

## **One Fight on Two Mountains: 1 Kings 18,20-40 Re-read in the Light of Ex 32**

### ***Una lucha en dos montañas: 1 R 18,20-40 releído a la luz de Ex 32***

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*Resumen:* El objetivo del presente ensayo es identificar los elementos paralelos que unen dos relatos bíblicos: la experiencia de Moisés y la de Elías. Tanto 1 Reyes 18,20-40 como Ex 32 cuentan con una historia redaccional compleja, estando ambientados en contextos diferentes. La lucha contra la idolatría, sin embargo, es un patrón que resuena frecuentemente en diferentes historias. Moisés y Elías son dos líderes con características muy similares en muchos sentidos y, una vez más, se encuentran en una misma lucha contra deidades similares (o quizás las mismas). Se trata de enseñar a su pueblo la importancia, entre las posibles opciones, de una elección adecuada de Dios.

*Palabras clave:* Idolatría, Elías, Moisés, Baal

*Abstract:* The aim of this article is to show parallel elements that bring together two biblical narratives: the experience of both Moses and Elijah. Both 1 Kgs 18:20-40 and Ex 32 have a complex redactional history and are set in different contexts. The struggle against idolatry, however, is marked by a pattern that always echoes in different stories. Moses and Elijah are two leaders with very similar characteristics in many ways and once again find themselves in the same struggle against similar (or perhaps the same) deities in order to assure their people the importance of a clear God's choice between so many options.

*Keywords:* Idolatry, Elijah, Moses, Baal

“*Acorda pra vida!*” (wake-up to the life!) is a Brazilian expression that imperatively urges a person to live in a less tedious, naive, and sleepy way in order to secure a more authentic and meaningful existence. Those who live with their eyes closed, simply dreaming with good things, in reality incubate the nightmare of those who never do anything to make this world a better place.

In this essay I would like to make a comparison between the experience of the prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel against the Baal’s prophets (1 Kgs 18,20-40) and the scene of Exodus 32,1-29, the molten calf’s episode. Elijah’s fight against idolatry is set in the context of the reign of Ahab, a king who worshipped Baal instead of YHWH. In the lives of people in need of rain, it was natural to pray to the god who promised this gift, although he proved to be ineffective. Similarly, the people who were in the desert together with Moses put their trust in a calf cast by themselves that promised to be visible in the midst of Moses’ absence. The two accounts remind each other both because of the proximity between Moses and Elijah, and because of several elements that are repeated in a similar way. In a similar way, the humankind continues to close their eyes to the reality of idolatry, always creating new forms of it.

## 1. ELIJAH’S STRUGGLE

Elijah, also called “Tishbite”<sup>1</sup> (1 Kgs 17,1), is set in the environment in which the Northern Kingdom was ruled by Ahab, son of Omri<sup>2</sup>, while the South was under the jurisdiction of Asa, in the 9th century BC. The northern ruler had no legacy of honor by the hagiographer: “(Ahab) did what is evil in the sight of the Lord above that were before him” (1 Kgs 16,30). Among his terrible actions the Bible quotes: the imitation of Jeroboam’s sin, the marriage with the princess of the Sidonians - Jezebel, the building of an altar

<sup>1</sup> The question of the location of a hypothetical city called “Tesbe”, or something similar, is inquired by Pick, to whom behind this adjective attributed to Elijah lies not a toponym, but a reference to the Hittite-Hurite deity called “Teshub” (P. W. Pick, “On the Cognomen ‘Tishbite’ of the Prophet Elijah”, *Hebrew Studies* 26 (1985) 197-202).

<sup>2</sup> According to TM the king is עֲחָב. On the LXX the king’s name is spelled Αμβρι.

dedicated to Baal in Samaria as well as the building of a grove (1 Kgs 16,31-33).

According to Georg Fohrer, Elijah exercised his ministry against the policy undertaken by Ahab, who sought to solve the problem of integrating both Israelites and Canaanites into his kingdom through a neutral approach that harmonized both groups. Ahab wanted to replace the Israelite conception of kingship with the absolute monarchy typical of the ancient Middle East, and to introduce into Israel the kind of royal law associated with absolute monarchy<sup>3</sup>.

From a military and economic point of view, King Ahab had some merits. His strategic alliance with the kingdom of Tyre provided him some comfort. In fact, the wealth he accumulated increased, although it was concentrated in the hands of a few<sup>4</sup>, at the price of breaking his alliance with the Lord<sup>5</sup>.

Faced with this scenario, God sends a prophet from Gilead, East of the Jordan River, to announce the verdict prepared by God: in the coming years there would be no rain in the region, not even dew, only drought (1 Kgs 17,1). Perhaps a reflection of the inner spiritual dryness that enveloped the ruler and the inhabitants of those parts.

The Elijah's message is as similar as the other Old Testament's prophets and can be outlined, according to Herbert Niehr, in four elements: word event formula, justification, threat and fulfillment<sup>6</sup>. Besides, Elijah is the type of itinerant prophet, unattached to a sanctuary, who appears and disappears in unpredictable ways. Somehow, he is a new Moses, with a similar itinerary: escape to the desert, refuge in a foreign country, signs and wonders, journey to Horeb (Sinai), which culminates in the manifestation of God. Like Moses, Elijah disappears in Transjordan. No doubt there is a premeditated intention on the part of the narrators in presenting

<sup>3</sup> G. Fohrer, *História da religião de Israel*, Nova Coleção Bíblica 15, trad. Josué Xavier, São Paulo 1982, 282.

<sup>4</sup> J. W. Jack, "La situation religieuse d'Israël au temps d'Achab", *Revue de l'histoire des Religions* 112 (1935) 145-168.

<sup>5</sup> According to Berlyn, "wealth and might and fine buildings were hollow and evanescent. Any leader who set it aside for the easier pursuit of superficial successes would lead it to ruin and oblivion" (P. J. Berlyn, "Elijah's Battle for the Soul of Israel", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40 (2012) 53).

<sup>6</sup> H. Niehr, "Os livros dos reis", en E. Zenger, ed., *Introdução ao Antigo Testamento*, trad. Werner Fuchs, Coleção Loyola Bíblica 36, São Paulo 2016, 204.

him in this way. If Moses was the founder of the Yahweh religion, Elijah will be its greatest defender in times of danger<sup>7</sup>.

Elijah's cycle begins with a period of hiding by the torrent of Cherit, East Jordan, until the spring dried up and the ravens no longer served him (1 Kgs 17,2-6). His mission continues in Zarephath, where he is fed by a poor widow. The widow, having lost her son, becomes angry with the man of God, who prays and finally has his prayers answered: The boy comes back to life after a ritual performed with striking words and gestures (1 Kgs 17,7-24).

The next meeting happens between Obadiah, a God-fearing as well as fearful man in relation to Ahab. Being the king's house governor, he had managed, however, to save a group of a hundred prophets in a massacre ordered by Queen Jezebel (1 Kgs 18,1-15). The time comes for the encounter between Elijah and Ahab. The prophet is called עִכְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (troubleth Israel - 1 Kgs 18,17) and he rebounds with similar words of accusation against the king and further calls for a challenge to gather the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

## 2. PROPHETS OF BAAL VS. PROPHET OF YHWH

The choice of Carmel as the setting for the dispute is not accidental. Whoever had control over that place could dominate a large part of the Northern territory<sup>8</sup>. The Mount seems to have an ancient cult tradition since many centuries, changing only the deity revered there<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> J. L. Sicre, *Profetismo em Israel: O profeta. Os profetas. A mensagem*, 2.ed., trad. João Luís Baraúna, Petrópolis 2002, 238-239. See also, B. P. Robinson, "Elijah at Horeb, 1 Kings 19:1-18: A Coherent Narrative?", *Revue Biblique* 98 (1991) 513-536; K. L. Roberts, "God, Prophet, and King: Eating and Drinking on the Mountain in First Kings 18:41", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000) 634-638.

<sup>8</sup> C. E. Baukal, "Pyrotechnics on Mount Carmel", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171 (2014) 290-292.

<sup>9</sup> Other than Baal e YHWH, one can also mention Teshub (Hurrian deity), or even in the Roman period there are some news about Vespasian, before invading Jerusalem, who consulted the oracle in Carmel (Suet. *De Vita*. V,6; Tac. *Hist.* II,78).

The worship of Baal<sup>10</sup> was widespread in the Canaanite environment. At least two reasons can explain the phenomenon: one practical and other political. Since Baal was the god of rain, the farmers who had no other water than rain had to invoke him (practical reason). The political reason of this cult finds its roots in the alliance that culminated in the marriage between Ahab (son of Israel's king) and Jezebel (daughter of the Sidon's king)<sup>11</sup>. From a sociological point of view, in fact, religion is the primary source of legitimacy of the state and therefore calls the attention of the rulers. The "prophets of Baal", therefore, since they ate at the king's table (1 Kgs 18,19), also had the political function of supporting and legitimating the sovereign<sup>12</sup>.

Elijah on the other hand worships the God who gives dew and rain (1 Kgs 17,1). In order to avoid any kind of syncretism, the prophet declared that it was YHWH, not Baal, who granted or withheld rain and the fertility of the earth (1 Kgs 15,1), even knowing that the Elijah's conception of YHWH as a god of war, storms and wrath was about to change<sup>13</sup> into a conception much more "softer" than his early experience (1 Kgs 19,11-12).

As Robert Cohn notes, while the prophets of Baal are described ridiculously shouting, making incisions and jumping (dancing), Elijah calmly prepares his offering and utters a single prayer, which is immediately answered by God. The sacred writer, therefore, evidences Elijah's control at the moment of his prayer<sup>14</sup>.

The account can be understood as an isolated pericope, as seen in the complex redactional history<sup>15</sup>, or, as Cohn maintains, it can be seen in a unitary perspective in the narrative of 1 Kgs 17-19, the center of which is found in 1 Kgs 18,20-40<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Probably here it is the Baal of Tyre, also called Melqart (R. de Vaux, "Les prophètes de Baal sur le Mont Carmel", *Bible et Orient*, Paris 1967, 486).

<sup>11</sup> L. J. Hoppe, "Elijah and the Prophets of Baal", *The Bible Today* 41 (2003) 349-351. According to an interpretation made by Flavius Josephus, Jezebel was responsible for introducing the cult of Baal (Βελία), the god of Tyre, to the Israelites (Ios. *Ant.* VIII, 317).

<sup>12</sup> P. Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen*, Collegeville 2004, 110-111.

<sup>13</sup> G. Fohrer, *História da religião de Israel*, 283.

<sup>14</sup> R. L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101 (1982) 333-350.

<sup>15</sup> According to Sweeney, in 1 Kgs 18,20-40: "apart from the identification of Elijah as the protagonist, this narrative could be set in any number of different periods in Israelite history" (M. A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 221).

<sup>16</sup> R. L. Cohn, "The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19", 333-350.

As noted above, the text of 1 Kgs 18,20-40 can be considered a retelling of Ex 32. Here, therefore, it is not a parallel version of the texts, nor a duplication, but a way of retaking essential concepts from Ex 32 in a new political and religious context. This kind of retaking highlights that the history of idolatry is repeated in a vicious cycle that continually plagues the people at different times and places, and with different characters.

### 3. EXODUS 32: BETWEEN THE INVISIBLE GOD AND VISIBLE GODS

The pericope is inserted within the great narrative block of Ex 32-34. This, in turn, breaks the sequence of “order of execution” (Ex 25-31) and “execution” of the temple’s construction (Ex 35-40). Its placement in this context can be explained by a complex redactional history<sup>17</sup>. However, from the way the text appears in its canonical version it is possible to assume that it has a clear purpose: in order to build God’s temple, first it is necessary to renounce the idols. In this sense, the text of Ex 32 is like the flattening of the ground on which the sanctuary is built.

This narrative block from Ex 32-34 has already been associated with Deut 9-10<sup>18</sup>, and even 1 Kgs 12,26-33 as a *retroprojection* of Jeroboam’s sin<sup>19</sup>. Following a canonical reading, however, Ex 32,1-29 underlies the critique of idolatry and serves as a model for other later texts.

The crisis of the people is due to the fact that they feel abandoned by their leader Moses and the God he represents. Both become invisible. Human beings, however, need symbols, certainties, concrete and visible elements that give them hope for a better present and future. Therefore, comes out the idea of creating a divinity in which human questions are supposed to be divinely answered.

<sup>17</sup> Essentially, the text seems to belong to the first Dtr redaction, but some words like could be from P source (Ex 32,15) (B. Renaud, “La formation de Ex 19-40 Quelques points de repère”, in VV. AA. *Le Pentateuque: Débats et recherches*, Association Catholique Française pour l’Étude de la Bible, Lectio Divina 151, Paris 1992, 120-130.

<sup>18</sup> B. Renaud, “La formation de Ex 19-40 Quelques points de repère”, 111-116.

<sup>19</sup> M. Priotto, *Esodo. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento*, I libri biblici. Primo Testamento 2, Cinisello Balsamo 2014, 578.

The people build their idol, a molten calf<sup>20</sup> from what they carried with them (Ex 32,2). Such objects – (קִּיָּוָה) –, as Priotto notes, may be a reference directly linked to the idols of Gen 35,4 and Jdg 8,24-27, which are amulets. Therefore, the idol is made of other idols that had never been left behind. They were the “plan B” in case that the foolishness of leaving Egypt wouldn’t end well.

God’s reaction is breaking the covenant. This comes across clearly when God tells Moses “YOUR people (עַמֶּךָ) have corrupted themselves (v.7)”. God no longer accepts that those people are called his own. Moses tries to rebalance the relationship with the same divine argument by saying that they are God’s people (vv.11.12). Moses tries to convince God to withdraw his anger and it succeeds (vv.11-14).

When Moses comes down from the mountain, he finds the people enjoying themselves, dancing and singing in choirs. All this is replaced by the sound of the stone tablets breaking. According to Priotto, the destruction of the tablets of the law written by God takes place “at the foot of the mount” (תַּהֲתֵךְ הָהָר) (Ex 32,19), an expression that occurs only in Ex 24,4 to indicate the local where Moses had made an altar to celebrate the Covenant. Therefore, in this scene the covenant is broken along with the tablets<sup>21</sup>.

Both “word of God” and “god created” by Aaron have a similar fate: both are torn to pieces. The only one who remains is the God’s messenger Moses who punishes the guilty and with this he shows that God continues to guide his people. The one who once lived for his idol now also dies for it by swallowing the remains that were mixed with the water<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Probably Aaron fashioned a mannequin (of wood or clay or some other elastic material), so one can understand how Moses might have burned and reduced to dust the golden calf (32,20), and then covered it with the gold sheets obtained from melting the gold from the earrings, fashioning it with the chisel into the shape of a calf. So, it is a golden calf, not a calf made of gold (M. Priotto, *Esodo*, 583).

<sup>21</sup> M. Priotto, *Esodo*, 593.

<sup>22</sup> The ancient *crux interpretum* of how both things could happen to the calf (being burned and reduced to ashes) has been partially resolved by an Ugaritic parallel that describes how “Anath with a sword, burns him with fire, grinds his body with millstones, and scatters his millstones, and scatters his flesh over the field”. The text describes the total annihilation of Mot by a series of actions, using the verbs in the same order as the biblical account



According to the perspective of this article, this text certainly inspired many other Old Testament texts, specially 1 Kgs 18,20-40. The fight against the idols is a *continuum* in the life of the god's people.

#### 4. ECHOES OF EX 32 IN 1 KGS 18,20-40

Ahab summoned the people on the Mount (1 Kgs 18,20), just as the people were gathered around Aaron when Moses was late in coming down from the mountain (Ex 32,1). In both accounts God seems to be distant and the signs of his presence are apparently missing: rain in one side and the physical presence of their leader in the other. In both texts the people are left without an answer.

Elijah accuses the people of “hesitate between two sides” (1 Kgs 18,21)<sup>23</sup> and invites them to choose either God or Baal. And then he makes a challenge from which it will be clear which god is believable. This kind of choice is similar to the one that appears in Ex 32,26, right after Moses comes down from the mountain. The idea of a choice between two paths is a striking feature of Deuteronomistic theology (Deut 11,26-32; 30,19, etc.).

Both the prophet of God and the servants of Baal are defined as נְבִיאִים (1 Kgs 18,20). All their actions however are very similar to those made by the ancient priests. On the other hand, a small difference puts an abyss between Elijah and the other prophets: he is designated only on that occasion with an article: הַנְּבִיאִי (the prophet - 1 Kgs 18,36). Yet, as is typical of some biblical accounts<sup>24</sup>, the contrast between the “representative” of God and those who serve other gods is huge: one against four hundred and fifty.

On the Exodus account the priest Aaron is the one responsible to make the creation e contact with the new god just made. Aaron

(B. S. Childs, *El libro del Éxodo: comentario crítico y teológico*, trad. Enrique Sanz Giménez-Rico, Nueva Biblia española, Estella 2003, 543).

<sup>23</sup> The verb נָסַח reappear on v.26 to describe the Baal's priest's liturgical actions even though the meaning is not very clear: the Hebrew texts read וַיִּסְחֻּ (they were limping), while the Greek texts read διέτρεχον (walked back and forth).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the victory of Gideon with only three hundred men against the Midianites (Jdg 7,1-8 or the victory of the little David over the giant Goliath (1Sam 17,40-51).



is the mediator who makes a representation of god. Once again there is a contrast between two cults and their leaders, Moses and Aaron.

Elijah exalts himself as the “only remaining prophet of God” (אֵין נֹתְרֵתִי נְבִיא לַיהוָה 1 Kgs 18,22). The people, on the other hand, preferred to follow the quantity rather than the quality of the divine emissaries. Perhaps it was easier to think that more than one person invoking their god would be more easily heard.

Similarly, in Ex 32,10 there is a contrast between Moses to whom is promised a descendance capable of forming a great nation, and the unfaithful people who are destined to wrath. Here too, therefore, only one is righteous and heard by God, in contrast to the others who are all unfaithful. Furthermore, behind the word נְבִיא (prophet) there is the concept of “speaking in the place of God” and “shouting the word of God”. Here the people, by asking for a god, become speaker for a mute god and a prophet who announce his own catastrophe.

Elijah is always pictured as the protagonist who give orders all the time and his “commands” are followed: he gives precedence to the prophets of Baal to perform the sacrifice, he asks them to invoke their god and to raise their voices to call him louder (1 Kgs 18,25-28). In all this he is “obeyed” by his adversaries. Thus, he is a man of initiative, leadership and movement.

This dimension of the prophet comes from his faith in a God who does not stop and is always looking for his people. According to the Israelite faith, the man is made by the image and likeness of God himself (Gen 1,26-27). In this way, the humankind is similar to God: the men and women have hands to use on behalf of those who doesn't have it; voice to use in favor of the voiceless; feet to run in order to aid the neighbor. That is the exact opposite of those who worship idols, who do not move like their own gods. Do not see anyone. Do not help anyone. Do not listen to anyone. The primarily consequence of idolatry, thus, is the insensibility.

The leadership of Moses is known as well. He is the one who goes up to the mountain, listen, pray for the people, punish them and give orders.

On the scene of the Mount Carmel narrative there is a suspense, that occurs through the use of fast-moving time (morning, noon, offering time). In this way the typical satire of the prophets

is dramatized (Is 40,18-20; 44,10-17)<sup>25</sup>. Although there is a great intensity in the actions of the Baal prophet's (so many strong gestures and shouts), the conclusion is disappointing: וְאֵין-קוֹל וְאֵין-עֲזָרָה וְאֵין-קִשּׁוּב (but there was no voice, no help, no sign of attention - 1 Kgs 18,29).

In Ex 32,1 Moses was late getting down. The next day they got up early (Ex 32,6). After Moses comes down and discusses with the people he says “receive today the investiture of the Lord” (Ex 32,29), the next day comes the punishment (Ex 32,30ff). Here there are the impatience of the people, the impatience of God, and finally the impatience of Moses. Even so, the story is slow in its development. The same drama of Moses is repeated on the episode of Elijah.

The rite celebrated by the Baal's prophets is composed by a violent choreography that goes as far as the shedding of blood. Their gesture of “bending the knee”, with the verb *Piel* פָּסַע, expresses this intensity that leads to delirium. The ritual dance is found in several ancient cults<sup>26</sup>, such as, that of the “lord of the dance” (Baal Marqod)<sup>27</sup>. In Ex 32 there is also a dance, albeit for a different reason. In one case it is a symbol of joy for the new god, in another it is a symbol of hope in the worshipped idol.

Baal's silence in the face of his prophets' gestures and words causes Elijah to mock by asking him to shout louder: “either he is talking<sup>28</sup>, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or maybe he sleepeth, and must be awaked<sup>29</sup>” (1 Kgs 18,27). The prophet uses the categories known in Baal worship and related to his death/

<sup>25</sup> P. Zamora García, *Reyes I. La fuerza de la narración*, 350.

<sup>26</sup> According to Roland de Vaux, “l'ult passage du romancier grec Hélio-dore nous éclaire sur cette gymnastique. Il décrit une fête que des matelots tyriens célèbrent en l'honneur de leur dieu Héraclès; après un banquet, on danse à la mode syrienne, avec un accompagnement musical: ‘tantôt ils sautaient en l'air avec légèreté, tantôt ils pliaient les genoux (ἐποκλάζοντες) près du sol et tournaient sur eux-mêmes comme des possédés” (R. de Vaux, “Les prophètes de Baal sur le Mont Carmel”, *Bible et Orient*, Paris 1967, 487-488).

<sup>27</sup> R. de Vaux, “Les prophètes de Baal”, 488.

<sup>28</sup> The LXX version of “talking” is ἀδολεσχία, which has the sense of being chatty and thus highlights even more the lack of interest on Baal's part. One hypothesis suggests maybe he is defecating/urinating (G. A. Rendsburg, “The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988) 414-417).

<sup>29</sup> The LXX reads: θεός ἐστὶν ὅτι ἀδολεσχία αὐτῷ ἐστὶν καὶ ἅμα μήποτε χρηματίζει αὐτός ἢ μήποτε καθεῦδει αὐτός καὶ ἐξαναστήσεται (god is meditating, or maybe he is doing business, or maybe he is sleeping and will wake up).

resurrection to mock him<sup>30</sup>. Antiquity offers many parallels of this type of ceremony<sup>31</sup>. The sleeping god may be also an allusion to the god Enlil, known for his anger toward humanity that does not let him sleep<sup>32</sup>.

This verse of 1 Kgs 18,27 echoes Ex 32,1: לֹא יָדָעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לּוֹ (we don't know what is become of him). Here the description is not detailed, nor are made detailed hypotheses about why Moses and his God are absent, but the anguish is essentially the same: God and the gods seem to be far away.

After noon, the prophets of Baal went into a trance, literally “prophesied” (נִיְהוֹנְנָאִי), until the time of the evening sacrifice (1 Kgs 18,29). Usually, the prophet's great *climax* moment occurs when he opens his mouth to utter the words that are not his own, but those of the god he worships. Here, however, there are traces of blood left on their bodies, which mingled with those of the butchered animals. But the long-awaited word was not poured out upon them. It remains only a terrifying silence on the scene. Very different from the experience of the God's prophet on the Horeb (1 Kgs 19,12)<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> According to Jagersma, “iln diesem Fall ist es sehr gut möglich, dass Elia mit den Worten וַיִּקַּח יֵשׁוּ הָרֹא וַיִּקַּח יֵשׁוּ הָרֹא in 1. Kön. xviii 27 *nicht nur* eine sarkastische Frage stellt, *sondern auch* sich mit diesem Ausdruck in die religiöse Denkart der Ba'lspropheten versetzt und ihre eigene Terminologie gebraucht” (H. Jagersma, “ישׁ in 1.Konige XVIII 27”, *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975) 675).

<sup>31</sup> According to De Vaux, in Egypt, for example, “les dieux dans leurs temples comme le souverain dans son palais étaient salués chaque matin par un chant où l'on répétait sans cesse l'invocation “Éveille-toi en paix!”, suivie des noms ou des épithètes du dieu” (R. de Vaux, “Les prophètes de Baal”, 493).

<sup>32</sup> On Howard Jacobson's theory: “iln the Mesopotamian epic, the *Atrahasis*, the god Enlil is angered at men and, after several failed attempts to reduce their population, he brings great rains that flood the earth and destroy most of humanity. The cause of his anger is straightforward. Mankind makes too much noise and keeps him awake: “With their uproar I am deprived of sleep”; “With their uproar sleep does not overcome me”. In contrast, 1 Kings' Baal seems oblivious to foe noise of his priests and sleeps undisturbed. The Bible's narrative will culminate with a rainstorm too (18,45), but this rain, brought by Israel's God who does not sleep, will bring not destruction but salvation for his people” (H. Jacobson, “Elijah's Sleeping Baal”, *Biblica* 79 (1998) 413).

<sup>33</sup> According to Abraham Heschel, Elijah's does not find God in the wind, the fire, the earthquake, but in the breeze, “literally: a voice of silence. (...) The voice Elijah perceived was almost silence” (A. J. Heschel, *Dio alla ricerca dell'uomo (Una filosofia dell'ebraismo)*, Documenti di cultura moderna 13, Torino 1969, 209).

Elijah takes on the task of praying to his God. Two moments of “closeness” between Elijah and the people are striking. At the beginning of the narrative Elijah approaches the people (1 Kgs 18,21) and takes the first step, as is typical of one who assumes the task of leader. The second step, however, is not his, Elijah asks the people to come closer (1 Kgs 18,30) as a liturgical invitation<sup>34</sup>.

A related movement happens in Ex 32,1 in which the people approach Aaron once with a request, taking the initiative, and the second time to bring the objects as they had been commanded (Ex 32,3).

The etiological quotation of Jacob’s name changed to Israel (1 Kgs 18,31) goes back to Gen 32,29<sup>35</sup> and reminds that it is time to start over. If Jacob was the man who wrestled with God, the people also defied God by adhering to Baal and his henchmen. Besides, the invocation to the fathers’ God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (1 Kgs 18,36) is common in the Old Testament, and is the same one Moses uses in Ex 32,13.

The text continues with the description of the ritual performed by Elijah that culminates in the prophets’ Baal massacre (1 Kgs 18,30-40)<sup>36</sup>. The fire devours the sacrifice is very intense and takes with it everything (wood, stones, dust and water). This echoes Ex 32,20 in which Moses burns the calf and tears it to pieces reducing it to dust.

Both texts end with the death of the idolaters. In Ex 32,29 the sentence of 3 thousand men killed expresses fidelity to the divine commandment<sup>37</sup>. The death of the 450 prophets (1 Kgs 18,40)

<sup>34</sup> In a similar way, for example, Ps 118(117),27 invites the procession to approach the horns of the altar.

<sup>35</sup> About the name Israel, A. Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, II, translated by W. M. B. Stevenson, Edinburgh 1897, 279-280.

<sup>36</sup> The prophets of Baal had to die in order for the rite of *levée de catastrophe* to be completed, with the culprits put to death to restore the situation to normal (A. Marx, “Mais pourquoi donc Élie a-t-il tué”, 26). This is typical of P theology according to which the perpetrator of the crime must be eliminated by the people.

<sup>37</sup> “l’ordine da parte di Mosè di uccidere a fil di spada gli adoratori del vitello non è altro che la proclamazione della trascendenza di YHWH e la meritata condanna per coloro che la rinnegano; la radicalità del castigo esprime l’assoluta fedeltà al comandamento divino (20,4). L’ordine divino a cui fa riferimento Mosè non si deve ricercare in una particolare parola precedente, bensì fa riferimento all’intera teofania sinaitica tramite cui YHWH

functions as the conclusion of the sacrificial rite, eliminating the evil from Israel.

This hecatomb can be seen as a bad example, especially in days when religious intolerance generates scenes of daily violence. But perhaps these prophets were already dead and their lives meaningless long ago. Although the voices of the prophets and Elijah are clear, the silence of the people is even more eloquent. Perhaps the people did not want to choose between one or other deity, but preferred worship both, disregarding the importance of a clear choice. In the end, some needed to die in order to make others raise up.

## 5. WHY TO FIGHT?

Since the idea of a “true religion” exists, it must be admitted that at least some other religion is false. From that moment on the disputes between the gods and their respective defenders get started. Basically, it is not a matter of defending one’s own divinity, because being of divine condition any god wouldn’t need neither worship nor apology from anyone.

What lies behind the fight against idols is the fundamental principle that moves the believing community in one direction. Sandro Galazzi makes a description that is perhaps excessively idyllic of the Jahvist religion, but that expresses well what it brings with it, a project of life and society<sup>38</sup>.

rivela il suo volto e dona la sua parola. La cifra di tremila uomini indica un numero consistente di vittime (Gdc 16,27), ma soprattutto l’efficacia della parola profetica di Mosè e l’obbedienza incondizionata dei leviti” (M. Priotto, *Esodo*, 599)

<sup>38</sup> According to Galazzi, “YHWH é um Deus que resume a experiência dos vários grupos oprimidos. Por isso é o único Deus de todos os hebreus. Ele é gerador de unidade social. Há muitos clãs, muitos grupos, mas um único Deus. Ele exige a obediência a um projeto de vida e de sociedade alternativo ao das cidades do Egito: um projeto em que o trabalhador não pode ser explorado; um projeto sem dominação, em que os únicos a serem ‘honrados’ devem ser os pais e as mães das casas e não os reis e faraós; um projeto em que o respeito deve ser a prioridade; um projeto que respeite a vida da família e do clã” (S. Gallazzi, *Israel na História: seu povo, sua fé, seu livro*, São Leopoldo 2011, 51).

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It is possible to discuss the problem of the visibility/invisibility of God<sup>39</sup>, but the fundamental question is how to distinguish the true from the false god? What to do to follow only one God, instead of many? In Thomas Mann's interpretation of Ex 32, Moses, seeing the cast calf without beauty, states that the object does not even resemble an animal and then says, "incorrigible people, deformed like the golden calf"<sup>40</sup>. Both the image forged in the desert and the mute and lifeless Baal represent faith deformed.

The struggle for the true God includes common life choices and concrete paths as a people. Deep down, Moses remains a metaphor<sup>41</sup> that revives in all times and whose history repeats itself, going through Elijah until these days.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The monotheistic conception of the God's people has not always been a unanimously accepted element. In fact, for many of them it seems that there was not always a need to make a clear choice for one God. Baal worship was widespread throughout the Canaanite environment and was often mixed with beliefs in YHWH. Therefore, the criticism made of such a deity is very blunt and constant.

<sup>39</sup> According to Richard, "O que está em jogo em Ex 32 não é a invisibilidade ou a espiritualidade de Deus, substituída pela visibilidade ou a materialidade do ídolo, mas sim a transcendência de Deus. E, para interpretar essa transcendência, devemos considerar a oposição que o revela (versículos 1 e 23) entre a presença do ídolo javista e a ausência de Moisés, que deixou o povo sozinho para subir ao monte Sinai. Construindo o bezerro de ouro, os israelitas querem que Deus os liberte do papel desempenhado por Moisés. O povo quer um Deus que marche à sua frente, suprindo a função de líder que vinha sendo cumprida por Moisés. Ele repele a liderança libertadora de Moisés, pretendendo que Deus exerça diretamente outra liderança, segundo os desejos do povo. Mas ao repelir Moisés, o povo está se recusando a assumir sua condição de povo" (P. Richard, "Nossa luta é contra os ídolos. Teologia bíblica", em VV. AA., *A luta dos deuses: Os ídolos da opressão e a busca do Deus libertador*, Libertação e teologia 9, trad. Alvaro Cunha, São Paulo 1982, 13-14). Priotto, on the other hand, states that what lies behind the request is a desire for a visible YHWH, with human dimensions (M. Priotto, M., *Esodo*, 581).

<sup>40</sup> T. Mann, *A lei*, in Id., *Dois romances. A lei e A enganada*, trad. Lya Luft, São Paulo 2001, 86.

<sup>41</sup> A. Wineman, "Between Person and Metaphor: Moses in the Hasidic Homily-Literature", *Hebrew Studies* 59 (2018) 209-220.

The coexistence of the worship of both gods can be explained with the *Mishnah*: a philosopher poses the question to the elders of Israel: “if your God does not want idols, why does He not abolish them?” They answered him: “if there were something that people worship that was not necessary for the world, He would have abolished it; but people worship the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets; should He destroy the universe because of fools?!” (*Abod. Zar.* 54b).

In this article it was pointed out Elijah’s struggle in the time of the ruler Ahab, the influence that the Baal cult had on people’s lives, the difficulties in adhering to one deity rather than another, and finally some echoes of Ex 32 that are reflected in 1 Kgs 18:20-40. Both texts, however, cannot be seen as parallels. They have instead a common vision that pervades elements of one narration in another. One could call this a “quasi-parallel”, or even a “biblical sensibility”, but the essential thing is to focus on the criticism of idols that is repeated yesterday and today. The protagonists and other characters change, but the plot remains.

The temptation of idolatry is also revealed in the desire for a concrete image, of something that can be touched, contemplated and even manipulated. Jacques Guillet says about this in a poetic way “(*l’idole est*) *une belle matière, du bon travail: c’est beaucoup, mais c’est tout*”<sup>42</sup>.

In these times of religious intolerance, mockery of any religion is unacceptable. This kind of filter of modern times, however, does not apply to the prophet’s time and he cannot be judged, only grasp its deeper meaning: the essentiality of choosing God despite all other alternatives. In the end, the fight of Moses and Elijah can be seen as one, on two different mountains. The third one is that in which we are standing right now.

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<sup>42</sup> J. Guillet, “La polémique contre les idoles”, 432.



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