelve pails of water to be poured over the victim and the wood, until it flowed down the altar and filled the trench. He now went up to the altar and prayed: "Lord, give proof this day that you are the one true God and that I am your servant who has done all this at your command. Hear me, Lord, and let this people see that you are the true God who is guiding their hearts and calling them back to you!" Thereupon the divine fire fell from heaven, and consumed the sacrifice and the wood, and even the stones and the earth, and the water in the trench.

And all the people fell on their faces crying: "The Lord is the true God! The Lord is the true God!"

"The rustling voice of the rain is already to be heard," said Elias. And he climbed Mount Carmel and knelt down and bowed his face to the ground. Then he ordered his servant: "Go up to the summit and look westwards towards the sea!" The servant climbed up, looked seawards, came down again and said: "There is nothing to be seen!" "Climb up and look seven times!" Elias ordered him. After the seventh time the servant announced: "There's a little cloud rising from the sea no bigger than my hand!"

While he was still speaking the wind rose, and black thunderclouds came racing across the sky, and after seven years everyone heard the rustling voice of the rain.

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In this passage a frontal attack upon the growing idolatry in Israel is described. We are gradually being prepared for the idea that though God chooses a people, that people may refuse to choose Him. History should have given the Israel of our Lord's time an opportunity to reflect. Let us in our turn not forget the lesson: it is not enough to be named "Christian," I must also live my religion. After all, idolatry is always in fashion: today we worship health, wealth, pleasure—"many gods, and many lords" (1 Cor. 8:5). We should pray to the Holy Spirit, "the fire of God," who destroys the wicked but lights and warms the just.