

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #16: Amatzya and the War with Yoash

In the two-hundred year span of the divided monarchy, Yehuda and Yisrael rarely clashed in armed conflict.¹ Relations between the sister-states were occasionally warm and friendly, but most of the time there was minimal bilateral interference and friction. However, during the reign of King Amatzya of Yehuda, violence flared between the South and the North, in a military campaign that included the sole instance of a Judean king captured by Yisrael.

THE ACCOUNT IN SEFER MELAKHIM

Amatzya rises to the throne following his father's assassination. He is described as faithful to God. He progressively gains power, and treads carefully; his father's assassins are identified as "his servants" which implies that the plot against his father had originated in government circles. Only after his reign stabilizes does he execute the men who killed his father. *Sefer Melakhim* consolidates our positive religious impression of Amatzya in a rare instance of quoting an earlier biblical book, *Sefer Devarim* (24:15)²:

He did not put the sons of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses ... "Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sins." (*Il Melakhim* 14:6)

This is evidence that Amatzya knows the Torah and follows its dictates.

Amatzya's prowess continues as he reasserts Israelite control over Edom for the first time in four generations.³ His killing of ten thousand residents of the city of Sela, and his renaming it Yokte'el, suggests the settlement of Israelites there. Scholars⁴ attest to the location of Sela as

¹ Military engagement is recorded after the split of the kingdom between Aviam and Assa (Yehuda) against Yerovam and Baasha (Yisrael,) see I Melakhim 14:30, 15:6, 15. See also the war, before the fall of the northern kingdom, between Pekah and Ahaz: II Melakhim 16:1-9, Yishayahu 7:1-9.

² For more on this, see Rabbi Dr. Yonatan Grossman, "A Man Shall Be Put To Death Only For His Own Crime," (VBM): <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.59/48kitetz.htm>

³ Yehuda had lost control over Edom in the reign of Yehoram, Amatzya's great-grandfather; see 8:20.

⁴ See *Daat Mikra* and *Olam Ha-Tanakh*. There is some uncertainty as to the identification of Sela. Whereas Josephus identified it as Petra, it more likely ought to be identified as es-Sela, an imposing natural rock fortress that still carries the name, east of Tafilleh (Tofel) and near

commanding important trade routes and copper mines. It is probable that control of this region opened the way southward for his son, Uzzia, who later establishes a successful port at Eilat (14:22). Up to this point all seems to go well for Amatzya. We then read:

Then Amatzya sent messengers to Yeho'ash son of Yeho'achaz son of Yeihu, king of Yisrael, with the challenge: "Come, meet me face to face." But Yeho'ash, king of Yisrael, replied to Amatzya, king of Yehuda: "A thistle in Lebanon sent a message to a cedar in Lebanon, 'Give your daughter to my son in marriage.' Then a wild beast in Lebanon came along and trampled the thistle underfoot.⁵ You have indeed defeated Edom and now you are arrogant (lit. your heart has been raised). Glory in your victory, but stay at home! Why ask for trouble and cause your own downfall and that of Yehuda also?" Amatzya, however, would not listen, so Yeho'ash, king of Yisrael, set out. He and Amatzya king of Yehuda faced each other at Beit Shemesh in Yehuda. Yehuda was routed by Yisrael, and every man fled to his home. Yeho'ash king of Yisrael captured Amatzya king of Yehuda, the son of Yo'ash, the son of Achazya, at Beit Shemesh. Then Yeho'ash went to Yerushalayim and broke down the wall of Yerushalayim from the Efrayim Gate to the Corner Gate—a section about six hundred feet long. He took all the gold and silver and all the articles found in the temple of the Lord and in the treasuries of the royal palace. He also took hostages and returned to Shomron. (*II Melakhim* 14:8-14)

What led to this war? One possibility is that Amatzya had extended his hand in peace, offering an alliance with the North. This would explain the positive language of "meeting face to face," and also Yoash's metaphor of marriage.⁶ If we follow this scenario, we will suggest that Amatzya wished to open access to coastal ports to allow the flow of trade from Edom to the sea, and he sought collaboration with Yisrael. However, he finds himself rebuffed by Yoash. Why did Yoash reject the offer of national unity? Possibly because he belittled Yehuda's power:

Even a peaceful collaboration was disdainful to him [Yoash], and certainly to join hands in battle. (Radak)

the Edomite city of Bozrah (Buseirah) in the rugged highlands of today's southern Jordan. Surrounded on all sides by deep ravines, es-Sela rises more than 600 feet above the surrounding valleys, culminating in a broad, flat summit. It can only be reached by an ancient, well-hidden staircase that follows a narrow cleft in the eastern face of the mountain. This would fit the account in *Divrei Ha-yamim* of 10,000 men being hurled from the Sela.

⁵ The parable does not seem to accurately correspond to the situation at hand. Whereas it is clear that Yeho'ash is describing himself as superior – the mighty cedar – and Amatzya as inferior – the lowly thistle, the applications of the other metaphorical elements (son and daughter, the offer of marriage, and the identity of the "beast of the field") elude us. Rashi reads Yeho'ash's parable as a popular folk fable that originated in the story of Ya'akov and Shekhem ben Chamor. Tanakh offers several instances of parables using the flora of the region, most classically, Yotam's parable in *Shoftim* 9:8-15. See also next footnote.

⁶ Shmuel Yeivin, *Studies in the Book of Kings - Proceedings from The Bible Study Circle at the Residence of David Ben-Gurion*, vol.2, B.Z. Luria (ed.) (Yerushalayim: Kiryat Sefer, 1985), pp. 303-4 and the ensuing discussion, pp. 308-310.

However the more standard view is that Amatzya's actively instigated the aggression against the North, possibly to shift the border northward.⁷

Although the text shrouds many elements of the story in obscurity, there is no doubt that this war was the greatest of failures on Amatzya's part. The army is defeated, Yerushalayim penetrated and Amatzya and members of his clan are taken captive. Curiously, *Sefer Melakhim* fails to articulate an ethical or religious criticism of Amatzya.⁸ At the text offers an implicit accusation of "arrogance" as embedded in Yoash's verbal jibe – "You defeated Edom and now you have become haughty" (14:10) – addressed to Amatzya.

Amatzya's fate after the war is also something of a riddle. The text records the capture of the king (14:13). If so, when did he return? The unusual notation that "Amatzya ... lived fifteen years after the death of Yeho'ash" (14:17) is commonly taken to indicate that Uzzia assumed the throne in his father's lifetime, while his father was prisoner in Shomron.⁹ Further obscurity surrounds the circumstances of his assassination. It seems that the conspiracy originated in Yerushalayim but transpired in Lakhish. Had Amatzya reassumed the throne in Yerushalayim? What were the motives of the assassins?

THE VIEW FROM *DIVREI HA-YAMIM*

Divrei Ha-yamim resolves some of these questions by offering a different perspective of Amatzya's actions. From a pure historical perspective, *Divrei Ha-yamim* adds new information, filling significant gaps in the story as reported by *Melakhim*. However, the resulting impression of Amatzya as perceived in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, is essentially different from a reading of *Melakhim*.¹⁰ We may list the significant differences as follows:

1. Amatzya's Brutality Against Edom

⁷ Rashi, Radak, Ralbag. This reading rests on Amatzya's initial approach of "*nitra'eh panim*" – a phrase which is ambivalent on its own – being mirrored by "*va-yira'u panim*" which describes a military clash, and clarifies the intent behind the language of Amatzya's initial approach. Regarding Amatzya's motives, see Oded Bustenai and Michael Kochman in *Olam Ha-Tanakh* pg. 107.

⁸ As articulated by Rav Yosef Kaspi: "How did the good and righteous fall into the hands of the wicked?" He soon addresses the issue philosophically, by stating that any number of Amatzya's sins may have been left unrecorded by the author of *Sefer Melakhim*. Possibly the discomfort with the lack of justice explains the elements introduced by *Divrei Ha-yamim* in which Amatzya features as more guilty.

⁹ See Y. Kiel, *Daat Mikra*, M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, in the *Anchor Bible* pg.159.

¹⁰ Sara Japhet notes that whereas *Melakhim* generally depicts a king in a static way, as a sinful or righteous king (as a function of his idolatry or opposition to it), *Divrei Ha-yamim* will frequently present a more complex biography with vacillations in the religious affiliation of the king. This is true regarding Rechav'am, Assa, Yehoshafat, Yo'ash, Amatzya, Uzzia, Chizkiyahu, Menashe and Yoshiyahu. See *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its place in Biblical Thought* (Yerushalayim: Mossad Bialik, 1977) pp. 410-11.

When Amatzya conquers Sela, he "captured ten thousand men alive, took them to the top of a cliff and threw them down so that all were dashed to pieces" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:11). It is possible that this violence was merely reflective of the norms of ancient warfare.¹¹ However one midrashic source condemns this action as highly unjustified, and a cause of national exile:¹²

I smiled upon you in the days of Amatzya, as it is said: "And Amatzya took courage, and led forth his people to the Valley of Salt... He captured ten thousand men alive, took them to the top of a cliff and threw them down" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:11). At that time the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "I decreed death upon the descendants of Noah only by the sword, but these "threw them down, all were dashed in pieces," At that time, the Holy One, Blessed Be He said, "Since they acted thus they shall go into exile." (*Eikha Rabba* 14)

2. The Cause of Amatzya's Aggression Against Yisrael

Divrei Ha-yamim details a very different lead-up to the clash between Amatzya and Yoash:

Amatzya called the people of Yehuda ... three hundred thousand men ready for military service ... **He also hired one hundred thousand fighting men from Yisrael for one hundred talents of silver.** But a man of God came to him and said, "O king, these troops from Yisrael must not march with you, for God is not with Yisrael—not with any of the people of Efrayim... Amatzya asked the man of God, "But what about the hundred talents I paid for these Israelite troops?" The man of God replied, "The Lord can give you much more than that." So Amatzya dismissed the troops who had come to him from Efrayim and sent them home. They were furious with Yehuda and left for home in a great rage... The troops that Amatzya had sent ... raided Judean towns from Samaria to Beth Choron. They killed three thousand people and carried off great quantities of plunder. (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:6-10, 13)

Here we have:

- The hiring of 100,000 Northern troops

¹¹ See another difficult episode in *II Shmuel* 8:2 or the mass killing in *I Melakhim* 11:15-16.

¹² It is my impression that *Tehillim* 137 similarly reflects the condemnation of the wanton violence that inheres in this cruel mode of execution: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us. Happy is he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." (137:8-9) The morbid "happiness" of this scene is the contemplation of vengeance against Babylon, as it is repaid in kind, for the murderous rampage it committed in Yerushalayim, their troops killing babies by smashing them against rocks. And yet the impetus for vengeance is the sheer horror at this cruel infanticide. The linguistic connection of the mass-murder together with the word "*sela*" is unavoidable, and with it, the implications of Amatzya's excessive and gratuitous brutality.

- The prophet instructing Amatzya that they are tainted and hence unsuitable for the Judean military force, because: "God is not with Yisrael"
- Amatzya obeying the prophet
- The rejected troops are insulted and they respond by rampaging through Judean towns on their return to the North, killing 3000 civilians.

This scenario throws Amatzya's actions into a new light. At the start, Amatzya is happy to collaborate with Yisrael, and he hires 100,000 troops. However animosity and violence erupt once Amatzya dismisses the mercenaries. This in turn induces Amatzya's belligerent call to battle against Yoash.

Now, the catalyst to the entire episode is the prophet's advice. What is the reason that Yehuda be restricted from associating with Yisrael? In the past, when Yehoshafat (Yehuda) associated with Ach'av (Yisrael) and the two royal houses united in marriage, it resulted in a devastating influx of idolatry into Yehuda. Does this explain the ban? Do the prophet's words give Amatzya the impression that he can defeat them on the battlefield?

3. **Amatzya's Idolatry and Opposition to the Prophet**

Amatzya's guilt is not his pride, but rather his religious turn to idolatry:

When Amatzya returned from slaughtering the Edomites, he brought back the gods of the people of Sei'ir. He set them up as his own gods, bowed down to them and burned sacrifices to them. The anger of the Lord burned against Amatzya, and he sent a prophet to him, who said, "Why do you consult this people's gods, which could not save their own people from your hand?" While he was still speaking, the king said to him, "Have we appointed you an adviser to the king? Stop! Why be struck down?" So the prophet stopped but said, "I know that God has determined to destroy you, because you have done this and have not listened to my counsel." (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 25:14-16)

Here Amatzya adopts the gods of the people of Sei'ir (Edom), bows and sacrifices to them, and then threatens the prophet who berates him for his misdemeanour.

As we may observe, the perspectives of *Melakhim* and *Divrei Ha-yamim* are rather different. *Melakhim* offers an Amatzya who is religiously devoted and successful in expanding his empire. His aggression towards Yisrael, possibly generated by overinflated hubris, lead to his demise.

Not only does *Divrei Ha-yamim* detail the sources of political tension between the North and South, but it also presents two distinct stages of Amatzya's reign. Prior to the campaign against Edom, Amatzya obeys the prophet and acts faithfully to God; he demonstrates compassion (against his father's assassins) and seeks national unity. After the successful campaign in Edom, he worships idols, intimidates the prophet and resists his message, exhibits extreme cruelty to Edom, and engages in a bombastic war campaign.

Divrei Ha-yamim offers a coherent rationale for Amatzya's downfall; his turn to idolatry and his direct challenge to God arouse God's punishment.¹³

CONCLUSION

We don't know what generated the drastic shift in Amatzya's behavior. In some ways, he recalls his father, Yoash of Yehuda,¹⁴ whose early life was marked by ardent devotion to God, but who altered radically in later life, rejecting the priesthood, turning to idolatry. Both kings disastrously mismanaged a war which resulted in Yerushalayim being penetrated by the enemy, and both kings were assassinated by political opponents.

This is a challenging historical period. After years of Aramean pressure, the region experiences a power vacuum which invites local kings to vie for regional control. It offers opportunities and dangers. In this environment, we see Yehuda regaining control over Edom, and eventually opening a port in Eilat. However in Amatzya's attempt to dominate Yisrael, he instigates his own downfall.

¹³ The application of strict correlation between actions and their reward or punishment is a distinctive feature of *Divrei Ha-yamim*. See Japhet pp. 145-154.

¹⁴ See Y. Kiel *Daat Mikra, Melakhim* pg. 839-40.