

... ELIJAH PUT DOWN BY DIVINE WHISPER

Did you read the previous column? About the show-down between the prophet Elijah and the followers of Baal? Elijah and the Lord God won, of course.

It really wasn't much of a contest. The devotees of Baal couldn't get their act off the ground. But when Elijah prayed, the Lord blow-torched the sacrifice offered to him.

As a result, the audience pledged its loyalty to Yahweh, Elijah lynched the supporters of Baal, and the rains came to end a three-year drought.

As told in 1 Kings 18 (or 3 Kings 18 in some Bibles), the story leaves no doubt about who wields the clout. The Baal forces have about as much chance as Republicans in Chicago.

However, the Jewish scriptures are seldom content to relate mere power plays. More often than not, the biblical authors have a surprising way of bringing out some finer nuances. In this case, the subtleties appear in the next chapter, 1 Kings 19 (a.k.a. 3 Kings 19).

Queen Jezebel, the chief proponent of the freshly humiliated religion of Baal, is a poor loser. She puts out a contract on Elijah. So the prophet escapes into the desert. And gives up.

"I've had enough," he prays before he goes to sleep. "Let me die now." But the Lord refuses to accommodate him. An angel serves him supper in bed and sends him on his way.

Forty days and 300 miles later, Elijah is holed up in a cave on Mount Horeb, deep in the Sinai Peninsula. Still feeling sorry for himself.

Why the prophet should be in such a blue funk in this chapter, having just come off an exhilarating victory in chapter 18, isn't entirely clear. For that matter, how he managed to travel those 300 miles without getting caught is anybody's guess. Apparently the biblical author wasn't interested in the fine points of psychology or geography.

The writer was more interested in the symbolism of the location. For Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai, was the same place where the Lord had met with Moses hundreds of years earlier.

On that long ago occasion, the Lord had dazzled Moses with lightning and thunder,

smoke and trumpets. All the hoopla was to impress the people.

When Moses presented them with the Lord's commandments, they were supposed to acknowledge his leadership and ratify the covenant.

In Elijah's case, however, things are different. When the Lord questions his motives, all the prophet can mutter is something about being jealous. "I'm the only person left who is faithful to you," he whines. So the Lord puts on another display.

A hurricane blows in. But the Lord isn't in the wind. Next an earthquake rattles the mountain. But the Lord can't be measured on a Richter scale. Then comes a fire. But the Lord isn't present in the blaze.

Finally Elijah hears a tiny, quiet voice. Barely a whisper. But he recognizes the Speaker. "What are you doing here?" Again the prophet bemoans his fate, but the Lord isn't buying his tale of woe.

"At least 7,000 of your countrymen are still on my side," insist the Lord. "You not the lone ranger." So he sends Elijah back home to commission two new kings and to appoint a successor for himself.

Which must have been rather deflating for Elijah. The prophet had grown fond of the Lord's power plays and his own center-ring notoriety. When the fireworks faded and it was business as usual, he went on to pout. So the Lord resorted to whispers to make his point.

You have to admire the skillful way the biblical author got the point across. It would have been easy to keep up a string of stories about the Lord's overpowering victories.

But in 1 Kings 18-19 he put two contrasting stories back to back. So by reading the stupendous and the sublime in conjunction with each other, we get the full picture.

In this case we get the message that while the Lord may use people like Elijah to stomp the opposition, that's no reason for Elijah—or anyone else, for that matter—to think they're indispensable.