

Thyatira

I can hardly believe we are more than half-way through our study of the Seven Letters! This week we will be spending time getting to know about the Church in Thyatira. The town of Thyatira is very different than all the other ones we have looked at. As each of our previous cities claimed to be centers of commerce, culture, or government; Thyatira has no such claim to grandeur. In fact it has very little claim to fame other than a mention in Acts 16:14 as it being the hometown of Paul's first convert in Philippi: Lydia, a cloth merchant who dealt in the rare purple cloth from this region.¹

Thyatira was established from its early beginnings under the Pergamum kings as a garrison town located between Pergamum and Sardis. It was located on the main road between Byzantium and all points east including Persia, India and Egypt. From the time of the Pergamum kings, to the Greek colonial period and through the Roman Empire, soldiers were garrisoned in this town as a means to keep the main land-route open and under control of the prevailing ruler. Pliny the Elder referred to Thyatira as "a city of no first-rate dignity".² The military purpose of Thyatira led to it being established as something of a blue collar town as families of the soldiers settled in the area. It became known for its trade in cloth making, dying and pottery. It possessed no impressive acropolis or outstanding temple. Nothing about the town would point to greatness or might. Its existence was to serve the surrounding cities with military protection and guard against enemy intrusion.

The peace brought on by the Roman Empire led the city to prosper. The necessity of the garrison became less significant. Along the main trade route of Asia Minor, Thyatira's importance was increased out of its position between the two major cities of Pergamum

¹ Her purple die came from a local plant, the madder root, the color of which was known as "Turkey Red" as opposed to the famed and highly prized royal purple, a dye made from shellfish found in the seas off Phoenicia and Sparta—*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, Ramsey.

² Trench, R.C.; *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia*.

and Sardis. It became a communications center and grew into a trade center. Wealth and prosperity came to Thyatira by the 2nd Century AD, one hundred years after John's letter to the Church in Thyatira. At the time of John's letter, Thyatira was small, but growing and was known for its extensive network of trade guilds. Inscriptions have been uncovered making mention of guilds for wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths. A coin from Thyatira illustrating a bronze worker making a helmet for the Goddess Pallas-Athena may attest to the importance of bronze making and weaponry to this small city. A special bronze alloy was known to come from this area described as "brilliant", "shining" copper or bronze used in both weaponry and idol making³. This may be significant to the reference in Revelation 1:15 and 2:18 of Christ's feet of "burnished bronze". Notably a shrine to the sun god Tyrinnus, whose physical description bears strong resemblance to the description of Christ in Revelation 2:18⁴ was located in this city, as well as a shrine to Apollo.

Josephus makes mention of the existence of Jews in Thyatira from the time of it being a Greek colonial outpost under Seleucus I. This would explain the distinction of Lydia being a "god-fearer", a gentile who had come to know the Jewish God and the ways of the Jews. Synagogues were certainly present among the Jewish population in Thyatira. By the time of John's letter to the church, many Christians in Thyatira would have been facing the persecutions of the Romans, as well as, the Jews who were exempt from participating in the requisite Roman cult worship.

While there were no major temples to be found in Thyatira, each trade had its own guild associated with it, and each guild had its patron god and shrine. Guilds were the center of both social and religious life in Thyatira. Membership in the guilds would have been mandatory for tradesmen, and members of each guild were obliged to participate in pagan rites of worship to their patron god. This would have included idolatry and ritual immorality.⁵ Trade and business would have been virtually impossible to Christians who refused to compromise their faith. Refusing guild membership would threaten their livelihood and bring about the persecution and ostracism of those refusing to associate

³ Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

⁴ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

⁵ Swindoll, Charles: *Swindoll's New Testament Insights: Insights on Revelation*

with the guilds. As we will see in our study this week, not only did some in this church turn to compromising with idolatry to ease the burden of their faith within this oppressive community, but also succumbed to the oppressive side of toleration within the church itself.

Jezebel

In order to fully understand the significance of Christ's identification of the woman in the Thyatiran church leading believers astray, it would be a good idea to spend some time getting to know her namesake. Jezebel was King Ahab's queen. Ahab ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 874-853 B.C., approximately 125 years after the reign of King David. Ahab is not a descendant of King David. When the Kingdom of Israel divided at the end of King Solomon's reign, Jeroboam rose to power over the northern kingdom. Jeroboam had been an official in the court of King Solomon. Ahab was a descendant of Jeroboam.

Jezebel came from the land of the Sidonians and brought with her into Israel the worship of Baal and Asherah. She had strong influence over Ahab, who was already a King not following in the way of the Lord. In fact, 1 Kings 16: 30-33 says this of King Ahab:

"Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. ³¹ He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. ³² He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. ³³ Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him."

At the point in which we will be taking up our scripture passage today, Israel has been suffering the effects of a severe three year drought. This drought was a judgment brought upon Israel for its sin of embracing the idol worship of Baal and Asherah.



1 Kings 18:1-4, 16-19:18

Instead of worshipping the One True God of Israel, Ahab welcomed the immoral practices of idol worship strictly prohibited by Israel's sacred scriptures. His wife Jezebel

promoted this worship throughout the land, building temples and high places of pagan worship, and employing hundreds of priests to serve in those temples. The idols of Baal were represented by the form of a bull, an image of strength and fertility representing lust for power and sexual pleasure.⁶ Not only did the worship of Baal include relations with temple prostitutes, and animal sacrifice, but also at times human sacrifice.⁷ God's prophets repeatedly called Ahab and Jezebel, as well as, all Israel to repent of their ways, pointing out the immorality and sin against God in pursuing false idols. Jezebel put to death God's prophets to silence and counter their words. The false prophets were an obstacle to the people of Israel. They advocated and led the people to believe that their sinful behavior was not immoral. They claimed the God of Israel was cruel, demanding and vindictive, while Baal and Asherah tolerated "natural" inclinations and desires. The false prophets told people what they wanted to hear, which was more pleasing to the people than acknowledging their sinful ways and repenting of them.

Jezebel's prophets also told her what she wanted to hear. We hear that 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah dined at her table (1 Kings 18:19) indicating her favor towards them. The sheer number of prophets indicates the prevalence and popularity of the cult in Israel during Ahab's reign. They predicted power and glory for her and Ahab in their reign over Israel. She invested time and money in the promotion of Baal worship throughout Israel. She garnered power and reputation for herself. She exerted influence over Ahab, using her power to gain whatever she and Ahab desired. By not only condoning, but promoting sinful activities she controlled the population of Israel. She held one of the highest positions in all Israel. She was powerful, persuasive and evil.

Israel had embraced Baal worship, either out of fear and intimidation from Jezebel and her priests, or out of tolerance and keeping the peace. There was certainly a remnant of faithful Israelites, but the majority had turned to Baal worship. The only one who stood up openly and confronted Jezebel was Elijah.

Elijah presented himself before Ahab as the spokesman of the Lord and pointed out that Israel's problems were not caused by Elijah, but by Ahab himself. The famine on the

⁶ Life Application Study Bible Notes, 1 Kings 18:18, pg. 529

⁷ Holman Bible Dictionary, "Baal Worship".

land was a judgment against not only Ahab, but also his father, who “[has] abandoned the LORD's commands and have followed the Baals.” (1 Kings 18:18). Elijah rebuked Ahab for turning his back on the Lord’s commands, the Law, and for leading Israel astray. Ahab had compromised his faith for glory, power and prestige. Israel was suffering physically and spiritually for it. Elijah commanded Ahab to gather Israel before the Lord at Mt. Carmel, the most sacred high place of Baal worship.

Elijah demanded that the people of Israel take a stand. Choose between God and Baal. He said in 1 Kings 18:21 *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is god, follow him.”* Worshipping both Yahweh and Baal was not an option. All day long the priests of Baal chanted, implored, and mutilated themselves in an attempt to draw Baal’s attention and consume the sacrifice. Nothing happened. In the evening Elijah prepared his sacrifice to the Lord before all Israel. He even instructed that water be poured three times all over the altar, the sacrifice and the wood. When the sacrifice was consumed by fire, no one could say it was by trickery on Elijah’s part. It was by God alone that the fire consumed the sacrifice, displaying God Almighty’s power and might. Elijah simply addressed the Lord as a servant of the Lord, obeying the Lord’s command. He was not working on his own initiative, but at the command of the Lord. Scripture records:

“At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. ³⁷ Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so these people will know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” (1 Kings 18:36-37)

The Lord responded by consuming the sacrifice and all Israel fell to the ground and worshiped the Lord. Elijah commanded them to seize all the prophets of Baal and put them to death in accordance with the Law:

If you hear it said about one of the towns the LORD your God is giving you to live in ¹³ that wicked men have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods you have not known), ¹⁴ then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, ¹⁵ you must

certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. Destroy it completely,⁽¹⁾
(Deuteronomy 13:12-15)

Our passage shows us that prophecy is not enough. The “inspired messages” of these false prophets are not backed up with divine power. One of God’s prophets was able to defeat 450 false prophets because there was no power in proclaiming Baal’s name. Only the God of Israel has power. One prophet speaking truth was able to defeat 450 false prophets, revealing the inefficacy of idol worship to all of Israel. This day brought Israel back to the Lord. This event also brought the end of the three year drought. The Lord’s blessing and grace poured out on Israel in the heavy rains for which Elijah ardently prayed. The false gods and their prophets had been defeated and disgraced. But Jezebel had been humiliated.

From a human perspective we can understand why Elijah was fearful of retribution from Jezebel for the death of the prophets of Baal. She was furious, powerful, and murder came easy to her. He was terrified, and to him it seemed all of Israel had forsaken their true God. Elijah feared her power and failed to trust in God’s protection. Elijah hid himself in the desert because there was nowhere else to go beyond her reach. 1 Kings 18:2-3 tells us that Jezebel had been killing off the Lord’s prophets. She was trying to replace the worship of Israel’s God with the cult worship of Baal and Asherah. We hear that Obediah (Ahab’s servant and overseer of the palace) had hidden away 100 priests of the Lord and kept them alive with food and water. (No easy task in the third year of famine). Elijah is aware of this, but is the only prophet of God left in all Israel (1 Kings 19:14) taking a stand for the Lord. The rest are in hiding. He tells God that all of the *“Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”* (1 Kings 19:10).

This story ends with God restoring Elijah strength, both physically and spiritually. He later stands before Ahab and Jezebel in the name of the Lord and prophesies over them. Before he returns to Ahab, God sends Elijah on a special mission. In 1 Kings 19:15-18 Elijah is sent by God to anoint three important people. First he is sent to Israel’s enemy, to anoint Hazael King of Aram. God will use this pagan king as an instrument of judgment against Ahab and Israel for

their sin of idolatry. Next, Elijah is sent to anoint Jehu to be the next king of Israel, Ahab's successor. Jehu, faithful to the God of Israel, will put to death those in Israel who worshipped Baal. Finally, Elijah is to anoint his own successor, Elisha, who will help Israel return to God. God knowing the heart of Ahab, sets in place his plan for Ahab and the Northern Kingdom.



1 Kings 21:20-24

"Ahab said to Elijah, 'So you have found me, my enemy!'"

"I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. ²¹ I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel--slave or free. ²² I will make your house like that of Jeroboam son of Nebat and that of Baasha son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin."

²³ "And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.'

²⁴ "Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country." 1 Kings 21:20-24 (NIV)

Elijah speaking God's words over Ahab tells him, that he and Jezebel will meet their death and their dynasty will be cut short (during the reign of his son) because he dared provoke the anger of the Lord and led Israel to sin against God (1 Kings 21:21-22). Neither Ahab or Jezebel would receive a burial fit for the King and Queen of Israel, instead their bodies would be discarded outside the city gates like refuse and consumed by dogs and birds of prey. Their family line would be cut off with their son Ahaziah, none of their descendants continued in the history of Israel. God gave Ahab and Jezebel time to repent until it was clear they would not. They trod upon God's patience pursuing their own desires and leading Israel astray. Eventually their time ran out and God's judgment burned against them. God has little patience for those who lead his people to sin. While our holy and righteous God cannot tolerate any sin, in mercy and patience he gives everyone an opportunity to repent. But it seems that leading his people to sin against him is the sin that provokes his anger the most. Ahab and Jezebel repeatedly heard Elijah's call for repentance and repeatedly they ignored it. God's anger and wrath burned against them

and would consume not only them, but also their descendants. Ahab with great humility repented and the Lord told Elijah:

When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

²⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son." 1 Kings 21:27-29

In his mercy, God reduced Ahab's judgment to come to pass in the time of his son, and not on the day that Elijah first issued God's proclamation against the House of Ahab.

Despite God's patience, Ahab still affronted the Lord. 1 Kings 22 tells the story of Ahab seeking assistance from Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, in going to war against the King of Aram. Jehoshaphat tells Ahab to consult a prophet of the Lord. But instead, Ahab seeks counsel from 400 prophets⁸ (22:6). These four hundred prophets tell Ahab what he wants to hear: that he will be victorious against the King of Aram, and he will take the city of Ramoth Gilead. Jehoshaphat asks Ahab "*Is there not a prophet of the Lord here whom we can inquire of?*" (v.7). There were prophets of the Lord in Israel, but Ahab still seeks counsel from false prophets and idols. When the prophet of the Lord arrives and warns Ahab what the Lord told him: "*I saw Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, 'These people have no master. Let each one go home in peace.'*" (v. 17). Ahab's response is "*Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?*"(v.18) Ahab never consulted the prophets of the Lord because Ahab's plans were never in alignment with God's will. He preferred to seek the counsel of the false prophets who glorified his plans telling him he cannot fail, that he would be victorious. They told him what he wanted to hear. They flattered him and played to his pride.

These false prophets were claiming to prophesy in the name of the Lord, telling Ahab, "*Attack Ramoth Gilead and be victorious,' they said, 'for the Lord will give it into*

⁸ Likely the 400 prophets of Asherah that were not present at Mt. Carmel when the 450 prophets of Baal were slain.

the king's hand.'" (v. 12). The Lord's true prophet tells Ahab he will meet his death at Ramoth Gilead. Ahab has him arrested and imprisoned because he is angered by the prophecy and blinded by his pride and desire to go to war against the King of Aram. He was utterly convinced of his own victory because he was seduced by the lies of the false prophets and he could not conceive of the idea of not getting what he desired. He chose to reject God because God did not serve his purposes as did the false prophets. Ahab dies just as God had said he would. Despite his temporary humility and repentance in 1 Kings 21:27-29, he returned to his evil ways and was judged accordingly. God used the false prophets in bringing about Ahab's downfall. Ahab persisted in his sin and God gave him over to it to his own destruction.

1 Kings 21:25-26 states in no uncertain terms the depravity of both King Ahab and his wife Jezebel leaving the following epitaph on their rule and influence over the Kingdom of Israel: *There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the LORD drove out before Israel.*