

CINCINNATI CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

SYNCRETISM IN OUR FAITH: COMPARING *REALPOLITIK* FOLK-RELIGION IN  
AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY WITH THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL LEADING  
UP TO THE AHABITE PARENTHESIS

SUBMITTED TO DR. MARK ZIESE  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
BCS 651, HISTORY OF ISRAEL: THE MONARCHY

BY  
JUSTIN SINGLETON  
DECEMBER 6, 2010

SYNCRETISM IN OUR FAITH: COMPARING *REALPOLITIK* FOLK-RELIGION IN  
AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY WITH THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL LEADING  
UP TO THE AHABITE PARENTHESIS

In 2007, I made the choice to further my education and take my family from just below the state median income<sup>1</sup> to living \$13,000 under the poverty guidelines<sup>2</sup> -- a change of about \$40,000 a year. In a completely technical sense, I am poor. I have a wonderful wife and several children for whom I have struggled to keep food on the table, clothes on their backs, and a roof over their head. At the same time, though, I have gained no debt, accomplished many goals, traveled the world, and am well on my way to complete more goals for my family and even for myself. I am poor, but I am also free.

Much could be said about the fact that I have lived a great life, complete with technological gadgets, all the while being labeled among the lowest of my peers. In fact, it seems that the lowest and poorest of Americans live “higher on the hog” than some of the richest of the ancients. The difference is in what we call the American dream.

In America, each and every citizen has the right to three distinct programs: life, liberty, and his or her individual pursuit of happiness. This includes the freedom to one’s personal quest

---

<sup>1</sup> “State Median Income Estimate for a Four-Person Family,” *Federal Register* 74, no. 48 (March 13, 2009): 10924.

<sup>2</sup> “Delayed Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines for the Remainder of 2010,” *Federal Register* 75, no. 148 (August 3, 2010): 45629.

for wealth or lack there-of; it also includes the public liberty of ideological choices and speech. Why, if I do not like what my government is doing, I can grab a placard, sign a petition, and even vote entire groups out of office.

Beyond all of this, I, as an American, can choose which religion or denominational affiliation I want to be a part of, and I can openly preach my religion (and have done so) without fear of government reprisal.

The simple fact of the matter is that I am free, and as an American I am able to live my life however I please.

### **Biblical Differences**

Of course, living under a king would complicate the American vision of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, for a king's command can trump all of an individual's dreams. In fact, according to the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 8), life under a king is very much different than life in a western, capitalist-driven, free-market, democratic republic. The easiest example of this is that of a building project. If a monarch has a building project – and who does not want to be remembered! – he simply tells his subjects to build it; sure, the king may pay for the labor and materials, but the labor force is often charged to drop their daily lives and do what the king commands (1 Kgs 5:13-14). In our new world, companies bid for the job, workers are paid handsomely, and everything must fall in line with what the people have previously determined to be fair. The kings could draft soldiers at will (1 Sam 14:52) and force labor (2 Chr 2:2). Except for in dire need, our nation seeks volunteers and will often move entire families to the work site. In the land of Israel, home of the chosen people, a king could do whatever he wanted to do simply because he was king.

Probably the most significant change in the history of Israel concerning religious freedom was the Ahabite parenthesis, a period of thirty-three years devastating the Northern Kingdom with deep-rooted and state sponsored Ba'alism.

Ahab, who ruled from 874-853 BC,<sup>3</sup> was the father of this episode. Married to a Sidonian princess, Ahab quickly aligned himself with her religion, bringing, for the first time,<sup>4</sup> pure Ba'al worship to the forefront of Israelite theology. It was not long before the wife of Ahab began to use her position of power and prestige to limit the worship of Yahwism by first killing the prophets of Yahweh.

Most Americans cannot imagine trying to live a life dedicated to the Lord in such a hostile environment, but dedicated Israelites did exist. The Scriptures mention seven thousand who did not bend their knees to Ba'al (1 Kgs. 19:18), but specific names are given as well. One Obadiah, the palace supervisor (not a prophet), seems to have continued to fear and obey the Lord while living under the king (1 Kgs. 18:3), for at risk of his own life, he managed to hide and tend for a hundred prophets fleeing from Jezebel. While living obediently, though, even Obadiah continued to fear for his own life (1 Kgs. 18:9).

In truth, Ahab seems to be not much more than a puppet under the wings of his Canaanite wife – who continued to live and push her theology throughout the entire Ahabite parenthesis. The most famous of her and Ahab's crimes against their subjects is the case of Naboth's vineyard – eminent domain to the extreme! When Ahab saw a prized piece of land adjacent to his palace, he first offered to buy it but later, after his wife had Naboth murdered, proceeded to

---

<sup>3</sup> Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Kregel Academic & Professional, 1994), 10.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Patrick D Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 57. Miller states that "[t]he rise of Baalism among the Yahwists, especially in the Northern Kingdom but also in Judah, may have been under the influence of Jezebel and the Phoenician worship of Baal."

simply take what he liked. His wife's reaction to her husband before she assigned the innocent's death was simply, "You are the king of Israel!" The intended meaning being that, of course, the king can do what he wills.

While it is hard to imagine living the faith-life in such hostility, the faith-life was continued throughout this time. Yahwism was not beaten. Yahweh's loyalists still existed. Though many hid, there was never a time when Yahweh's people had completely died off or when Yahweh allowed his truth to fail. Though the wolves were many, Yahwism persisted.

To the American it seems almost equally hard to imagine living simple life without the basic American tenants of freedom. Why, when even a hint of religious persecution comes to the ear, it seems that the entire church grabs placards, signs petitions, and moves to vote entire groups out of office. While this is not wrong, I do wonder how this compares to the past Yahwists who slowly merged secular life and politics with Yahwism until there could be seen no difference. Are we adapting our Yahwism to the socio-political religion of our age?

### **Who We Really Are**

As in Biblical times, the *realpolitik* folk religion differentiated itself from pure Yahwism as seen in the Law of Moses, so in modern times the *realpolitik* folk religion of Christianity (the modern socio-political religion of our day) has differentiated itself from Historic-Biblical Christianity. This seems to happen in our age by blurring politics and pluralism with what the church has always taught to be true, and so in Old Testament times as well.

In the Biblical world, this could be seen not in the Ahabite parenthesis (which seemed to be purely Ba'alistic) but what led to the Ahabite parenthesis – namely the syncretism of the local religion (Canaanite Ba'alism) with Yahwism.

Of course, the cause of this syncretism has so often been accurately traced to the disobedience of the mandate to destroy the Canaanites (and thus their religion) in the original conquest of the Holy Land. Here, we find Joshua opening the land through military might, conquering key beachheads in different localities, and then dividing the land into the prescribed tribal allotments with the intention that these tribes would carry out the mandate of Yahweh, which was to rid the land of the Canaanites. What happened next, as can be seen in the biblical text, was not a quick drive through the land, but rather merely an attempt followed quickly by an acceptance of Israel's neighbors (syncretism began).

This is not the only error; as a matter of fact, the history of the Northern Kingdom is riddled with failure after failure on the part of the people and the kings. Every time a king came to the throne we find that whatever his good qualities, he continued to lead Israel away from pure Yahwism after the manner of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 13:33).

What must be imagined is what one often misses when reading a quick summary of a king list: the fact that the Northern Kingdom continued for two hundred years. These were not two hundred stale years, but rather two hundred years of more than a dozen kings who allowed a continual but slow progression (if we skip over the Ahabite parenthesis for a moment) of slipping from pure book-form Yahwism (from before the divided kingdoms) into a kind of folk-religion where Yahweh has become blurred with Ba'al.

Evidence of this blurring is found not only in the text (beginning with Jeroboam's calves themselves), but also in the material record. Take as evidence, for instance, a large storejar from the early 8<sup>th</sup> century that contains the inscription concerning the Northern Kingdom deity, "I

[b]lessed you by (or ‘to’) Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah”<sup>5</sup> – Asherah being commonly known as the wife of Ba’al, thus Yahweh is equated with Ba’al.

What we find in the “real” Israel is that although God had moved his prophets and certain people, most of the people tried to move in a different direction. Now, transpose this idea of syncretism to the United States and what we find is not much different than what we have seen in the past.

Where in ancient Israel we find traces of Canaanite religion mixed into the worship of Yahweh, in America we find traces of Eastern, pagan, and other religions mixed with Christianity. More to the point, though, in the United States we find political opinions being mixed with Christianity. Now, it must be stated that I firmly believe that my politics are shaped by my religion (I consider myself a values voter), but what within my religion can transfer over, or rather, how much of my religion is based solidly on Scripture and how much of my religion is based on the cultural syncretism of my age?

As a way of example, we can turn to the modern state of Israel. A great number of evangelicals are currently pressing for the expansion of the borders of Israel into Palestinian territory and beyond. These political beliefs are based primarily on the theological presuppositions that “the Jewish people have a right to live in their ancient land of Israel, and that the modern State of Israel is the fulfillment of this historic right.”<sup>6</sup> Now, it must be understood that this theological position is highly debated, not a part of historic Christian belief,

---

<sup>5</sup> William G. Dever, *Did God Have A Wife? Archaeology And Folk Religion In Ancient Israel* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 162.

<sup>6</sup> This is taken from “The Israel Pledge” published by Christians United for Israel as seen from at the following link, accessed December 10, 2010: <https://secure2.convio.net/cufi/site/SPageServer?pagename=TheIsraelPledge>. Note the language in the pledge when it says of the ethnically and religiously Jewish people: “We pledge to stand with our brothers and sisters in Israel ...” This, also, is a highly controversial claim implicating salvation through Christ to non-believing Jewish people.

and ultimately leads to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Arab Muslims, Jews, and Christians – of whom many have already been forced into apartheid refugee camps.

While a highly controversial topic, one can easily see a syncretistic mixture of Christianity and the popular religion (politics) of the day. Instead of basing our politics on standard, historic Christian beliefs like the evangelism of the lost, many Christian groups, basing their politics on controversial apocalyptic doctrines, exist today bent on the syncretistic-Christian beliefs commonly referred to by its opponents as the “Israel can do no wrong” belief; in short, we find a *realpolitik* folk religion that replaces the true book-form of Christianity.

### **How We Got Here**

Today, as in the time of the biblical kings, the discourse communities of the populace mold the minds of those within their community. In Israel, Ba’alim spread to become so mixed with Yahwism that judges and then prophets were consistently deployed to urge the people back to God. In America, Christian politics has become blurred with historic Christianity to the point that large groups now praise the death of American troops, physically injure the homosexual and abortionist, and fund the displacement of certain ethnic groups. The question is how did we get here?

If one were to study the evolutionary move of modern Christian thought, one would be quite surprised to find that much of what the church believes today is not what the church once believed in the past. With constant denominational bickering, changing schools of thought, and even simple human selfishness, the church has become so entangled in cultural tradition, that many movements and denominations are now pushing the grand idea that we should go “back to the Bible” to find our doctrines.



These evolutionary changes within the church are sometimes products of cultural change, what many refer to as the zeitgeist or “spirit” of the age. Historical examples are plenty. On the day that Constantine legalized Christianity and made it the state religion of the Roman Empire, mass conversions were made simply because it was the way to get ahead in one’s personal interests – thus the spirit of the time led to a large influx of powerful, but ungodly men. For a more recent example, we look to the founding of our great nation and see, in the Christian world, a battle between democratic republicans and federalists, both using their personally and fervently held political beliefs to not only split churches but to make enemies of (here I think of the battle between Bishop Francis Asbury [Federalist] and Rev. James O’Kelly [Republican]).

While I consider myself a firm historical Christian, I can also become quite zealous in my political beliefs, even to the point of momentarily understanding such splits during in-house debates, but when it comes to specifically basing political protests on my Christian beliefs, I am somewhat at a lost. Certain key issues such as abortion, marriage, and homosexuality are quite obviously issues in which I can take up my placard in a God honoring manner, but what about taxes, education, and foreign policy? I may have secular political opinions on these matters and speak my mind, but dare I stand before an audience shouting, “Thus saith the Lord”? Is this not the same as was spoken during the Christian Crusades and from the mouths of the prophets to Ahab before he attacked Ramoth Gilead? Perhaps, as Christians, we need to wonder how effective our mouths can be both for good and for the evil.

### **Conclusion: Disentangling the American Dream**

The promises of gospel faith have become entangled with the American dream, and these promises now need to be disentangled. The great desire for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is not necessarily a promise from God.

Hebrews 11, labeled the faith chapter, gives us wonderful examples of great men of faith. From Abel to Samuel, we find great men who did mighty deeds, but the end of the chapter tells us a different story. This last section of the chapter teaches us that there are times when our beliefs lead us not to a corporate CEO position, but to destitution and affliction. In fact, many in the Western World today have forgotten that we have brothers and sisters in Christ who right now live this.

Before the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan River and began the conquest, as seen in Deuteronomy 8:10, we find Yahweh demanding that when Israel finds goodness and plenty and has become comfortable in the land He has given them, at that time they are to bless Yahweh and remember that He has given them all that is great.

As we have now been in our promised land for longer than the Northern Kingdom of Israel was allowed to stay in her promised land, perhaps now is as good a time as any to think about all that Yahweh has done for us, to become aware of our own syncretisms in our faith, and to stand firm in the phrase “Back to the Bible.”

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Delayed Update of the HHS Poverty Guidelines for the Remainder of 2010.” *Federal Register* 75, no. 148 (August 3, 2010): 45628–45629.

Dever, William G. *Did God Have A Wife? Archaeology And Folk Religion In Ancient Israel*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

Miller, Patrick D. *The Religion of Ancient Israel*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

“State Median Income Estimate for a Four-Person Family: Notice of the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2010 State Median Income Estimates for Use Under the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) (Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number 93.568) Administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services, Division of Energy Assistance.” *Federal Register* 74, no. 48 (March 13, 2009): 10922-10924.

Thiele, Edwin R. *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*. Kregel Academic & Professional, 1994.