

For Better or For Worse - Lessons From Old Testament Couples
Ahab and Jezebel: Abuse of Authority

Lesson #11 for September 15, 2007

Scriptures: 1 Kings 16:28-18:46; 1 Kings 21; 2 Kings 9:30-37.

1. Ahab and Jezebel! It is hard to imagine anything worse that could have happened to the struggling nation of Israel than those two! Jezebel's father, Ethbaal, was a priest of Astarte (Asherah) and king of Tyre. He attained the status of king by killing his own brother who had been king of Sidon. It was the custom of Phoenicians for a high priest of Baal to install his daughter as the high priestess. So, it is very likely that Jezebel was a high priestess of Baal before she ever married Ahab.
2. One wonders whether she and her father had a plan ultimately to take over Israel as well! Is it possible that it was only the influence of Elijah—with God's help—and his work through the schools of the prophets that prevented Israel from collapsing at that point in time?
3. While this lesson is not primarily about Athaliah, their daughter, she almost brought the kingdom of Judah to its knees as well!
4. How do you think Ahab and Jezebel got together? Was Ahab like Samson? Or more like Solomon?
5. As we know, Solomon rose to power and extended his territory far and wide. But turning from the true God, he lost his moral authority and his kingdom dwindled. When his son, Rehoboam, became king, there was a rebellion and Jereboam became king of the northern kingdom of Israel and the two nations were split from that time onward. After some years Baasha killed Jereboam's son Nadab and all their relatives. When Baasha's son became king, on one occasion he drank too heavily at a friend's house and was in turn killed by Zimri who ruled for only seven days. When the general of the army, Omri, returned home and found out what Zimri had done, he besieged the capital city, Tirzah, and captured it. Zimri went into his palace, set it on fire, and committed suicide. Omri ruled in Israel for 12 years. In the middle of that time, he moved the capital from Tirzah to Samaria. He purchased a hill from a man named Shemer, fortified it, built a palace on the top of a hill in the city, and named the city Samaria after its former owner.
6. But like those before him, Omri sinned more and more. When his son, Ahab, became king, he was known as the most wicked king of ancient Israel. He married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal of Sidon, and began the official worship of Baal. What would David and Solomon have said if they could have seen their kingdom at that point?!
7. Baal was a fertility cult god. He was the consort of Astarte or Asherah, the female fertility goddess. Between the two of them, they were supposed to ensure successful harvests from the fields and fertility to the herds of their followers. To subsistence farmers living in a marginal rainfall area, those were important issues! Baal was the one who was thought to send the rain and cause everything to grow.
8. Ahab and Jezebel built a temple and altar for Baal in Samaria. (1 Kings 16:31-33)
9. The reign of Ahab was characterized for much of its duration by skirmishes against Ben-hadad, the king of Aram or Syria. It is quite possible that Ahab had married Jezebel to cement ties with Phoenicia to help him against Ben-hadad.
10. As mentioned earlier Ahab and Jezebel's daughter, Athaliah, married into the royal family

of Judah probably for the same reason. They hoped to jointly be more successful against Ben-hadad. But after Athaliah's son and the potential king was killed by Jehu, (2 Kings 10:1-17) she killed all the potential heirs that were descendants of David except for the baby Josiah who had been hidden by a relative. (2 Kings 11:1-3)

11. In the days of Samuel, schools of the prophets were established in several locations in the northern kingdom. It is hard to trace exactly what happened to them in the succeeding years, but they were probably very successful in the days of David and Solomon. With the rise in power of Ahab and Jezebel, all those who worshiped the true God, Yahweh, were threatened. Students and teachers in the schools of the prophets were killed or scattered. But Elijah and Obadiah (not the author of the book by the same name) did their best to preserve the true knowledge of God.
12. Read 1 Kings 17:1-4. Try to imagine what the scene was like. It is possible that Psalms 45:13, which speaks of a gold dress worn by a Princess of Tyre, may have been speaking about Jezebel. Ahab and Jezebel were, no doubt, comfortably seated in their palace or at least enjoying the comforts of their home in Samaria. Suddenly, out of nowhere appeared a hairy man wearing a very primitive garment who did not ask for permission to talk with the king but suddenly appeared before the King and announced, "In the name of the Lord, the living God of Israel, whom I serve, I tell you that there will be no dew or rain for the next two or three years until I say so."
13. That was a direct challenge to the supposed abilities of Baal to provide rain and storms to water the crops of Israel. Yahweh had said there would be no rain! Ahab and the followers of Baal believed that Baal could supply rain. But 3 ½ years went by and not a drop of rain! No doubt Jezebel ranted and raved against Elijah. She insisted that her husband send out messengers to have people search for Elijah in every portion of every country nearby. And incredible as it may seem, after hiding on the east side of the Jordan River near the Brook Cherith until it dried up, Elijah traveled directly to Sidon, the home of Ethbaal, where he found refuge in a small city, Zarephath, eight miles south of Sidon!
14. In a time of such drought, how could anyone believe in a queen who claimed that her "god" could send the rain? Jezebel was supported by 850 false prophets that "ate at her table." Did anyone ever question what those 850 "prophets" were doing? Did people routinely ask them why they had not brought any rain to end the drought? What kind of answers did they give?
15. What would you say if your pastor—who was single—moved in to live with a widow and her son for a long period of time? Didn't anyone in the town of Zarephath ask any questions? In any case, when the widow's son became sick and died, Elijah raised him back to life. By that miracle, the widow was assured that she had done the right thing and that Elijah was indeed a man of God.
16. After 3 ½ years, Elijah was instructed to return to Israel. On the way to the king's palace, he met Obadiah who was searching for possible sources of feed for the king's livestock. They spoke briefly and then Obadiah was instructed to go to Ahab and tell him that Elijah was on his way.
17. When Ahab and Elijah met, the power struggle was on! Ahab accused Elijah of being the "troubler of Israel." Elijah assured Ahab that Ahab himself was the guilty party!
18. As we know, Elijah challenged Ahab to call the children of Israel to the top of Mount Carmel which was beside the sea.
19. The prophets of Baal were given all the time they needed to try to call down fire from Baal

to consume their offering. You can be certain that if there had been any possible way for them to slip some fire onto the altar, they would have. No doubt, Yahweh prevented every attempt to do so! If they had been able to cause even the tiniest bit of fire so that the offering burned up, Elijah would have been instant mincemeat.

20. No doubt, Yahweh performed two miracles at this point. He prevented the devil or the false prophets from setting fire to the sacrifice to Baal; and then He set Elijah's sacrifice on fire—probably with a bolt of lightning! Was God being fair? Was God manipulating things at that point? Did God need to show that there was a difference between Himself, who was the real God, and the pretend “gods.” Did God need to level the playing field in order to give the people of Israel freedom of choice and a chance to worship Him and “follow” Him?
21. Finally, about three o'clock in the afternoon, Elijah called the people to gather around him. He prepared an altar for the Lord and placed an offering and the wood on it. Then, just to make sure that nobody was cheating in any way, he had 12 barrels of water poured over it! When everything was prepared, Elijah knelt down and simply prayed to Yahweh.
22. 1 Kings 18:36-38 (*GNB*):

³⁶“O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, prove now that you are the God of Israel and that I am your servant and have done all this at your command. ³⁷Answer me, LORD, answer me, so that this people will know that you, the LORD, are God, and that you are bringing them back to yourself.”

³⁸The Lord sent fire down, and it burned up the sacrifice, the wood, and the stones, scorching the earth and drying up the water in the trench.

23. Try to imagine how you would have felt if you had been present! There was no way to twist that evidence. There was no way that the priests of Asherah or Baal could claim that Elijah had somehow deceived the people. Everyone saw it with their own eyes! Then to add injury to insult, Elijah had the prophets of Baal and Asherah seized, and all 850 of them were killed on the spot. After the crowd disbursed, Elijah went to the top of the hill and began to pray. After seven times his assistant said that there was a small cloud appearing over the Mediterranean. Elijah sent him to tell Ahab to quickly “go back home before the rain stops him”! (1 Kings 18:44, *GNB*)

In a little while the sky was covered with dark clouds, the wind began to blow, and a heavy rain began to fall. Ahab got in his chariot and started back to Jezreel. The power of the Lord came on Elijah; he fastened his clothes tight around his waist and ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel. (1 Kings 18:45,46, *GNB*)

24. Try to imagine the thoughts and questions in the mind of Jezebel as she sat at home. She knew what was happening. No doubt she knew the real power—absence of power—of Baal and Asherah. She sent all of her friends to make sure that somehow or other they would make it come out right for Baal! She waited and waited and suddenly it began to pour down rain! Did she think that Baal had suddenly awakened? She did not have to wait long. When Ahab arrived without even one of her “prophets,” she heard the whole story. She sent a message to Elijah saying, “May the gods strike me dead if by this time tomorrow I don't do the same thing to you that you did to the prophets.” (1 Kings 19:2, *GNB*) As we know, the Lord provided for Elijah's safety. Once again he escaped to another country and beyond Jezebel's reach.
25. One other story clearly spells out the awful behavior of Ahab and Jezebel. Ahab noticed that there was a beautiful vineyard close to his house. It belonged to Naboth. He asked to

purchase it from Naboth. But Naboth assured him that it was his ancestral property and he was not free to sell it. Selling such property was strictly forbidden by Israelite law.

26. But Jezebel had no respect for Israelite law. She was accustomed to living in places where the king's word was law. So she arranged for two scoundrels to lie about Naboth so that he would be stoned to death outside the city.
27. After that despicable deed, the king took possession of the land and was enjoying his new vegetable garden! Who should appear but Elijah! And of course, Ahab's response was, "Have you caught up with me, my enemy?" Then Elijah predicted that Ahab's blood would run in the same place were Naboth's had, and that all of his descendants would be destroyed. (1 Kings 21:20-24)
28. Having married off his daughter to the prince in Judah, Ahab then asked the visiting king of Judah to go with him to fight Ben-hadad. Ahab called forth his false prophets who assured them that the battle would be a great success. But when the true prophet of God showed up, there was a different story! (1 Kings 22:1-28) And when the battle took place, Ahab was hit by a random arrow and died that same evening while trying to escape in his chariot. So, king Ahab died, and his body was taken to Samaria and buried. His chariot was cleaned near the pool of Samaria, where dogs licked up his blood and prostitutes washed themselves, as the Lord through Elijah had said would happen. (1 Kings 22:37,38)
29. Read 2 Kings 9:30-37 (*GNB*). The Lord assigned a young prophet to anoint Jehu, one of Ahab's generals, to become the next king. On God's instructions, Jehu destroyed the entire family of Ahab including their descendants in the royal line of Judah:

³⁰Jehu arrived in Jezreel. Jezebel, having heard what had happened, put on eyeshadow, arranged her hair, and stood looking down at the street from a window in the palace. ³¹As Jehu came through the gate, she called out, "You Zimri! You assassin! Why are you here?"

³²Jehu looked up and shouted, "Who is on my side?" Two or three palace officials looked down at him from a window, ³³and Jehu said to them, "Throw her down!" They threw her down, and her blood splattered the wall and the horses. Jehu drove his horses and chariot over her body, ³⁴entered the palace, and had a meal. Only then did he say, "Take that cursed woman and bury her; after all, she is a king's daughter." ³⁵But the men who went out to bury her found nothing except her skull, and the bones of her hands and feet. ³⁶When they reported this to Jehu, he said, "This is what the LORD said would happen, when he spoke through his servant Elijah: 'Dogs will eat Jezebel's body in the territory of Jezreel. ³⁷Her remains will be scattered there like dung, so that no one will be able to identify them.'"

30. Thus ended the dynasty of Omri/Ahab even though it was several years before Athaliah was killed. Why are stories like this included in the Bible? Are these stories of Ahab and his family examples of "deeds to be done"? We certainly do not want to be like them!

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