

2 Chronicles 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2nd Chronicles chapter 20 After this the Moabites and Ammonites, and with them some of the Meunites, came against Jehoshaphat for battle. Some men came and told Jehoshaphat, A great multitude is coming against you from Edom, from beyond the sea, and behold they are in Hazazan Tamar, that is Engedi.

Then Jehoshaphat was afraid and set his face to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah assembled to seek help from the Lord, from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the Lord.

And Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, and said, O Lord God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations.

In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. Did you not, O God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?

And they have lived in it, and have built for you in it a sanctuary for your name, saying, If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry out to you in our affliction, and you will hear and save.

[1 : 1 6] And now, behold, the men of Ammon and Moab, a Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy.

Behold, they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession, which you have given us to inherit. O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us.

We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you. Meanwhile, all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. And the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jehaziel, the son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mataniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly.

And he said, Listen, all Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat, Thus says the Lord to you, Do not be afraid, and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours, but God's.

Tomorrow go down against them. Behold, they will come up by the ascent of Ziz. You will find them at the end of the valley, east of the wilderness of Jeruel. You will not need to fight in this battle.

[2 : 2 8] Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid, and do not be dismayed. Tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you.

Then Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshipping the Lord. And the Levites of the Kohathites and the Korahites stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

And they rose early in the morning, and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa. And when they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established.

Believe his prophets, and you will succeed. And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army and say, Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever.

And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. For the men of

Ammon and Moab rose against the inhabitants of Mount Seir, devoting them to destruction. [3 : 42] And when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another. When Judah came to the watchtower of the wilderness, they looked toward the horde, and behold, there were dead bodies lying on the ground.

None had escaped. When Jehoshaphat and his people came to take their spoil, they found among them in great numbers, goods, clothing, and precious things, which they took for themselves until they could carry no more.

They were three days in taking the spoil. It was so much. On the fourth day they assembled in the valley of Bereka, for there they blessed the Lord. Therefore the name of that place has been called the valley of Bereka to this day.

Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy, for the Lord had made them rejoice over their enemies. They came to Jerusalem with harps and lyres and trumpets, to the house of the Lord.

And the fear of God came on all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet, for his God gave him rest all around.

[4 : 48] Thus Jehoshaphat reigned over Judah. He was thirty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Azuba, the daughter of Shilhai.

He walked in the way of Asa his father, and did not turn aside from it, doing what was right in the sight of the Lord. The high places, however, were not taken away. The people had not yet set their hearts upon the God of their fathers.

Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, from first to last, are written in the chronicles of Jehu the son of Hanani, which are recorded in the book of the kings of Israel. After this, Jehoshaphat king of Judah joined with Ahaziah king of Israel, who acted wickedly.

He joined him in building ships to go to Tarshish, and they built the ships in Ezion-Geba. Then Eliezer, the son of Dodavahu of Marashah, prophesied against Jehoshaphat, saying, Because you have joined with Ahaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made.

And the ships were wrecked, and were not able to go to Tarshish. In 2 Chronicles chapter 20, Jehoshaphat and Judah face a great challenge from the east.

[5 : 54] Moab, the Ammonites, and some of the Meunites come out against him for battle. The identity of the Meunites is not entirely clear. It is most likely that they live to the south of Judah, within the territory of Edom around Mount Seah.

The Moabites and the Ammonites come from the far side of the Dead Sea, and they encamp at En-Gedi with the Meunites. En-Gedi is situated about the middle of the west coast of the Dead Sea. It is quite likely that this conflict is caused by the alliance between Jehoshaphat and the northern kingdom.

As the strength of the kingdom of Moab increased, and they successfully rebelled against Israel, they can now turn against Israel's ally to the south, Judah. Seeing the size of the multitude, Jehoshaphat's response is one of fear.

He sets his face to seek the Lord, and proclaims a fast. And the people seem to spontaneously gather together in a great assembly. They join together from all the different parts of Judah, and have a great assembly before the temple.

In Solomon's prayer of dedication in 1 Chronicles 6, verses 28-31, he had declared, If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence, or blight, or mildew, or locust, or caterpillar, if their enemies besiege them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea, is made by any man, or by all your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own sorrow, and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven your dwelling place, and forgive, and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways.

[7 : 24] For you, you only know the hearts of the children of mankind, that they may fear you, and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our fathers. As the king, Jehoshaphat is like the chief worshipper, and he leads the people in prayer before the Lord.

He declares the greatness of the Lord, that the Lord is above all of the nations, that he is the creator, and he is the God of the covenant, the God of their fathers. He has the power of rule.

He is the one who providentially oversees the affairs of men, and no one can withstand him. He recalls God's work in the exodus, and in the conquest of the land. God has driven out the former inhabitants, and he promised the land to his people as an enduring inheritance.

With the construction of the temple came the promise that the Lord would hear prayers directed to the temple. And now, he comes on the basis of what God has done in the past, on the basis of what God has promised, and on the basis of God's power.

The threat that Israel seems to face is an existential one. These forces are not just squabbling over borders. They seem to want to wipe Judah out. And Jehoshaphat underlines this point.

[8 : 28] These enemies want to drive Judah out of the Lord's possession, which he has given to his people to possess. When the Lord brought his people out of Egypt, he did not permit them to displace these particular people, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Edomites.

God has established the borders of the peoples, and he gave these peoples their lands. But now these nations want to displace Judah from the inheritance of the Lord. Jehoshaphat and Judah confess their powerlessness, and they look to the Lord to take action on their behalf.

They cannot do anything, but their eyes are upon him. The assembly of the people is not a regular assembly, just of the males of Judah. Rather, it includes the women and the children. Such a general gathering of the people highlights just how existential the threat they are facing is.

The whole fabric of the life of Judah, every part of its people, is now standing in jeopardy. And the Lord responds with prophecy. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jehaziel, and he gives a prophecy concerning the deliverance of the Lord.

The Lord will save his people, even apart from any action on their part. They will not need to fight. Just stand firm, hold their position, and see the salvation of the Lord on their behalf.

[9 : 36] The language used here is almost exactly the same as that which we find in Exodus chapter 14, verses 13 to 14, preceding the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. And Moses said to the people, Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today.

For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent. Jehaziel seems to be one of the Levitical singers. It is possible that he was not a prophet, and the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him was a surprise to all concerned.

This gathering of the people in an assembly of worship and of prayer is continued as they go out to the battle. They are led not by elite warriors, but by singers. This might recall the defeat of places like Jericho, where priests blowing trumpets and carrying the Ark of the Covenant were central to a liturgical procession that led to the collapse of the walls of the city.

The singers who lead the army of Jehoshaphat lead the people in a song of praise, and when they begin to sing and praise, the Lord acts on their behalf. An ambush is set against them by the Lord. This is presumably a human action against them, and as this great army is taken by surprise, they turn upon each other in mutual suspicion, and they end up largely wiping each other out.

[10 : 52] When Judah sees the aftermath, there are just dead bodies littering the ground. Once again, the careful reader will recall the events of Exodus chapter 14 and the crossing of the Red Sea.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore, in verse 30 of that chapter. As the Egyptians were spoiled by the Israelites, so the men of Judah take the spoil of this invading army.

There is so much spoil to be had that it takes almost three days to gather it all up. They respond by blessing the Lord on the fourth day, and renaming the place where they do that after that event, in order to provide a memorial for future generations.

They return to Jerusalem with celebrations, with harps, lyres, and trumpets, to the house of the Lord. Once again, the triumphal liturgical procession recalls the events of Exodus chapter 14 and 15, in particular the Song of the Sea in chapter 15.

As a consequence of this great victory, the nations around about fear the Lord, knowing that he was the one to bring this great defeat upon the enemies of his people. The result of all of this is that Jehoshaphat enjoys peace on all sides.

[12 : 01] The chapter ends by recounting his reign. He was a faithful king like his father Asa, although he did fail to remove the high places. As in 1 Kings chapter 22, we read of his abortive attempts at seafaring.

In 1 Kings chapter 22, Ahaziah, the king of Israel, wants to join with Jehoshaphat in the enterprise and send some of his men with the men of Judah on the ships. Jehoshaphat declines.

In 2 Chronicles, however, we read that Ahaziah had been a partner with Jehoshaphat in building the vessels in the first place. It seems most likely that the word of Eliezer the prophet against Jehoshaphat in this alliance came between the building of the ships and their actual sailing. And as a result of the prophecy, Jehoshaphat refused to let Ahaziah's men travel with his men on the ships. Nonetheless, the ships are wrecked and nothing comes of the enterprise. In 1 Kings chapter 22, the suggestion is given that the ships are constructed according to a model that is associated with Tarshish.

Here, however, they seem to be designed to go to Tarshish, which raises challenging questions as Tarshish is usually associated with places on the Mediterranean, whereas these ships are built in the Gulf of Aqaba.

[13 : 11] There is very little reason to believe that a circumnavigation of Africa would have been either feasible or even if it were possible for such a fledgling sea power that it would be economical. This then leaves us with the question of what must be referred to by Tarshish.

It seems unlikely that such an obvious problem would have been unnoticed by the chronicler, so there is most likely some straightforward explanation, even if we do not have it. A question to consider.

As in a number of places in Scripture, the great victory of this chapter is a liturgical victory. How do such deliverances help us to think about the worship of the Church?