

1 Kings 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Kings chapter 20 Ben-Hadad the king of Syria gathered all his army together. Thirty-two kings were with him, and horses and chariots. And he went up and closed in on Samaria and fought against it.

And he sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel, and said to him, Thus says Ben-Hadad, Your silver and your gold are mine, Your best wives and children also are mine.

And the king of Israel answered, As you say, my lord, O king, I am yours and all that I have. The messengers came again and said, Thus says Ben-Hadad, I sent to you, saying, Deliver to me your silver and your gold, your wives and your children.

Nevertheless, I will send my servants to you tomorrow about this time, and they shall search your house and the houses of your servants, and lay hands on whatever pleases you, and take it away. Then the king of Israel called all the elders of the land and said, Mark now and see how this man is seeking trouble.

For he sent to me for my wives and my children, and for my silver and my gold, and I did not refuse him. And all the elders and all the people said to him, Do not listen or consent. So he said to the messengers of Ben-Hadad, Tell my lord the king, All that you first demanded of your servant I will do, but this thing I cannot do.

[1 : 16] And the messengers departed and brought him word again. Ben-Hadad sent to him and said, The gods do so to me, and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people who follow me.

And the king of Israel answered, Tell him, Let not him who straps on his armour boast himself as he who takes it off. When Ben-Hadad heard this message, as he was drinking with the kings in the booths, he said to his men, Take your positions.

And they took their positions against the city. And behold, a prophet came near to Ahab king of Israel and said, Thus says the Lord, Have you seen all this great multitude?

Behold, I will give it into your hand this day, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And Ahab said, By whom? He said, Thus says the Lord, By the servants of the governors of the districts.

Then he said, Who shall begin the battle? He answered, You. Then he mustered the servants of the governors of the districts, and there were two hundred and thirty-two. And after them he mustered all the people of Israel, seven thousand.

[2 : 20] And they went out at noon, while Ben-Hadad was drinking himself drunk in the booths, he and the thirty-two kings who helped him. The servants of the governors of the districts went out first.

And Ben-Hadad sent out scouts, and they reported to him, Men are coming out from Samaria. He said, If they have come out for peace, take them alive. Or if they have come out for war, take them alive.

So these went out of the city, the servants of the governors of the districts, and the army that followed them. And each struck down his man. The Syrians fled, and Israel pursued them. But Ben-Hadad king of Syria escaped on a horse with horsemen.

And the king of Israel went out, and struck the horses and chariots, and struck the Syrians with a great blow. Then the prophet came near to the king of Israel, and said to him, Come, strengthen yourself, and consider well what you have to do, for in the spring the king of Syria will come up against you.

And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we will be stronger than they.

[3 : 25] And do this, remove the kings, each from his post, and put commanders in their places, and muster an army like the army that you have lost, horse for horse, and chariot for chariot.

Then we will fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they. And he listened to their voice, and did so. In the spring Ben-Hadad mustered the Syrians, and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel.

And the people of Israel were mustered, and were provisioned, and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats. But the Syrians filled the country. And a man of God came near, and said to the king of Israel, Thus says the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, The Lord is a God of the hills, but he is not a God of the valleys.

Therefore I will give all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And they encamped opposite one another seven days. Then on the seventh day the battle was joined, and the people of Israel struck down of the Syrians one hundred thousand foot soldiers in one day, and the rest fled into the city of Aphek.

And the wall fell upon twenty-seven thousand men who were left. Ben-Hadad also fled, and entered an inner chamber in the city. And his servants said to him, Behold now, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful kings.

[4 : 44] Let us put sackcloth around our waists, and ropes on our heads, and go out to the king of Israel. Perhaps he will spare your life. So they tied sackcloth around their waists, and put ropes on their heads, and went out to the king of Israel, and said, Your servant Ben-Hadad says, Please let me live.

And he said, Does he still live? He is my brother. Now the men were watching for a sign, and they quickly took it up from him, and said, Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad. Then he said, Go and bring him.

Then Ben-Hadad came out to him, and he caused him to come up into the chariot. And Ben-Hadad said to him, The cities that my father took from your father I will restore, and you may establish bazaars for yourself in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.

And Ahab said, I will let you go on these terms. So he made a covenant with him, and let him go. And a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his fellow at the command of the Lord, Strike me, please.

But the man refused to strike him. Then he said to him, Because you have not obeyed the voice of the Lord, Behold, as soon as you have gone from me, a lion shall strike you down.

[5 : 52] And as soon as he had departed from him, a lion met him and struck him down. Then he found another man and said, Strike me, please. And the man struck him, struck him and wounded him.

So the prophet departed and waited for the king by the way, disguising himself with a bandage over his eyes. And as the king passed, he cried to the king and said, Your servant went out into the midst of the battle, and behold, a soldier turned and brought a man to me and said, Guard this man.

If by any means he is missing, your life shall be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver. And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone. The king of Israel said to him, So shall your judgment be.

You yourself have decided it. Then he hurried to take the bandage away from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. And he said to him, Thus says the Lord, Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life, and your people for his people.

And the king of Israel went to his house vexed and sullen, and came to Samaria. From 1 Kings chapter 20 to the end of the book, there are a series of chapters presenting an indictment of Ahab and his sins in various contexts.

[7 : 09] And in this chapter, chapter 20, we have interactions between Ben-Hadad and the Arameans, and Ahab and Israel. Asa made a covenant with Ben-Hadad earlier in chapter 15.

The Ben-Hadad there was a contemporary of Baasha, and there had been intermittent conflict between the Arameans or the Syrians and Israel from that time on. The Ben-Hadad in this chapter is most likely a different one.

Ben-Hadad may have been a throne name, and there are probably three Ben-Hadads in scripture. In this chapter, there are two different attacks by the Arameans or the Syrians. At this time, the Assyrians were rising in power, and the Syrians or the Arameans, who were in the region of Damascus to Israel's east, were being pressured from them and pushed towards Israel.

The Arameans or the Syrians were forming a regional alliance. They had 32 kings, and they wanted to make Ahab's kingdom of Israel a tributary kingdom also, presumably to assist in the anti-Assyrian cause.

At the beginning, they have much greater power than Israel, which enables Ben-Hadad to come with these extravagant demands. He comes against Samaria. He does not seem to be surrounding Samaria at this point.

[8 : 19] He's demanding silver and gold, and then the best wives and children of Ahab. And Ahab initially accepts he has no power to resist. He doesn't have the power to stand up against a command even as brazen as that of giving over his best wives and children.

However, Ben-Hadad comes back with even greater demands that they should be able to go through his house and the houses of his servants and ransack them for anything that they wanted. And so he sends out messengers to the elders of the land who counsel him to resist the demand.

When he refuses, Ben-Hadad declares that he will destroy Samaria. And Ahab warns him not to be overly confident. Don't boast in your victory. Before you've achieved it. The Lord sends a prophet to Ahab.

The Arameans will be given into his hand. And this will be a means by which he and Israel will know that God is the Lord. The prophet instructs him to begin the battle and that his forces must be led by the servants of the governors of the districts.

This is not a crack force. These would seem to be weaker men that he is sending out. And he sends out 232 of them, perhaps connected with the 32 kings that are associated with Ben-Hadad.

[9 : 29] They are followed by 7,000, which might remind us of the word of the Lord to Elijah concerning the remnant in the preceding chapter. Ben-Hadad is drunk and overly confident.

He doesn't actually appreciate his weakness. The Syrians are defeated and driven off, but the Syrians will regroup and return to fight them again on the plain in the spring. And the prophet instructs Ahab to prepare for that return.

In the spring, the Syrians return and they fight Israel in Aphek on the plain. This is the same place where Israel had lost the great battle to the Philistines a number of centuries earlier.

The Arameans believe that by changing the ground of the battle, they will have a better chance, that the Lord will not be able to act on behalf of his people as effectively in the valley as he has in the hills.

Ben-Hadad has also changed the leaders, so he is no longer leading the men with the 32 kings, but with chosen commanders. The army is being consolidated under his leadership.

[10 : 27] It might also seem that he's not just gathering the army, he's gathering the wider group of the people. He musters the Syrians, not just the army. Once again, a man of God comes to Ahab.

There is a close parallel between these two events, the first attack of the Syrians and then the second attack of the Syrians in the spring. In both cases, the Syrians attack. A prophet visits Ahab.

Ahab wins the battle, then Ben-Hadad is advised by his servants, and then Ben-Hadad takes action accordingly. This is a battle that the Lord himself is going to win, and he's going to win this battle against the Syrians because they have taken up the battle against him.

They have dishonoured his name by claiming that he just rules over the hills rather than being the ruler and creator of all things. Neither the battle nor the enemy then are ultimately Ahab's.

Ahab has to recognise that the Lord will give him the victory because the enemy is the enemy of the Lord and he is being called to play the part of a servant of the Lord in bringing the victory about. There is a remarkable victory won over the Syrians.

[11 : 30] Even though Israel was completely outnumbered, they end up crushing the Syrians and a large number of the Syrians who take refuge in the city are destroyed as the walls of the city come down on them and Israel overcomes them.

As all of this happens on the seventh day, it shouldn't be hard to see a reminder of the story of Jericho. The city of Jericho was rebuilt as part of Ahab's re-canonisation of the land back at the end of chapter 16 but now there is a new defeat of a type of Jericho and the Lord overcomes the Syrians.

Ben-Hadad flees and holds himself up in an inner chamber in the city. At his servant's council, he comes to terms with Ahab. The story begins with Ben-Hadad very much in power and it ends with Ahab in the position of power.

They forge a new covenant between them with Ahab now the overlord in the relationship. He will receive back cities that had been taken from his father. It is likely that father here is not referring to his literal father Umri but to his royal predecessor most likely Baasha.

He is now the overlord. However, like Saul wrongly spared Agag, Ahab should not have spared Ben-Hadad. The battle we must remember belonged to the Lord.

[12 : 41] As a result, Ahab did not have the right to choose whether to spare Ben-Hadad or not. Ben-Hadad should have been put to death. Like Achan took devoted things and Saul took the devoted person of Agag, he is taking another devoted person.

The passage ends with a peculiar account. One of the sons of the prophets instructs another man to strike him and when the other man fails to do so, even at the explicit command of the Lord, he is struck down by a lion.

This should recall to us the story of the man of God from Judah and the old man of Bethel in chapter 13. It is also, once again, a parable for the nation. It's a parable for the king of Israel.

As in chapter 13, the king is not usually named, rather he is spoken of as the king of Israel or the king. This might be one of the details that heightens the sense of the symbolic character of what is taking place.

This is an enacted parable. The second person who is instructed to strike him does indeed strike him. He wounds the prophet and the prophet places a bandage over his eye and disguises his identity.

[13 : 45] When the king passes, he gives a story to the king of how he was instructed to guard a prisoner and while he busied himself with other affairs, he found that the prisoner was gone. He was now either to forfeit his life or to pay a talent of silver in ransom.

The king of Israel confirmed the judgment upon the man and then the man uncovers his identity and he's revealed to be one of the prophets. He declares that the man who has really committed this sin is the king himself.

He had been entrusted with Ben-Hadad. Ben-Hadad was not ultimately his prisoner but the Lord's and he was responsible for letting the man go. As a result of his failure, his life and his people would be forfeit.

Ahab responds not with repentance, not even by seeking to see if there was another opportunity, if there was some ransom, he could pay, like the one talent of silver that was required of the hand of the man in the parable.

No, he returns to his house vexed and sullen, still resistant at the word of the Lord. A question to consider, how should Ahab have known that he did not have the right to treat Ben-Hadad as he wished, but should rather have treated him as a prisoner who belonged to the Lord?