

Lessons from the life of Elijah

20. The death of Ahab and his son (1 Kgs. 22; 2 Kgs. 1)

Stephen Whitehouse

Because Ahab humbled himself and was contrite over the murder of Naboth and his sons, God forestalled the judgement announced against him. Yet death soon came upon him, and he was succeeded by his son, Ahaziah, who also defied the God of Israel and served Baal, just like his parents, and met an early death.

IT WOULD APPEAR that Ahab reigned a further three years after the death of Naboth (1 Kgs. 22:1,2). Throughout this period there had been no war with Syria, but now things were quickly changing. There was a rising threat from Assyria, and Ahab needed to take decisive action.

An opportunity arose to collaborate with Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, a relative of his through the marriage of his own daughter, Athaliah, and the king of Judah's son, Jehoram (2 Kgs. 8:16,25-27). Their desire was to prise the strategic hold of Ramoth-gilead from out of the hands of their enemy (1 Kgs. 22:3,4), so in agreement they warred together against the Syrians.

The death of Ahab

In the heat of battle Ahab was shot and fatally wounded. An archer fired an arrow from his bow and struck the king between his breastplate and lower armour (v. 34). The injury was terminal, yet the proud king still insisted that he be propped up in his chariot to encourage his troops to continue with the fight. Finally he "died at even: and the blood ran out of the wound into the midst of the chariot" (v. 35). What a sorry end to the king of Israel! After Ahab's death, his army brought him back to Samaria, where he was later buried (v. 37).

Something quite significant then happened. When they "washed the chariot in the pool of Samaria", and while the soldiers "washed his armour", "the dogs licked up his blood . . . according unto the word of the LORD which He spake" (v. 38). God's judgement had thus been executed (21:19). But there is a difference between what Elijah predicted and what actually came to pass. Elijah told Ahab that his blood would be

licked by the dogs at Jezreel, but it actually occurred at Samaria.

What is the explanation of this? There are two possible answers. Firstly, Naboth's blood was shed outside the gate of Jezreel, and the pool of Samaria was apparently outside the gate of that city. This possibly helps to explain the discrepancy. Secondly, and more importantly, God changed His sentence upon Ahab because of his repentance (v. 29), and so Elijah's prediction (v. 19) was effectively annulled.¹

After the death of Ahab

Sadly, as was the trend in the northern kingdom, wickedness beget wickedness and evil beget evil. Ahab's son, Ahaziah, came to the throne, and unfortunately he was no different from his father, for during his two-year reign "he did evil in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the way of his father, and in the way of his mother, and in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin: for he served Baal, and worshipped him, and provoked to anger the LORD God of Israel, according to all that his father had done" (22:51-53).

So, after all that had happened to the family of Omri—the death of Ahaziah's father and the judgement of his mother (21:23)—he had still not learnt his lesson. He continued to worship Baal. And this is the depressing note on which 1 Kings closes and 2 Kings opens. What a desolate situation! How little had changed in Samaria!

Significantly, the opening verse of 2 Kings reads, "Moab rebelled against Israel after the death of Ahab". At first glance we may be excused in thinking that this is not particularly important. However, if we bring to mind the prophecy that Balaam made concerning the Moabites, "there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab" (Num. 24:17), then there is an interesting connection to be made.

1. For further details concerning the death of Ahab and the fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy see the previous article (Feb. 2006, p. 40).

This reference to the smiting of Moab was literally fulfilled by David when he made the Moabites his "servants" (2 Sam. 8:2; cf. Ps. 60:8). This is a wonderful prefigurement of the future work of Christ, who will subdue all his enemies, signified by the Moabites, the enemies of Israel. But here, at the end of Ahab's life, something changed; Israel's servants became her foes. They decided to revolt against their master.

But why did the Moabites rebel against Israel? The wise man assists us here: "When a man's ways please the LORD, *He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him*" (Prov. 16:7). Because the king's "ways" were an abomination to God, the "peace" was broken. In this we observe a simple cause-and-effect relationship: the kingdom of Israel continued in idolatry so God responded by bringing Moab, Israel's enemy, against her.

The illness of Ahaziah

If this were not enough to worry the king, during the Moabite rebellion he had a terrible accident; he "fell down through a lattice in his upper chamber that was in Samaria, and was sick" (2 Kgs. 1:2). Notice that Ahaziah had decided to stay at home, but the narrative does not inform us of the reason. Perhaps his reluctance to challenge the Moabites was down, at least in part, to that terrible fate which befell his father Ahab. Yet even at home he also suffered a terrible injury and fell sick!

In light of this, consider the longsuffering of our God. He could easily have taken the king's life and replaced him in an instant, yet He desired to provide one further opportunity for the house of Omri to repent. God presented the means by which the king could "consider [his] ways" (Hag. 1:5,7); and what better opportunity would he have than as he lay on his bed, pondering his present situation?

Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron

Sadly, even this did not have the desired effect. The king was so concerned about the state of his health, and so unprepared to approach the God of Israel, that "he sent messengers" to "enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron" as to whether he would "recover of this disease" (2 Kgs. 1:2). Ahaziah firmly believed that this idol possessed the ability to foresee the future, and so, desirous to learn his fate, he dispatched his men. Such practices were punishable by death under the Law (Lev. 20:6; Deut. 18:10-12; cf. 1 Chron. 10:13), yet the king persisted in defying the God of Israel.

It is worth pointing out that any king of Israel should have remembered a significant moment in Israel's history concerning Ekron. When the ark of the covenant came to Ekron the inhabitants were afflicted with horrible tumours, and panic spread through the city (1 Sam. 5:10-12). The Philistine gods were utterly powerless, they could not stand in the presence of the ark, nor could they sustain the health of the people. Why then would Ahaziah enquire of the god of Ekron to find an answer about his health? The history of Israel already contained a powerful testimony to the foolishness of such a move. What is more, Baal had already proved himself to be totally ineffective (1 Kgs. 18:29). Man can be so blind to truth and reason! Let us take heed.

The fact that Ahaziah sought a Baal outside the land of Israel could be evidence as to the effectiveness of Elijah's actions upon Carmel in curbing the Baal cult (v. 40). The name Baal-zebub is actually a combination of two Hebrew words, *Baal*, meaning 'lord' or 'god', and *zebub*, which is from the verb *zabab*, meaning 'to dangle', 'to move here and there quickly'. In noun form it means 'fly', and together the two words denote 'The lord of the fly' or 'flies'.

This raises the question, Why would they worship such an idol? The land was commonly infested with flies, and disease was widespread, so in order to protect oneself 'The lord of the flies' was sought. The Pharisees made mention of this god, referring to it as "the prince of the demons" (Mt. 12:24). This would suggest that evil spirits were actually worshipped under various names during the time of Christ, and Baal-zebub was regarded as "the prince" over them all. And it was such that Ahaziah preferred to seek instead of Yahweh, the God of Israel!

Assisted by an angel

While these events transpired, an angel was sent to Elijah, just as before (1 Kgs. 19:5,7), and commanded him to do God's bidding: "Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that ye go to enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron?" (2 Kgs. 1:3). This message also contained something personal for Ahaziah: "thus saith the LORD, Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die" (v. 4). Sentence had already been passed; the king had been found guilty and so would "surely die".

Let us not underestimate the tremendous faith and courage required of the Tishbite to carry out this commandment. Remember that he had previously fled “for his life” from Ahaziah’s mother, Jezebel (1 Kgs. 19:3), and now he was being instructed that he was to give a painful message to her son the king personally. And, true to form, Elijah responded immediately: “And Elijah departed” (2 Kgs. 1:4). The prophet went, met the servants of Ahaziah, delivered God’s message and then sent them back to inform the king what they had just heard.

The messengers of Ahaziah

What about these messengers of Ahaziah? Nothing is disclosed of their identity. What is clear is that they were prepared to abandon the king’s quest and face the consequences back at the royal court. Elijah must have had a huge impact upon them, since they did not delay.

We can imagine how shocked the king must have been when the messengers returned. His surprise is conveyed in his response: “Why are ye now turned back?” (v. 5). Ahaziah knew full well that they could not possibly have succeeded in their mission, since insufficient time had elapsed. The messengers replied, “There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die” (v. 6).

Notice that in all this there is an obvious omission; there is no mention of Elijah by name. We suggest that this was because they were not aware of who he was; they must have been totally ignorant of his identity.

Elijah’s striking appearance

The king, on hearing this message, had only one thought on his mind: “What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words?” (v. 7). Most probably the king was now fully convinced in his own mind it was Elijah—no other man would dare say these words—yet Ahaziah still wanted his identity confirmed.

His messengers described the prophet’s appearance: “He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins” (v. 8). The original Hebrew literally means, ‘a lord of hair’. Most commentators suggest that this description actually refers to the hairy coat of untanned skin

that the prophet wore as sign of his profession (cf. Zech. 13:4; Mt. 3:4). Evidently he was a striking figure of a man—by now probably infamous in appearance—and any one who saw him would never forget his attire. This description was sufficient for the king to have his fears confirmed: “It is Elijah the Tishbite” (2 Kgs. 1:8), his father’s sworn enemy!

But now Ahaziah knew that it was Elijah who had pronounced sentence upon him, what effect would it have upon him? Would he be humbled? Would he repent and faithfully seek the God of Israel? Sadly, this man, like his father, showed both an unwillingness and an inability to learn from past mistakes. Even with his present affliction, helpless in bed, he was still not prepared to change and repent. In fact repentance was the last thing on his mind; what he wanted was a bloody retaliation. He desired Elijah’s life, just like his mother had before him (1 Kgs. 19:2).

Ahaziah’s troops are sent

So desperate was the king for Elijah’s capture that, rather than sending a silent assassin, he made every attempt to utterly vanquish the protester and sent “a captain of fifty with his fifty” (2 Kgs. 1:9). The idea of a captain and fifty soldiers was first instituted in the wilderness, when Moses was assisted in his work over the children of Israel (Ex. 18:25). However, such men were to be selected under the strictest criteria; they were to be “able men, such as feared God, men of truth, hating covetousness” (v. 21). Would the captain selected by Ahaziah meet such high standards and ideals? Certainly not! He was prepared to assist his sovereign in defying Almighty God.

Sending fifty-one soldiers against one prophet is surely an acknowledgement from the king that this was no ordinary man, that Elijah had a power at his disposal which was both extraordinary and terrifying. Does this not remind us of the “band of men and officers” which was sent “with lanterns and torches and weapons” to arrest another righteous man (Jno. 18:3)? Both men challenged the authorities of their day and suffered evil from their own countrymen.

Elijah sat on top of a hill

So off the soldiers went. But would they find the prophet? Elijah was easily located, “he sat on the top of an hill” (2 Kgs. 1:9). Elijah had made for a mountain top before, as soon as his public work had been completed (1 Kgs. 18:42). In this simple act we see the prophet cutting himself off

from the world and escaping for peace in order to bring himself closer to his God. He may well have taken heed to the advice of the psalmist: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty" (Ps. 91:1). Elijah was indeed under God's "shadow", Divinely protected from all his foes. And in this there is a lesson to be found for us: "Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you" (Jas. 4:8).

Once the captain and his fifty troops had found Elijah, the captain commanded the prophet, "Thou man of God, the king hath said, Come down" (2 Kgs. 1:9). Elijah had been described as a "man of God" before (1 Kgs. 17:18), but this time the context and setting were altogether different. Before, this phrase had been uttered in humility and sincerity by a lowly widow; but this captain, it would appear, spoke almost with contempt and disdain for Elijah and his God.

Such an insult was not going to be left unchallenged. The prophet responded with a contest of his own: "If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty" (2 Kgs. 1:10). The Septuagint renders this, "fire will come down". There was no doubt in Elijah's mind that God would answer in dramatic fashion. Though it is not recorded here, it would seem that Elijah actually prayed for fire to come down and consume these men (Lk. 9:54). Thus he did not merely assume that God was going to grant his request, he offered up an earnest prayer for it (Jas. 5:16-18).

God responds with fire

God responded with a terrifying display of power: "And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed [the captain] and his fifty" (2 Kgs. 1:10). The Almighty accepted the prophet's prayer, evidence that he had not been driven by a spirit of revenge but was indeed a "man of God" (v. 9).

So "the fire of the LORD" (1 Kgs. 18:38) fell again. Previously it had descended from heaven and consumed "the burnt sacrifice . . . wood . . . stones . . . dust, and . . . the water", but here there was no altar offering but instead fifty-one sinners who had called into question the power of God and the credibility of His beloved servant.

There is an interesting parallel here for those who now await the return of the Master; this terrifying scene of destruction will be repeated on a far greater scale when the Lord Jesus Christ returns and pours judgements upon those that do not obey him: "the Lord Jesus shall be *revealed*

from heaven with his mighty angels, in *flaming fire* taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:7,8). We therefore see Elijah as a type of Christ, prefiguring his future work of judgement.

The king does not learn

After such an event, one would think that the king would immediately see the error of his ways and realise the need to repent and worship the God of Israel, or at the very least that it would serve as a great disincentive for challenging Elijah again. Yet flesh, if left unrestrained by the Word, is painfully foolish and struggles to learn from past error: "Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty" (2 Kgs. 1:11). Thus a second officer went forth, clearly not having taken heed of the earlier events.

Once Elijah had been found, the officer addressed the prophet, as on the previous occasion, "O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly". Elijah responded to this impertinent request with the same reply as before: "If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty"; and once again "the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty" (v. 12).

On learning that he had lost another fifty-one men, the king "sent again a captain of the third fifty with his fifty" (v. 13). Ahaziah was totally undeterred! How many men would he have to lose for him to take notice? Just like Pharaoh before him, his heart was hardened (Ex. 8:15,32; 9:34).

Finally a faithful response

However, there was something different about the third captain. Maybe he had learnt from the terrible events of before, or was even a secret worshipper of God. From the record we cannot tell. What we do know is that this man had an attitude and spirit which pleased the Almighty. In fact he "came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and besought him, and said unto him, O man of God, I pray thee, let my life, and the life of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight . . . therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight" (2 Kgs. 1:13,14). This was a heartfelt plea. He knew that Elijah had the power to destroy him and all his men, so he earnestly sought for mercy.

Elijah did not have to respond, for God intervened: "And the angel of the LORD said unto Elijah, Go down with him: be not afraid of him"

(v. 15). Did Elijah wait for the angel to speak, or did God ensure that His angel spoke before the prophet had even opened his mouth? What is abundantly clear is that this was a severe test of the prophet's courage, for he was sorely hated by the Omri family. The angel instilled a confidence in Elijah, so that, rather than fleeing as before (1 Kgs. 19:3), he was now prepared to venture into the royal court. Elijah went forth buoyed in the knowledge that "His salvation is nigh them that fear Him" (Ps. 85:9).

The death of Ahaziah

So Elijah journeyed with the officer to Ahaziah's court, where he stood before the wicked king face to face, just as he had done with his father (1 Kgs. 18:16,17). Would he change his message,

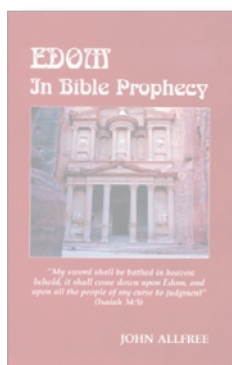
massage his words so that they fell softly upon the king's ears? No. He was a stalwart of the Truth and firmly delivered his message: "thou . . . shalt surely die". And God's verdict upon the monarch appears to have taken immediate effect: "So he died according to the word of the LORD which Elijah had spoken" (2 Kgs. 1:16,17). There was no further opportunity for the king to repent; his time had come, he would never commit another act of folly again.

Thus Divine judgement had been passed and fulfilled. Quietly the prophet left the court and departed. There was nothing more to be said or done. Again he had been the vehicle of destruction upon the royal household. But would Israel take notice, repent and change her ways? Only time would tell.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Israel's ancient enemy

John Nicholls



Edom in Bible Prophecy,
John Allfree, 2005. 93
pages.

Available from Bible
Study Publications, 1
Penrith Place, Mansfield,
Notts., NG19 6NE.

Price: £3.50, or £4.40
including postage and
packing. Cheques
payable to John Allfree.

EDOM IN BIBLE PROPHECY is the title of a timely new book by Brother John Allfree, written in the clear and forthright style we have come to expect from him. So much is happening today in the Middle East, Russia and Europe that all who desire to understand the word of prophecy better will be interested in this exposition.

Edom figures in several latter-day prophecies, such as Isaiah 34, Ezekiel 35, Obadiah and Psalm 83, and has been the subject of exposition by many Christadelphian writers, but with varying conclusions. Brother Allfree's exposition struck a satisfying chord with this reviewer in that it relates many recent events in the Arab world to prophecy, without jettisoning very much

of the exposition of prophecy by our pioneer brethren.

Brother Thomas's predictions about the return of the Jews to their land, and the establishment of a colony having no great faith in their God, have proved to be sound. But even he did not visualise the extent of the development of the nation of Israel and its duration prior to the coming of the Lord, and he failed to anticipate the rise of Arab nationalism that has occurred concurrent with the return of Israel from all nations. With the benefit of hindsight, we are "privileged", as Brother Allfree says in his book, to see that God foreknew the bitter and tenacious jealousy and hatred the Arab peoples would bear towards the establishment of Israel in Palestine.

Brother nation to Israel

That animosity has its roots back in the origin of the Arab peoples as descendants of Ishmael, Edom, Moab, Ammon and others. Although the Arabs like to think that they are descended only from Ishmael, the evidence from Scripture does not support them. Esau married into the family of Ishmael (Gen. 28:9), and it seems that several peoples occupied the Arabian Peninsula to give rise to the Arab nations that we know today. Brother Allfree gathers together the Scriptural proof in a useful diagram on page 56 of his book.