

Ahab

The Life & Times of Ahab

Ahab whose name means 'the Father is my brother', i.e. 'God is my close relative' (Pfeiffer, 1988: 40), owed much of his success to his father Omri's efforts to set the Northern Kingdom on a firm political foundation. Omri founded Samaria, the third capital of the Northern Kingdom in his 7th year (c. 880 BC). Jeroboam had chosen Shechem, a place of with ancient associations with the patriarchs Abraham (Gen. 12:6) and Jacob (Gen. 33:18). Later the capital had moved to Tirzah, about 7 miles to the north-east of Shechem." (Bruce, 1983: 43). Omri bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer for 2 shekels of silver (1 Kings 16:24), and increased its natural advantages by fortification. Samaria was built on an isolated hill, 90m [300 ft] in height, connected with the surrounding hill country only by a saddle to the east and surrounded by a fertile valley (Isa. 28:1, 4) (Van Selms, 1988: 296). The strength of Samaria can be gauged by the number of sieges it withstood against well-equipped armies during its 150 year history. It took the Assyrians three years to capture it (725-722 BC). The city could control the trade routes to the North, East and West to the Valley of Esdraelon. Omri made Samaria the property of the Kings of Israel; technically not subject to the tribes and their popular gatherings, but only to the King and local authorities (Van Selms, 1988: 296) as David had done for Jerusalem.

The Moabite Stone records that Moab was subjugated by Israel during the reign of Omri (something that Scripture does not mention) (Prichard, 1955, 320-321). Some measure of his success can be gained when reading Shalmanesser III's account of the tribute he received from Jehu (841-814 BC) (1 Kings 19:16-17). Shalmanesser refers to Jehu as "the son of Omri". Although not physically descended from him by this time the Royal house of Israel was known internationally by the name of its most famous member. Omri was as far thinking politically as he was strategically. By the time his son Ahab acceded to the throne in 874 BC he had already cemented his father's alliance with Phoenicia by marrying Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal, the priest-king of Tyre. In this he followed the precedent for international marriages set by Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-8), with similarly disastrous results. He later arranged the marriage of his daughter Athaliah to Joram, crowned prince of Judah, sealing an alliance with their father Jehoshaphat. This marriage was to have serious religious consequences; for Athaliah had imbibed her mother's Baalism, which later led to a crisis in Judah (see 2 Kings 11). Joint operations between Ahab and Jehoshaphat were equally ill-fated. Their trading venture, again reminiscent of Solomon's (1 Kings 9:26-28), was brought to an abrupt halt when the entire fleet was wrecked before it had even set sail (2 Chron. 20:35-37; 1 Kings 22:48). Joint military operations also ended in disaster (1 Kings 22:29-38).

Ahab is said to have been worse than all who preceded him. Jeroboam had set up the golden calves and Bethel and Dan for political reasons, but Ahab went further, setting Ba'al up on a par with Yahweh (1 Kings 16:31-33). "It was common practice that a foreign princess who married a ruler of a neighbouring state should have facilities for practising her native religion in her new home" (Bruce, 1983: 43-44) - as Solomon did for his wives on the west slope of a hill East of

Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7). In the case of Ahab this meant allowing the worship of Ba'al-Melqart the chief god of Tyre, whose devotee Jezebel was, and building a temple of Ba'al for her in Samaria (16:32-33; 2 Kings 3:2). Ahab may have been happy to continue to worship Yahweh, as he named his children Jehoram ('Yahweh is high'), Ahaziah ('Yahweh has taken hold'), and Athaliah ('Yahweh is exalted'), but Jezebel was clearly not (Bruce, 1983: 44). It was she who organised the massacre of Yahweh's prophets and gave the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah all the privileges of pensioners and courtiers (1 Kings 18:4, 19). He said that he hated prophets of Yahweh, such as Micaiah son of Imlah, and was considered to be a 'troubler of Israel' by Elijah (18:17).

Jezebel's patronage of the cults of Ba'al and Asherah led Ahab into direct confrontation with one of the greatest of the prophets, Elijah. He appeared suddenly before the king and defied Ba'al by declaring that by his word alone would there be either rain or dew in the land (1 Kings 17:1). Before Ahab could detain him Elijah was gone and despite an international search Elijah remained hidden (18:9). After three years Elijah sought out the king, who was now searching for grass for his horses (18:5-6). Obadiah, who was in charge of Ahab's palace, brought him word of where Elijah was to be found and when they met Ahab accused him of being a "troubler of Israel". The prophet's response left him stunned as he found himself accused of being the cause of Israel's hardships. Without another word he accepted the challenge that Elijah issued to the prophets of Ba'al and Asherah on Mt. Carmel (18:16-20). Throughout the famous contest on Carmel Ahab was little more than a silent spectator, but when it was over Elijah told the king to go and eat and drink while he went away and prayed for the end of the drought. Coming back from the mountain Elijah warned Ahab that heavy rain was on the way and that he should make haste and ride in his chariot to Jezreel. Before him all the way, in the manner of a loyal servant, Elijah ran ahead of the king's chariot (18:46; cf. 1:5; 2 Sam. 15:1). Receiving a letter Elijah from Jezebel the prophet fled and it was some time before their paths crossed once more.

Ben Hadad, King of Aram aided by 32 of his vassals attempted to capture Samaria. Initially it appears that Ahab was prepared to surrender to him and accept the loss of his wives and possessions (20:1-7). Ben Hadad, however, appears to have wanted a fight and so made his demands so unreasonable that Ahab had no choice but to refuse them and prepare for a siege (20:9-12). Encouraged by an unnamed prophet Ahab sent out a sortie led by the young provincial officers which routed the Aramean army while it was engaged in a drinking bout (1 Kings 20:13-21). Ben-Hadad was finally captured by Ahab's inferior forces after being defeated at Aphek in the plain of Jezreel the following year. Ahab spared his life using language reminiscent of that that would be used by equal partners in a covenant; an action that brought prophetic condemnation and in the long term was ill-advised. In the short term it had advantages as it led to a military alliance and the return of captured Israelite cities which his father, Tabrimmon, had captured, as well as the establishment of Israelite Bazaars and extraterritorial rights in Damascus. The peace thus established lasted for three years (20:23-43).

During these three years the states of Israel, Aram, Hamath and nine other smaller powers were forced to unite against the growing power of Assyria, which had been impotent for almost two centuries due to the attacks of Aramean nomads. From 900 BC onwards the power of Assyria

swept westwards and in 853 Shalmaneser III faced the coalition of Syrian and Cilician states at Qarqar on the Orontes river. According to Shalmaneser's own records Ben-Hadad fielded 20 000 soldiers, and Ahab 10 000 soldiers and 2 000 chariots.

Shalmaneser claims a sweeping victory; the corpses of his foes, he says, covered the plain of the Orontes and dammed the stream itself [Pritchard, 1955: 277-281]. But the fact that he did not pursue his alleged advantage and returned home and did not return for 12 years suggests that the confederates gave a good account of themselves." (Bruce, 1983: 47, brackets mine). The size of the force that Ahab fielded is ample proof that he was the most powerful king in the history of the Northern kingdom (Hoerth, 1998: 313). After the Assyrian threat had been vanquished, for a time at least, the alliance soon broke up and war resumed between Israel and Aram.

The affair of Naboth's vineyard gives a fair insight into his character. Ahab had a right to offer to buy the vineyard from its lawful owner, and under the laws of Israel Naboth had a right to refuse him (cf. Lev. 25:23-28; Num. 36:7-12), which he did. Ahab went home and sulked. Jezebel, who cared nothing for the laws of Yahweh, organised the slaughter of Naboth. It is likely that her Phoenician upbringing taught her that the desires of the king were not to be denied (Hoerth, 1998: 310). However, when Ahab arrived to claim his property he faced once more the wrath of Elijah the Tishbite (1 Kings 21:18) who pronounced his doom, together with that of his wife. His house was to be brought to an abrupt end and the bodies of his children would lie unburied in the streets and fields. The encounter led Ahab to repentance which appears to have been genuine, if temporary, and resulted in a deferral of the Lord's judgement on his house (21:15-29).

Following the Battle of Qarqar Ahab called upon his ally Jehoshaphat to aid him in his struggle with Ben Hadad. It is thought that Jehoshaphat had become the weaker party in the alliance between Judah and Israel and readily accepted Ahab's invitation to join him. Gathering their forces together before the action Ahab had his prophets prophecy concerning the battle, but Jehoshaphat was disturbed that no prophet of the Lord was present. Ahab dissembled that there was one, but that he never cared to hear what that man had to say. Nonetheless Micaiah son of Imlah was summoned and declared that Ahab would die. It is perhaps some measure of Jehoshaphat's subservience to Ahab that he agreed to act as a decoy for him. Despite entering battle in disguise Ahab was finally slain by a stray arrow (22:1-34). At the last he appears to have shown real courage in remaining propped up in his chariot until he died from loss of blood, to delay the dispersal of his troops when they saw that he was dead (22:34-36). Ahab was succeeded by his son Ahaziah (1 Kings 22:40), he had ruled Israel for 22 years.

Significance in Israel's History

The writers of Kings present Omri and Ahab as the antitheses of David and Solomon. Omri initiated international treaties and Ahab continued them. Under Ahab Israel reached the zenith of the power it was to enjoy as an independent state, and plumbed the depth of its corruption. Its riches are demonstrated by the mention of ivory in the construction of Ahab's palace (1

Kings 22:39). Elsewhere in kings ivory is only mentioned in connection with Solomon (10:18, 22; 2 Chron. 9:17, 21). Both Ahab and Solomon were led into sin by their foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1-8; 16:30-33). As a result he received the same punishment as Solomon - his son would bear the consequences of his actions (21:29; cf. 11:11-12). His reign without doubt made more certain the Lord's punishment on Israel and its dispersion at the hands of the Assyrians. Perhaps more significantly for Christians his policy of intermarriage with royal the house of Judah almost brought the line of David to an abrupt end (1 Kings 11:1-3). If Athaliah his daughter had succeeded in her attempts to wipe out David's descendants then the Davidic covenant and the blood line of the promised Messiah would have come to nothing.

Ahab as an Example for Christians

The verdict of Scripture on Ahab is damning He "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him." (1 Kings 16:30). For that reason it is not surprising that most of the lessons he has for modern Christian's are negative: "Whatever he did; you do the opposite." The account demonstrates him to have been careless of the covenant, to have treated human life lightly, to have openly opposed and despised the Lord's prophets and to have allowed his wife to usurp his authority and lead further into sin (18:4; 21:8-10; 22:25). He "was selfish and sullen (20:43; 21:4-5), cruel (22:27), morally weak (21:1-16), and concerned with luxuries of this world (22:39)" (Patterson, 1988: 136). On the positive side, however, that at times he was capable of genuine obedience (18:16-46; 20:13-17, 22, 28-30; 22:30), repentance (22:27-28) and great courage in the face of his enemies. At the last he died courageously leading his army in battle.

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