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ELIJAH AND THE TYRIAN ALLIANCE

SARTELL PRENTICE

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THE separation of Judah from Israel under Rehoboam left the Northern Kingdom weak at the time when she was called upon to face the ambitious and aggressive power of Damascus under Benhadad. Coupled with her weakness was the exceeding value of her situation, for Samaria lay at the ganglion of all the trade routes which ran from east to west and from north to south. The roads which ran to the great ports of the Mediterranean Sea, to Tyre, Sidon and to Acca, led past the gateways of Samaria; the road to Philistia and thence to Egypt, the road to Jerusalem and thence to Elath, the road over Jordan and thence southward to Moab, Edom, Petra and Elath, the northern road to Damascus, all passed through the land of Samaria. Samaria was a ganglion and a gateway, an exceeding temptation to any commercial power which felt strong enough to follow the pathway of ambition.

Isolated on the South, threatened on the North, Ahab turned to the West and sought to secure his frontiers against Aramaean aggression by an alliance with Ethbaal, priest of Astarte and king over both Tyre and Sidon. This alliance with Tyre for protection against Damascus became the keystone of Ahab's foreign policy.

An alliance with Tyre was no novelty in Israel's history. Both Solomon and Omri had effected alliances with that maritime Power, but these earlier treaties were commercial only. Was the alliance of Ahab merely a continuance of what had become almost a tradition, or was it a new departure in diplomacy?

Was this alliance commercial or was it military? The question is important.

In the first place, Ahab had great need of a military alliance. The security of his northern frontier was the primary necessity. It would be idle to heap up wealth from a commercial alliance, if a king of Damascus could use anything like the words which the book of Kings puts into Benhadad's mouth: "Thou shalt deliver unto me thy silver and thy gold, and thy wives and thy children. Yet I will send my servants unto thee tomorrow and they shall search thy house and whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes, they shall take away." The general condition of anarchy which obtained through much of Ahab's reign, the constant raids, by both Aramaeans and Midianites, who fell upon small parties travelling Samaria's roads, carrying away spoils and captives, emphasize the futility of a commercial alliance which piled up wealth but left the land a prey to the military superiority of Damascus.

The terms of the alliance are unusual, if a mere commercial treaty was all that Ahab had in mind. It would be wholly within the custom if Jezebel had been allowed to have her own altar and priests of her father's faith within the palace walls, but the attempt to establish the worship of the Tyrian Baal, Melkarth, and of the Tyrian goddess, Astarte, on an equal level with the altars and worship of Jehovah has no parallel in the previous history of either Israel or Judah. Ahab did not mean to abandon the worship of Jehovah nor to proscribe it. The fact that he gave two of his sons names which were compounded with the name *Jah*, (Ahaziah and Jehoram) clearly indicates that Ahab intended no apostasy. He planned no more than the addition of the worship of the Tyrian deities on equal terms with the worship of Jehovah. Nevertheless, the establishment of these foreign cults invited rebellion, as Ahab must have foreseen. It meant that he would have to face the unrelenting opposition of all the conservative forces of his land; the bitter antagonism of the people, the priests, and the prophets of Jehovah. The evidence of this opposition is not delayed. Elijah, sprung from the soil of Gilead, a land that bred conservatism and fanatic adherence to the ancient faith, is the first and most

energetic spokesman of the opposition, but he does not stand alone. We see again the emergence of the Sons of the Prophets, those stormy petrels who appear in every hour of Israel's danger from foreign rulers or from foreign gods, and these followed Elijah in proclaiming everywhere the exclusive character of Jehovah's claims and Jehovah's worship. The complaint of Elijah: "they have forsaken thy covenant, cast down thy altars and slain thy prophets with the sword" shows the bitterness of the preaching, for Ahab slew no prophet who kept his tongue from political themes, he overturned no altar which was merely a place of sacrifice. The prophets he slew were preachers of resistance to Jezebel, to the priests who ate at her table, and to the infection of Israel's worship by these imported gods of Tyre and Sidon.

The fire thus kindled blazed on until it broke out at last in the revolt of Jehu and the slaughter of Jezebel and the sons of Ahab.

Ahab could not have been ignorant of the effect his alliance with Tyre would have upon the families, the priests, and the prophets of the old faith. Would he have challenged these forces, as no king of Judah or Israel had ever challenged them, for a mere commercial alliance, especially when that alliance would leave his frontiers open to the armies and raiding parties of Damascus? Finally, although we are told none of the terms of the Tyrian alliance, other than the marriage with Jezebel and the establishment of the Tyrian worship, we are told the terms of the other alliance effected by Ahab, that with Judah, and this was unmistakably military in its character, and follows closely what we know of the Tyrian alliance. Ahab marries his daughter Athaliah to Jehoram son of Jehoshaphat, and the worship of the Tyrian deities is set up in Jerusalem. Jehoahaphat marches with Ahab against Moab; Ahaziah, his grandson, joins Joram of Israel against the Syrians at Ramoth-Gilead, and dies with him at the hands of Jehu.

Do not the known terms of the treaty with Judah throw a light on the unknown terms of the Tyrian alliance, and are we not justified in assuming that both alliances were military as well as commercial?

But while it is easy to see what Ahab had to gain by a military alliance, the question still remains, what had Ethbaal at stake? One can see the advantage to Ethbaal of a commercial alliance, but what had he to gain by a military compact?

A glance at the map and a study of the trade routes may help us to answer. A strong Aramaean power established in Samaria, fortifying Carmel, could command all the roads by which the trade of the East or South could reach the ports of Phoenicia. Damascus, holding the gateway of Esdraelon and Samaria, could divert all traffic to Acca or to Egypt, bargaining in return for the trade of the Nile over the caravan route. The trade of Mesopotamia, of all the hinterland, including that of the port of Elath, and much of the trade of Africa could be diverted and controlled by a Damascus which held Samaria in its grasp. It was evidently vital to the welfare of Tyre that the Syrian should be kept from the plain of Esdraelon and the gateways of Samaria. Otherwise the port of Tyre might die as the Mediterranean cities died after the shifting of the trade routes in the 16th Century, and some port to the South or the North would become the center of the traffic which came by sea.

Despite Ahab's alliance with Tyre we find Damascus suddenly arising and pressing upon Samaria; the city was besieged repeatedly under Benhadad II, once being reduced to the extreme of famine, while Hazael stripped Israel of all of her possessions east of the Jordan, and throughout his long reign continually encroached upon that land. Yet Tyre sits still and lifts no hand in Israel's defense. If Ahab had effected a military alliance with Tyre, what had happened to destroy its effectiveness?

Let us go to the great gathering of Israel on Carmel. The story of the contest on Carmel evidently belongs to one of the earliest strata of the book of Kings, and probably dates from within fifty years of Elijah's time. We are justified in accepting the account of some kind of a contest upon Carmel between Elijah and the priests of Baal, before a great gathering of the people and in the presence of the king. The issue of that contest left Elijah in a position of temporary control, and he used his power to secure the massacre of the priests of Melkarth, and if

we are right in reading the priests of Astarte instead of the priests of the Asherah, then the massacre included the priests of both the Tyrian deities.

But who were these priests whom Elijah slew?

If the Baal whom Ahab had established in Israel had been the Baal of Canaan, there were many both of Canaanite stock and of Hebrew blood who were familiar with the forms, rites, and sacrifices which belonged to that altar. But the worship of Melkarth and of Astarte was new in Israel, there were none indigenous to the land who knew "the manner"¹ of these deities. The priests who had fed at Jezebel's table, and whom Elijah slew, had come with Jezebel from Tyre, they were a part of the royal cortege. Some of them may well have been fellow-priests of Ethbaal, King of Tyre and High Priest of Astarte: some of them doubtless had been connected with the royal chapel of Melkarth in Tyre, all of them were of Tyrian blood and citizenship. If the establishment of the Tyrian forms of worship and the sending of these Tyrian priests had been a part of the terms of the alliance, then the slaughter of these priests in the very presence of the king was a most brutal and insolent breaking of the alliance. When Ahab returned to Jezreel that night, he doubtless held a long and anxious conference with Jezebel. He saw the keystone of his foreign policy suddenly fallen at his feet; he saw the alliance with Tyre broken, Damascus freed from all restraint, and his borders again ablaze. There was but one dim hope: if by any means he could persuade Ethbaal that he had been as much a victim of Elijah's violence as had been the priests of Baal; that he had been powerless to avert the disaster, that he wholly repudiated it and stood detached from it and from all responsibility, there was yet some measure of hope that he could save something of the alliance from the wreckage of Carmel. But how could he speak to Ethbaal with any voice that would carry conviction? Obviously but in one way. If he could get the head of Elijah to Ethbaal before the tidings came, or at least hard upon the heels of the bearer of those tidings, all might yet be well. So the word went

¹ Cf. the colonists in Samaria, 2 Kings 17 *et* ff.

forth: "The head of Elijah by about this time tomorrow." But when the servants of the king came seeking Elijah he was nowhere to be found. The one and only proof of Ahab's sincerity which might have availed to soften the grief and anger of the King of Tyre could not be presented; and so, when the narrative is resumed, it begins with the statement that "Benhadad gathered all his host together and went up and besieged Samaria and warred against it."

The effects of that scene on Carmel can be traced for long years in the history of both Israel and Judah. Because of it there is constant strife between Israel and Damascus, until pressure from Assyria gives Samaria a brief period of quiet as she waits the hour of her own fall before the very forces that gave her respite. Because of it Jehoshaphat leads forth the armies of Judah to Gilead and to Moab side by side with Israel's king. Because of it Ahaziah of Judah fights in Gilead and dies in Megiddo. Because of it Athaliah comes to Jerusalem to destroy the House of David and dismantle the Temple of Jehovah; and, finally, the very reformation of Joash is a reaction against the Tyrian paganism which the daughter of Ahab and of Jezebel had brought with her to the City of David.