

Homework: 1 Kings 21

What did you learn about BenHadad?

What does his name mean?

Notice any similarities to how kingship is viewed in Israel in comparison to Psalm 2?

BenHadad and Ahab fight three times - twice in this chapter and once in chapter 22. Finally Elijah predicts and pronounces Ahab's doom in chapter 22:17ff. In all of these stories of Ahab and Elijah the issues remain the same:

Who is God?

Who rules the earth?

Who speaks for God?

What does it mean to be king over the Lord's people?

There is a textual question with the next two chapters. Scholar's debate which came first, chapter 20 or 21. The Septuagint or Greek translation of the OT usually shown as LXX has chapter 21 next to chapter 19 keeping together the narrative while the Masoretic text or Hebrew Bible has it in the order we have it in our Bibles. The evidence is difficult to assess and the commentary I am reading suggests either may be correct, but I think this order is most likely correct.

Vv20:1-12 Syria comes calling again

An old enemy returns to assert her dominance over the northern kingdom, Syria. Recall in chapter's 15 and 16 Syria was a thorn in Israel's side. Now here they are again. Syria was not a cat but a rat...a medium sized nation seeking to assert its power and to enforce its will upon a weaker neighbor. BenHadad wants tribute or peace money or a bribe.

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Then he wants to up the ante and humiliate Ahab and his leadership class by enslaving their families, impoverishing them publicly and looting the palace of Samaria for all to see.

The laws of the Middle East, then and now, are “Might makes”. Right and possession is 99% of the law.

Ahab decides he cannot do this and so Israel decides they must fight rather than surrender, even though they have almost no chance of winning.

Vv.13-22 God promises victory and a second invasion.

Having kept his promise God speaks again through his prophet to Ahab. Ahab and his inferior forces have overthrown in what can only be described as an upset victory over superior forces. Then the prophet forewarns Ahab that this is not over. The king of Syria will return and seek to conquer Israel and end his dynasty.

BenHadad is drinking himself blotto along with his officers not unlike we see Elah did before Zimri assassinated him in 1 Kings 16:9, 10. Drinking is mentioned twice in v12 and v16.

Vv. 23-30 The second campaign

Syria fails to understand the meaning of the events they have experienced. Their diagnosis is that the gods of Israel are gods of the hill while their gods are gods of the plains. So they resolve to return in the spring with chariots to fight in the plain. Syria must learn that Yahweh exists everywhere and is the everywhere Lord. So God will fight for Israel again. The Lord is portrayed as sovereign over all matters in all nations.

By now, Ahab should have learned that Yahweh alone is Lord but he still does not get it...and so he attempts to buy peace and friendship, perhaps looking at the looming threat from Assyria.

As prophesied in the Spring, the king of Syria returned for battle again. And as prophesied, the Lord was still with Israel and the Syrians were overthrown and routed. They fled into the city of

Aphek. Israel laid siege to the city which finally fell to them and they captured BenHadad.

Vv.31-34 Ahab spares BenHadad

The key language is found in 18:13 as the prophet declares that God will give them into the king's hand. This is holy war language and calls for the enemies' utter destruction as in Deut 20:10f.

When Yahweh gains the victory he, not the king of Israel, make the terms of peace. Ahab usurped God's place in deciding for himself the terms of the peace.

Vv.35-43 An unnamed prophet denounces Ahab

The voice of prophecy is strangely quiet in vv, 31-34. It returns here and informs Ahab of what the future holds in light of the covenant stipulations which he has again violated.

The prophet orders a fellow prophet to strike him. When he refuses, the first prophet predicts a lion will kill him not unlike what happens to the good prophet in 1 Kings 13. God's word must be obeyed. Another prophet obliges the first prophet by striking and wounding him. His wounds make him look like a soldier who survived the battle. He now disguises himself and goes to meet the king. When Ahab passes, the prophet acts like a common soldier who has allowed a prisoner to escape. Ahab pronounces judgment on the soldier, but ironically pronounces judgment on himself.

This episode is very much reminiscent of 2 Sam 12 in a judicial event between King David and Nathan the prophet. In each, the king pronounces judgment upon a wrong that is crystal clear to him only to find out that he has pronounced judgment upon himself.

The key violation of the covenant responsibilities is found in Lev 27:28f; and is lived out in Deut 2; Joshua 6 and 7 in the destruction of Jericho and the incident of Achan and his family. The prophecy comes to pass in 1 Kings 22:29-40. Hearing his sentence the king stalks away sullen and angry.