

1 Kings 20 – VV notes

In this chapter, Elijah is off doing other things and various unnamed prophets step in. Ben-Hadad, after a great deal of arrogance and boastful words, attacks Israel and it does not go well for him. Ahab, after initially being submissive, somehow finds himself following God to military victory for Israel, twice, and even making a very wise statement, only to mess it up by not fully following God's instructions in the end. The prophets are also doing odd things while imparting the word of God.

Verses 1-6: Ben-Hadad threatens Ahab/Israel

The location of Aram roughly translates to the modern-day location of Syria, i.e. north-east of Israel and Judah. To start this chapter, Ben-Hadad, King of the Arameans, take 32 allied kings (who were probably tribal chiefs from the eastern areas of Aram) and goes off to attack Samaria, capital of Israel. He arrogantly demands that all that belongs to Ahab is his, down to the wives and children. Ahab initially acquiesces. Ben-Hadad, emboldened by this, ups the ante and declares he won't wait for Ahab to hand everything over, he will send his people to come and get it, whatever they want.

Why do you think Ahab initially submits?

Not including Donald Trump, can you think of anyone else (in the bible or not in the bible) who uses boastful and arrogant words and threatens people? What was the result?

Verses 7-12: Ahab does something right!

Ahab summons the elders and they advise him not to give in to this demand. Ahab sends a message to Ben-Hadad saying the first he could do but not the second. This angers Ben-Hadad and he threatens Ahab in a similar way to the way Jezebel threatened Elijah.

In verse 11, Ahab makes an uncharacteristically wise statement that "One who puts on his armour should not boast like one who takes it off." Ben-Hadad, who has been drinking with his 32 kings, is enraged and prepares to attack.

Discuss Ahab's words and actions.

Discuss Ben-Hadad's words and actions

Verses 13-22: Ben-Hadad's first attack

An unnamed prophet comes to Ahab and tells him that God will hand over the Aramean forces to him and "then you will know I am the Lord". Given everything that happened with Elijah, it seems that Ahab is still not convinced.

Why does Ahab take so much convincing that the Lord is God and not Baal?

Can you think of a time when you needed a lot of convincing on something?

Ahab wants to know what to do and the prophet tells him to get ready and attack and that the young officers will carry the day. One question might be, how plausible is it that just 232 junior officers could rout a massive Aramean army (1 Kings 20:15–21)? I did a quick search and it seems that a smaller well organised force can gain victory over a much larger less organised force caught off guard. In the case of 1 Kings 20, the leaders of the army were (still) in their tents getting drunk. If the leaders of the larger force are killed (each man in the 232 Israelites defeated their opponent) this can quickly create fear and confusion causing morale to collapse. Ahab then brings his army into play and the Arameans are defeated and Ben-Hadad escapes on horseback (without his chariot).

Discuss the broader implications of this crushing defeat at the hands of a smaller but better prepared force.

Are there any personal implications here?

Verses 22-30: Ben-Hadad's second attack

The Prophet warns Ahab to get ready because Ben-Hadad will make second attack the next year. We then have this thing about who's God is more powerful. Ben-Hadad comes up with the argument that the God of Israel is a God of the hills and that's why they won, so they decide to fight Israel again on the plains because Baal is a god of the plains. Once again, Israel looks like a tiny flock compared to the vast Aramean army. And once again, God helps, sending a prophet to Ahab and Israel that they will defeat the Arameans "So that the people will know that God is a God of the hills and the plains." Despite Ahab being an infamous king of Israel – God helps him to victory both times.

What was the message that God was trying to send to Ahab, the people of Israel and the Arameans?

How does this chapter challenge our understanding of who deserves God's help and why?

Verses 31-34: Ahab messes up.

Ben-Hadad is defeated but decides to try for mercy from Ahab. Foolishly, Ahab makes a treaty with Ben-Hadad. The start of this chapter implies that Ahab prefers peace at any cost (as long as he's not the one bearing the cost). Remember, God had forbidden Israel to make alliances with foreign powers.

What does this say about whether or not mercy should be given to everyone?

Verses 35-43: The prophets do weird things (but get their message across).

Is it just me or does the thing where a prophet refuses to punch another prophet and is then punished for his disobedience by being eaten by a lion, seems over the top?

Discuss (or not as the time may allow)

Another prophet then obediently punches the first prophet. This prophet goes to Ahab and pretends to be a soldier. He tells a story about losing a prisoner and Ahab condemns him for it. The prophet reveals himself to Ahab and states that Ahab's failure to execute Ben-Hadad will result in hardship for God's people and Ahab's life for Ben-Hadad's life.

Ahab goes home in a huff (just like he did after Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal).

Given the lack of mercy shown to the prophet who refused to punch his fellow prophet at God's command, and the condemnation of Ahab for making a treaty with Ben-Hadad and letting him go:

What do you think the author is trying to impress upon the reader (and us) about mercy and obedience?

In spite of everything that happens in this chapter, God still seems to be struggling to impress upon the Israelites that their God is The Lord (and not Baal).

Discuss

Thank you all in advance for an excellent discussion.