

# 10

## The Decline and Fall of Israel

**I Kings 16:29—22:53; II Kings 1—17;  
II Chronicles 17—28**

### **a** **Ahab—Israel’s Worst King** (I Kings 16:29-34)

**Ahab . . . made an Asherah pole and did more to arouse the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, than did all the kings of Israel before him.**  
—I Kings 16:33

Asa, the third king of Judah, reigned 41 years and followed in the spiritual footsteps of his great-great-grandfather David (see I Kings 15:10, 11). In the 31 year of Asa’s rule in Judah, Omri was crowned in Tirzah (see 16:23) after deposing Zimri as king of Israel (see vss. 17, 18). Though economically Omri was a powerful ruler, the Bible dismisses this man in six verses as a wicked king who moved the capital of Israel to Samaria (see vss. 24, 25).

As He did with the kings of Israel, God will not judge us according to our accomplishments, but according to our faithfulness to Him.

Sources outside the Bible indicate that Omri was also an energetic ruler who initiated strong ties with the Phoenicians. It’s likely that his son

Ahab married Jezebel (16:31) during Omri’s reign to seal treaties between the two kingdoms. The Jewish historian Josephus says that Jezebel’s father, Ethbaal, was both king of Tyre and Sidon and a priest of Astarte (Asherah). Ethbaal had assassinated the last of King Hiram’s dynasty (see 5:1) and established a government hostile to the worship of the Lord.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Does anything hinder my ability to worship God?*

When Ahab began his 22-year reign over Israel with Jezebel at his side in Samaria, Asa still had three years left in his tenure over Judah (16:29). But evil days lay ahead for both kingdoms. The influence of Baal worship that Ahab introduced in Israel from Tyre and Sidon (vss. 30, 31) devastated the spiritual condition of Israel and nearly ended the Davidic dynasty in Judah. The Lord responded to the threat of Baal worship in Israel with the spectacular prophetic ministries of Elijah and Elisha (see I Kings 17—II Kings 13) and to the threat in Judah through the heroics of Jehoiada the priest and Joash the boy king (see II Kings 11—12).

*Ancient relief of the Canaanite god Baal, standing above the clouds and waters of the earth. Through Jezebel and her children, the worst of Canaanite idolatry and immorality nearly engulfed Israel and Judah.*

---

The writer of Kings summarized the reign of King Ahab by saying that he did more than any other Israelite king to provoke the wrath of the Lord against him and the nation. By his actions, Ahab made the calf worship Jeroboam had begun more than 40 years earlier seem an insignificant offense against the Lord. He made his queen a priestess of Baal. He built a temple to Baal in Samaria and personally inaugurated its altar. He set up a pole in honor of Asherah, Baal's mistress in his fertility cult (I Kings 16:31-33). Baal's temple also contained a sacred stone that may have been an image or an engraved column (II Kings 10:26).

As an indication of the indifference toward the Lord that developed in Israel during the days of Ahab, the writer of Kings related that Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho at this time (I Kings 16:34) in violation of the prohibition against its rebuilding and in disregard of the curse pronounced on its builder (see Josh. 6:26). Jericho had been uniquely devoted to the Lord as a reminder that the whole land was His and held by Israel strictly by the terms of their covenant with Him.

Hiel showed disregard for the Lord and Israel's covenant with Him by rebuilding Jericho, and in so doing he may have exhibited



the grossest of pagan spirits. Some Canaanite cults entombed alive in the cornerstone the last male baby born before a new building went up. His spirit supposedly animated the structure. Hiel may have sacrificed his first and last sons in the initial and final cornerstones of Jericho. On the other hand, the deaths of

the two boys may have been acts of judgment by God that Hiel absorbed as ordinary tragedies without recognizing their significance. Either way, in Ahab's day the people of the northern kingdom were becoming increasingly indifferent to the Lord.

Elijah the Tishbite was a perfect spokesman in the battle between the Lord and Baal. The name Elijah means "the Lord is my God." This prophet's name summarized well the message of his life.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *If I were going to sum up the spiritual message of my life in four or five words, what would they be?*

## **b** **Elijah Announces a Drought (I Kings 17:1-6)**

**Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word."** —I Kings 17:1

The ministry of Elijah was like a two-sided coin. He spent most of his time announcing the dire consequences for Israel of breaking their covenant with God. That was the bad news. But his presence and the power of his ministry testified to the concern of the living God who called Israel to return to Him. That was the good news.

One of the threatened curses for abandoning the covenant Israel had made with the Lord was drought (see Deut. 28:22-24). It was the most appropriate sentence to bring upon Israel during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel because a drought was a slap in the face to the fertility god Baal.

## **A Wadi Ravine**

**T**he brook of Kerith, where Elijah hid out, ran through a *wadi*. This Arabic term describes a ravine in an arid region that runs with torrents of water during the rainy season, though they dwindle to leave a dry streambed during much of the dry season.

Because the Sea of Galilee, Jordan River, and Dead Sea lie in a gorge far below sea level, the wadis running into them out of the western hills and eastern plateaus are rugged, steep, and deep. These wadis were often used to mark boundaries.

Little is known about Elijah's background except that he came from Tishbe in Gilead (I Kings 17:1), the upper reaches of the part of Israel east of the Jordan River. The Lord sent Elijah to Ahab in Samaria to announce that there would be no rain or dew for three years. The drought may have been six months old already (see 18:1; Luke 4:25), and Elijah had been praying earnestly for God to bring it about at this time (see Jas. 5:17).

God had Elijah give Ahab a bold version of events that focused on the prophet. Elijah was the servant, the one who stood before the God of Israel. The drought would last for years until Elijah, as God's spokesman, called for it to end.

Then the Lord directed Elijah to flee Samaria and hide himself by the Kerith Ravine east of the Jordan. The Lord directed ravens to bring His prophet bread and meat every morning and evening (I Kings 17:2-4).

Elijah readily obeyed the Lord and hid out by the Kerith Ravine, ate what the ravens brought him, and drank from the waters of the stream (vss. 5, 6). In the world beyond the ravine, the drought raged and King Ahab searched for Elijah to kill him (see 18:10).

Elijah seems to have been well suited to this rugged existence. He dressed in a garment of hair girded with a leather belt (see II Kings 1:8). Under the urging of God's Spirit he could race a horse-drawn chariot 20 or more miles in a blinding rain (see I Kings 18:46).

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How do I react to the times when God takes me apart from the main action of life and causes me to be quiet? What have I learned in the quiet seasons of my life?*

---

## **C** **The Lord Cares for a Widow (I Kings 17:7-16)**

**"This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.'"**

**—I Kings 17:14**

Inevitably the drought dried up the brook running in the Kerith Ravine (vs. 7). The Lord then sent Elijah to hide in Jezebel's homeland where Baal was supposed to be god. Zarephath was a village dependent on Sidon for protection and commerce. It lay on the Mediterranean coast about seven miles south of Sidon and twice as many miles north of Tyre.

The Lord had probably not personally communicated to the widow of Zarephath His command to care for Elijah (vss. 8, 9). Instead, He superintended the interaction of Elijah and the widow to achieve that end (see Luke 4:25, 26). Elijah obeyed the Lord and went straight into enemy territory as readily as he had sought the solitude of the Kerith Ravine (I Kings 17:10a).

As Elijah approached Zarephath,

*The Ministry of Elijah*



Likewise, when we think someone might be receptive to the good news of Jesus Christ, we can also test them with questions like these, “Do you see yourself on a spiritual journey? If so, where are you on that journey?”

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How could I make myself more approachable for non-Christians?*

The widow appealed to the Lord, Elijah’s God, as the witness to the truthfulness of her next statement. Language, dress, or appearance made it clear to her that she was talking to an Israelite, and she adapted her oath to his religion. She professed that she had no bread—not even the meanest little, hard loaf, as the Hebrew noun denotes. She was gathering sticks to make a last little meal from the dregs of her flour and oil for herself and her son

before they began the slow process of starvation (vs. 12).

he saw a widow gathering sticks outside the town gate. It’s unclear whether he realized yet that she was a widow, let alone the widow, but he asked her for a drink of water. When she turned to comply, he also asked for some bread (vss. 10b, 11). These questions may have been the test by which Elijah was to identify the widow God had in mind.

Elijah’s response to the widow of Zarephath reveals his absolute confidence in the Lord. First, he urged her not to fear for her life or the life of her son. Then he told her to put her plans on hold, make a little cake of bread for him, and bring it to him. After that she

could make something for her son and herself. He promised that her tiny ration of flour and oil would last as long as the drought made her needy (vss. 13, 14).

More amazing than Elijah's confidence was the faith of the widow who had grown up where people looked to Baal for rain and food. She did what Elijah told her to do and witnessed daily miracles as her flour and oil vessels never emptied (vss. 15, 16). At each meal she probably developed a new understanding about the ultimate source of her bread, oil, and other daily provisions.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *How has God demonstrated His faithful provision for me this week?*

---

## **d** The Lord Raises the Widow's Son (I Kings 17:17-24)

**The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived.** —I Kings 17:22

The age of the widow's son isn't specified, but he is called a "boy," a Hebrew term usually used of small children (vs. 21). After Elijah had been with the mother and son for some time, the boy became ill and wasted away until he died. The bereaved mother interpreted her son's death as the judgment of God upon her sins. She continued to show a pagan tendency to view God

as capricious and vindictive in dealing with people. She vented her bitterness on Elijah as a "man of God" whom she viewed as His agent in dashing her hopes for the future by taking her son (vss. 17, 18).

Like the widow, we may know people who are bitter at God for some terrible circumstance in their lives. Elijah did not preach to the woman or chide her for her attitude. Instead, he set an example for us by bringing the hurting person's concerns to God.

**Ask Yourself . . .** *Have I ever felt abandoned by God?*

The woman was holding her son's corpse while she berated Elijah. With her permission he took the body to his chamber on the roof. Homes in the ancient Middle East had flat roofs, and it was common to build rooftop guest rooms reached by outside stairways. Elijah put the boy on his pallet and cried out to the Lord, asking why He had let this tragedy strike the widow who had been his hostess (vss. 19, 20).

The prophet stretched himself atop the little boy three times and called out to the Lord, imploring Him to restore the dead child to life (vs. 21). Years later Elisha also restored a boy to life by lying on him "mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands" (II Kings 4:34). Perhaps Elijah followed a similar procedure.

The Lord responded to Elijah's fervent prayer and the boy began to breathe again. The prophet reversed the earlier sequence by

carrying the boy back downstairs and returning him to his mother's arms (I Kings 17:22, 23).

When Elijah told her that her son was alive once more, the widow again had to reshape her view of God. Pagan deities did not do things like this for ordinary people. Only heroes could expect the gods to pay attention to them. The God of Elijah was a personal God who cared about each person intimately, even a poor widow and her only son.

When the widow had earlier called Elijah a "man of God" (vs. 18), she had viewed him as an agent of judgment. In verse 24, she used the same wording to mean an agent of blessing and hope. She had believed God before (vs. 15), but when she called the word of God from Elijah's mouth the truth, she recognized God's word as liberating truth rather than as an enslaving demand.

**I Kings 18—22; II Kings 1—17;  
II Chronicles 17—28 in Brief**

After three years of hiding, Elijah was sent by God to humiliate Baal and announce the end of the drought. The prophet of God challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest that would show whether Baal or the Lord was living and powerful. Baal did not send fire on his altar, but the Lord sent fire from heaven to consume Elijah's sacrifice. Then Elijah killed all of the prophets of Baal and prayed for rain to end the drought.

Elijah ran away to hide at Mount Sinai when Jezebel threatened his life. There the Lord recommissioned the prophet to anoint three men to do His work: Hazael to be king in Syria and a special opponent to Israel, Jehu to be king over Israel in place of Ahab's family, and Elisha to be the next great prophet in the northern kingdom.

Elisha's ministry extended through the reigns of Ahab, Ahaziah, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Jehoash—a period of over 50 years. After Elijah was taken up into heaven on a chariot of fire, Elisha assumed the prophetic role of his mentor. Several miracles are associated with Elisha, including the cleansing of the irrigation water at Jericho, the bear attack of the mockers at Bethel, the miraculous production of oil for an indebted widow, the healing of Naaman, and the recovered ax head.

Ahab and Jezebel went from bad to worse until Ahab was killed in battle against the increasingly troublesome Syrians. Jezebel lived on to influence her son Joram and her son-in-law Ahaziah the king of Judah, who had married Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. In spite of the spectacular miracles surrounding Elijah and Elisha, the spiritual condition of both Israel and Judah continued to decline.

Jehu, the Israelite general anointed by Elisha to avenge the wickedness of Ahab, killed Jezebel and annihilated all of the descendants of Ahab. He also killed the visiting king of Judah, many members of

Judah's royal family, and the priests of Baal. Jezebel's daughter Athaliah ordered all of the remaining Davidic descendants killed, and she became queen of Judah. An infant son of royal birth, Joash, was hidden in the temple for six years. Then Athaliah was overthrown and Judah experienced revival under the reforms of Joash the king and Jehoiada the high priest.

In Israel, Jehu's descendants did not follow the Lord. After brief glory under a second Jeroboam, Israel went into decline. Assyria replaced Syria as the big threat to Israel. Finally in 722 B.C., while Hoshea was king of Israel, an Assyrian army

besieged and conquered Samaria, deported the population of Israel, and replaced them with other displaced peoples from Mesopotamia. A hybrid religion began to develop in northern Israel made up of elements of paganism and elements of Old Testament worship.

The Chronicler narrated only the history of Judah during this era, so Chronicles mentions Israel only as events affected the house of David. Chronicles, however, gives expanded accounts of Judah's kings of this period: Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, and Ahaz.