

HOPPING BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLICAL PORTRAIT OF AHAB

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The Book of Kings records more about Ahab than any other Northern monarch (I Kg. 16:29-22:40). Its scathing introduction to Ahab's reign sets a decidedly negative tone for the six chapters that follow:

Ahab son of Omri did what was displeasing to the Lord, more than all who preceded him. Not content to follow the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Baal and worshipped him Ahab did more to vex the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who preceded him (16:30-33).

Much of the Ahab narrative may be interpreted in light of this condemnatory introduction. Under Ahab, the worship of Baal became the official religion of the Northern Kingdom. Prophets of God were exterminated (18:4, 13), altars to God were destroyed (18:30), and prophets of Baal and Asherah became the national religious figures (18:19). Although he witnessed drought and rain decreed by Elijah (17:1, 18:45), the spectacular miracles at Mount Carmel (Chap. 18), and the victories against Aram (Chap. 20), Ahab stubbornly clung to his idolatrous behavior.

Ahab had a stormy relationship with the prophets, calling Elijah *troubler of Israel* (18:17) and *my enemy* (21:20). Ahab hated the prophet Micaiah (22:8), and imprisoned him after he declared that Ahab would perish in battle (22:26-27). The murder of Naboth (Chap. 21) capped a ruthless career of idolatry and immorality.

Nevertheless, there are two domains that require further scrutiny: The extent of Jezebel's influence over Ahab, and the surprisingly positive aspects of his reign. The narrator's negative characterization of Ahab raises important methodological issues. Must one read the entire episode in light of the summary

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statements? Should juxtapositions of narratives affect the interpretation of a given passage? Or, must each episode first be understood in itself, only later to be woven into a more multifaceted picture of Ahab?

A talmudic debate captures the complexities in the Ahab narratives:

R. Nahman said: Ahab was equally balanced, since it is written, *The Lord asked, 'Who will entice Ahab so that he will march and fall at Ramoth-gilead?'* Then one said thus and another said thus (22:20). R. Joseph objected: He of whom it is written, *Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel* (21:25) yet you say that he was equally balanced! (Sanhedrin 102b).

According to R. Nahman, Ahab's overall judgment was balanced. By taking each dimension of Ahab separately, R. Nahman allows for a more favorable interpretation of many of Ahab's actions, as we shall see below. In contrast, R. Joseph maintains that the negative summary statements of Ahab's reign should shape the interpretation of all the narrative. In this essay, we will consider how both views together capture the comprehensive portrait of Ahab.

JEZEBEL'S INFLUENCE

The Book of Kings mentions Jezebel in both summarizing statements condemning Ahab's unparalleled idolatry (16:30-33; 21:25-26). It specifically was Jezebel who killed the prophets of God (18:4, 13). It is unclear, however, whether Jezebel acted on Ahab's orders, with his approval, or whether he weakly and passively looked the other way. The Naboth episode presents a similar ambiguity. Jezebel in fact orchestrated the murder. Ahab may have actively manipulated her emotions, and certainly was guilty for inheriting the vineyard immediately after the execution (Abarbanel, Elhanan Samet).¹ On the other hand, Ahab pouted like a child, and Jezebel acted as a protective mother:

Ahab went home dispirited and sullen because of the answer that Naboth the Jezreelite had given him He lay down on his bed and turned away his face, and he would not eat His wife Jezebel said to him, 'Now is the time to show yourself king over

Israel. Rise and eat something, and be cheerful; I will get the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you' (21:4-7).²

From this point of view, Ahab was only passively guilty.

The Jerusalem Talmud addresses this textual interplay between Ahab and Jezebel:

For six months, R. Levi explained the verse: *Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord (21:25)*, in a manner critical of Ahab. Ahab came to R. Levi in a dream, and protested: "How have I wronged you? Is there only a first half to this verse? [The second half reads] *at the instigation of his wife Jezebel!*" R. Levi responded by teaching this verse for six months with a favorable slant towards Ahab (J.T. Sanhedrin 10:2, 28b).

To summarize, Jezebel personally carried out the greatest crimes of Ahab's reign. Ahab may have actively manipulated her to carry out his agenda, or he may have been a passive character who tolerated his wife's crimes of idolatry and murder.

POSITIVE ELEMENTS OF AHAB'S CAREER

Whether Ahab actively influenced Jezebel to implement the crimes or whether he passively tolerated them, Ahab is still painted in a very negative light. However, other components of Ahab's career appear surprisingly positive.

OBADIAH

Ahab had summoned Obadiah, the steward of the palace. Obadiah revered the Lord greatly. When Jezebel was killing off the prophets of the Lord, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them, fifty to a cave, and provided them with food and drink.) And Ahab had said to Obadiah, 'Go through the land . . . Perhaps we shall find some grass to keep horses and mules alive, so that we are not left without beasts' (18:3-5).

If Ahab were an unparalleled idolater, why did he retain Obadiah – one who *revered the Lord greatly* – as his chief steward? It appears that Ahab

recognized value in God-fearing people, and kept Obadiah as a counterbalance to Jezebel (cf. Sanhedrin 39b; Malbim on 18:3).

AHAB'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SHOWDOWN AT CARMEL

After Obadiah announced the arrival of Elijah, Ahab could have attempted to seize Elijah or to demand as king that Elijah come to him. Instead, Ahab went to greet the prophet. Upon seeing Elijah, however, Ahab rebuked him for decreeing the drought. Elijah retorted that the drought was Ahab's fault and not Elijah's. He then suggested a joint action at Carmel, and Ahab cooperated (18:17-20). The worst idolater in Northern history thus helped organize the most dramatic battle against idolatry.

Aside from orchestrating Elijah's showdown at Carmel, Ahab did not interfere with the massacre of the prophets of Baal. Further, one may ask: Did Ahab join the nation in proclaiming that *the Lord alone is God* (18:39)? Did he assist in the massacre of the prophets of Baal (18:40)? Malbim (on 18:41) maintains that Ahab was indeed swayed by the fire from heaven and supported Elijah. Alternatively, Elhanan Samet asserts that the narrator's silence on Ahab's presence during the showdown (18:21-40) casts Ahab as a passive, secondary character.³ In any event, Ahab's participation was sufficiently impressive to warrant Elijah's honoring him by running ahead of his chariot for some 16 miles. The prophet's preternatural speed indicates Divine approval of the reconciliation between Elijah and Ahab, and was one of the high points of Elijah's career.⁴

Rather than ending the episode on this happy note, however, Ahab returned home and recounted the day's events to Jezebel (19:1). He likely could have anticipated her reaction: *'Thus and more may the gods do if by this time tomorrow I have not made you [Elijah] like one of them'* (19:2). It appears that while Ahab may have retained Obadiah as a counterbalance to Jezebel, he also used Jezebel as a counterbalance in the other direction. The harmony created at the end of Chapter 18 was shattered, and Elijah was driven into exile. However, it is also plausible that Ahab was so moved by the miracle at Carmel that he rode home excitedly to report everything to his wife. It may have been Ahab's naïveté, not malice, which led to Elijah's banishment (Malbim on 19:1-2).

CHAPTER 20

In Chapter 20, Ahab defended the honor of his nation against Aram. Strikingly, he had a favorable relationship with an anonymous prophet (20:13). Ahab attacked the Arameans in broad daylight against superior forces, demonstrating that he completely trusted the prophetic promise that God would help (Abarbanel on 20:16). One may conclude that the war against Aram brought out a positive dimension in Ahab. With national security and honor at stake, Ahab's allegiance to God and his nation came to the fore.

Alternatively, this chapter may be read in light of the negative characterization of Ahab from the surrounding narratives. He listened to the prophet only so long as he was a bearer of good tidings. The moment a prophet rebuked him, however, Ahab turned away (20:35-43). This story is followed immediately by the Naboth episode, and then by Ahab's testimony that he hated Micaiah for constantly forecasting bad news (22:8).

Even according to the more favorable reading of Chapter 20, however, Ahab's faithlessness described in the broader narrative enters this chapter through the words of the prophet. God intervened in the battle against Aram so that Ahab would become a believer: *Thus said the Lord: 'Do you see that great host? I will deliver it into your hands today, and you shall know that I am the Lord'* (20:13; cf. v. 28). Thus, Ahab entrusted his nation to God and the prophets, yet he also lacked faith in God and the prophets. Chapter 20 captures the extent of Ahab's complexity in his beliefs.

CHAPTERS 20-22

In the Septuagint, the Naboth story precedes the battles against Aram. This sequence places the Elijah stories (Chaps. 17-19, 21 in the MT) in one block, and Ahab's wars against Aram (Chaps. 20, 22 in the MT) in another. However, the masoretic organization – which inserts the Naboth episode between the two chapters on Aram – invites comment. Abarbanel (on 21:1) observes the irony of Ahab's being referred to as a magnanimous king (20:31) followed by his murderous behavior in the Naboth incident. Additionally, he derives from the juxtaposition of Chapters 20-21 that Ahab did not learn anything from the prophetic rebuke in 20:35-42. Rather than improving, he went on to have Naboth executed.

The masoretic order may affect the interpretation of Chapter 22 as well. By reading it immediately after the murder of Naboth in Chapter 21, one may perceive selfish motivations behind the attack against Aram; that is, Ahab greedily initiated the war at the expense of the lives of others – similar to what he did with the murder of Naboth.⁵ Without bringing the Naboth episode into account, however, one may view Chapter 22 as a justified battle to retrieve lost territory (22:3).

Another fascinating issue of placement is the summary condemnation of Ahab's behavior:

Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably, straying after the fetishes just like the Amorites, whom the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites (21:25-26).

Although this passage might have been placed at the end of Ahab's career, it is followed instead by Ahab's repentance after the Naboth affair (21:27-29) and an additional chapter about Ahab's battle against Aram. Had the summary condemnation appeared at the end of the Ahab narratives, his reign would have been enveloped by harsh criticism. Instead, the narrator invites the reader to distinguish multiple facets of Ahab.

Chapter 22 presents further complexities as Ahab consulted prophets before going to battle:

So the king of Israel gathered the prophets, about four hundred men, and asked them, 'Shall I march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or should I not?' 'March,' they said, 'and the Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty's hands.' Then Jehoshaphat asked, 'Isn't there another prophet of the Lord here through whom we can inquire?' And the king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, 'There is one more man through whom we can inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune – Micaiah son of Imlah' (22:6-8).

How did Jehoshaphat know to ask for a second opinion? Radak, Ralbag, and Abarbanel surmise that he must have recognized those four hundred prophets as prophets of Baal. Upon seeing Jehoshaphat, they fraudulently used God's Name in an attempt to persuade him to listen. It appears that these

commentators were swayed by the summary statements of Ahab's reign that cast him as an idolater.

Following the Talmud (Sanhedrin 89a), Rashi asserts that the 400 were prophets of God, but were giving the identical message, indicating a conspiracy. Surviving prophets of God had, by and large, learned to support Ahab so they might live. In this episode, only Micaiah had the independent courage and resolve to serve as a true prophet.

Ahab apparently wanted to listen to prophets of God, but preferred that they say what he wanted them to say. Thus, Ahab's messenger prodded Micaiah, *'Look, the words of the prophets are with one accord favorable to the king. Let your word be like that of the rest of them; speak a favorable word'* (22:13). Micaiah mocked the king by mimicking the false prophets, *'March and triumph! The Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty's hands'* (22:15). Ahab, who had been insistent that Micaiah say what he wanted him to, now scolded him, *'How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?'* (22:16). It is clear that Ahab recognized Micaiah's integrity, and the truth of his message.

Ahab was caught in a paradox: He knew that the 400 others simply were supporting his decision, whereas Micaiah was a true prophet. At the same time, however, Ahab wanted true prophecy to support him. Unwilling to renege on his battle plans, Ahab imprisoned Micaiah (22:26-27). However, although Ahab did not heed the prophet, he disguised himself in a failed attempt to outwit the prophecy that he believed to be true (22:30; see Ralbag on 22:18, Abarbanel on 22:30).

Ahab's behavior during the battle reflected his full complexity:

Then a man drew his bow at random and he hit the king of Israel . . . he said to his charioteer, 'Turn the horses around and get me behind the lines; I'm wounded.' The battle raged all day long, and the king remained propped up in the chariot facing Aram; the blood from the wound ran down into the hollow of the chariot, and at dusk he died . . . Thus the dogs lapped up his blood and the whores bathed [in it], in accordance with the word that the Lord had spoken (22:34-38).

In mortal pain, Ahab did not want his troops to be demoralized. Dying of his wounds, dogs licked his blood and whores bathed in it, tying together the

punishments of 20:42 (that Ahab would be killed in battle against Ben-hadad) and 21:19 (that dogs would lick Ahab's blood). Thus, Ahab's career ends with a striking combination of heroic love for his nation and Divine punishment for his murder of Naboth and his lack of concern for his nation in sparing Ben-hadad.

CONCLUSION

Ahab believed in the prophets, but still wanted control over their messages and despised them when they maintained their integrity. The Naboth episode condemns Ahab; yet, even that chapter ends with God's praising Ahab's repentance. In most cases, Ahab was unable to remain consistent either on the side of God or Baal. He allowed Jezebel to have her way, and may have instigated her in threatening Elijah (19:1-2) and in murdering Naboth. At the same time, he retained Obadiah, and contributed to Elijah's dramatic victory at Carmel. He defended the honor of his nation, and died as a hero for his people.

Then again, perhaps Ahab was purely evil. The complexities in the narrative may allow him to hide behind his wife's crimes and other ostensible virtues, but the summary statements capture his true essence. Ahab, the monarch of Israel, truly represented the people of his time: *he* was the one who needed Elijah's rebuke at Carmel, *'How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!'* (18:21).

While Ahab and his nation were hopping between two opinions, the reader similarly must vacillate between interpreting each element separately and considering the components of the narrative in light of the summary statements unequivocally condemning Ahab. This tension results from the magnificent narration that brings the multifaceted personality of Ahab to life.

NOTES

1. E. Samet, *Pirkei Eliyahu* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Press, 2003) pp. 363-368.
2. Cf. J. T. Walsh, *Berit Olam: 1 Kings, Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, ed. D. W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996) pp. 321-327.
3. Samet, pp. 210-213.
4. Cf. Samet, pp. 226-231.
5. Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, "Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah As a Test Case," *Harvard Theological Review* 96 (2003) p. 4.

The US under President Joe Biden is extremely unlikely to make any seismic policy shift, but public opinion is changing and the prevailing narrative that this is a "complicated" issue where "both sides" need to figure it out is quickly being rejected by new generations. What's becoming clearer everyday to more people is that getting to the heart of this polarizing issue means addressing contradictions perpetuated by Israel since it's Israel that wields most of the power, not Palestinians. Think your friends would be interested? Share this story! The statements, views and opinions expressed in Ahab, under the influence of his queen Jezebel, allowed her to foster the worship of the fertility god Baal in Samaria—the capital that Omri had built—and in all Israel, even though he himself remained a worshipper of Yahweh. A temple was built for Baal in Samaria; Jericho was rebuilt (even though the ban against its existence still remained) by Hiel of Bethel, who sacrificed two of his own sons and placed them in the foundation and the gates of the walls of the city. Elijah first taunted the spectators, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." Upon Ahab's return to Samaria Jezebel attempted to coerce the king into confiscating the vineyards of Naboth of Jezreel, which was a Canaanite centre. For more than two thousand years, Jezebel has been saddled with a reputation as the bad girl of the Bible, the wickedest of women. This ancient queen has been denounced as a murderer, prostitute and enemy of God, and her name has been adopted for lingerie lines and World War II missiles alike. But just how depraved was Jezebel? The story of Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab of Israel, is recounted in several brief passages scattered throughout the Books of Kings. Scholars generally identify 1 and 2 Kings as part of the Deuteronomistic History, attributed either to a single author or to a group of authors and editors collectively known as the Deuteronomist. In the author's opinion, these messianic expectations are peculiar precisely to Palestinian literature and are found in the texts of the Mediterranean Diaspora. Therefore, an understanding of events within Palestine and Jerusalem during Pontius Pilate's governorship, which are described in the Gospels, really depends on knowledge of the rich context of Jewish messianic views of that epoch. 2 Chr 22:7: "Jehu the son of Nimshi, whom the Lord had anointed to cut off the house of Ahab." [14] But already in Dan 7:13-14 the Messiah is shown as a heavenly ruler (also 1 En 62:5 ff), and in 9:26 as a martyr whose death is connected with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. One must also keep in mind the difference between the biblical portrayal of the Biblical Hermeneutics Stack Exchange is a question and answer site for professors, theologians, and those interested in exegetical analysis of biblical texts. It only takes a minute to sign up. Sign up to join this community. Could Ahab have deliberately mislead Jehoshaphat to put on his robes so that he will be identified as the king of Israel whilst Ahab disguised himself? prophecy 1-kings. Share.

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