

THE ALTAR OF AHAZ: A REVISIONIST VIEW

by

RICHARD D. NELSON

Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, PA 17325

Peter Ackroyd has suggested (1968) that knowing too much background may prevent us from reading some texts as they were meant to be read. Certainly it is hard to read 2 Kings 16 without “static” from what we know from other sources. For example, because we enjoy a reasonably full knowledge of the Syro-Ephraimite War, we may assume connections in this text that are simply not present. Again, we may automatically take the opinion of Ahaz’s foreign policy held by the author of Kings to be identical with that of the prophet Isaiah.

This paper takes up the problem of Ahaz’s altar. Having inherited a negative view of Ahaz’s character and religious loyalty from the book of Isaiah, we may unconsciously read this into the story of his new altar in Kings. Our evaluation of Ahaz’s altar could also be contaminated by the Chronicler’s opinion that it was an act of blatant syncretism.

There is a second problem. Because we read Kings so often as a source book for history, we tend to overlook its character as a theologically oriented literary creation. Miracles and wonders (for example the stories about Elijah and Elisha or 2 Kgs 19:35) are set along with theological discourse (1 Kgs 11:31–39, 14:7–9, and the like) into a temporal and spatial framework. Kings is a piece of theological literature written to effect a transformation of belief, a reevaluation of identity. Certainly Kings is historiography and as such provides information about past events and a framework by which those events can be grasped as meaningful. Yet at a more fundamental level, Kings focuses not on the past but on the present, on the reader’s inner orientation to the God who is said to have turned against Judah and undone the exodus by sending them back into exile (2 Kgs 21:10–15, 24:3–4). Historical questions about Ahaz certainly have their place, but this paper will focus on the literary effect of the report on Ahaz’s new altar and its role in the theological plot of Kings.

2 Kgs 16:10–16 describes the erection of a great temple altar to replace the bronze altar of Solomon. Although some scholars have reconstructed the events otherwise, notably Bright (1981, pp. 276–77), the report seems clear enough on the surface. Ahaz saw an altar in Damascus and was moved to have a copy of it put up in the forecourt of the Jerusalem temple, in the process shifting Solomon’s bronze altar from its former central location to the north side of the temple courtyard.

The reader seems to be intended to read between the lines a bit. The mention of blood (v. 13) implies a dedication ceremony (Exod 29:36–37; Lev 8:15). Ahaz’s new altar was “great” (v. 15) and thus bigger than the bronze one to which it is contrasted. The king could go up upon it (v. 12); thus it must have had steps or a ramp. The contrast with “bronze” implies that the new altar was built of stone.

The reader of Kings remembers this bronze altar from Solomon’s temple dedication. The descriptive phrase “before the Lord” (2 Kgs 16:14) was first used in 1 Kgs 8:64. This same altar was also mentioned in 1 Kgs 9:25.¹ In fact, 2 Kgs 12:9 has already anachronistically placed this bronze altar in its new northern location in describing the location of Joash’s money chest.

Historical questions about these two altars are beyond the scope of this study. We must also set aside speculation about the relationship of Solomon’s bronze altar to that of the tabernacle (Exod 27:1–8; 38:1–7; 2 Chr 1:5–6) and the altar mentioned in Ezek 9:2, as well as any relationship between Ahaz’s new altar and those described in Exod 20:24–26, Ezek 43:13–17, or 2 Chr 4:1.

Most readers have interpreted what Ahaz did as an act of apostasy. For example, the author of Chronicles used it as the inspiration for a tale of sacrificing to Syrian gods, closing up the temple, and erecting altars all over Jerusalem (2 Chr 28:23–24). Combining Chronicles and Kings, Josephus (*Ant.* ix 255–57) reported that Ahaz worshipped Syrian gods during the war, then switched to Assyrian gods (based on 2 Kgs 16:18?) after a second defeat.

1. Although too small for the extraordinary volume of Solomon’s dedication sacrifices (1 Kgs 8:64), the bronze altar is presented as being adequate for the king’s thrice yearly offerings. The use of the verb “build” (*bnh*) in 1 Kgs 9:25 creates some difficulty, since it is most natural to infer from it something constructed of stone (cf. the verbs in Exod 20:24–25 and the use of *bnh* for Ahaz’s stone altar in 2 Kgs 16:11). This verb, however, may also be used for construction in wood (1 Kgs 6:15–16; Ezek 27:5), and the bronze altar seems to have had a wooden frame (Exod 27:1–8).

Understanding this as an Assyrian altar, some scholars use it as evidence that Ahaz introduced (voluntarily or otherwise) the worship of Assyrian gods into Jerusalem (Olmstead 1931, p. 452; Gressmann, 1924, p. 324). This view prevails among the standard histories such as Noth (1960, p. 266), Bright (1981, pp. 276–77), Jagersma (1983, p. 159), and Soggin (1985, p. 228).

The Assyrians, however, did not use altars for burnt offering sacrifices, but only for incense, libation, and display purposes. See Oppenheim (1964, pp. 191–92) and Saggs (1969, pp. 21–22). For this reason, other scholars have insisted that the altar of Ahaz followed a Syrian pattern, rather than an Assyrian one, Galling (1925, pp. 43–45) and de Vaux (1961, pp. 409–13) among them. They view the erection of this altar as a general expression of subservience to Assyria, but discount the possibility of any actual adoption of Assyrian religion. Yet they still assume that Ahaz's altar represented a serious breach in orthodox Yahwism. This view rests primarily on an oracular interpretation of the verb *bqr* in 2 Kgs 16:15 and on the assumption that Assyria regularly imposed certain religious practices on its vassals.

Scholars remain undecided as to whether Assyria generally forced religious practices on its vassals. McKay (1973) and Cogan (1974) have stressed the paucity of evidence for any such religious impositions. In reply, Spieckermann (1982, pp. 307–72) has pointed to the needs of resident Assyrian officials and garrison troops and the cultic implications of the guarantee of a vassal treaty by divine witnesses. He cites particularly the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon with Median city rulers, which outlines certain cultic obligations on their part. Any decision on this point must rest on the disputed interpretation of these and other texts. It cannot be denied, however, that such religious impositions are very rarely mentioned in the inscriptional evidence.

It is difficult to estimate whether what was required in Media would be thought useful or politic to impose on Judah. What is clear, however, is that the book of Kings makes no mention of such a practice on the part of the Assyrians. Religious apostasy in Kings follows Canaanite models, not Assyrian ones (for example, 2 Kgs 16:3–4). No single apostate act in Kings can be unambiguously labeled as an Assyrian practice. Neither political considerations nor vassal status has anything to do with religious loyalty as far as the theological plot of Kings is concerned. We cannot assume that the author of Kings knew anything about an Assyrian policy of religious imposition on Ahaz or intended to imply thereby that Ahaz's erection of a new altar was an act of apostasy.

Ahaz moved the bronze altar aside for some purpose of his own, but what this purpose was remains hidden by the difficult *lēbaqqēr* of v. 15. This infinitive has often been taken to mean “inquire” in an oracular sense and linked to the Assyrian practice of examining victims for omens, originally by Mowinckel (1961, I, p. 146). Today’s English Version follows this line of reasoning: “to use for divination.” Support for such an interpretation has been sought from the usage of Lev 13:36; 27:33 (to examine for skin disease), the Aramaic cognate found in Ezra 4:15, 19; 6:1; 7:14 (to scrutinize), and the Rabbinic use of the verb for examining animals for blemishes.

Several other interpretations are equally probable, however. The New English Bible’s “to offer morning sacrifice” follows the reasoning of the Septuagint. The New Jerusalem Bible suggests “I shall see to that” (cf. the Jewish Publication Society version), following the Vulgate and Luther. Reference to Ps 27:4 suggests a more general act of prayer (Syriac, Revised Standard Version, New International Version). In any case, it is hard to see how the passionately deuteronomistic author of Kings could have let any reference to taking omens pass without a condemnatory reference to Deut 18:10–12. Certainly a disputed theory about the meaning of a difficult verb is not a sufficient reason to interpret Ahaz’s altar as an apostate act without some other support. If anything, understanding Ahaz’s proposal on the basis of Ps 27:4 suggests that it is meant to be understood as an act of piety.

In fact, the author of Kings neither praises nor condemns Ahaz for his altar. Recognition of this evaluative neutrality has led in recent years to several reconstructions of Ahaz’s action which put it in a somewhat more positive light. Yeivin (1979, p. 177) sees the importation of this altar as a defensive action on the part of Ahaz to preclude being forced to adopt some even more distasteful Assyrian religious practices. Jones (1984, p. 539) feels that, even though the worship at this altar was orthodox, such worship still represented a demotion of the universal claims of Israel’s God. Saggs (1969, pp. 19–22) offers the opinion that this altar was intended to strengthen commercial links to Phoenicia. McKay (1973, p. 8) suggests that this altar was a reminder of the vassal sacrifices Ahaz had (supposedly) offered in Damascus. Cogan (1974, p. 77) sees Ahaz’s use of a Syrian altar for the legitimate cult of Judah as part of a general pattern of cultural assimilation. Hoffmann (1980, pp. 139–45) explains the lack of any critique against the altar by suggesting that the entire section was a post-exilic insertion, demonstrating that King Ahaz actually carried out his modifications in strict

accord with post-exilic, priestly norms. Ahaz was thus transformed into an exemplary model of cultic reorganization.

Spieckermann (1982, pp. 364–68), followed by Würthwein (1984, pp. 389–91), offers an ingenious proposal. By copying an impressive Syrian altar, Ahaz performed an astute political maneuver. He could show his loyalty to the God of Judah by providing a new altar for the legitimate sacrifices of the national cult. At the same time he could use the old bronze altar for some purpose connected with his new vassal status. Ahaz could thus honor Assyrian gods without causing any unrest among loyal Yahwists, who would have been mollified by the grand new altar. The details of this wily move have been obscured by the deuteronomistic author's selective presentation.

Ackroyd (1984, pp. 251–54) goes one step further in rehabilitating Ahaz's altar. He suggests that what Ahaz did is presented by Kings as a positive and pious act. The use of a formula found in the report of the building of the tabernacle according to pattern (2 Kgs 16:10; 16; Exod 25:9, 39:32) points in this direction, as does the author's stress on the propriety of the rites carried out on the new altar (2 Kgs 16:15). The replacement of an old-fashioned bronze altar by a new-style stone one could have been seen as an improvement. The king's personal use of the small altar could indicate his own piety.

Ackroyd has pointed us in the right direction. Kings presents what Ahaz did as a liturgically proper and praiseworthy act. His new altar is bigger and better than the old one erected by Solomon. Although the actual historical facts may have been quite different, Kings knows of only one altar for sacrifice in Solomon's temple, the one described as the "bronze altar" (1 Kgs 8:64). This had been too small to handle the vast Solomonic dedicatory sacrifices, and temporary overflow arrangements had to be made (1 Kgs 8:64). By contrast, this new altar is a "great altar" which can handle all the sacrifices required of it, big enough to "go up beside" (2 Kgs 16:12) on steps or a ramp. This bigger and better altar would later be used by Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:22) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23:9) without negative comment from the author, surviving their reforming purges without a hint of illegitimacy. Although in comparison with the widespread reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, Ahaz's new altar might seem an unimpressive accomplishment, it certainly corresponds in scope to Joash's low-key reform of temple fiscal policies in 2 Kgs 12:4–16.

Ahaz dedicates the new altar in a way reminiscent of Solomon (2 Kgs 16:13; 1 Kgs 8:62–64). The carefully orthodox terminology (cf. Num 29:39) used to list the sacrifices of vv. 13 and 15 underscores

the legitimacy of these offerings. As Wellhausen pointed out, this list of sacrifices accurately represents a stage of liturgical affairs earlier than Ezekiel or the Priestly writer (1885, p. 79). The author uses this list to associate the entire legitimate sacrificial cult with this new altar. That Uriah the legitimate priest offers these traditional sacrifices is a further indication that no impropriety is intended. The Book of Kings always assesses the role of legitimate priests positively (cf. Jehoiada and Hilkiah).

There is no reason to suppose that the author of Kings would have seen anything wrong in using a Syrian design for this new, improved altar. The foreign origin of the temple layout and decorations shows through the description of Solomon's achievement without embarrassment or xenophobia. The deuteronomistic author of Kings does not seem to have been hypercritical about such worship arrangements. What mattered was the centralized location of sacrifice in Jerusalem, not those liturgical details which so concerned the Priestly writer or Ezekiel. Unlike Exodus, Deuteronomy does not offer any regulations for the construction of the central altar, although it does describe one of unhewn stone at Shechem (Deut 27:5–6; carried out in Josh 8:30–32). If anything, Ahaz's altar would be closer to this ideal than Solomon's bronze one had been.

The author of Kings was not so rigid as to require that every action of a king judged evil be wrong. One need only think of the reforming actions of Jehu (2 Kgs 10:18–27) or the prayers of Jehoahaz of Israel (2 Kgs 13:4–5). Ahaz's altar was an act of temple improvement which the author presents as a positive move.

The critical question remains: Why should the author of Kings, who judges Ahaz so harshly (2 Kgs 16:2–4), offer positive information about Ahaz's liturgical reform to the reader at all? What literary or theological function could this altar play in the overall plot of the Book of Kings? For an answer, we must first look again at the presentation of Ahaz's political activities.

When everything is taken into consideration, international affairs under Ahaz are described as a mixture of success and failure, not as a complete fiasco. There is no reason to suppose that the author of Kings viewed Ahaz's reliance on Assyrian assistance as an act of disloyalty to God. While it may be clear to us, with the benefit of hindsight, that Ahaz's deal with Assyria was an extremely foolish step, Kings operates with a different view of historical causality. Actually, Kings offers no comment at all on the political wisdom of Ahaz's desperate move. Calling on a larger nation's help might be a reasonable ploy for a small

nation in trouble. Asa did so without being condemned for it (1 Kgs 15:16–21). Kings also reports without comment that both Hezekiah and Menahem bought off Assyrian attacks (2 Kgs 15:19–20, 18:15–16). Of course, Ahaz's policy entailed the undoing of much of Solomon's glory (2 Kgs 16:17), but Hezekiah's actions in 2 Kgs 18:16 would be quite similar.

If anything, Judah's story in 2 Kings 16 has a happy ending, at least when one considers the fate of Israel and Syria (2 Kgs 15:29; 16:9). The critical problem of the attack by Syria and Israel was taken care of quite neatly. The anti-Judah coalition never even engaged Ahaz in open battle (2 Kgs 16:5). Instead, Ahaz's submissive language and diplomatic "present" to Tiglath-pileser saved the day quite neatly. We may speculate about other Assyrian motives, but the author sees vv. 7–8 as the direct cause of v. 9: "the king of Assyria listened" to Ahaz.

All is not positive, of course. On the negative side, the author reports a crisis with Edom (v. 6), which reversed 2 Kgs 14:22. The author also describes how Ahaz had to strip the temple of bronze, apparently to raise money for the Assyrian king (v. 17).

The same mixture of positive and negative which characterizes international politics in Ahaz's reign is repeated in the even more intense paradox of religious affairs.

The judgment formula (vv. 2–3) emphasizes Ahaz's wickedness, but does so with a unique twist.² An otherwise positive formula has been converted into a negative one, and Ahaz is the only king for whom this has been done. Other kings "did evil." Ahaz, somewhat ambiguously, "did not do right." The formula for Ahaz turns out to be a reversal of the positive one which Josiah will receive (2 Kgs 22:2; cf. Asa, 1 Kgs 15:11):

Ahaz: And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God, as his father David had done, but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel.

Josiah: And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father.

Ahaz certainly deserved a negative judgment. He burned his son as a sacrifice in violation of Deut 18:10, a crime which links him in the evaluative network of Kings to the sins of Israel (2 Kgs 17:17) and to the arch-villain Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:6). As Deut 18:9 makes clear, Ahaz

2. An analysis of the judgment formulas used in the Deuteronomistic History may be found in Nelson (1981, pp. 29–41 and especially p. 136, n. 28).

thus joined in the “abominable practices” of the Canaanites (2 Kgs 16:3; cf. Deut 20:18). This ties Ahaz to Rehoboam (1 Kgs 14:24) and again to Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:2). Like the people of Judah under Rehoboam and the people of Israel generally, he contaminated Yahweh worship at the local high places with fertility religion (as implied by the shared language of 1 Kgs 14:23 and 2 Kgs 17:10).³

Yet over against this sorry history of apostasy, the author of Kings sets Ahaz’s praiseworthy and thoroughly orthodox act of providing a bigger and better altar of sacrifice. The provision and utilization of this altar is described in the most positive possible terms (vv. 10–16). Ahaz’s unusual judgment formula seems to be a reflection of his paradoxical story.

The presentation of Ahaz’s religious affairs then returns to the negative mode in vv. 17–18. 2 Kgs 16:18 reports:

The Sabbath structure which they had built in the house (temple? palace?) and the royal entrance to the outside he reoriented in regard to the house of the Lord because of the king of Assyria.

There has been a temptation to include the new altar of Ahaz as something else done “because of the king of Assyria” along with these obscure structural alterations. These temple modifications, however, seem to be a completely separate matter, at least as presented by the author of Kings. Perhaps they were a further result of the king’s financial emergency (v. 17). Perhaps the Assyrians demanded them as a symbol of diminished royal dignity (cf. Ezek 46:1–2).

In religious matters, then, as in foreign relations, Ahaz’s reign was something of a toss-up. His apostasy to Canaanite religious practices was unquestionable (vv. 3–4), yet he was also an orthodox patron of the temple, the king who installed the great altar of sacrifice. Why does the author of Kings present the reader with such a paradoxical treatment of Ahaz?

The answer lies in the critical positioning of this chapter in the theological plot of Kings. Ahaz comes between the slide of the Northern Kingdom to disaster (2 Kings 15) and that nation’s final fall (2 Kings 17). He is also the last king of Judah before the extreme poles of reform and apostasy represented by Hezekiah and Josiah on the one hand and Manasseh on the other.

3. To blame Ahaz for the rooftop altars of 2 Kgs 23:12, as is commonly done, goes beyond what Kings actually says.

Ahaz marks the beginning of the moment of truth for Judah. He is the paradoxical focus of both obedience and disobedience. He is tied to Solomon as one who dedicates an altar, but also to Rehoboam as one who does "abominable practices" "under every green tree" (1 Kgs 14:24; 2 Kgs 16:3, 4). He is linked to Hezekiah as one who pays tribute to Assyria and succeeds moderately in international affairs (2 Kgs 18:15–16), but also to Manasseh as one who offers his son as a sacrifice (2 Kgs 21:6). Although his judgment formula is clearly a negative one, it is the negative image of the positive verdict given the saintly Josiah, introducing a subtle note of ambiguity. He walks "in the way of the kings of Israel" (2 Kgs 16:3), but nevertheless still builds a new central altar of sacrifice in Jerusalem.

The paradoxical figure of Ahaz signals to the reader that the plot of the book of Kings is still open-ended at this point. Matters can still go either way. David has laid out the deuteronomistic schema of this plot in 1 Kgs 2:3, addressing Solomon: "Keep the charge of the Lord . . . that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn." So far the kings of Judah have not done too well in this regard, yet there has been some evidence of obedience and reform. The Northern Kingdom cannot be salvaged, but God has not yet closed off Judah's future.

The ambiguous figure of Ahaz, partially a success and partially a failure, in at least one major way faithful to God but quite often not so, reflects Judah's situation precisely. There are still two ways set before Judah, the way of obedience and life and the way of idolatrous worship and death (Deut 30:15–20). Eventually Judah will lose this choice, and death will become inevitable (2 Kgs 21:10–15). Yet here in 2 Kings 16, Ahaz and Judah still stand where the original readers of Kings stood, at the intersection of choice between faith and disbelief, obedience and apostasy, life and death.

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