

Jezebel

In this series, we will consider the work of two Old Testament prophets. They worked in difficult times, had many challenges, but were able to do amazing things. And we can learn a great deal from them.

WHEN Prince Harry married Meghan Markle, it was because they chose one another and because they are in love. It was not in the hope of cementing any relationship between Great Britain and the United States of America.

Until quite recently political alliances between different countries were often established by arranged marriages between members of their royal families. At one time Queen Victoria was related to many of the crowned heads of Europe, her many children having conveniently married in the hope of establishing warmer political relations.

It was much the same in Bible times, and weaker kingdoms would seek to prevent war and conflict with a larger neighbouring kingdom by a strategically arranged marriage.

So it was that Ahab, the son of Omri, king of Israel, married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. From about 875 to 853 BC, Ahab reigned over the northern Kingdom of Israel, which had been formed when it split from southern Judah after the reign of Solomon.



A Really Bad Partnership

Israel had a very chequered history, and none of its kings has a good record in the Bible, but Ahab seems to have been one of the worst. It is said of him that:

Now Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, more than all who were before him (1 Kings 16:30).

Reading the account of Ahab's life, it appears that much of the wrong he did was because he allowed his wife to dominate his life and his decision making. It ought to have been obvious that it would be a difficult relationship.

The Lord God was still, if only nominally in some people's minds, the God of Israel. Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, which means "With him is Baal". He was priest of Ashtoreth and had murdered his brother to seize the throne.

Baal was the most prominent fertility god of the period, widely worshipped, and often

this idolatry caused the people of Israel to fail in their worship of the true God. Jezebel seems to have been well taught by her father, and to have schemed and plotted her way through life. She dominated Ahab and held a most unhealthy influence in the kingdom. Although she was only the king's consort, having no legitimate role in the kingdom, she nevertheless managed to dominate affairs during the reign of Ahab, and beyond.

Ahab's reign began about 100 years after the division of the kingdom; six evil kings had reigned over the northern kingdom. He must have thought that the political alliance of such a marriage would be valuable, Sidon being on the north east of Israel.

Introducing the Prophets

However, the Lord God could not allow Israel to slip deeper in the worship of idols without attempting to restore them and bring them back to Him. For the period we are to look at, covering the reigns of four or five kings, and spreading over about 50 years, He made repeated attempts to bring the people back to Him, in the hope that true worship might be re-established.

During this time, two prophets dominate the scene: firstly Elijah (his name means 'Yahweh is God') and then Elisha (his name means 'God is salvation'). Both sought to bring the nation back to true worship, to influence kings and rulers; both had trials and difficulties, triumphs and times of bitter disappointment. Through



Stele of Baal

most of the time of Elijah, Jezebel is seen at work, attempting to guide Ahab into ways of supporting Baal worship, rather than godly ways.

False Worship

There had been several attempts to set up alternative forms of worship. The first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam, did not want his subjects going to Jerusalem to worship, as it was now in a foreign country.

Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (1 Kings 12:28).

Ahab's contribution later was to actively worship Baal:

Then he set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal, which he had built in Samaria (16:32).

It was as if he was deliberately trying to provoke the Lord God by acts which were hostile to true worship. Once again it would mean that ordinary people would be less likely to go to Jerusalem to worship the true God in the way He required.

It did not stop there. It is recorded that Ahab made an Asherah. This was a wooden pole, placed at Canaanite places of worship, possibly a tree with the branches removed. They were often erected by the side of altars to Baal, and were seen as fertility symbols. Women wove hangings for Asherah. No wonder it is written that:

Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him (v33).

There is a further comment made on Ahab's reign. He allowed a man called Hiel to rebuild Jericho, something which had been specifically forbidden by God. In the time of Joshua, when Jericho had been destroyed at the start of the Israelite conquest of the land, this prophecy was given to the people:

Cursed be the man before the LORD who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates (Joshua 6:26).

The record suggests that Hiel lost his firstborn son, Abiram, when he laid the foundations of the rebuilt city of Jericho; and when he was able to install the gates it was at the cost of his youngest son, Segub, exactly as prophesied by Joshua. We need to learn the lesson that God's commands are not to be ignored.

Trying to Set It Right

This series of articles has started with Jezebel because she dominates the scene during the work of Elijah. Both Elijah and Elisha are prophets in the sense that they told the people what God wanted them to do.

A distinction is sometimes made between prophets who 'foretell' (tell the future) and those who 'forth tell' (telling people about what God wants). Neither Elijah nor Elisha made any long term prophecies, only comparatively short term ones, and neither wrote down their own message, but they are both well worth considering because of the way they reminded the people of Israel of God's message.

Their story is a fascinating account of the Lord God seeking to bring His people back to Him, with miracles, wonders and signs to accompany all that they said.

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