

AHAB & JEZEBEL

Facing Our False Gods (Book of Kings Part 1) | 1 Kings 16:29-33

His family owned a billion-dollar construction company. He studied business administration at a prestigious university. He had natural gifts as an organizer and motivator of others. But it wasn't until he found his PARTNER that his influence really took off. He met a mechanical engineer who'd gone to school in North Carolina and was a very creative thinker. He had this idea about repurposing a common mode of transportation to change history. The son of the construction empire liked the idea, particularly as his partner was a very spiritual person, like him. So he ponied up the funding and the personnel for the project. The engineer brought the operational know-how -- including a strategy for putting some of their staff in the cockpits of some commercial airliners. And on this 11th day of September long ago, these two partners -- Osama Bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Mohammed -- altered the world in a ruinous way.

Osama and Mohammed. Hitler and Goebbels. Bonnie and Clyde. Harley Quinn and The Joker. Or, as we'll discuss today, **Ahab and Jezebel**. There are some power pairs who, when they come together, can do a level of damage that blows the mind. They can become a veritable HOUSE OF DRAGONS. And nowhere is this more evident than in the very relevant stories we'll explore together this fall in the BOOK OF KINGS. Listen with me to the story the Bible tells in 1 Kings chapter 16 at verse 29...

In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years (1 Kgs 16:29). Now, let me just pause here at the start and observe that, at face value, what we're reading here doesn't appear to be very big news or all that engaging. So let me give you a little background. Think of it as like catching up with past episodes of GAME OF THRONES, so that you understand what the current episode is really all about.

You need to understand that in the ninth century before Christ, the land of Palestine in the Middle East was partitioned into two separate but related states. It used to be the United States of King David but, over a couple of hundred years, there's been a succession of not so good kings and queens, with the result that now the Jewish people are divided and undergoing decline.

Which brings up one of the most important lessons of the BOOK OF KINGS and of the Bible, in general. Leadership really matters. I think all who mourn the death of Queen Elizabeth and who are hoping that King Charles rises to the moment are thinking about that now. A nation can have a very good constitution, and a lot of great natural resources, and even an impressive past history; but if it doesn't have good leaders, there's trouble. A household or a church can have nice statements on their wall, and fine facilities, and good aspirations; but if it doesn't have good leaders, woe to it. We must care about ***who will sit on the throne***.

Now, when I say “good leaders,” what do I mean? I mean people who are morally excellent and practically effective. There’s every reason to think that both of those qualities marked the life of Queen Elizabeth. We need both those qualities. It’s not enough if a leader is effective in getting stuff done, but is NOT morally sound; that will lead to major mistrust, division and a decline in the standards of virtue of the spheres they influence. It’s also not enough if a leader is a pretty nice person but their practices or policies are ineffective in addressing the real problems or opportunities at hand. That just leads to another kind of distrust and decay. In every zone of life, good leadership (by this definition) deeply matters.

When we open the BOOK OF KINGS to chapter 16, we’re dropped into a time when the effects of poor leadership have taken their toll. The formerly united Jewish nation is now arranged sort of like the North and the South would probably be had there been no Abraham Lincoln. The land mass is smaller, so maybe think of North Dakota and South Dakota but with nicer winters and better hummus! The Northern Kingdom is referred to as Israel and its capitol was a city called Samaria – from which Samaritans hail. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah and its capitol was Jerusalem.

At this moment of history, the Southern Kingdom is going through a bit of a resurgence. A king named Asa has been on the throne of Judah for thirty-eight years and he turns out to have been a pretty GOOD leader. The Bible tells us that Asa led a campaign against the pagan superstitions and destructive practices that had become commonplace during the two prior administrations. He reduced crime and established greater public safety. Asa’s reign was marked by military peace and a revival in worshipping the LORD. Until he became too caught up in money at the end of his life, he was a generally GOOD KING, which is why if you go back to the Puritan beginnings of the U.S., you’ll find that people often named their kids Asa.

Life in the Northern Kingdom, on the other hand, wasn’t going so well. The people there endured a succession of harsh, selfish, or incompetent kings whose reigns ended in assassinations and coups and self-destruction. For the twelve years leading up to 1 Kings 16, Israel had a king named **Omri**. Sort of sounds like “ornery” – which means bad-tempered and combative. Omri appears to have been a strong military leader, but he was morally corrupt and cruel and faithful to God mainly in words rather than deeds. When Omri finally decided to retire and turn the throne over to his son in 874 B.C., you can imagine what people were feeling: *“Thank goodness we’re done with THAT administration. Oh, this next one HAS to be better. THIS is the king that’s going to make things right!”* Sound familiar? People think this way in every time.

But, listen to what the Bible goes on to record: **Ahab son of Omri did MORE evil in the eyes of the Lord than ANY of those before him (1 Kgs 16:30)**. Wow, that’s a pretty ringing condemnation. *“We thought your dad was bad, but you’re worse. You have done more evil than ANYONE who has come before you!”* You are the worst of

the worst! Not a good annual review!! Notice, however, what verse 30 actually says. It doesn't say that Ahab was a bad king in the eyes of the citizens of Israel. His programs and personality might actually have been pretty popular with a lot of people. We know from the writings of the Assyrian empire (the greatest secular power of that era) that Ahab was seen as an effective leader. The Assyrians viewed the House of Omri as enormously successful in extending power and influence.

But that's not the LENS that is being used to assess Ahab's kingship. It says that Ahab did more evil than any before him in the eyes of **WHO**? That's right, the LORD. I said earlier that the FIRST lesson we draw from the BOOK OF KINGS is that *leadership matters* and that leadership, in the fullest sense embraces moral excellence as well as practical effectiveness. But I want to underline a SECOND important lesson we find here: In the assessment of a life, it's God's view that counts most.

It strikes me that you and I are living in an era that looks at life in a different way than that. So much of the time, we are thinking about how we are being viewed by other people and how well we align with the dominant values of our times. *"Do I look thin or fat? Do I look like a winner or a loser? Do I seem culturally or politically savvy or stupid? Do I have enough likes or loves or followers? Am I popular with people? What do the polls say? Will my leadership legacy be one of success or failure?"*

We spend a lot of time curating and questioning our image before the people of this world. ***But what if that's the wrong focus?*** What if we are actually WASTING precious time and energy pursuing the approval of people who will be corpses or trembling on the ground, when the living GOD, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of the Universe, is actually THE ONE who is assessing us?

When I read the teaching of Jesus closely, here's what I think GOD will be interested in knowing at the final moment of accountability: *"What evidence is there that you have loved ME above all others? Have you lived out my commandment to love your neighbor as yourself and as I have loved you? Have you used your talents to advance my purposes? In other words, I know you're constantly being called to pursue the values of the Empires of this world, but how have you sought first the kingdom of GOD?"*¹

In the ninth century B.C., AHAB, the leader of Israel – and the people who followed him – did not answer well these most important of all questions. What was it about Ahab that was badly off the mark and how might this be still happening for a lot of us today? Let me try to unpack what the Bible says about this.

The BOOK OF KINGS offers two principal critiques of Ahab's life and leadership. The FIRST critique is that **He... considered it TRIVIAL to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat (1 Kgs 16:31).** Again, to understand what is said here, you have to understand the back story revealed in previous episodes of the Bible. "Jeroboam son of Nebat" was a servant of King Solomon, one of the wisest leaders of

ancient times. Jeroboam was an immensely talented man who later became one of the kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But Jeroboam's besetting sin was that he got comfortable with putting God in SECOND place in his life. He LIKED God and the values of his kingdom, but he LOVED wealth, control, and popularity even more. In other words, he valued IDOLS above God. Ahab was like him.

The question is: ***Are we like that?*** In what ways (like Ahab and Jeroboam) do you and I "consider it TRIVIAL" (as in, not a significant matter) that we put the idols this world worships FIRST and God SECOND? How do we make our kids sports and academic records more important than seeing that they develop a love of God and a deep attachment to his forever family, the Church? How do we make pleasing our audience on social media more important to us than pleasing God? Why do we make serving our political tribe more significant to us than pursuing the more complex agenda of God's Kingdom? Why have some of us deprioritized public worship or lost the habit of being in the face-to-face company of other Christian disciples? Why does GOD not get FIRST place?

The SECOND critique of Ahab's life is that he let Jezebel in to his life and that of his nation. The Bible says: **Ahab also married JEZEBEL daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians (1 Kgs 16:31).** Jezebel is one of the most notorious figures of the Bible. She shows up not only in the BOOK OF KINGS but later on in the BOOK OF REVELATION, as an archetype (or symbol) of ALL the forces that "mislead" the followers of Jesus and lure them into practicing evils that end up destroying them. She's like Melisandre, the Red Witch in the GAME OF THRONES saga – a seductive power that attracts and ruins everyone who falls in love with her.

Jezebel whose name, ironically, means "chaste," was from Sidon, a city on the Phoenician coast, north of Palestine. The Sidonians were a great maritime people, but they worshipped the pagan gods, **Baal** and **Ashtaroath** (a.k.a. Astarte). Baal was the god of sun and storms. Ashtaroath was said to be his divine wife, the goddess of sex and war. In ancient times, she was represented as a beautiful woman with two horns on her head. Closely aligned with Baal and Ashtaroath was also **Asherah**, the goddess of fertility, whose altars would be marked by what were called Asherah Poles. To appease these gods, the Sidonians practiced ritual sex and were known to sacrifice children by burning them alive². Can you imagine a culture that would worship sex and destroy children and become obsessed with seeking sunshine and avoiding all storms? Such was the cult of Ashteroth, Asherah and Baal.³

When the Jewish king Ahab married Jezebel, do you think he imagined that he would give up his worship of the LORD? I doubt it. He likely thought: "I'll just respect Jez' religion. She'll probably come around to my faith in time." How'd that work out?

In his book, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, C.S. Lewis describes a Senior Devil advising a more junior demon in how to wreck the life of someone who is trying to follow Jesus.

I'm paraphrasing here: *"Just get your patient to start thinking about Christianity AND [anything else]...and you've got him or her." Get them to see Christianity as a constituent element of life -- a philosophy to be conjoined with other issues -- instead of the lens through which all of life can be seen for what it is, and Christianity will lose its power. It won't be long before these other things, assume the center.*

Here's a question for all of us: **What are we letting into our life?** Where are we indulging in some **"I can have Jesus-AND-this-not-so-compatible-thing thinking?"** And how is that marriage going? Ahab let Jezebel and her priorities into his life and that of his nation, and the BOOK OF KINGS tells us what happened: **Ahab set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole. [He] did more to arouse the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him (1 Kgs 16:32-33).**

Like Osama & Mohammed, Hitler & Goebbels, or Bonnie & Clyde, the power pair of Ahab & Jezebel would wreak profound destruction. Who would stand up to them? Who, in the name of God, could stand up to them? The answer is ONE courageous figure – and we'll meet him **next** week.

Please pray with me...

God, we know that leadership matters – that every circle in this world needs leaders who are morally excellent and practically effective. We also know that in the assessment of anyone's life, your view counts the most. You see the powers and temptations that are trying to seduce us and steer us and take the throne of our life. Please give us greater clarity about that. Give us courage to not let these things in or to throw them out. Give us the commitment to put you first and at the center of our life. In the name of King Jesus we pray. Amen.

¹ Matthew 22:34-40; Matthew 6:33

² 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6

³ Holman Bible Dictionary