



The Relationships of Ahab & Jeoshaphat

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Introduction

This article explores the relationships of Ahab and Jehoshaphat to God and to each other. Their reigns took place in the middle period of the kings (870's - 850's BC ¹), and their decisions and relationships shaped subsequent history - beginning the decline towards the captivity. Ahab's religious innovations re-introduced Baal worship furthering Israel's religious decline. His failure to follow-up on his victory with Syria doomed future generations to continual warfare. Jehoshaphat's faithfulness kept Judah on the right track during his lifetime, but his fatal decision to ally himself to Ahab brought about the tumultuous reign of Athaliah and a checkered future of faithful and unfaithful kings. Throughout this, God's faithfulness to Israel and Judah did not relax. This was the era of Elijah and God's miraculous blessings. God still wanted his covenant relationship with his people. In many ways Ahab and Jehoshaphat's relationship to God summarizes that of their respective kingdoms; Ahab's weakness and indecision is shown by the nation before Carmel, while Jehoshaphat's profound faith is shown by the nation in the invasion of the Edomites.

Ahab's Weakness

Ahab wears a mask: he talks big, he thinks he is in charge; in reality, however, Ahab's weak character allows him to be ruled and manipulated by others. Ahab's weakness comes from a religious contradiction. It is the same contradiction that Israel was experiencing because of his decisions. Before Ahab, there was one deity and two religions in Israel - the pure worship of YAHWEH (predominate in Judah), and the worship of YAHWEH through the Jereboam's golden calves - backed by the state. Ahab introduced a new deity, a new religion, and a zealous evangelist of that new religion - his wife Jezebel and her Zidonian god Baal ².

"And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him." - 1 Kings 16:31. (KJV)

Ahab did not reject or outlaw Jereboam's calf worship but instead allows the two to go on side by side. It can be argued from 1 Kings 18:19, and 19:1-2, that Baal was first and foremost Jezebel's religion and special obsession (though Ahab's involvement is not negligible). It appears from 1 Kings 22:6 that Ahab's personal preference was still for "prophets of the LORD" though these were actually representatives of Jereboam's calves.

Jezebel is the dominating influence in Ahab's life ³. Ahab is not a man of action, he gives up easily and seems to prefer sulking to acting. He fits into the role of a constitutional monarch than an oriental despot; in at least one instance we see him act as though he is under the law. Jezebel is a woman of action - she takes her royal position to the level expected of a near-eastern dictator and certainly believes she is above the law.

Jezebel is the one who orders the execution of all followers of the pure YAHWEH wor-

ship - Ahab talks big, but takes it easy on the sword (at least in the case of Micaiah -1 Kings 22:27). Ahab also talks big when he first confronts his "enemy" Elijah, but it is Jezebel who sends the death threat (1 Kings 18:17, 19:1-2). Ahab retreats before Naboth's legal objections, but Jezebel has no such hindrances (1 Kings 21:4, 7-11).

The story of Naboth also reveals another aspect of Ahab's character - he is moody and easily depressed.

He flops on his bed and pouts when Naboth refuses to sell his vineyard in 1 Kings 21:4-6 (much to Jezebel's disgust). He was also depressed right before the Naboth episode in 1 Kings 20:43 (see below).

When it comes to religion, Ahab is comfortable both with Jereboam's calves and Jezebel's Baal; but neither he nor Jezebel can get rid of the religious minority of genuine YAHWEH prophets whose messages from God haunt him.

There is no doubt that Ahab's heart is very hard towards God, but his nature is not as hardened as Jezebel's, and God's messages find their way into his stony heart and cause him fear.

The scene before Carmel highlights his weakness of character and his religious conflict. He confronts Elijah with his regal mask. Despite his big talk he immediately obeys Elijah without another word when the prophet orders him to assemble Israel for a contest against Baal. Ahab does not even interfere when the Baal's priests were slaughtered, but neither does he interfere with Jezebel's attempt on Elijah.

Ahab's fear of God is further evidenced in 1 Kings 20:43, 21:27, and 22:30. In the first instance, he is deeply upset by a message of doom for his alliance with Syria.

"And he said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Because thou hast let go out of thy hand a man whom I appointed to utter destruction, therefore thy life shall go for his life, and thy people for his people. And the king of Israel went to his house heavy and displeased, and came to Samaria." - 1 Kings 20:42-43 (KJV) On the second occasion, he is deeply affected (to the point of repentance) by another reprimand after his unjust seizure of Naboth's vineyard. "It happened, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes, and put sackcloth on his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. The word of Yahweh came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'See how Ahab humbles himself before me? because he humbles himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days; but in his son's days will I bring the evil on his house.'" - 1 Kings 21:27-29 (WEB)

On the last occasion, he appears to be very hardened against the message of doom but is affected enough to put on a disguise in order to avert the prophecy. "The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, I will disguise myself, and go into the battle; but you put on your robes. The king of Israel disguised himself, and went into the battle." - 1 Kings 22:30 (WEB)

Ahab's and Israel's relationship with God is one of fear and rejection.

What about God's side of this relationship? Though his people ignored him, he did not ignore them. God sends one of the greatest Old Testament prophets - Elijah. God reveals his presence and his displeasure during a 3 year drought, which culminates in another revelation clearly demonstrating his reality as opposed to Baal. God not only demonstrates his power and displeasure, but also his love and encouragement when he rescues Israel twice

from a Syrian invasion. He is ready and waiting for Israel to show some sign of repentance and turning - however small. This is best demonstrated in his relationship with Ahab. As with Israel, after years of sending prophets, Ahab finally shows signs of repentance after the Naboth episode. God is very willing and ready to respond to humility and repentance. God's love does not die, and despite repeated rejection, he suffers with Israel until the captivity.

Jehoshaphat's Faith

Jehoshaphat was a man of faith, he was also a reformer. While Ahab was introducing another religion, Jehoshaphat was seeking to simplify (2 Chronicles 17:6).

Jehoshaphat was deeply concerned about God's law and with promulgating it - sending the Levites to teach it to every city in the kingdom. Jehoshaphat was also deeply concerned with justice (2 Chronicles 19:5-10), establishing judges throughout his kingdom and reiterating the Mosaic judicial ideals.

Jehoshaphat's relationship with God is the inverse of Ahab. He sought after God and his ways and was consequentially blessed materially ⁴. We learn of Jehoshaphat's deep faith relationship when it is put to the test by an allied invasion of Judah's eastern neighbors. Jehoshaphat's trust was not devoid of fear - that is his first reaction (2 Chronicles 20:3). Instead of reacting to fear like his father Asa (2 Chronicles 16:2) who resorted to money and alliances, Jehoshaphat decides to trust himself and Judah completely to their relationship with God. Their reaction to the invasion was, from a military perspective, bizarre. They marched out to meet their enemy lead by singers - praising the LORD.

Their faith in God was not disappointed; they did not even have to fight a battle.

It was one of the greatest deliverances Israel had, and it was a moment of perfect trust and faith in God.

Throughout his life, Jehoshaphat kept a close relationship with God, even though he had one major failing.

The Fatal Alliance

When we first meet Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 17:2, he is fortifying Judah. It appears that he is preparing for a siege or a war. Jehoshaphat, however, has a peaceful nature and we see that he tries to pursue a peaceful policy with his neighbors - especially the northern kingdom of Israel. His policy towards Israel and Ahab extended beyond simply a peaceful understanding, it was an alliance. The alliance was cemented by marriage (2 Kings 8:18).

"And in the fifth year of Joram the son of Ahab king of Israel, Jehoshaphat being then king of Judah, Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah began to reign. Thirty and two years old was he when he began to reign; and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. And he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as did the house of Ahab: for the daughter of Ahab was his wife: and he did evil in the sight of the LORD." - 2 Kings 8:16-18 It could be looked at as a mere political union - Jehoshaphat fortifying with politics as well as stones ⁵. Jehoshaphat may have been driven by more than just political considerations, he seems to have been driven by a desire for unity between these two kingdoms, maybe even a desire to convert them back to

the true religion ⁶. His heart is so set on turning the land back to the Lord, that he may have looked on this political alliance as an “in” to Ahab and the northern kingdom.

Regardless of the motivation, this alliance had strong religious and political repercussions. From a political perspective, Judah lost some of its strength and independence. In the next generation Judah would not carry on Jehoshaphat’s policy; it would inherit Ahab and Jezebel’s policy through their daughter Athaliah.

The introduction of Athaliah brought on a reign of terror after Jehoshaphat’s death, it brought on the reversal of all that Jehoshaphat had worked so hard for. All of his strides towards turning Judah back to the Lord were wrecked by the introduction of Jezebel’s daughter.

After Jehoshaphat, there would be a checkered future. Righteous kings would grow fewer and wicked monarchs would increase; until the fateful year, 586 BC, when a kingdom from the northeast would swoop in and end their independence ⁷.

Conclusion

Ahab and Jehoshaphat fit into a pivotal moment in Israelite history, a decision point - follow the LORD or follow Baal? Israel and Ahab choose Baal, and Judah and Jehoshaphat choose the LORD. Jehoshaphat, however, also chose to make another decision - to allow Ahab an “in” to the future of Judah.

Their decisions would move Israel and Judah another step towards the captivity.

Why did it happen?

Ahab’s weak character ultimately lead to others making the decisions for him, and those others were Jezebel and her cohorts. He fails to lead, and thus is lead.

Jehoshaphat’s righteous character leads to a religious reformation in his kingdom. His desire for friendship and cooperation between Israel and Judah is fatal to his reform policy in the next generation. He fails to properly discern in his choice of a partner for the next leader ⁸.

This story emphasizes God’s faithfulness, despite his people’s unfaithfulness. Judgment will happen, but, as shown with Ahab’s repentance, God is very responsive towards any sign of repentance and any sign of a desire for a better relationship from his people.

Another important lesson is discernment in the area of relationships. Jehoshaphat failed to look ahead and understand the real consequences of the alliance with Ahab, he failed to exercise discernment when choosing partners. Finally, God’s faithfulness and long-suffering encourages faith. Jehoshaphat’s extraordinary faith in God on the eve of the Moabite/Ammonite invasion was not disappointed. God’s salvation was awesome, complete, and powerful. God is also willing to have mercy on and deliver his erring children. Not once, but twice God delivered Israel from the hands of the Syrians. It was only after Ahab rejected God’s plan and insisted on his own that the judgment was pronounced.

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