

BIBLICAL PROPAGANDA FOR KING OMRI

Think of the Bible as a collection of propaganda. Its documents are biased. They are not impartial. Their authors all seem to have their own axes to grind, specific points of view they want to get across to their readers.

In this case “propaganda” doesn’t have to carry the negative overtones we usually associate with the term. According to my edition of Webster’s, propaganda is “any organized effort to spread particular doctrines or information.”

That’s a fair assessment of the biblical writings. For even when they chronicle historical events they do not pretend to be impartial reports. On the contrary, the biblical authors were determined to get a particular message across, even if that meant interpreting history from a somewhat biased point of view.

A good case in point is King Omri. Here’s the background: After the fabled King Solomon died, his kingdom was split in two by civil war. Only two of the twelve tribes stayed loyal to his son. These two are usually known as the southern Kingdom of Judah. The other ten tribes formed the northern Kingdom of Israel.

For the next fifty years the fortunes of northern Israel went up and down, but in general the kingdom dwindled in power and prosperity.

Then Omri came on the scene. After the assassination of the previous ruler and the suicide of another contender Omri instigated a successful coup and usurped the throne of northern Israel.

From then on things got steadily better and better. Omri managed either to subdue the neighboring states which threatened Israel or to negotiate favorable treaties with them.

In several instances these alliances were mutually profitable, and the new trading and commercial agreements were sealed with royal marriages. New wealth began to flow into Israelite markets, and a growing and prosperous middle class began to flourish.

So successful was Omri’s program that he was able to build a new capital city for his country. Eventually Samaria, the new capital, gave its name to the entire territory. Some historians conjecture that Omri’s Israel was wealthier and more prestigious than the united kingdom had ever been under Solomon!

Need more evidence of Omri’s accomplishments? The dynasty he founded lasted for at least three generations. A century after he died, and long after his dynasty had been replaced by another, the official court records of the Assyrian Empire still referred to the northern Kingdom of Israel as “the house of Omri.” All this was accomplished during a reign that lasted only a dozen years.

So why is it that few readers of the Bible can even remember the man’s name? You could attend Sunday or Sabbath School or your church or synagogue for a lifetime without ever hearing about Omri. Well, that’s where the biased viewpoint of the biblical author comes in.

You can check this out by reading two paragraphs in 1 Kings 16 in the Hebrew scriptures (or 3 Kings in some Bibles). Two short paragraphs are all the biblical author devotes to Omri.

He mentions his accession to the throne, the establishment of Samaria, and the length of his reign. Sandwiched in is a cryptic notice about “the might that he showed.” And that’s it! Eight verses in Kings 16:21-28, is all the space Omri gets in the biblical history.

All of which goes to underscore the historian’s biased perspective. For the biblical author was not interested in a king’s political accomplishments as much as he was concerned about his relationship to the Lord God. From the viewpoint of the author of 1 Kings, the only thing that mattered was whether a ruler worshiped the Lord faithfully in the temple at Jerusalem.

Naturally, from that perspective Omri came up on the short end of the stick. For he obviously did not worship at Jerusalem, the capital of the southern Kingdom of Judah, when he had his own brand new capital city. In fact, he did his worshiping (if he worshiped at all) before the golden calves at the outlying shrines which had been established a half century earlier.

So, in a nut shell, what we have in the Bible is a collection of biased propaganda. Like most collections of good literature, it offers unique messages told from specific perspectives. And people who read the Bible miss out on most of the fun if they fail to look for those distinctive viewpoints.