

Background Characters in the Old Testament

The Widow of Zarephath: The Leap of Faith

Lesson #11 for December 11, 2010

Scriptures: 1 Kings 17; Job 38; 42:5,6; Luke 4:24-28; Hebrews 11:1; Revelation 1:17.

1. This lesson is about a widow and her only son. We do not know the name of either of them. We know nothing about her husband. They lived in the heart of a region dominated by the worship of Baal. She was not an Israelite. Despite living just a few miles from the heart of Baal and Ashtoreth worship, somehow, she came to believe in the true God, *Yahweh*, of Israel. In order to better understand her story, we need to examine what we know about the place where she lived and about some of the other characters in the story.

ZAREPHATH (PLACE) [Heb *sārēpat* (זָרְפָּת)]. A city-state located near the tip of a promontory along the Lebanese Mediterranean seacoast about 14 miles (ca. 22.5 km) N of Tyre and 8 miles (ca. 13 km) S of Sidon. . . A 13th century B.C. Egyptian papyrus lists Zarephath as the site of a Phoenician harbor (*ANET*, 477).

. . .The prophet Obadiah envisioned Zarephath as the Northern boundary of restored Israel (Obad 20).

Recent archeological excavations undertaken by J. B. Pritchard since 1969 have unearthed information showing Zarephath to be a sizable commercial city during both the Phoenician and Roman occupations. They showed the site to have been inhabited during the latter part of the 2nd millennium and through most of the 1st millennium B.C. More than 20 pottery kilns were uncovered, showing that the city probably was a center for manufacturing pottery. The city possessed industrial, religious, and residential quarters. The main business was the production of textiles and ceramics. Exports included grain, oil, wine, and a red-purple dye extracted from local shellfish from which both Zarephath and Phoenicia (“red-purple”) derive their names. Of the old city, considerable indications remain to this day. A large, technically sophisticated Roman port was found dating from the 1st to 6th centuries A.D. A shrine of the goddess Tanit was discovered overlooking the Roman port, and scholars have associated the shrine with pagan religious ceremonies calling for the sacrifice of children, a practice strongly condemned in the Hebrew Bible (Jer 7:31; 19:3–6; 2 Kgs 23:10). . . *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Ray L. Roth [Note: This is an Adventist scholar]

ETHBAAL (PERSON) [Heb *etba·al* (לְעֵבְתָא)]. King of Tyre, father of Jezebel who married Ahab, king of Israel (1 Kgs 16:31). After the kingdom of Tyre had grown to include the port city of Sidon, Sidon became a general name for the people of the area, hence the designation “king of the Sidonians” in the biblical text. Josephus, drawing his information from the historian Menander, states that *Ithobalus*, an alternate form of the name Ethbaal, was a priest of Astarte who gained the throne by assassinating Pheles, king of Tyre (*AgAp*. 1.18). He ruled for thirty-two years (887–856 B.C.) and is said to have built two cities: Botrys in Phoenicia and Auza in Libya (*Ant* 8.13.2).

JEZEBEL (PERSON) [Heb *zebel* (לְבַזָּא)]. The daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, and wife of Ahab, the son of Omri and king of Israel (1 Kgs 16:29-31). As it is vocalized in the Massoretic Text, the name Jezebel is probably a

two-layered parody. The original name $\text{ʔr}^{\wedge}\text{z}\ddot{\text{e}}\text{b}\ddot{\text{u}}\text{l}$ (“Where is the Prince?”) first became $\text{ʔr}^{\wedge}\text{-z}\ddot{\text{e}}\text{b}\ddot{\text{u}}\text{l}$ (“No nobility”). *Zēbūl*, a title of Baal, was then distorted into *zebel* (“dung”; cf. 2 Kgs 9:37).

The biblical texts present a thoroughly negative picture of this undoubtedly powerful woman. Jezebel became the influential queen of the northern kingdom as the foreign wife of Ahab. She fostered the worship of Canaanite fertility deities, supporting 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the goddess Asherah at *her* royal table (1 Kgs 18:19). In the meantime, she ruthlessly persecuted the rival prophets of Yahweh, causing them to go into hiding (1 Kgs 18:4). The great Elijah himself did not underestimate her death threats (19:1-3). . . According to Brenner (1985), Jezebel had two sources of power. The first was her status in her Phoenician homeland. As daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians, she was a princess by birth. According to Josephus (*Ant* 8.13.2), Ethbaal was also a priest in the Phoenician cult of the goddess Astarte (Ashtoreth). Brenner suggests that Phoenicia followed the Mesopotamian practice of appointing the king’s daughter as the high priestess of the chief local god, in this case, Baal Melqart. With the king as high priest and his daughter serving as high priestess, links between the monarchy and the state religion were considerably strengthened. Together, the two were able to wield substantial political, economic, and religious power over the land. Hence, when Jezebel came to Israel she was accustomed to being an active participant in government. She promoted the cult of Baal, which had long enjoyed extensive support in Israel, since her status as the god’s high priestess was integral to her authority as queen. . . *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*

2. The basic story is a fairly simple one: 1) Elijah was called by God to condemn the blasphemous Baal worship (the Lebanese “god” of the storm) being followed by Ahab (king of Israel) and Jezebel in Samaria.
 - 2) After condemning Ahab, Elijah declared that there would be a drought in the land until he said it was over. Then he disappeared, and no one could find him.
 - 3) He traveled back east across the Jordan River to a brook near his home of Tishbe in Gilead. He was fed miraculously by ravens although it is possible that he also received some food from Ishmaelite traders. (Their name in Hebrew is almost exactly the same as “raven.”)
 - 4) When the brook finally dried up, Elijah, who must have been getting thirsty, was instructed by God to travel some 50 miles to the northwest—leaving Israelite territory and going to the heart of the area of Baal worship to the village Zarephath which was just 8 miles south of Sidon.
 - 5) When he reached Zarephath, he met a widow gathering a few sticks of firewood to prepare her last meal for herself and her son. Apparently, God had spoken to her (1 Kings 17:9) and informed her that Elijah was coming. When Elijah arrived, he asked her to take her last bit of flour and oil and make him a small loaf of bread *first* before she fed herself and her child.
 - 6) She did. And as a result, neither her flour nor her oil ran out until the famine was over.
 - 7) Sometime later, the widow’s son died. Why did she blame Elijah? Had the woman and Elijah had some conversations about her past? Elijah prayed for the son to be restored to life. (1 Kings 17:17-24) God resurrected him from the dead. Both Elijah and the widow apparently took this as proof that God would be with them. Why did Elijah blame God for the death?
3. Ahab, the son of Zimri was the new king of Israel. He had married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal who was king of Tyre and Sidon. Sidon was the capitol of Baal worship. Ethbaal also apparently served as the high priest of Ashtoreth/Astarte. His daughter, Jezebel, who married

Ahab was also recognized as the high priestess of Baal and Ashtoreth. Zarephath, where the widow lived, was located between Sidon and Tyre on the Phoenician coast.

4. The “god” Baal—sometimes called the “storm god”—was supposed to be the one who brought the rains. Just as *Yahweh*, Israel’s God, had challenged the Egyptian gods with the plagues, (Exodus 12:12) *Yahweh* challenged Baal with the drought. (Psalm 86:8; Jeremiah 10:6; Hebrews 1:1-3; Job 38; Isaiah 40-55) Our God is without a peer! He is Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, and Savior. Let the real God stand up!
5. Jezebel had done everything possible to import Baal worship into the nation of Israel. As high priestess of Baal and Ashtoreth, she was accustomed to exercising authority. She did not hesitate to use Ahab’s authority to accomplish her purposes. (See the story of Naboth’s vineyard. I Kings 21:1-19)
6. How did God communicate with the widow of Zarephath before Elijah arrived? (1 Kings 17:9) How did she recognize Elijah when he showed up? How did he find her? How much did she know about the God of Israel and Elijah? Elijah’s behavior—living with or even associating with a Gentile—would never have been approved of by the Pharisees!
7. Do you think Elijah found anything to eat on his journey from the dry brook Cherith to Zarephath? Was there any water along the way? Elijah approached the widow pleading his need. The widow, exercising her faith based on the little she did know, complied with Elijah’s request. Can you think of a parallel story in the New Testament? (See John 4)
8. Try to imagine yourself in the shoes of the widow when Elijah showed up. Try putting yourself in this story! Did she have any idea about the cause of that drought? Had she heard about Jezebel, Ahab, or perhaps even Elijah?
9. What would you think if a single pastor suddenly showed up in town and moved in with a local widow and her son? Did everyone in Zarephath know Elijah? Did they know he was there? If so, why was it that Ahab could not find him? (1 Kings 18:10)
10. Surely, Elijah could not have remained hidden in the widow’s house for months or even years. What did she say to her neighbors about who Elijah was, why he was staying with her, and her unending food supply? Did any of them ever ask her to share? Why didn’t the neighbors help this widow when her food was running out?
11. The big question which hovers over this whole story is: Why did God choose this widow—a non-Israelite living in the heart of Baal country—as a place to send His prophet? It seems clear that God could have provided food and water for Elijah in almost any place where He chose to do so. He had done so at the Brook Cherith. Then, He did so in the widow’s home.
12. As we know, widows had a very low social standing in the times of the Old Testament. Clearly, God is not hampered by geography or by human limitations when He chooses His instruments to work through. How many of us would have chosen her. In fact, considering the story of Gideon, it is often the case that God works best when the instrument is weakest! (Judges 7)
13. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* describes the widow’s acceptance of Elijah’s request as a “leap of faith.” Is this equal to a “leap in the dark”? Do you believe that is a correct representation? In modern times, theologians often talk about “leaps of faith.” What are they talking about? If faith is based on evidence, how is that related to leaping? (*Steps to Christ*, page 105) The woman had been promised that God would take care of her and her son if she helped the prophet. Was it a cultural norm for her to be hospitable? Was it wise to “gamble” on that promise or on the oil and flour she had left? What was her reaction when she went back to her pantry? What promises of God have you claimed? What was that like?
14. Faith is just a word we use to describe a relationship with God as with a friend well-known. True faith is not based on what we *do not know*, but on what we *do know*! As Christians, we need

to focus on what *we do know* not on *what we do not know*. Did Abraham have adequate reason to trust God before he took Isaac out to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him? (Genesis 22) What did God tell the widow from Zarephath? What did Elijah say to her when he first showed up? Was it reasonable for God to expect the woman to exercise her faith based on the amount of information she had?

15. While it is true that this widow lived almost in the heart of Baal country, “she was a believer in the true God and had walked in all the light that was shining on her pathway.” – Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 129. While she was surrounded by heathenism, she was not a heathen. (Compare the story of Jesus. Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, p. 195)
16. Read again 1 Kings 17:9-14. What do these words tell us about what the widow might have known already about the God of Israel and even, perhaps, about Elijah and about faith? Did the worshipers of Baal wonder what had happened to the rains?
17. Read 1Kings 17:18. In what sense did the presence of Elijah remind this widow of her sins? Was it just that this man of God lived such a faithful life that, by contrast, she felt she was a sinner? We know nothing about her previous life. Do you suppose that Elijah ever spoke to her about her previous life? How often do our previous sins cause the problems that we face? Do we ever become pawns in the great controversy? (Compare Job)
18. When Elijah handed her son—raised from the dead—back to her, what was her response? What kind of responses are frequent when individuals in the Bible recognize God’s immediate presence in their lives? (Job 42:5,6; Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 10:8; Luke 5:8; Revelation 1:17) God always told people to stand up because He wanted to talk to them! Is it important for us today to recognize our sinfulness as these biblical characters did? (Romans 1-3)
19. Read 1 Kings 17:24. What is implied by the widow’s statement, “Now I know that you are a man of God”? Did she not have enough evidence prior to that time?
20. “God will never remove every occasion for doubt. He gives sufficient evidence on which to base faith.” – Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 432.
21. Do you think that God allowed her son to die as a test of her faith? Was Elijah’s faith tested also? Can you think of others who were well-known and powerful evangelists whose faith was tested? (Matthew 11:1-3)
22. Did God choose this widow from Zarephath because she had more faith than anyone else around? Did God send Elijah all the way to Zarephath because it was not safe for him to remain in the kingdom of Israel?
23. What does God want us to learn from this story? Think of the way in which this woman responded—preparing a meal for Elijah—based on the small amount of evidence that she had available to her when she apparently had nothing left for herself and her son. Did her son have anything to say about it? While we do not know very much about how much evidence she had, how much evidence do we have? Is there any basis for us to doubt God?
24. Why do you suppose that Jesus mentioned this experience of the widow and Elijah as an illustration in His very first recorded sermon? (Luke 4:24-26) Why was the telling of this story by Jesus at Nazareth, His hometown, so offensive to them? (Luke 4:24-28) Are we offended when we are compared unfavorably with others?

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