

ELIJAH SCORES KNOCKOUT ON MOUNTAIN . . .

Those old story tellers knew what they were doing. They had a way of getting their point across so subtly you wouldn't know you'd been taken for a ride until the train put into the station. They could charm you out of your dentures.

Or they could clobber you with the obvious. Or do both at the same time. Jab, feint, knock-out.

If you want to see the ancient authors at their best, check out a pair of tales about the prophet Elijah. You'll find them in the Jewish scriptures at 1 Kings 18-19, or as the books are numbered in some Bibles, at 3 Kings 18-19.

In both cases the action takes place on a mountain. In chapter 18 Elijah slugs it out toe-to-toe with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. That's on the Mediterranean coast of northern Israel.

In chapter 19 he is confronting the Lord God himself on Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai. That's 300 miles south near the Red Sea.

This column treats the Mount Carmel incident. Read the next column for the Mount Horeb sequel.

Here's the background. When Ahab the king of Israel marries the Phoenician princess Jezebel, she brings her home-town religion with her.

It isn't long before her pagan god Baal is ensconced as the royal religion and the Lord Yahweh is shoved aside.

Naturally the Lord takes umbrage to that. So he commissions his prophet Elijah to harass Jezebel and her cohorts. The prophet then has the thankless task of predicting that the kingdom will be devastated by drought and famine.

Jezebel retaliates by executing hundreds of the Lord's followers. Elijah takes the hint and goes underground. He hides for three years.

Then he gets in touch with the king and proposes a show-down. The ground rules are like this: Both parties will meet on Mount Carmel. Each will prepare an altar and pray to their respective deities.

If Baal can answer by setting fire to the sacrifice dedicated to him, then he will be the winner. Ditto for Yahweh and his sacrifice.

The morning of the contest the minions of Baal go first. They dance around their altar, slice their skin, shout their prayers, and in general put on quite a show in hopes of attracting Baal's attention. Nothing much happens, of course.

Elijah humiliates them. "Try a little harder," he wisecracks. "Perhaps your god is meditating. Or going to the toilet. He might be on a trip. Or taking a siesta."

Twelve o'clock comes and goes. Then it is Elijah's turn. He builds his altar out of twelve boulders, a not so subtle reminder of the Israelites' descent from the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob.

He piles on the wood, digs a trench around the altar, slaps the carcass of a bull on top, and drenches the whole thing with water. After three drenchings the altar is soaked and moated.

Then Elijah prays: "Show 'em your stuff, Lord. Let them know who's God."

Zap! The Lord's fire falls. Bull, wood, stones, water—the whole mess is burnt to a steaming crisp. And the people fall all over themselves with "Yahweh, he is God!"

Elijah doesn't waste any time. He lynches all 450 of Baal's shamans on the spot. (That wasn't in the original game plan, but when you're hot, you're hot.)

He invites the king to a picnic, but, as often happens with picnics, it starts to rain.

The drought is over. The Lord God has stolen the show. The people have renounced the queen's pagan deity. And Elijah is the hero of the day.

Whether you buy the religious implications of this incident or not, you'll have to admit it's a good story. There's nothing subtle about it. It is a knock-down drag-out fight, and the good guys—the Lord Yahweh and his man Elijah—come out on top.

However, the ancient writers were seldom content to leave it at that. More often than not, they weren't satisfied with mere power plays. They often brought out some finer nuances.

That's where the next chapter comes in, with its personal confrontation between the Lord and Elijah. But more about that in the following column.