As we’ve seen, Jeroboam’s religious innovations were not only clear violations of the Lord’s revealed will, but also created great instability in the kingdom of Israel. As Jeroboam and the kings who followed rejected the Lord’s will, they would find their lives and/or their dynasties cut short as God executed judgment on the king and his house. Some measure of stability came with the reigns of Omri (885-874 B.C.) and his son Ahab (874-853 B.C.). However, this doesn’t mean that the spiritual condition of Israel was improving, quite the opposite. Of Ahab the Scriptures say, “surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him” (1Kings 21.25). Jeroboam’s religious innovations were all changes in how Israel worshipped Jehovah; Ahab would come to reject the Lord altogether!

It’s impossible to cover everything from the reign of Ahab in one lesson, particularly given the extensive attention given to Elijah’s work. If you wish to study these chapters in greater detail, please visit www.builtbyhim.com/category/days-of-elijah/

Survey of Ahab’s reign (1Kings 16.29-34).

» reigned over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years (vs. 29). This was the longest reign of a northern king since the reign of Jeroboam. Furthermore, we know from historical records that Israel remained a significant military force, as it had been in the days of Omri. This is best seen in the Kurkh Monolith inscription of Shalmaneser III, describing the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BC. Ahab is said to have brought 2000 chariots and 10,000 infantry to the battle, second only to the Syrian force.
Ahab’s apostasy (vss. 31-33). It should be noted that Ahab was not looking to completely eradicate worship of Jehovah, rather he was instituting a syncretic system of worship where both Jehovah and Baal were worshipped. Note that Ahab references Jehovah in the naming of his children: Jehoram (Yahweh is high), Ahaziah (Yahweh has taken hold), Athaliah (Yahweh is exalted). While the worship of Baal had already been a problem in Israel’s history, what Ahab and Jezebel did was to make idolatry a part of Israel’s national identity. “In accepting Baal, Ahab was simply bringing his kingdom closer to the mainstream of ancient Near Eastern thought and practice. In fact, most cities and kingdoms in the region had their local versions of Baal... Under Ahab Israel became yet another Baal-worshiping nation state.” (ZIBBC)

Baal and Asherah (vss. 32-33). Israel had given its allegiance to Baal numerous times in her history. While traveling toward the Promised Land, they had been seduced by Moabite women to worship their idol (Numbers 25.1-9). Throughout the period of the Judges, Israel would turn away from Jehovah to worship the Baals (Judges 2.11-13; 3.7; 6.25-32; 8.33; 10.6). While the people put their Baals away during the days of Samuel (1Samuel 7.2-6), the temptation to serve Baal would remain. “As the storm god and bringer of rain, Baal was recognized as sustaining the fertility of crops, animals, and people. His followers often believed that sexual acts performed in his temple would boost Baal’s sexual prowess, and thus contribute to his work in increasing fertility.” (Lexham Bible Dictionary) That Baal and Asherah would be the principle gods worshipped by the Canaanites is due to their association with agriculture and fertility. In a society dependent on rainfall and the fertility of both the ground and livestock, these “gods” would have constantly vied for the affection of any people, including Jehovah’s people.

In his days Hiel the Bethelite built Jericho (vs. 34). On the surface, this passage demonstrates the ambition of Ahab, as would numerous other building projects. However, we also know that this was done with blatant disregard for the Lord’s command (see Joshua 6.26). Could the passage also demonstrate a deeper issue? Why would God command that Jericho not be rebuilt? For centuries the city had stood watch at the pass into the interior of Canaan. Could it be that the Lord was saying Israel should put its trust in Him, not in fortifications? Thus, Ahab put his trust in fortifications, not the Lord.
It is significant that right after we are introduced to Ahab and Jezebel who “did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1Kings 16.33), we are introduced to Elijah (1Kings 17.1). This man of God, who would risk his life by confronting kings, is given little introduction other than stating that he was from Tishbe in Gilead (on the eastern side of the Jordan River) and that his family still worshipped Jehovah (his name means, “My God is Yahweh”). His background and history are secondary to the fact that he was a faithful spokesman for the Lord.

The work of Elijah and Elisha would continue throughout the reigns of Ahab and his two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram. Israel’s rulers and her people may have forgotten God, but He had not forgotten them! “Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah through all His prophets and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments, My statutes according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you through My servants the prophets.”” (2 Kings 17:13, NASB95)

The accounts that follow emphasize several principles. First, Jehovah is proven to be superior to any other God. Thus, Elijah questioned the people, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21, NASB95) What preceded that question, and what followed, showed Jehovah’s vast superiority to Baal. It was Jehovah who caused the rains to stop, and it was Jehovah who allowed them to return. Baal was shown to be impotent in both counts. Second, these accounts show God’s ability to provide for His people (as He provided for Elijah) and even for the nations (as He provided for the widow at Zarephath, in the land of Sidon). Finally, these accounts show the judgment of God on the idols along with the kings and nations who supported them.

Ahab’s failed opportunity to know the Lord (1Kings 20)

The reign of Ahab was a time when Israel forsook her Lord for other gods. They did this in spite of Jehovah revealing Himself to be the one, true God (1Kings 19) and in spite of the fact that the Lord had provided for her in the past, and continued to do so for His faithful ones. And because Israel had rejected the Lord as her God, she would be judged by Him! And so the Lord proclaimed to Elijah in 1Kings 19.15-17, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. “It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death.” The Lord’s judgment on Israel was coming, and He would utilize various men to bring that judgment about.
1 Kings 20 recounts two wars Israel had with Aram (Syria) during the reign of Ahab. While Israel would be victorious in these battles, they foreshadow the judgment which was swiftly coming on the house of Ahab and ultimately on all of Israel. Beginning with this chapter, Aram becomes a thorn in Israel’s side. The king of Aram may have set his sights on Israel for a couple of reasons: first, Ahab’s alliance with Phoenicia (see 1 Kings 16.31) may have restricted the Arameans access to the lucrative trade markets of Phoenicia. Second, the Assyrian empire was growing during the reign of Shalmaneser III (859-829 BC) and this likely meant that Aram had little prospect of expanding to the north. Thus, they looked to the south and to Israel.

Twice in this chapter Ahab was told that the Lord would grant him victory so that he would “know that I am the Lord” (vss. 13,28). Clearly, the Arameans did not know the Lord, for they thought he was localized deity (vs. 23), but the tragedy is that Israel did not know the Lord either. Even though the Lord twice gave Ahab victory, his treaty with Ben-hadad proved that he didn’t know the Lord.

» Ben-hadad king of Aram (vs. 1). This appears to be a dynastic name as several kings of Aram bear the name.

» Their gods are gods of the mountains (vs. 23). This was in keeping with pagan beliefs that deities were localized. Samaria, located in the hill country, was protected by a god of the hills, or so they thought.

» New tactics (vs. 24). “The tactics that will be used for the second campaign are significantly different. In the first round the Aramean coalition attacked Samaria directly. This was intended as siege warfare. In the second phase the emphasis was not on starving the people out or on breaching the walls of a city, but on pitched battle in open terrain where the Arameans intended to take full advantage of their chariotry and cavalry. Whether because of the different battle tactics or because of the failure of the first campaign, the Arameans assigned a new group of field commanders and filled the ranks with new recruits.” (IVP Bible Background Commentary)

» Ben-hadad’s appeal to Ahab (vs. 31). “Ben-Hadad is left with no alternative but to appeal to treaty loyalty, which he expects from Ahab (20:31). ‘Merciful’ is a covenant term denoting loyalty to a relationship. Submission, made evident in their garments, is the basis of appeal to someone who can respect agreements. Course black cloth attached to the waist is a sign of
penitence, a sign of suspension of normal activities to focus on critical relational matters. A rope on the head indicates servitude, either as a prisoner of war or as someone who has given up his rights to one who has the power of life and death." (NIV Application Commentary)

» Ahab’s mercy (vss. 32-33). “By referring to Ben-Hadad as his brother and taking him up into his chariot, Ahab is expressing his willingness to renegotiate their former relationship.” (IVP Bible Background Commentary)

» talent of silver (vs. 39). a talent of silver was ~ 100 times the price of a slave according to the Law (Exodus 21.32).

Judgment on Ahab (1Kings 21-22)

1Kings 21.25 declares, “surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in in the sight of the Lord, because Jezebel his wife incited him.” This statement is made immediately following their treachery in dealing with Naboth, and to better understand their treachery we must first understand the importance of the land to Israel. First, the land was the inheritance of Israel and was divided first by tribes then by individual families in each tribe (Numbers 26.52-56). And since the land was their inheritance, it was not to be transferred from one tribe to another (Numbers 36.7-8).

Finally, consider the Lord’s words in Leviticus 25.23, “The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.” The Lord went on to provide for how the land could be redeemed (vss. 24-28), but His point was clear: it was His land and the promised inheritance of His people. And what He had provided for His people should remain theirs. Thus, Ahab and Jezebel didn’t just commit murder and theft, they deprived Naboth and his family of their rightful inheritance. And they would be judged for it!

» Jezreelite (21.1). Jezreel was ~ 23 miles from Samaria.

» Give me your vineyard (21.2). Israel’s king should have protected the rights of the people (see Deuteronomy 17.14-20), but God revealed that their kings would oppress them (1Samuel 8.14). Ahab’s request smacks of the latter.


» Judgment pronounced (21.19). The fulfillment of this prophecy occurred in stages. First, Ahab’s blood was licked up by dogs (1Kings 22.38), but then his son Joram was cast on this ground (2Kings 9.25-26).

Jehoshaphat (22.2). We will cover the king of Judah’s alliances with Ahab in greater detail in our next lesson. “It is generally assumed that the reason their alliance remained strong was because of the threat of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III who was making his way westward. He finally posed a threat to southern Aram in 853, where he was met by a coalition of twelve western nations at the Battle of Qarqar. Shalmaneser lists Ahab of Israel and Hadadezer of Damascus as two of the most significant parties in the alliance which was led by Iarhuleni of Hamath. Qarqar is on the Orontes River about 150 miles north of Damascus, but only 25 miles north of Hamath. Though Shalmaneser claims victory, study of subsequent history suggests that the western coalition succeeded in their major objective. It was not until ten or twelve years later, after the confederacy had eroded, that Shalmaneser finally shows any indication of control in the region. It is most likely the general success against Shalmaneser that gave Ahab the confidence to take military action against the Arameans and try to regain Ramoth Gilead.” (IVP Bible Background Commentary)

Ramoth-gilead (22.3). Ben-hadad had not been faithful to his promise (see 1Kings 20.34). “It was an all-important city on the Transjordanian highway that connected Arabia and Aram. From this site a convenient ridge descended to the Jordan Valley and over to Jezreel and Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley.” (ZIBBC).

Micaiah (vs. 8). His name means “who is like Yahweh?” Possible he was the prophet who rebuked Ahab in 1Kings 20.42.

Sheep which have no shepherd (22.17). depicts a lack of leadership that results in ruin (see Numbers 27.16-17; Zech. 13.7; Matthew 9.36; 26.31). It could be argued that Israel was already without a shepherd in that they were not following their true Shepherd (cf. Psalm 23).

Micaiah’s vision (vss. 19-23). “Prophetic visions are anthropomorphistic. They do not always correspond to reality. Such visions are the vehicle used to convey a cardinal truth to the mind of the prophet. In this case the truth is that Ahab’s death in battle had been foreordained in the counsels of God, and that divine wisdom had devised a means for accomplishing this goal... Ahab wished to be guided by false prophets. The justice of God permitted him to be so guided.” (James Smith)

Man drew his bow at random (vs. 34). There was no escaping the Lord’s justice.