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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are two of the most notorious characters within the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the book of Kings records more stories about King Ahab than any other monarch of Israel. Throughout the entire text, Ahab and Jezebel are vilified. However, there is room for debate about the interpretation of the text. This paper will identify the characters of Ahab and Jezebel in a historical perspective as well as in a narrative one. Was Ahab truly evil as depicted or was he influenced by his vindictive wife? Furthermore, was Jezebel truly the Harlot Queen of the Bible or was she simply a literary scapegoat for the author? Finally, is it plausible that neither was evil and they were malignantly presented by the author of Kings to reinforce his/her own personal message?"



Frederick Flo

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel: Evil or Scapegoats?

Introduction

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are two of the most notorious characters within the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the book of Kings records more stories about King Ahab than any other monarch of Israel. Throughout the entire text, Ahab and Jezebel are vilified. However, there is room for debate about the interpretation of the text. This paper will identify the characters of Ahab and Jezebel in a historical perspective as well as in a narrative one. Was Ahab truly evil as depicted or was he influenced by his vindictive wife? Furthermore, was Jezebel truly the Harlot Queen of the Bible or was she simply a literary scapegoat for the author? Finally, is it plausible that neither was evil and they were malignantly presented by the author of Kings to reinforce his/her own personal message?

The book of Kings was not a contemporary historical writing in regards to the style and form that modern audiences are accustomed to. Although it was impressive on the account of the author to weave a variety of historical information into a literary unity, the book was a theological essay written by a passionate author who possessed strong personal ideas that sat at the center of his/her motivation for the text (cfr. Zevit 669). The author obviously possessed historical sources at his disposal because the book embraces the regal period of Israel in its entirety with the exception of two monarchs (cfr. Lumby 30-31). Often the writer refers the reader to other sources for additional information, e.g. 'the book of annals of Solomon' (1 Kings 11:41), or the 'the book of the annals of the kings of Israel' (1 Kings 14:19). The fact that the author refers the reader to other sources demonstrates that he/she has exposed us to limited information which serves his/her purpose (cfr. Bimson 335). Furthermore, the uneven treatment and focus given to some kings within the texts suggests the same.

So why was this text written? Nearly 200 years after the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judea, the northern kingdom of Israel had vanished due to the advancement of the Assyrian empire. The southern kingdom was now facing similar opposition from Babylon. It was an ideal time to write a “polemical history, one that would explain why the north had collapsed, and act as an object lesson for the south” (Hazleton 7). The author of Kings identified the unfaithfulness to Yahweh as the key source of destruction. Thus, the collapse of Israel was divine punishment for this infidelity (cfr. Hazleton 7-9).

The author is labeled a “deuteronomistic historian” by most scholars (cfr. Walsh 160). Deuteronomists choose sources that they arrange and modify, expand and supplement with a personal goal in mind rather than with an objective of reporting historical accuracy (cfr. Walsh 160). Obviously, the main objective is to tell the fate of Yahweh’s people, but there appears to be an ulterior motive. There seems to be an underlying prejudice in the author’s tone that explains the use of sarcastic and vivid language. How a story is told is as important as the story itself. The original Hebrew language presented stories of the Bible with earthy language that embodied its targeted people and allowed for it to develop through time before being written down (cfr. Hazleton 14). According to Lesley Hazleton, who translated the original Kings, “The vivid, even lurid, language of Kings is completely at odds with the decorous tone of most translations...curses and oaths are fulsome and imaginative, the wordplay is downright outrageous” (14). For example, the god Baal-Zebul-“Lord Prince”-became Beelzebub, meaning “Lord of the Flies” (cfr. Hazleton 14). Further evidence is found in the translation of the curse on Ahab which reads “I will cut off from Israel every male belonging to Ahab” (1 Kings 21:21). The original Hebrew reads “I will cut down every one that pisses against a wall” (cfr. Hazleton 14). It is clear here that author was passionate and crude in his writing that steered away from traditional biblical style. Thus, Kings was a passionate theological essay written by an author convinced that the destruction of the Northern Kingdom was due to incompetent and unfaithful rulers (cfr. Zevit 669).

King Ahab: The Narrative Character vs. the Historical Monarch

King Ahab, the seventh King of Israel, was considered the most evil of all the kings. The verses of 1 Kings 16:29-34 introduce the reader to the reign of King Ahab. The introduction is a dark one, as Ahab is considered to have “done more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him” (1 Kings 16:30). He is further scrutinized for marrying a foreign woman, Jezebel, who worships the god Baal. He built altars and constructed temples in Samaria in honor of Baal and built a pole in honor of the goddess Asherah. The introduction of King Ahab contains sarcastic disapproval by the author as relevant in the use of language: “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 worshiped him” (1 Kings 16:31). This sentence structure ensures that the reader understands that it was not sufficient for Ahab to upset

Yahweh with only one violation, but implies that Ahab took satisfaction in his intentional defiant acts (cfr. Sweeney 206).

The author's hatred of Ahab is understandable from the narrator's perspective. During the reign of Ahab, the worship of Baal became one of the official religions of the Northern Kingdom (cfr. Angel 4). Under Ahab, prophets were killed (1 Kings 18:4, 13) and altars to God were destroyed (18:30). In addition, prophets of Baal and Asherah became national religious figures (18:19) and were placed on the national payroll by Jezebel (cfr. Angel 4-5). Elijah, the great prophet of the time, became Ahab's number one enemy. He hated the prophet Micaiah and imprisoned him when he declared that Ahab would fail in battle (cfr. Angel 5). Then there was the ruthless murder of Naboth (1 Kings 21) that placed Ahab as the personification of evil.

There are other angles with which to view King Ahab. The historical and narrative characters must be separated and evaluated to find Ahab the person. From a historical standpoint, King Ahab, like his father Omri was a powerful and influential ruler. King Omri, Ahab's father, is credited with a coup d'état that overthrew the dynasty in Israel in the early ninth century B.C.E. (1 Kings 16:21-23). After four years of civil war, Omri took to the task of alliance building with neighboring states and according to written records, may have put Israel onto the world stage (cfr. Walsh 4). Assyrian records began to refer to Israel as the "land of Omri" and its kings as the "sons of Omri" (cfr. Walsh 4) yet there is no sign of a positive portrayal by the narrator of Kings in regard to Omri or his son.

Archeological evidence points to the successes of Omri and Ahab in the history of Israel. Advancements in architecture including but not limited to elaborate buildings and multi-chambered gate complexes have been attributed to the reign of Ahab (cfr. Walsh 8). Ahab has been credited with the building of his famous "Ivory Palace" (cfr. Walsh 7). Other evidence points toward Ahab's reign filled with technological innovation, a strong economy characterized by international trade, and advancements in the arts. Ultimately, Omri seemed to have had established a strong political and military force within Israel. His diplomatic and military accomplishments fell to his son Ahab who capitalized on his father's initiatives (cfr. Walsh 9). During this time, Israel endured a social stratification, in which the development of different classes created a hierarchy within society.

The picture here that we have painted of Ahab is quite different from the one depicted by Kings' narrator. From a historical standpoint, King Ahab was a powerful and influential ruler who achieved tremendous success by adding onto his father's legacy and establishing his own. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was expanding its borders and establishing its military among the elite. There were advancements in the arts and indications of a vibrant economy. Historical documentation depicts a blossoming society.

King Ahab: The Good Side

There are elements within the narrative that display positive facets of Ahab's character as well. Let us begin with the appointing of Obadiah. Obadiah, which means "servant of Yahweh" (Sweeny 222), was the appointed chief steward who "revered the Lord greatly" (1 Kings 18:3). If Ahab was in a war against Yahweh, why would he appoint a faithful servant of Yahweh to such a high government post? It is plausible that Ahab recognized the value of God-fearing people as a possible counterbalance to the influence of Jezebel (cfr. Angel 6).

The narrator describes King Ahab as an opponent to Yahweh, but some scholars believe this to be highly improbable. Ahab wouldn't have wanted to abolish or reduce the Jewish tradition in favor of Baal (cfr. Albertz 362), he simply supported an official ditheism (1 Kings 18:21). This is evident in Elijah's words, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him!" (1 Kings 18:21). Yahweh still remained the national god, but according to some scholars, was to be accompanied by Baal, whom Ahab believed, as the Syro Palestinian weather god, could improve upon the agricultural economy (cfr. Albertz 362). Furthermore, the portrayal by the author of Kings of Ahab as a great polytheistic pioneer and opponent of Yahweh is quite ridiculous. The historian Rainer Albertz confirmed this when he wrote, "Archaeological and textual evidence create an awareness that there was no exclusive Yahwism before the ninth century in Israel; thus it cannot be adequately explained why the Omride diplomatic syncretism, which was fully accepted in the polytheistic world everywhere else, could have been so heavily opposed in the first place" (359-360). The stories of Ahab may describe the time when Israel transformed into a mature state of monotheism (cfr. Albertz 363). Therefore one could argue that the evil qualities of Ahab that are mentioned in the text may not be more immoral than the predecessors before him, but are simply highlighted due to the social and religious transformation that was occurring at that time.

Another reinforcement to Ahab's diabolic lifestyle, according to the author, is the extreme opposition exhibited by the prophets, particularly Elijah. This fundamental prophetic opposition to the ruling king is a new tactic in Israel's history, a strategy not employed by earlier prophets (cfr. Albertz 360). Prior to the 9th century, the prophets were ecstatic groups with no visible social function (cfr. Albertz 361). Due to the economic booms created by the Omride reigns, prophets now enjoyed somewhat of a profession as healers, exorcists, or oracle givers as people could now afford to pay for such services (cfr. Albertz 360). Furthermore, prophets generally emerged from the lower classes. However, Elisha had been a prosperous farmer (1 Kings 19:19) with ties to the upper class. Both Elijah and Elisha came from the eastern area of the Northern state where a "less developed form of Israelite society and Yahweh religion" still persisted (cfr. Albertz 363). Thus, it not unreasonable to conclude that the economic and social statuses of Elijah and Elisha contributed towards their development as a new breed of prophet. This classification is not intended to dismiss their divine call as prophets but simply to give an appreciation of the dynamics that contributed to the development of their social positions. Due to their economic independence and social status, these prophets were able

to become critical of the system and stand as the voice for the lower classes. The misfortunes of Israel, including but not limited to the present drought were believed to be caused by the infidelities of the king and queen. It was this new type of social prophet that was able to use Yahweh as a symbol and as a standard with which to fight the king's social and religious policies. This may have been the catalyst for Israel's previously mentioned transformation into a mature and uniform monotheistic state. This push towards an exclusive worship of Yahweh is why Ahab experienced tremendous amounts of pressure and resistance from the prophets as opposed to prior kings.

One controversial area of interpretation in Kings lies within King Ahab's participation in the prophet showdown at Mt. Carmel. When Obadiah announced to Ahab that Elijah wished to see him, he could have had him arrested and killed. Instead, he rushed to greet him. Upon seeing the prophet, Ahab accused Elijah of bringing upon the country the drought to which Elijah retorted that it was Ahab's ways that brought upon the misfortune. This ignorance of Ahab may be evidence that he truly did not find fault in his actions and may be an indication that Elijah's accusations should have been directed towards the conscious sinner, Jezebel. However, Elijah clearly directed fault for the sins and misfortunes of the people at the King. Regardless of this subtlety, Ahab, the so called worst idolater of the Bible, helps organize Elijah's dramatic appearance at Mt. Carmel. Yes, one could easily argue the point that Ahab simply saw this as an opportunity to humiliate Elijah. However, this was not Egypt during the time of Moses where the pharaoh and his priests felt confident in their practiced magic. This was a public chance that could do more harm than good to the monarch and yet this opportunity was still granted to Elijah. The simple act of cooperation is sign that Ahab may still honor Yahweh.

Furthermore, after the events that took place at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40), Elijah slaughtered over 450 prophets of Baal. King Ahab, commander of the army, did nothing to stop him. Some scholars ask if Ahab participated in the crowd's rejoicing while they proclaimed "The Lord alone is God" (1 Kings 18:39). The narrator's silence on Ahab during this scene casts Ahab as a passive, secondary character (cfr. Angel 6). Other theologians contest that Ahab may have been swayed by the power of Yahweh and begun to see the message presented by Elijah through the magnificent fire from heaven (cfr. Angel 6). Regardless, King Ahab must have done some deed that warranted such a sign of respect from his enemy, Elijah, who honored the King by running ahead of his chariot for sixteen miles (1 Kings 18:46). This was an ancient sign of respect and honor that may be an indication that Ahab had been won over to Yahweh (cfr. Seow 136).

Upon return to Jezebel, the description of Ahab's reenactment of Elijah's showdown is vague. Some scholars interpret Ahab as hurrying home in excitement to tell Jezebel the wonders that Elijah had done (cfr. Angel 7). However, the death cry of Jezebel that led to Elijah's banishment leaves Ahab's role in the matter to debate. Whether he was part of the decision or simply too passive in his wife's decisions is unknown.

As 1 Kings continues from the Mt. Carmel showdown, the existence of absolute Baalism becomes less prevalent. It seems as though King Ahab has begun to show favor towards Yahweh. In 1 Kings 20:13, Ahab has built a favorable relationship with an anonymous prophet who cries out, “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.” Ahab gives the signals for his soldiers to attack the Arameans in broad daylight, putting his faith in Yahweh to deliver victory. During a national crisis with security and honor at stake, Ahab allies with Yahweh (cfr. Angel 8).

The central point within the text that displays an act of penance on the part of Ahab is after the killing of Naboth when Elijah appears before King Ahab and condemns him and his future generations (1 Kings 21:20-24). Following the curse appears the repetitiveness of the divine speech that introduced Ahab. When Ahab heard the words of Elijah, he humbled himself before the Lord and fasted (1 Kings 21:27-29). These actions were worthy of Yahweh’s forgiveness.

There are certainly positive elements within the character of Ahab. Unfortunately, his good and evil qualities seem to jump around the text and his behavior and loyalty are often unpredictable and random. In fact Yahweh’s behavior towards Ahab is inconsistent as well. There are contrasting parallels present in chapter 20 and chapter 21. In chapter 20, a foreign king, not loyal to Yahweh, attacks Israel and is defeated by Ahab. Ahab grants mercy upon the ruler and is condemned by Yahweh for not destroying him. In chapter 21, the death of a loyal servant to Yahweh, Naboth, is instigated by Ahab and manufactured by Jezebel. When Ahab humbles himself before the Lord, Yahweh shows him compassion. It is obvious that these contrasting parallels are indications that the author has reservations about the story and the characters within it (cfr. Walsh 80).

The historical and narrative qualities of King Ahab almost repel each other. In order to get insight into what he was like as a person, all records must be accounted for. One evil depiction by a biblical author is not nearly enough to convict this man as purely evil. The initial condemnation that introduces the king in the text bases the bulk of his evil on his marriage and religious practices. I believe there to be sufficient controversy within the interpretation of his religious affiliations. For instance, Ahab did not choose to marry Jezebel. It was common tradition for kings to make political alliances through marriage (cfr. Vos 436). When Ahab’s father, Omri, formed alliances with Tyre to the North, it was cemented through the union of Ahab and Jezebel (cfr. Walsh 4). Furthermore, to rebut the narrator’s emphasis on Ahab’s building of a temple to Baal as indication of the king as a sacrilegious dictator, it should be noted that Ahab’s actions were not novel by any means. It was standard practice at the time that when a foreign princess was taken in diplomatic marriage, that a temple be built in honor of her god and kingdom (cfr. Hazleton 35).

Most kings of their time incorporated the divine name into their own as means of establishing their divine right to the throne (cfr. Hazleton 35). Ahab made no such claim, never putting himself as a divine source; however he

was crowned in Yahweh's name (cfr. Hazleton 35). Lesley Hazleton summed the misguided view of Ahab best when she noted:

He fought his battles and celebrated victories in the name of Yahweh, sought the advice and blessings of the priests by Yahweh, and would name all three of his children by Jezebel in praise of Yahweh: two sons, Ahaziah, meaning "he who holds Yahweh close," and Joram, "Yahweh is exalted," and a daughter, Athaliah, "Yahweh is on high." The biblical portrait of Ahab, it turns out, is as distorted as that of Jezebel. (35)

Obviously King Ahab was far from becoming a patron saint and the points of these insights are not to glorify his character. However, the Word of God is a collection of works that were inspired by God, but written by human hands. The message of the writings may be divine and inspired, but may also be contaminated with human bias. Thus, it is not necessarily a historical fact when a Biblical author states that a particular character was the most evil person in all of history. The author's views of an individual may or may not be shared by God. It is at best that *human* author's interpretation of texts he/she has read and, upon inspiration by God, has put His glorified *message* within the body of a human story.

Inspiration

To find bias within the Scriptures does not challenge the integrity of the Bible. God is the author of Sacred Scripture and His inspired books teach the truth. However, they are just that, inspired books. Christians should be reminded that we are not a religion of the book, but rather a religion of the Word. True, the biblical authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit but direct communication with the divine has only fully been established through the incarnation.

The Scriptures provide a forum for God to speak to the world in a human way. It is done through human words, language, and writing, using human stories, under the Holy Spirit's guidance to portray a divine message. Anything possessing human qualities is accompanied by human error. The exception to this rule is found only in Jesus Christ.

God made full use of the faculties and powers of the human mind when inspiring the Scriptures; however the reader must be attentive to what the human authors wished to affirm and to what God wished to reveal through their words. Scripture must be read in light of the Spirit and within the living Tradition of the Church, but not word for word. The Bible is not a historical book, nor is it a book of science or literature but rather it is a book of message. We must comb through the human properties to discover the divine message.

Scripture possesses multiple senses to interpret meaning. There is a literal sense, a spiritual one, an allegorical view, and also a moral undertone. They work together to establish the true message. Being conscious of these various elements, the reader must discover the authors' intentions. Truth is presented differently in Scripture. The conditions of the time and culture, the literary genres in use at the time, the dialect, and most importantly the intended audience must be accounted. Being aware of these elements allows the reader to separate the human bias from the inspired message.

Jezebel: Framed

The climate of deep social change initiated by the Yahweh-Baal syncretism became a symbol for modern societal development, both economically and culturally (cfr. Albertz 362). The social stratification set up by the Omri reign separated the supporters and rejecters of this development. Thus, it is easy to understand, keeping the ninth century prophets in mind, that a strong opposition to this new royal policy would develop (cfr. Albertz 362). When a story is contrived by those who are passionately opposed to someone, every element of that individual's true self is twisted. Inconvenient facts are left out and the wildest rumors are passed off as fact (cfr. Hazleton 6). One loses their identity as a person and become a mere image or a tool for the opposition. This was the case with Jezebel.

Jezebel's name has been degraded all throughout history. In one of his famous homilies on repentance, St. John Chrysostom referred to her as "a most shameless, forbidden, filthy, and accursed woman" (Chrysostom 21). The degradation of her name began three centuries after her death when her stories were written by her enemies (cfr. Hazleton 6). Her real name was actually *Itha-Baal*, "woman of the Lord", but the Hebrew writers changed it to *I-zevel*, which means "woman of dung" (cfr Hazleton 2). It was written as *Jezebel* when translated to Greek and English.

Lesley Hazleton makes a strong point when approaching biblical interpretation:

Whether or not we believe the Bible was divinely inspired, we tend to think of it as something that has simply always been. Given the reverence in which we hold it, it is easy to forget that it was written by specific men in specific times and places, for specific reasons. Nowhere is this more evident than in the aptly named Kings. (6)

The author from the Southern Kingdom of Judah was given the chance to write a story that could teach Judah a lesson, a story that could prevent the self destruction that was seen in Israel. There was certainly resentment after the north seceded and became a regional power. Thus, the story within Kings would be a chance for the author to present history, teach a lesson to Judah, and potentially settle the score with the north. The bias is prevalent in the author's language and joyful tone. Given the chance to personify his/her target, the author seemed to have chosen Ahab and

Jezebel. However, Jezebel was the main target as she embodied all of the elements of the perfect scapegoat. She worshiped false gods, was foreign royalty, arrogant, and vain. In order to destroy a woman's reputation, the tactic was similar to today. "You sexualize her" (Hazleton 8). She was presented over and over again as a killer, a harlot, and an evil queen when in fact we do not know that much about her. Nowhere in the bible are there any actions that indicate she was a harlot. Maybe in the biblical sense, some may argue that the name stems from her "prostituting herself to false gods" but nowhere in the literal sense (cfr. Hazleton 10).

Jezebel's reputation stems mainly from two scenes within Kings. First, when Ahab reports the killing of her prophets (1 Kings 19:1-3), she responds with her famous outcry of revenge, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them." This act of vengeance is indicative of her true character. She is a strong, passionate leader who is not afraid to stand up to one of the most powerful prophets in Hebrew history. What is controversial about the scene is that the stereotyped killer gives her arch enemy twenty four hours to flee Israel. If she really intended to kill him, why would she spare his life rather than sending an assassin to kill him or a royal bailiff to arrest him (cfr. Seow 139)? This act of mercy does not correspond with her character in Kings. Scholars would argue that it was a political move. She simply did not want to martyr Elijah which would bring about severe consequences from the public outcry. However, a woman of her power could have easily arranged for a discrete murder or "accident". One important detail to understand about Jezebel is that she was devoted to her faith just as Elijah was devoted to Yahweh. She was a religious woman and honored the power of faith. Most polytheists of the time, even if they did not worship another deity, still respected the existence of that other god, in this case Yahweh (cfr. Hazleton 102). It would have been uncharacteristic for a religious woman of her time to actually dishonor another deity and his/her prophets. Therefore, it is understandable that Jezebel reacted in such a way to Ahab's news about her prophets. Who would kill an assembly of prophets? She was outraged at Elijah's actions and challenged him. Yet, even in her darkest emotional moments, she restrained from murder and showed mercy. This is truly not characteristic of the Jezebel that is depicted throughout history.

The vineyard scene of 1 Kings 21:1-16 is the climax of sinfulness presented in Kings. According to the text, Jezebel takes it upon herself to frame Naboth and have him murdered. She writes letters and involves elders, nobles, judges, and numerous witnesses to the plot. Historians that are familiar with Jezebel and her political maneuvering argue that this tactic was highly uncharacteristic (cfr. Hazleton 115). It would have been much simpler to forge papers saying that Naboth had agreed to sell the vineyard to Ahab (cfr. Hazleton 115). Again, we see inconsistencies in the character development that we experienced earlier with Yahweh and Ahab. How does this evil woman so easily kill an innocent citizen of Israel over a plot of land but spares the life of her arch enemy Elijah? What is the purpose of this storyline by the author of Kings? Deeper analysis reveals that the vineyard may have been a biblical metaphor. These

insights are just as, if not more, hypothetical than accepted claims, but again provide another lens in which to view the story. First, Jezreel Valley where the vineyard was located cannot support such agriculture (cfr. Hazleton 108). The vineyard is a metaphor for well-being and prosperity (cfr. Vox 194). In this sense, the vineyard of Naboth may represent the Promised Land itself, Israel, which belongs to Yahweh. Thus, when Ahab says that he wishes to uproot the vineyard to make a garden for his palace (1Ki 21:1-3), he is actually implying that he wishes to uproot Israel (cfr. Hazleton 108). This metaphoric story needed a villain. Hence, Jezebel earned the role as a killer.

Jezebel's Influence on Ahab

Ancient pre-arranged marriages, especially royal ones, often lacked the elements of a true relationship. A true partnership is rare enough under any circumstances, let alone arranged ones. However, despite their personal obstacles, there is reason to believe that Jezebel and Ahab were actually quite in love (cfr. Leith 46). They portrayed multiple aspects of a model partnership. Some biblical scholars believe that Ahab was simply the puppet and Jezebel was the evil the puppet master. Jezebel charted the nation's domestic policy, its foreign policy, and its theology with Ahab's permission because he was so addicted to his wife (cfr. Wiesel 97). She is ridiculed for her line, "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel" (1 Kings 21:7), as if she is taunting him for being weak. Sure, it is easy to interpret Jezebel as a vindictive wife, who challenges her husband's masculinity in order to manipulate him in participating in her own endeavors. This is reasonable based upon the character build up of the queen thus far in the story. However, taking into consideration what we have established about the bias and intentions of the author, why can't this image of a harlot be exchanged for one who is concerned for her husband as he sits in a state of depression (1 Kings 21:4). Switching the lens in which the reader views the text alternates a picture of a seductive siren to one of a loyal and loving wife whose concern for her husband allows her to put Ahab's desires and interests above all else (cfr. Hazleton 112). Again, looking at the text from this angle, the image of the harlot disappears.

Conclusion

The book of Kings is filled with many inconsistencies in character development. The portrait that has been painted by the author has stained the historical perceptions of two of the most prominent figures in Israel's history. The writer's view of what made a king important during his era is very different from that of modern day historical scholarship (cfr. Bimson 335). The writer ignores the social, military, and political achievements of the king and judges solely on the cultic worship of his people. Hence, the book of Kings becomes a story with historical elements read within the lines of its own theological commentary of the time (cfr. Bimson 335).

Even in our biblical studies, we find a need to separate religion and state. The prophetic narratives reveal critical stances of prophets toward kings, and vice versa, but are not always clear on how to interpret the moral messages with the political policies of the state within that time (cfr. Gottwald 341). For instance, King Ahab's installment of ditheism was a political tactic which proved to be quite valuable to the vulnerable nation of Israel at that time. During the years of drought both from rain and war, Ahab was allowed to build up the infrastructure of Israel. When Israel did officially become a mature monotheistic state, it was plagued with years of war (cfr. Albertz 363), wars that it would not have been able to survive during those drought years. Thus, regardless of who is to blame for the drought in Israel, King Ahab's political decisions of the time may have saved Israel from destruction.

Jezebel appears to be a target. As a foreign woman who practiced a different faith, she fell victim to the patriarchal society that was dominated by radical nationalists. This is something that we might see today as well. With constant struggles between the religion and politics of nations, a foreign figure with that much power at home would certainly cause a tremendous amount of public outcry as it did in 9th century B.C.E. Israel. When a revolt brought about the end of the Omri dynasty, Jezebel served as the scapegoat for the new king, Jehu, who blamed the queen for all of Israel's infidelity (cfr. Piazza 32). Jezebel also appears in the New Testament in the Book of Revelations. Many theologians would quickly point to her references as wicked by two Biblical authors as proof above and beyond doubt of her evil. However, the Book of Revelation was written after Kings, and the unknown author may have used Kings as a source. Furthermore, some scholars speculate that the passage in Revelations is actually descriptive of a contemporary figure that readers would recognize under the nickname of Jezebel.

This debate is not an attack against the author of Kings nor is it mocking divine inspiration. Rather, it is insight into how important it is to evaluate scripture based upon the setting of and motive of the writing. The divine message is not altered due to a human's interpretation of character. Regardless of one's evaluation of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the message of the text remains. The ultimate purpose of the book was to justify God's decision to send His people into exile by showing that the kings of Israel and Judah, as well as the people that followed them were at fault (cfr. Bimson 336). It reaffirms the failure of human rule as an institution, as it had already appeared in the book of Judges (cfr. Bimson 336). It reiterates Yahweh's commitment to the people of Israel, who is involved in all facets of His people's lives including the nation's political life (cfr. Bimson 336).

The epic battles between Jezebel and Ahab against Elijah told a story of polytheism versus monotheism, statesmanship versus divine rule, and liberalism versus conservatism. It included the elements of marriage, sex, politics, religion, war and scandal; all elements which sell stories in today's world. It is clear that King Ahab and Queen Jezebel were not who the author made them out to be. They were literary vehicles used to carry and emphasize elements of the story. They may not have been the most morally sound human beings, but they certainly weren't any more evil than

many of the kings and queens before them and those to come. King Ahab and Jezebel were framed through literary propaganda that stuck through time. We see that history can be twisted if biblical writing is accepted without evaluating the text with the author's purpose in mind. In depth, historical and social analysis helps to liberate truths within the writing that are too often lost, casting people as evil villains without perhaps total justification. It is my conviction this is the case with Ahab and Jezebel.

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