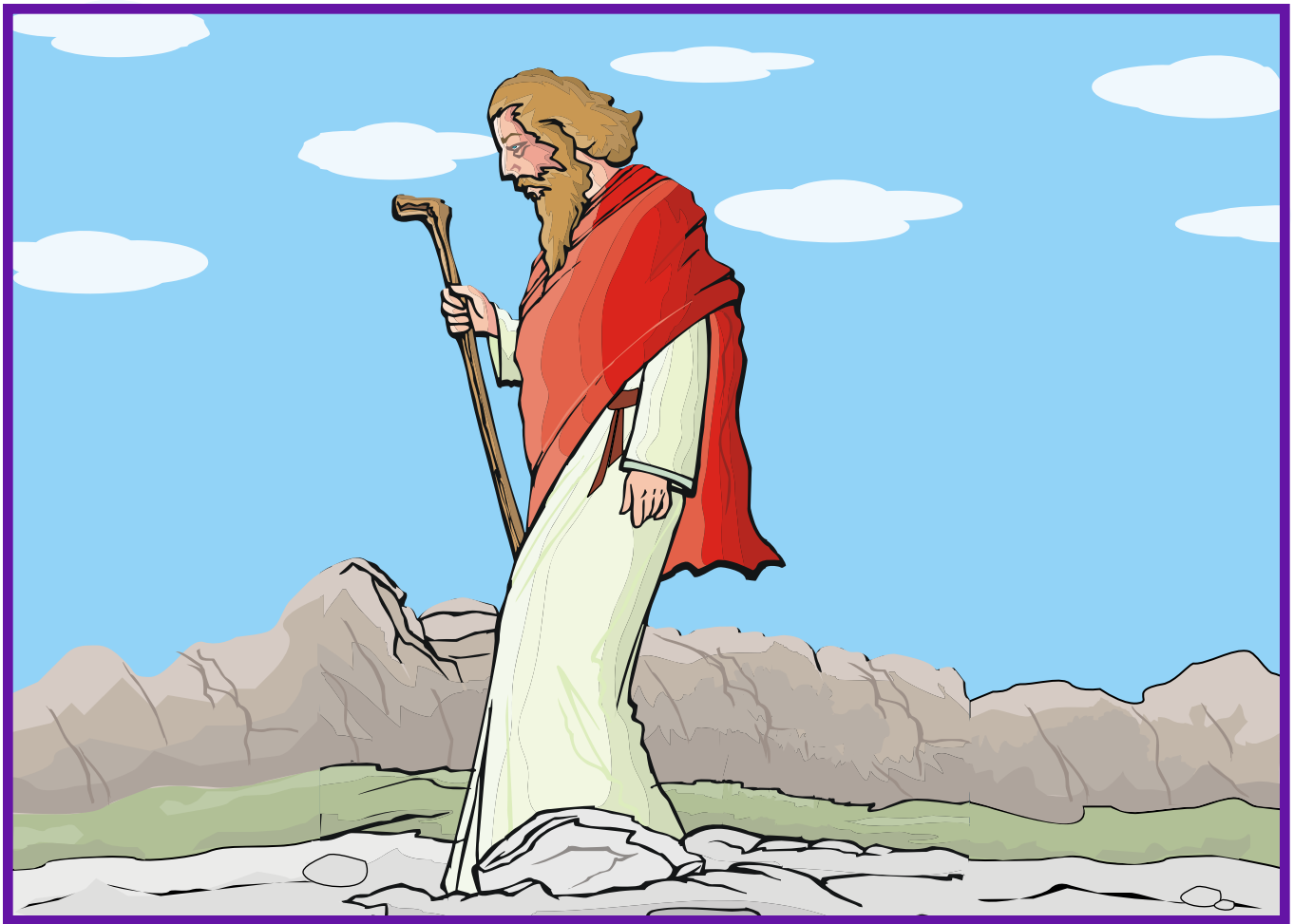


Tour of the Holy Lands - Mount Carmel



After we left Megiddo, we drove north towards Mount Carmel, a mountain ridge that divided the land of Israel from the land once called Phoenicia. A dramatic story took place there, which you can read about in I Kings 17 and 18. Nine hundred years before Christ, King Ahab ruled Israel. He said he worshiped the Lord, but he made a great mistake. He married a princess from a kingdom to the north, who did not believe in his God. Her name was Jezebel and she worshiped the Baals - gods of the skies. Ahab wanted her to feel at home, so he built altars to Baal for his new bride. (We remember the altar back at Megiddo.) Soon King Ahab forgot the Lord, and let the altars of the true God fall down. He didn't realize this was part of Jezebel's plan to make the Baals the new gods of the whole land. Someone had to wake up the king. And that "someone" was Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of all time!



Elijah must have been quite a sight, dressed in animal skins and a leather belt with his long, thick hair. He had an unforgettable name, too. "El" and "Jah" both mean God, so "Elijah" means "Yahweh is my God." He blew in from Gilead across the Jordan River with an announcement. That's what prophets did - they gave advice to kings from God, whether the kings wanted it or not. Elijah told Ahab that there would be no more rain until the pagan gods were gone. The king did not listen and so, sure enough, three years went by with no rain. The crops dried up and people were hungry and thirsty.

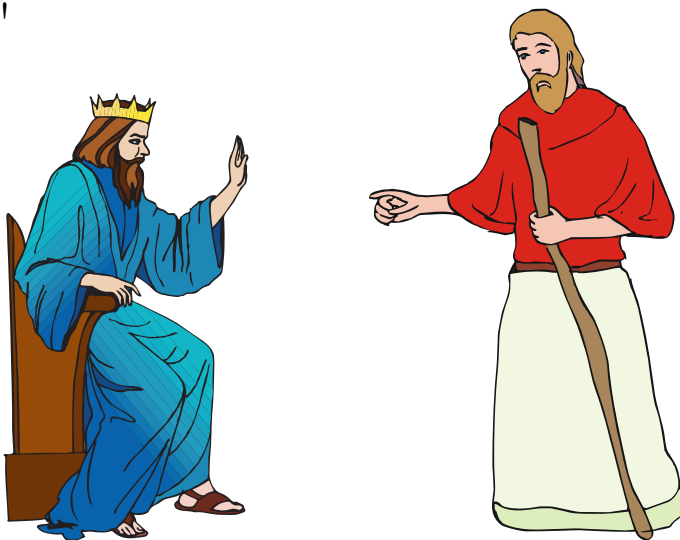




Today, however, when we look around, the fields are rich with harvested grain.

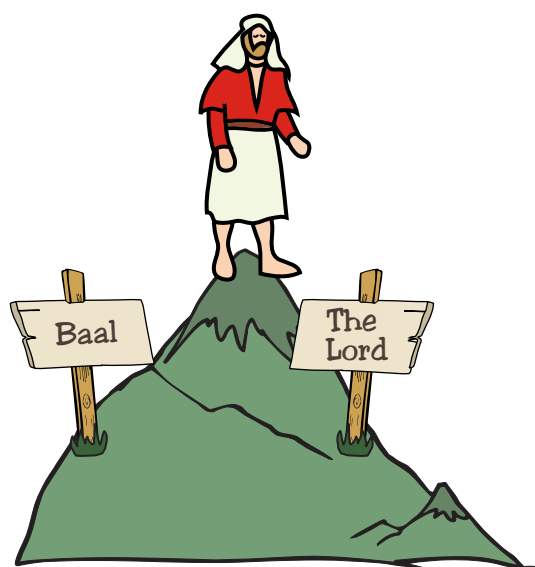
The king said to Elijah, "Aren't you the one who's been troubling Israel? It's your fault we have no rain!"

Elijah answered, "Me? No! You're the one who has forgotten the God of Israel." And then he said, "Come, let's have a contest. Gather all the people of Israel, including 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Baal's wife and let's meet on Mount Carmel."





We couldn't wait to reach the top of that ridge. We knew what that contest was all about. We climbed out of the bus and up the hill. Wow, what a view! We could hear Elijah's voice echoing in the valley below, shouting out his challenge to the crowds. "How long are you going to keep limping from one leg to the other? One foot on the north side of the ridge, one foot on the south side...one foot worshiping Baal...one foot worshiping the Lord. You can't have both at the same time."





The contest would prove which was the true God. Both sides would sacrifice a bull. Whichever god first lit a fire under a bull would be THE god. They all agreed. Elijah let the prophets of Baal go first. They called loudly to their gods all morning: "Oh Baal hear us!" They danced around their altar! They leaped and hurt themselves. Elijah teased them: "Shout louder! Maybe he's busy! Maybe he's on vacation! Maybe he's sleeping!"

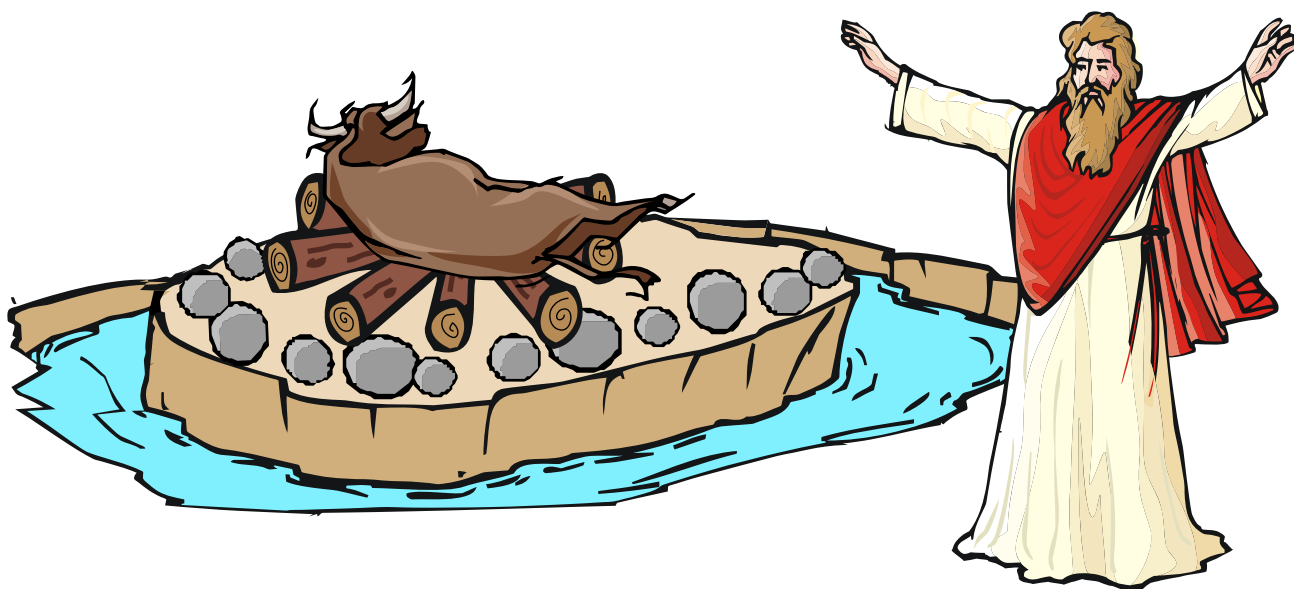
One of our group shouted, "Maybe he's out to lunch!"

But nothing! Even in the middle of the afternoon their wild cries did nothing to raise their god!



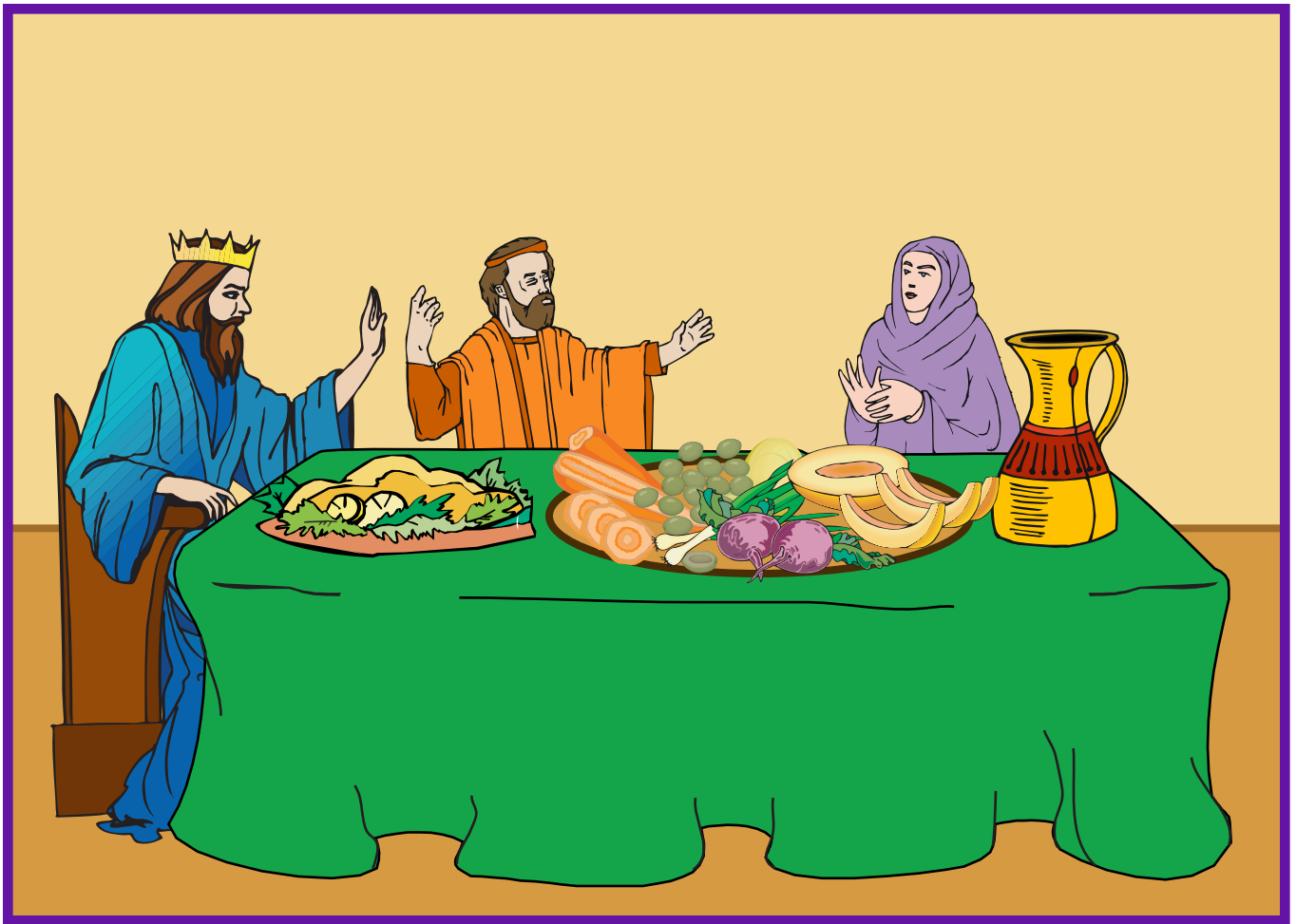
Elijah said: "Come over to my altar." (Our group moved over from the east to another view of the rich green valley to the south.) All by himself, Elijah made an altar of 12 stones, which stood for the 12 tribes of Israel. Then he dug a trench 3 feet wide around the altar. Our favorite part was when he asked the people to pour 4 barrels of water onto the bull and the firewood. He didn't seem to care that fresh water was precious. In fact, he asked them to repeat it again and again. We could picture the water soaking into the sacrifice and the wood and filling the trench.

We wanted to shout for the Lord to light the sacrifice. But Elijah didn't shout or dance. Instead, he prayed. "O Lord, God of our fathers, let it be known that you are God and I am your servant. Answer me, so everyone will know you are the true God and are bringing these people back to you."





Suddenly...well, you know what happened. From a clear blue sky, the fire fell and lit the altar. And that fire didn't burn up just the sacrifice or the wood. It burned up those 12 stones, the dust and even the 12 barrels of water. No wonder the pagan prophets shouted with one voice. We shouted with them, "The Lord, he is the God! The Lord, he is the God!"



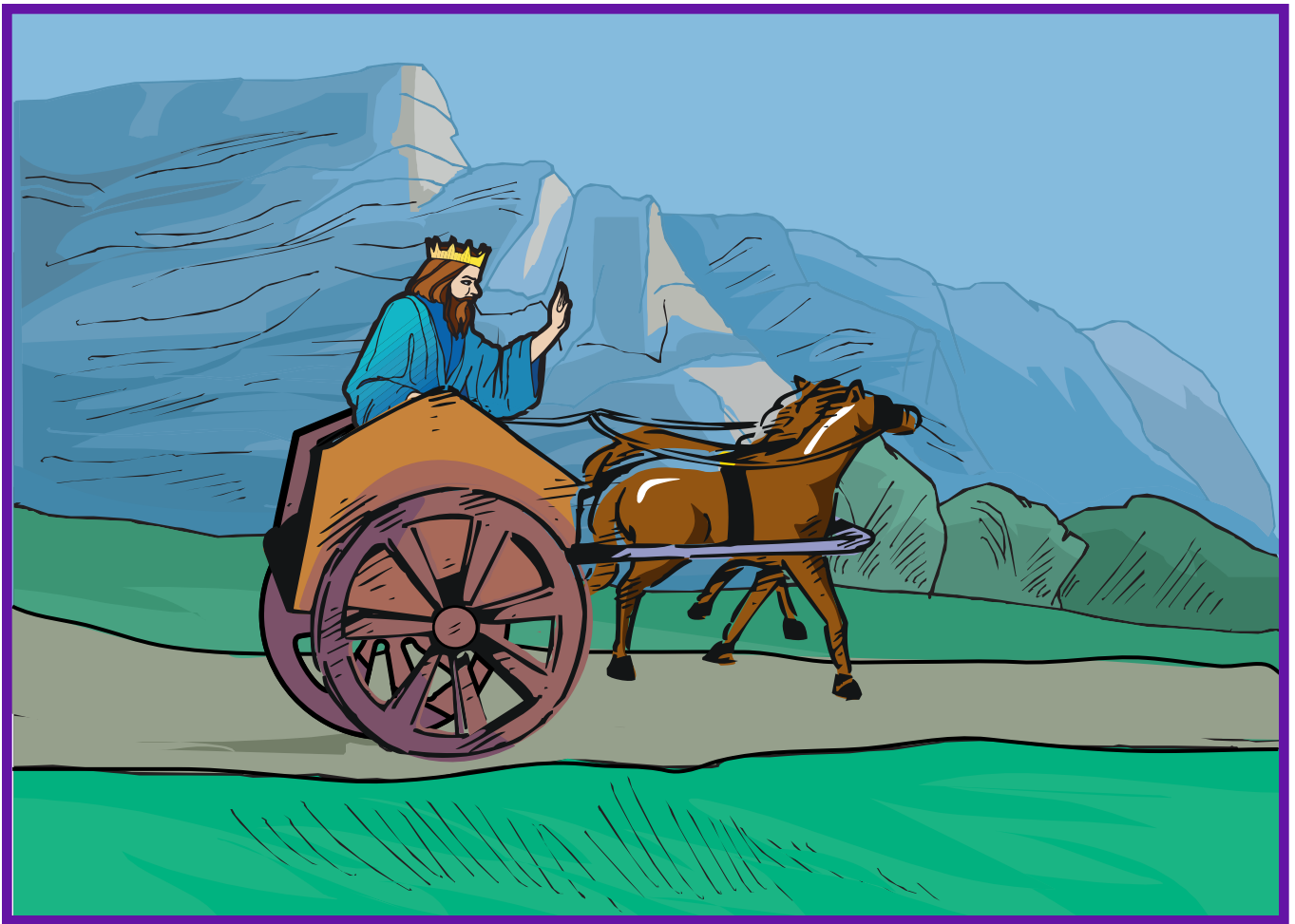
Elijah told Ahab, "You can now celebrate the winner! I hear a mighty storm coming our way." So the king prepared a royal feast and everyone ate and drank for the first time all day.

While the king was eating, Elijah was praying. He had climbed even higher up the mountain, knelt down, and buried his head between his knees. By this, he showed how deeply he was praying and his humility before God. Elijah took no personal credit for winning the contest.



Elijah was sure God would answer his prayer. The Baals claimed to be gods of the skies, but Elijah knew that the Lord ruled the heavens. While he prayed, he sent his servant to look for signs of rain. But the servant reported nothing.

Elijah told him to scan the skies again and again, never giving up his trust. On the seventh time, the servant reported, "I see a little cloud about the size of a man's hand rising out of the sea."



That's all Elijah needed to hear. A little cloud meant that big clouds were coming. Elijah said, "Go tell the king to get his chariot ready. Tell him to get down the mountain before the dust turns into thick mud." Chariot wheels can't turn in mud.



Soon, lightning was shooting across the black sky, thunder was rolling in, and it began to pour. Ahab knew he should listen to Elijah. He climbed into his chariot and headed down the mountain. He would be safe from the storm if he could reach his other palace across the valley 17 miles away.



Then Elijah did a strange thing. First, he tied his robe around his waist, so it wouldn't get in the way. Then he was off like one of those lightning flashes, chasing after Ahab. He ran with a strength that was not his own. Elijah reached the chariot and surprisingly ran ahead of it. This didn't make any sense to us, and the Bible doesn't explain.

We asked our guide, who said that kings often had runners who would run alongside their chariots. Their jobs were to clear the path for the king, to knock on the door of the house they were visiting, to take the reins at the stopping point, or carry their sandals in the mud.

We thought about that for awhile and realized that Elijah was showing the king that he was a servant, not a hero. Elijah was ready to serve any king who would toss out the Baals and worship the one and only God.

Elijah didn't think he was a hero, but we sure do!



At this point, we are ready for lunch! We were invited to try a typical fast food treat for people in this land - falafels. They are made from ground up chick peas made into balls, fried, and piled into pitas. Most of us were used to hamburgers. We had to be brave to try something new.





Just look at the choice of veggie toppings!

When we finally took a bite...not bad! We think we could eat those every day while we're here!

When we get back on the bus, we're told that we'll be in Nazareth in no time at all. This country is only as big as the state of New Jersey.

