

Sacred Authority Showdown

1 Kings 18: 16-39 Galatians 1: 1-12

Everybody loves the showdown, the contest between the good guy and the bad guy, that will display the ultimate triumph of good over evil and provide the assurance that the order of all things is preserved as *they lived happily ever after* and the keystone of our life's assumptions are reaffirmed as good, true, and divinely ordained. As former Sheriff Chris Blair was fond of saying, 'it's the white hats against the black hats.' The white hats – the good guys – must prevail – justice!

In this imagined pairing, there is good and there is evil, and they are clearly differentiated by the color of their hats. The Lone Ranger always wore the white hat, and the villain always wore the black hat.

In the “Rocky” movies, the interesting part was the white *guy* against the black *guy*, as Rocky Balboa had his first showdown with Apollo Creed. The imagery of “The Great White Hope” against the Black menace was never so transparent. Okay, it was more transparent in real life in 1982 when Long Island boxer Gerry Cooney, promoted as “The Great White Hope,” fought for the boxing championship against black champion Larry Holmes, and lost decisively. Or the “Fight of the Century” in 1908 between black boxer Jack Johnson and white boxer James Jeffries, where Jeffries said, "I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a negro." He lost.

We will see lots of these kinds of showdowns in the “Star Wars” movies, several showdowns in every movie, in fact. It never gets tiresome.

There are plenty of showdowns in scripture. The most well-known is the story of David and Goliath as it pits the boy warrior and his slingshot against the super-human villain warrior of fearful ferociousness. Spoiler alert: David wins.

Today's story from 1st Kings about the prophet Elijah and his contest with Jezebel's prophets of Ba'al is another well-known showdown.

There is a lot of build-up to this showdown which I don't have time to dwell on, but it's fascinating stuff. Here King Ahab is finally face-to-face with Elijah, his harsh critic. The King spits, *Is that you, you troublemaker for Israel?* Troublemaker means Elijah, the one who has a nasty habit of speaking uncomfortable truths to the powerful, wealthy, and well connected. The troublemaker causes turmoil and disrupts the good order of things. And this “good order” is the order that happens to benefit the powerful, wealthy, and well-connected.

But Elijah comes right back at the king, saying: *I haven't made trouble for Israel. But YOU and your father's family have. You've abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Ba'als.* Ahab's attack on Elijah's character gets countered with Elijah's own charges against the king. And then Elijah begins to set-up a showdown, a contest.

First, Elijah casts a challenge out to the audience, to the people, and he asks: *How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Ba'al is God, follow him.* It says the people did not answer him at all – silence.

This is actually the key verse of the whole passage; the whole “showdown” is really just a fun sideshow. The key is a theological question about who **is** God and a challenge to the common belief in Judah and Israel that one can worship Yahweh **and** one can also worship other gods **as well**.

We imagine that God’s people generally kept faith and devotion for **one** God of their ancestors. How about those Ten Commandments, like ‘no other gods before me,’ ‘no idols,’ and ‘not taking the Lord’s name in vain,’ which seems to make the one God only expectation pretty clear.

Then there’s that passage in Deuteronomy 6: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* And later Deuteronomy 6 says: *Fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples around you, because the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God.*

These passages are meant to address the very problems commonly present among the people in most of the eras, and encourage faithfulness to one God alone with the voice of scriptural authority. The people of God routinely divided their devotion between God and other gods and their promises.

Let’s also remember that gods like the Ba’al and the Asherah were not individual gods, but general names for a pantheon of varied gods and local deities, sometimes oriented to nature functions, fertility, agriculture, and ultimately the big three in life – prosperity, posterity, and power. Think back; it isn’t a mistake that God gets involved in situations where children are not being produced, playing ‘let’s make a deal’ to solve the issue of **posterity**. God-Yahweh is in constant competition for the devotion of the people. The people are continually **divided** in their devotion, being very comfortable with serving multiple gods who may suit their particular interests at a particular time.

Remember that question of devotion to God as we come to the showdown. In this corner, Elijah stands alone against hundreds of Ba’al and Asherah prophets in the other corner.

What will the gambit be? Elijah lays that out, too. Two bulls set up for an offering; one bull for the white hats and one bull for the black hats. The fire will be supplied by the prophet’s respective god. Dum, da-dum, dum, DUM!

The prophets of Ba’al go first. From morning till noon, they call on their god and nothing happens. They plead, but no answer comes. They dance around the altar, but no fire.

At noon, Elijah begins mocking and taunting the prophets of Ba'al who kept at it, even slashing themselves and drawing blood in a desperate attempt to show their devotion to their god, how deserving they were of Ba'al's beneficence. By the end of the day, they give it up.

Now it was Elijah's turn. He sets up an altar to the God of Abraham, choosing twelve stones to represent the twelve tribes. The wood is in place, and the bull is in place. But wait: Elijah ups the ante. He calls for water to douse the altar, the carcass, and the wood. He calls for this drenching *three times*. Everything is so soaking wet that there would seem to be *no way* that any fire could get started, and certainly any fire started couldn't be sustained, even for a decent barbecue much less a holocaust – a total consumption of the offering in sacred fire.

With the set-up complete, Elijah calls on the God of Abraham, and what do you think happened? Boom! The text says: *Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.* Not only the offering made a holocaust, everything got consumed by the fire – even the altar itself, and every drop of water.

End of showdown; victory is God's. But as I said, it was a sideshow really to that key question: *Are you really serving God and God alone who brings you prosperity, posterity, and power?*

Turning to Galatians, we find an exceptional letter of Paul's confronting this question. Galatians is written in seething anger. Paul usually has long, elaborate, extended introductions to his letters. In Galatians, he tersely introduces himself, and then manages: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.* Then: *I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.* Paul is really angry here, and it shows.

The newbie Jesus followers in the region of Galatia were presumably Gentiles/non-Jews mostly, and they were baptized and formed into a church community by Paul. The Galatians have seen Paul go off in his missionary work and have been on their own. However, it becomes clear that the Galatians were paid a visit by a group known as "Judaizers," or as Paul calls them, "the circumcision group." It's believed that they were sent from the more strictly Jewish community following Jesus in Jerusalem. The Judaizers had different ideas from Paul about what constituted God's word and way, and Paul, having been a Jew, will understand where the Judaizers are coming from.

Here again, we have different sets of understandings about God competing to prevail in the minds of believers. It is not between Yahweh-God and traditional nature gods, but between the traditional way and the new thing that Paul is bringing about among the Gentiles. There is a conflict, something that the church in Jerusalem has presumably already decided in favor of supporting Paul's additional way following Jesus

without necessarily following Judaism and Jewish Torah-Law. *Now* how does sacred authority get defined? Do you choose what you like, as if it was a menu of options, or is there a way to reckon with sacred authority? Y'know, what we need is a good ol' showdown! Right? Except it can't happen here.

We can imagine that the gospel of the Judaizers recognizes that Jesus is the promised Messiah who brings new life to *all* people, even Gentiles, making it possible for Gentiles now to become Jews – to join in the historic covenant of Abraham, of the people of God – and gain their righteousness and salvation. Once Gentiles accept Jesus, they also accept at least minimal levels of Jewish law and tradition.

For Paul, this was not the case. For Paul, the gospel meant something quite different – the inapplicability of the Torah-Law as solely defining the covenant of God's people. Paul saw in Jesus a new covenant of salvation and new life for **all** people, Jews and Gentiles alike. For Jews who sought righteousness under the Torah-Law and who never found peace in it or an ongoing assurance of righteousness, in Jesus, there was now peace and the promise of new life apart from the Torah-Law. Paul saw Jews and Gentiles united in this new covenant through Jesus.

As we confront these scriptures, we're reminded there are many gods that command our obedience and devotion in our own era. They typically concern those big three life concerns, **prosperity** – our material comforts and benefits, **posterity** – our family, kin, legacy, and social relationships, and **power** including prestige, status, security, and the ability to influence outcomes. There are gods who have plenty of say and sway over our lives, and they bear no resemblance to the God of scripture.

In the same way, those gods that seek and expect our devotion have their “gospels” and those gospels can be quite compelling stories and present deeply-held beliefs that inform what we like, what we expect, and the good order in life that we believe should exist. It takes little effort to expose our gospels to be fraudulent and disingenuous, and compared to the gospel of Jesus Christ, downright crude and paltry. We love our Jesus, of course, but it is our version of Jesus, and ultimately our version of his gospel.

We find the tension points between Jesus' gospel and the gospels of our other gods when we find them incompatible and irreconcilable. We hold up Jesus' gospel, but at arm's length, and wonder why it puts such burdensome requirements on the faithful, and wonder why the teachings seem so extreme. We might even look for a way to water them down, to shrink their majesty and our exposure to failure.

Paul concludes his arguments in this opening section by stating: *Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.* The gospel of Jesus Christ has always been difficult. And it exposes our private gods and their gospels in ways we may prefer to avoid.