

FIRST KINGS

Chapter 20

Ben-Hadad Attacks Samaria

Now Ben-Hadad king of Aram mustered his entire army. Accompanied by thirty-two kings with their horses and chariots, he went up and besieged Samaria and attacked it. ² He sent messengers into the city to Ahab king of Israel, saying, “This is what Ben-Hadad says: ³ ‘Your silver and gold are mine, and the best of your wives and children are mine.’ ” ⁴ The king of Israel answered, “Just as you say, my lord the king. I and all I have are yours.” ⁵ The messengers came again and said, “This is what Ben-Hadad says: ‘I sent to demand your silver and gold, your wives and your children. ⁶ But about this time tomorrow I am going to send my officials to search your palace and the houses of your officials. They will seize everything you value and carry it away.’ ” ⁷ The king of Israel summoned all the elders of the land and said to them, “See how this man is looking for trouble! When he sent for my wives and my children, my silver and my gold, I did not refuse him.” ⁸ The elders and the people all answered, “Don’t listen to him or agree to his demands.” ⁹ So he replied to Ben-Hadad’s messengers, “Tell my lord the king, ‘Your servant will do all you demanded the first time, but this demand I cannot meet.’ ” They left and took the answer back to Ben-Hadad. ¹⁰ Then Ben-Hadad sent another message to Ahab: “May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if enough dust remains in Samaria to give each of my men a handful.” ¹¹ The king of Israel answered, “Tell him: ‘One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.’ ” ¹² Ben-Hadad heard this message while he and the kings were drinking in their tents, and he ordered his men: “Prepare to attack.” So they prepared to attack the city.

20:1 *Ben-Hadad king of Aram.* Chronological considerations suggest that this was Ben-Hadad II, either a son or a grandson of Ben-Hadad I, who had ruled Aram as early as 900–895 B.C. (see notes on 15:9–10, 18–20, 33). The events of this chapter span parts of two years (see vv. 22–26) followed by three years of peace between Israel and Aram (see 22:1). Ahab died at the conclusion of the three years of peace in a battle against the Arameans (22:37) in 853. This means that the events of this chapter are to be dated c. 857. (CSB)

Not the first Syrian king by that name. This Ben-hadad besieged Samaria. He renewed the attacks on Israel originally requested by King Asa of Judah. (TLSB)

thirty-two kings. Tribal chieftains or city-state kings who were vassals of Ben-Hadad II. (CSB)

His army consisted of 32 divisions, each of which was under the command of an allied king or provincial chieftain. (TLSB)

20:3 *best wives and children.* Choicest slaves. Ben-hadad insists that Israel become Syria's vassal state. (TLSB)

20:4 *I and all I have are yours.* Ahab's submission to Ben-Hadad's demand suggests that Israel saw little hope for the possibility of a military victory over the Aramean forces. The negotiated settlement would end the siege on Samaria, spare Ahab's life and avoid the plundering of the city. (CSB)

20:6 *I am going to send my officials to search your palace and the houses of your officials.* Ben-Hadad's new demand required the surrender of the city to his forces. (CSB)

whatever pleases you. Further mockery and threats. (TLSB)

20:7 *seeking trouble.* Increasing demands showed that Ben-hadad would not keep his word of peace after he received tribute. Conflict was unavoidable. (TLSB)

20:8 *Do not listen or consent.* The mockery solidified Israel's leadership in support of King Ahab. (TLSB)

20:9 *this demand I cannot meet.* Ahab replied in language conceding Ben-Hadad's superiority ("my lord the king, 'Your servant ... ' ") but was adamant in refusing to surrender the city. (CSB)

Concede to the increasing demands. (TLSB)

20:10 *May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely.* A curse formula (see note on 1Sa 3:17). (CSB)

handfuls. The Syrian threatened to demolish Samaria so completely that his men would be able to carry off the remaining dust in their hands. Cf 2Sm 17:13 for a similar threat against Jerusalem. (TLSB)

20:11 *'One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.'* A saying similar to the familiar "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." (CSB)

20:1–12 After describing Elijah's prophetic ministry, the sacred text returns to the history of King Ahab and his wars with Ben-hadad, king of Syria. The Lord guides history and even uses evil people for His good purposes. In such records, the Lord teaches us how He punishes the godless and protects those who call on His name. While the Bible records battles and wars, behind it all, God is still in control for the sake of His people. • Lord of the nations, amid the upheavals and wars of this sinful world, guide, strengthen, encourage, and uplift Your people. Amen (TLSB)

Ahab Defeats Ben-Hadad

¹³ Meanwhile a prophet came to Ahab king of Israel and announced, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Do you see this vast army? I will give it into your hand today, and then you will know that I am the LORD.’ ” ¹⁴ “But who will do this?” asked Ahab. The prophet replied, “This is what the LORD says: ‘The young officers of the provincial commanders will do it.’ ” “And who will start the battle?” he asked. The prophet answered, “You will.” ¹⁵ So Ahab summoned the young officers of the provincial commanders, 232 men. Then he assembled the rest of the Israelites, 7,000 in all. ¹⁶ They set out at noon while Ben-Hadad and the 32 kings allied with him were in their tents getting drunk. ¹⁷ The young officers of the provincial commanders went out first. Now Ben-Hadad had dispatched scouts, who reported, “Men are advancing from Samaria.” ¹⁸ He said, “If they have come out for peace, take them alive; if they have come out for war, take them alive.” ¹⁹ The young officers of the provincial commanders marched out of the city with the army behind them ²⁰ and each one struck down his opponent. At that, the Arameans fled, with the Israelites in pursuit. But Ben-Hadad king of Aram escaped on horseback with some of his horsemen. ²¹ The king of Israel advanced and overpowered the horses and chariots and inflicted heavy losses on the Arameans. ²² Afterward, the prophet came to the king of Israel and said, “Strengthen your position and see what must be done, because next spring the king of Aram will attack you again.” ²³ Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, “Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.” ²⁴ Do this: Remove all the kings from their commands and replace them with other officers. ²⁵ You must also raise an army like the one you lost—horse for horse and chariot for chariot—so we can fight Israel on the plains. Then surely we will be stronger than they.” He agreed with them and acted accordingly. ²⁶ The next spring Ben-Hadad mustered the Arameans and went up to Aphek to fight against Israel. ²⁷ When the Israelites were also mustered and given provisions, they marched out to meet them. The Israelites camped opposite them like two small flocks of goats, while the Arameans covered the countryside. ²⁸ The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD.’ ” ²⁹ For seven days they camped opposite each other, and on the seventh day the battle was joined. The Israelites inflicted a hundred thousand casualties on the Aramean foot soldiers in one day. ³⁰ The rest of them escaped to the city of Aphek, where the wall collapsed on twenty-seven thousand of them. And Ben-Hadad fled to the city and hid in an inner room. ³¹ His officials said to him, “Look, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful. Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life.” ³² Wearing sackcloth around their waists and ropes around their heads, they went to the king of Israel and said, “Your servant Ben-Hadad says: ‘Please let me live.’ ” The king answered, “Is he still alive? He is my brother.” ³³ The men took this as a good sign and were quick to pick up his word. “Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad!” they said. “Go and get him,” the king said. When Ben-Hadad came out, Ahab had him come up into his chariot. ³⁴ “I will

return the cities my father took from your father,” Ben-Hadad offered. “You may set up your own market areas in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.” Ahab said, “On the basis of a treaty I will set you free.” So he made a treaty with him, and let him go.

20:13 *a prophet.* Not identified. (TLSB)

you will know that I am the LORD. Although Ahab had not sought God’s help in the crisis confronting the city, the Lord graciously chose to reveal himself yet another time (see 18:36–37) to the king and people, this time through a deliverance. (CSB)

20:14 *young officers of the provincial commanders.* See note on 16:27. Organizational details of the provincial government of the northern kingdom are unknown. (CSB)

Ahab was trapped in the city without his normal command. He would have to lead an army of bureaucrats against a real fighting force, a considerable act of faith. (TLSB)

20:15 *governors.* Ben-hadad’s invasion of Israel brought all the provincial officials to Samaria for refuge. (TLSB)

232 men ... 7,000 in all. Not a large military force (though a significant number for a city under siege) but one of fitting size for demonstrating that the imminent victory was from the Lord rather than from Israel’s own military superiority (cf. Jdg 7:2). (CSB)

20:16 *went out.* Charged out of the city. (TLSB)

booths. Temporary barracks, sometimes translated “tabernacles.” (TLSB)

20:18 *take them alive.* Odd orders, likely the result of his drunken state. (TLSB)

20:20 *each one struck down his opponent.* Apparently they were met by a small advance force like their own (see 2Sa 2:15–16). (CSB)

They attacked successfully and without losses. (TLSB)

escaped on horseback with some of his horsemen. Since fighting on horseback did not come until later, reference must be to chariot horses and charioteers. After their defeat, the Arameans seem to have withdrawn to Damascus. (CSB)

20:22 *the king of Aram will attack you again.* The anonymous prophet (see v. 13) warned Ahab against undue self-confidence. The prophet’s announcement of an impending renewed attack by Ben-Hadad should have driven Ahab to more complete reliance on the God who had revealed himself on Mount Carmel and in the recent military victory. (CSB)

In His grace, God helped Ahab, who neither deserved nor sought God’s help. (TLSB)

20:23 *gods of the hills.* An expression of the pagan idea that a deity's power extended only over the limited area of his particular jurisdiction. (CSB)

The remark of Ben-hadad's servant reflects the notion, prevalent in the ancient world, that a certain deity had power in only one geographic area or in the exercise of only one function. (TLSB)

That is why they were too strong for us. The Arameans believed that the outcome of military conflicts depended on the relative strength of the gods of the opposing forces rather than on the inherent strength of the two armies. For this reason, their strategy was to fight the next battle in a way that advantageously maximized the supposed strengths and weaknesses of the deities involved. (CSB)

plain. Syrians were more familiar with battles in open areas, using chariots. (TLSB)

20:24 *remove the kings.* Kings were traditionally warriors, but over time, in a peaceful empire, warrior kings were replaced by administrators who had not experienced battle. They became a liability in a real fight. (TLSB)

20:13–25 Speaking through a prophet, the Lord tells Ahab that he will defeat the Syrian forces of Ben-hadad. Though undeserving, Ahab is blessed by God with victory. The Lord still sends the rain on the wicked as well as on the just (Mt 5:45). His merciful goodness is infinite for the sake of His children, whom He protects. • We praise You, O Lord, for the mercy and righteousness You provide us, though we are unworthy. Guide Your people, and shine on us from age to age. Amen. (TLSB)

20:26 *Aphek.* Presumably the Aphek located a few miles east of the Sea of Galilee. The battle apparently took place in the Jordan Valley near the juncture of the Yarmuk and Jordan rivers. (CSB)

Number of cities bore this name. Cf 1Sm 4:1; 29:1.(TLSB)

20:28 *man of God.* Apparently the same prophet mentioned in vv. 13, 22. (CSB)

you will know that I am the LORD. See note on v. 13. God will again demonstrate that he is the sovereign ruler over all nature and history and that the pagan nature deities are powerless before him. (CSB)

20:29 *seventh day.* Time was needed to settle the large number of troops and organize for battle. (TLSB)

a hundred thousand casualties. Probably includes all those who were driven from the field and the Aramean encampment, including support personnel. (CSB)

The Hbr word here and in v 30 can denote units of soldiers organized by the thousands or also the title for the leader of such a troop. If the wording represents a troop leader, there would be 100 leaders. (TLSB)

20:30 *wall collapsed*. The God of Israel not only gave Israel's army a victory in battle but also caused an additional disaster to fall on the Aramean army. (CSB)

Casemate walls could hold large numbers of troops within them. Collapse of such walls would be disastrous (see note, Jsh 2:15). However, also see the note on calculating numbers, v 29. Luth: "They surpass us by so many thousands, and all that we have seems to recede into nothing. But do not compare yourselves with them. No, compare yourselves with your Lord, and it will be wonderful to see how superior you will be. The flock of Israel was small too, a little band. Yet the king of Israel defeated King Benhadad" (AE 30:289). (TLSB)

twenty-seven thousand. Aphek was certainly not so large a city that its wall could literally have collapsed on so many. Perhaps this is the number of troops that had taken refuge in Aphek and were left defenseless when the city walls gave way. (CSB)

20:26–30 The Lord allows the smaller Israelite force to crush many Syrians because the Syrian king, Ben-hadad, mocked God's omnipresent rule. Beware of mocking the Almighty, either by insult or by lack of faith in His good and gracious rule, which extends over all. He rules in favor of His beloved people. How great is His power toward us in the living Savior, Jesus! • Grant me all boldness, mighty Lord, to carry out Your will and declare Your greatness. Amen. (TLSB)

20:31 *kings of the house of Israel are merciful*. The Arameans recognized that Israel's kings were different from, e.g., the ruthless Assyrian kings. (CSB)

In contrast with kings such as the Assyrians, known for their brutality. (TLSB)

sackcloth ... ropes. Perhaps here symbolic of humility and submission. (CSB)

Emblems of repentance. (TLSB)

20:32 *Your servant*. In the diplomatic language of the time, Ben-Hadad acknowledged his inferiority and subordination to Ahab by designating himself Ahab's servant (see note on v. 9). (CSB)

my brother. Ahab disregarded Ben-Hadad's concession and responded in terminology used by rulers who considered themselves equals (see 9:13). In doing this, Ahab gave much more than Ben-Hadad had asked or expected. (CSB)

Truly generous and speedy alliance. (TLSB)

20:33 *come up into his chariot*. Not the treatment normally accorded a defeated military opponent. (CSB)

20:34 *cities my father took from your father.* Perhaps Ramoth Gilead (see 22:3) along with some of the cities Ben-Hadad I had taken from Baasha (15:20) at an even earlier time. (CSB)

Evidently, Ahab's father, Omri, suffered reverses that are not mentioned in the short record of his reign (16:21–28). (TLSB)

your own market areas. Outlets for engaging in the lucrative international trade—a distinct economic advantage; usually such privileges were a jealously guarded local monopoly. (CSB)

Promise of a trade relationship. (TLSB)

made a treaty with him, and let him go. A parity treaty (a peace treaty between equals) that included among its provisions the political and trade agreements proposed by Ben-Hadad. (CSB)

A Prophet Condemns Ahab

³⁵ By the word of the LORD one of the sons of the prophets said to his companion, “Strike me with your weapon,” but the man refused. ³⁶ So the prophet said, “Because you have not obeyed the LORD, as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you.” And after the man went away, a lion found him and killed him. ³⁷ The prophet found another man and said, “Strike me, please.” So the man struck him and wounded him. ³⁸ Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king. He disguised himself with his headband down over his eyes. ³⁹ As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, “Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, ‘Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.’” ⁴⁰ While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared.” “That is your sentence,” the king of Israel said. “You have pronounced it yourself.” ⁴¹ Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. ⁴² He said to the king, “This is what the LORD says: ‘You have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people.’” ⁴³ Sullen and angry, the king of Israel went to his palace in Samaria.

20:35 *sons of the prophets.* An expression designating members of prophetic companies (see 2Ki 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1). “Son” is not to be understood here as “male child” or “descendant” but as the member of a group. These companies of prophets were apparently religious communities that sprang up in the face of general indifference and apostasy for the purpose of mutual edification and the cultivation of the experience of God. It seems likely that they were known as prophets because their religious practices (sometimes ecstatic) were called prophesying (see 18:29; Nu 11:25–27; 1Sa 10:5–6, 10–11; 18:10; 19:20–24)—to be distinguished from “prophet” in the

sense of one bringing (“prophesying”) a word from the Lord. The relationship of the Lord’s great prophets (such as Samuel, Elijah and Elisha) to these communities was understandably a close one, the Lord’s prophets probably being viewed as their spiritual mentors. (CSB)

20:36 *as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you.* A penalty reminiscent of what happened to the man of God from Judah (13:23–24). (CSB)

Swift, harsh punishment. The matter was gravely urgent. (TLSB)

20:38 *bandage.* Disguised as a wounded soldier, a member of the prophetic guild used a parable to trap Ahab into condemning himself (cf 2Sm 12:1–12). (TLSB)

20:39 *Your servant went out.* Prophet begins the parable. (TLSB)

talent. See NIV text note. Because few soldiers could have paid such a large sum, it would appear to Ahab that the man’s life was at stake. (CSB)

Penalty for negligence was set at a huge sum. A talent was equal to 3,000 shekels, 100 times the price of a slave. (TLSB)

20:40 *That is your sentence.* Ahab refused to grant clemency. Little did he know that he was pronouncing his own death sentence (cf. the similar technique used by Nathan the prophet, 2Sa 12:1–12). (CSB)

He is self-condemned. (TLSB)

20:41 *king ... recognized.* Prophets often served as court counselors. (TLSB)

20:42 *let go.* From a political point of view, the release of Ben-hadad was a wise move. Cooperation between the two countries was necessary to check the growing menace of Assyrian expansion into Syria, then southward into Israel. Later, Ahab and the Syrians did make common cause against the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III. The battle took place in 853 BC at Qarqar, c 100 mi N of Damascus. (TLSB)

a man I had determined should die. See NIV text note and notes on Lev 27:28; Jos 6:17. It is not clear whether Ahab violated a previous revelation or erred by simply neglecting to inquire of the Lord before releasing Ben-Hadad. In any case, the Lord had given Ben-Hadad into Ahab’s hand (see v. 28), and Ahab was responsible to the Lord for his custody. (CSB)

your life for his life, your people for his people. Because Ahab sinned in his official capacity as king, the sentence fell not only on Ahab personally but also on the people of the northern kingdom. Ahab died in battle against the Arameans (22:29–39), and Israel was severely humiliated by them during the reigns of Jehu and Jehoahaz (2Ki 10:32; 13:3). (CSB)

20:30–43 The Lord’s prophet uses a parable to show Ahab his guilt in releasing Ben-hadad, king of Syria. God calls us to deliver His Word faithfully, whether creatively (as in this example) or in brutal directness. How marvelously our Lord’s parables continue to instruct us in repentance and in faith, through the Gospel of His kingdom. His gracious rule delivers us from evil. • Strike my heart, O Lord. Wound me by the Law, that You may heal and deliver me with the life-giving Gospel of Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)