

2 Kings 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] 2 Kings chapter 16 And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.
- Then Rezan king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Ramaliah king of Israel, came up to wage war on Jerusalem. And they besieged Ahaz, but could not conquer him. At that time Rezan the king of Syria recovered Elath for Syria, and drove the men of Judah from Elath.
- And the Edomites came to Elath, where they dwelt to this day. So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, saying, I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria, and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.
- Ahaz also took the silver and gold that was found in the house of the Lord, and in the treasures of the king's house, and sent a present to the king of Assyria. And the king of Assyria listened to him.
- The king of Assyria marched up against Damascus, and took it, carrying its people captive to Kerr. And he killed Rezan. When king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, he saw the altar that was at Damascus.
- [1 : 3 3] And king Ahaz sent to Uriah the priest a model of the altar, and its pattern, exact in all its details. And Uriah the priest built the altar in accordance with all that king Ahaz had sent from Damascus.
- So Uriah the priest made it, before king Ahaz arrived from Damascus. And when the king came from Damascus, the king viewed the altar. Then the king drew near to the altar, and went up on it, and burned his burnt offering, and his grain offering, and poured out his drink offering, and threw the blood of his peace offerings on the altar.
- And the bronze altar that was before the Lord he removed from the front of the house, from the place between his altar and the house of the Lord, and put it on the north side of his altar. And king Ahaz commanded Uriah the priest, saying, On the great altar burn the morning burnt offering, and the evening grain offering, and the king's burnt offering, and his grain offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, and their grain offering, and their drink offering.
- And throw on it all the blood of the burnt offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice. But the bronze altar shall be for me to inquire by. Uriah the priest did all this, as king Ahaz commanded.
- And king Ahaz cut off the frames of the stands, and removed the basin from them. And he took down the sea from off the bronze oxen that were under it, and put it on a stone pedestal.
- [2 : 5 3] And the covered way for the Sabbath that had been built inside the house, and the outer entrance for the king, he caused to go around the house of the Lord, because of the king of Assyria. Now the rest of the acts of Ahaz that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?

And Ahaz slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. And Hezekiah his son reigned in his place. 2 Kings chapter 16 chronicles the reign of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, and the grandson of Uzziah as the king of Judah.

Ahaz reigns from the 17th year of Pekah the son of Remaliah in the northern kingdom of Israel, likely in a co-regency with his father Jotham between 735 and 732 BC.

There have been a series of kings in Judah who are largely faithful to the Lord, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, and then Jotham. While all of these men were faulted in some regard, for their failure to remove the high places typically, but also for their personal sins, most usually their failure to be faithful in the later years of their reign, Ahaz breaks this streak.

Ahaz walks in the ways of the kings of Israel, although no reason is given here for his following of their example. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 9 to 14, the Lord had warned Israel about the practices of the nations whom they were entering into the land to remove.

[4 : 15] When you come into the land that the Lord your God has given you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, or tells fortunes, or interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a necromancer, or one who inquires of the dead.

For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations, the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. Ahaz follows the pattern of the Israelite kings, but he also acts according to the practices of the dispossessed nations.

Most notably, he makes his son pass through the fire, which Manasseh, the most wicked king of Judah of all, will also do in chapter 21 verse 6. This practice seems to refer to the actual burning up of children as an especially cruel and abominable form of sacrifice.

Such a reversion to the practices of the Canaanites is clearly concerning, especially when a line of largely faithful kings might have led us to hope that Judah had progressed beyond such extreme forms of wickedness to more subtle forms.

[5 : 37] Turning back to the ways of the Canaanites will also mark out Judah for the fate of the Canaanites. In chapter 15 verse 37, we read of the reign of Jotham. In those days, the Lord began to send Rezaan, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah, against Judah.

In the reign of Ahaz, this alliance becomes a far more serious threat. The coalition of Syria and Israel was designed to function as part of an anti-Assyrian alliance of smaller nations of the region.

Assyria was expanding and threatening to wipe them all out. During Pekah's reign, the Assyrians overran large areas of the land of Israel and deported their population to Assyria. The alliance was a matter of existential urgency for the nations within it.

The Assyrians would completely wipe them out if they could not effectively withstand them. The coalition needed to pressure all of the nations in the region to stand with them. If Ahaz did not join the alliance, they would replace him with a puppet king of their own.

We get a sense of their intent in Isaiah chapter 7 verses 1 to 6. In the days of Ahaz, the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but could not yet mount an attack against it.

[6 : 51] When the house of David was told, Syria is in league with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. And the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Shear Jashub, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field, and say to him, Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah.

Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has devised evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabeel, as king in the midst of it.

Israel and the Syrians came up to Jerusalem, besieged it, but were unsuccessful in their attempts to capture it. However, the Syrians were able to strike a crucial blow against Judah by capturing the city of Elath.

This had been Judah's access to the Red Sea and its lucrative trade. It was an extremely strategic area, which they had recaptured under Uzziah. After they were driven out by the Assyrians, the Edomites returned to possess it.

Facing this threat, Ahaz turns to the monster in the north, Assyria, for aid. Ahaz becomes a tributary and vassal of Assyria, stripping the treasures of the king's house and of the temple and sending them to Tiglath-Pileser, looking to him rather than to the Lord as his saviour.

[8 : 20] Assyria is encouraged to take more immediate action against the coalition of Israel and Syria and to come to the aid of Judah. It was presumably in response to this that Assyria subjugated the north of Israel and deported its people and Assyria also killed the king of Syria and captured Damascus.

Following the victory of Tiglath-Pileser over Damascus, Ahaz goes up to meet him there as an obedient vassal, confirming his official relationship with him. Ahaz is a syncretist, someone who is looking to the surrounding nations rather than to the Lord for security and aid and someone who assimilates to their religious practices and brings elements of their practice into the worship of the Lord.

Seeing a great pagan altar in Damascus, he wants to have an altar built according to its pattern in Jerusalem, replacing the bronze altar that belonged to the temple. By imposing pagan forms upon the worship of the Lord, Ahaz was also implying the subservience of the Lord himself to the supposedly greater gods of the surrounding nations.

Uriah the priest readily and seemingly enthusiastically complies with Ahaz's request. He has an altar built according to the pattern of the Damascus altar, even before Ahaz has returned.

On Ahaz's return, he inaugurates the altar with a series of sacrifices and demotes the bronze altar of the Lord, moving it to the north side, treating it as a private altar for his personal use, perhaps in practices of divination.

[9 : 46] From that time on, Uriah and the priests must offer sacrifices using Ahaz's pagan altar. Indeed, Ahaz goes further in redesigning the temple in terms of the pattern provided by the Assyrians and the temple in Damascus.

He adapts the Bronze Sea to a more pagan pattern. In the thrall of the king of Assyria, he redesigns what was likely a covered walkway for use on the Sabbath and also redesigns the king's entrance.

The impetus for these actions is subservience to the king of Assyria, for whose sake he will willfully reorder and adulterate the worship of the Lord. The Lord had given the pattern of the tabernacle on Mount Sinai and that pattern was developed by King David according to the vision that the Lord gave him.

King Ahaz is assuming for himself the privileges of a new Solomon or David and is doing so according to a pattern not received from the Lord but from pagan neighbours. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways that we might adulterate the worship of the Lord in subservience to the dominant forces and rulers of our own age?■■■■■■■■■■

