

THE MEANING OF II KINGS 3:27

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Jehoshaphat had a difficult time grasping the lessons that God wanted to teach him in the area of political allegiances with unbelieving nations, especially with "sister-nation" Israel to the north. But in spite of his failure to grasp this principle of God's, Jehoshaphat was honored by God for the righteous desires of his heart.

Thus we find him in the third chapter of the book of II Kings in league once again with ungodly Jehoram, and also with the King of Edom. Although He almost allowed these allied forces to perish in the desert, God still could not refrain from honoring the faith and life of Jehoshaphat:

And Elisha said (to Jehoram), As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee (II Kings 3:14).

Elisha then went on to prophesy of the great defeat that would soon be visited by God upon the rebellious Moabites at their very hands.

We are not surprised when reading on through the chapter to see Jehovah begin to fulfill His word through His prophet Elisha. He caused the Moabites to mistake the abundant water provided for the Allies for blood flowing freely in the sunshine of early dawn, and to rush forth hastily in search of easy spoil. These eager warriors had their hopes spoiled in a devastating ambush that virtually annihilated their forces. Some were able to retreat and regroup in a nearby city, but even here it seemed only a matter of time before these bastions would also fall before the vicious allies who were felling all the trees in the land, stopping up the wells of water, and beating down all of the cities. Thus Mesha, King of Moab, mustered the strength he had left, seven hundred men, and thrust them forth on a mission of penetrating and breaking the enemy lines where the

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When this "Battle of the Bulge" tactic failed, we expect to read of the total massacre of the remaining brash Moabites. But instead we find Moab with still one last desperation tactic, as we read:

Then he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there was great indignation against Israel: and they departed from him, and returned to their own land (II Kings 3:27).

Our shock at the sacrifice by Mesha of his eldest son is surpassed only by our surprise at the completion of the Biblical account of this military operation. We had been witnessing a dramatic, climactic fulfillment of prophecy, when we are unexpectedly left hanging in mid-air. Israel leaves the battlefield and leaves us with our mouths hanging wide open.

Why did the conflict end in this manner? What could the meaning of this verse be? The unfulfilled expectations and the ambiguous phrases of the verse leave us perplexed. The element of human sacrifice to those of us who have come into a new relationship with God by means of appropriating the benefits to ourselves of the voluntary, self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ adds further fascination and motivation to our wondering minds.

This paper will attempt to clarify some of these questions by examining the two leading problems in II Kings 3:27. The first problem is the identification of the meaning of Mesha's sacrifice and the second is the identification of the meaning of Israel's response to this sacrifice.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF MESHA'S SACRIFICE?

Obviously, the sacrifice of his eldest son was an act of desperation, but beyond this fact, what was Mesha's motive for doing so? What could he have hoped to accomplish?

Some find that the best way to account for this gruesome act is to plead temporary insanity on the part of the defendant in a manner similar to the defense of Sirhan Sirhan today:

In his madness he took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and flung him for a burnt offering upon the wall.¹

Certainly such an explanation strikes home as being within the realm of possibility, especially as we hear repeatedly that hospitals are full of people with mental and emotional collapses over far lesser things. Nevertheless, such an explanation should be reserved for those who have failed to make any rational explanation fit the facts, for it is not a very satisfying answer.

Another desperate, though ancient, solution to the problem is the suggestion that Mesha sacrificed, not his own son, but the son of the King of Edom. The door to such a view was opened by the Septuagint which reads *ton huion autou* ("his son") instead of *ton huion heautou* ("his own son"), and Fathers such as Theodoret walked through the door.² The son could well have been taken captive during the preceding thrust into the territory controlled by the King of Edom, and the motive of revenge would have followed naturally after the frustrating failure of the attempted penetration. Support for this view is then also found in the words of Amos, who condemned Moab "because he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime."³

But Dr. Badhr (*Lange's Commentary*) argues rather convincingly against this interpretation and offers several reasons why Amos 2:1 may not be used as a legitimate support.⁴ When all is said and done, this view is rather remote, and it would be far wiser to remain with the most obvious meaning that Mesha sacrificed his own son.

The majority are correct when they see this sacrifice as the product of Mesha's active faith in Chemosh, god of Moab. The Moabite Stone bears strong testimony to this religious zeal in the heart of Me~ha:

"I am Mesha, son of Chemosh-. . . ., king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father was king over Moab thirty years and I became king after my father. And I made this sanctuary for *Chemosh* at Qrchh, (a sanctuary of) salvation; for he saved me from all the kings and let me see my desire upon my adversaries. Omri, (5) king of Israel, he oppressed Moab many days, for *Chemosh was angry with his land*. And his son succeeded him and he too said, 'I will oppress Moab.' In my days *he spoke* (thus), and I saw my desire upon him and upon his house, when Israel perished utterly for ever. And Omri had taken possession of the land of Medeba and (Israel) dwelt in it his days and half the days of his son, forty years; but *Chemosh dwelt in it in my days*. And I built Baal-meon and made in it the reservoir, and I built (10) Qaryaten. And the men of Gad had long dwelt in the land of Ataroth, and the king of Israel had built Ataroth for himself. But I fought against the town and took it and *I slew all* the people of the town, a spectacle for Chemosh and Moab. . . .And *Chemosh said to me*.⁵

We see very clearly in this tablet the Chemosh-centered life that Mesha led in which he interpreted all of his circumstances in terms of the activity and attitudes of the unseen god of Moab. Consequently, just as in the days

when Moab was oppressed by Omri, Mesha must have come to the conclusion that "Chemosh was angry with his land" when all of his military maneuvers ended in failure. Rather than continue a hopeless fight against his seen enemy, Mesha came to the end of himself and tried to placate the wrath of his alienated god by sacrificing the dearest thing to his heart, his eldest son. Some go even a step further in stressing the fact that this offering took place upon the wall, thus indicating that Mesha did it publicly for Israel's benefit. This inference is not necessary, because it was normal to offer sacrifices from high places, but even if it be allowed, we must speculate concerning Mesha's strategy in letting Israel observe this awful deed. Did he, like Elijah, hope to demonstrate that his god was truly alive, while Jehovah was asleep? Did he know of the Jewish abhorrence of human sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5), and hope that Israel might take upon herself the guilt for driving Moab to these extremities? Or did he suspect that their abhorrence might simply nauseate them and sap their drive for conquest? Such speculation does not merit any further thought because all of these motives are nullified by the observation of Dr. Bahr that if Mesha's act of sacrifice was a strategic move with Israel in mind, then it would have been pure folly to have sacrificed his own son, and successor to the throne.⁶ Mere human sacrifice would accomplish any of these speculative goals, but only the offering of his eldest son could placate the wrath of Chemosh.

Consequently, Mesha did not sacrifice the Son of the King of Edom, but his' own son; nor did he do it out of sheer madness or sharp strategy to overcome Israel. He did it in a sincere effort to regain the favor of his god Chemosh.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ISRAEL'S RESPONSE TO MESHA'S SACRIFICE?

Although Mesha may not have offered his son primarily with its effect upon Israel in view, he must have interpreted the subsequent retreat by the Israeli armies as the answer from Chemosh to his prayers and sacrifice. Why did Israel, on the verge of final and total victory, suddenly "return to their own land?" Is it possible that Chemosh did, in fact, strike terror into the hearts of the aggressors? Rawlinson scoffs at the very thought.⁷ But why did Israel retreat and what is the meaning of the phrase "there was great indignation against Israel?"

The Meaning of "There Was Great Indignation Against Israel "

Many commentators (e.g. Montgomery, Farrar, and Keil) make the observation that the Hebrew word for indignation is used almost exclusively to refer to divine wrath.⁸ Some have interpreted such divine wrath as the

wrath of Chemosh, and Kittel even assumed that "the wrath of Chemosh" once stood in the text; but most take the expression to mean the divine wrath of Jehovah.⁹

Most of those understanding this phrase in this normal sense of the wrath of Jehovah explain the cause of the Wrath in terms of the Biblical injunction not to make human sacrifices:

As hayah qesep 'al is used of. the divine wrath or judgment, which a man brings upon himself by sinning, in every other case in which the phrase occurs, we cannot understand it here as signifying the "human indignation":... The meaning is: this act of abomination, to which the king of the Moabites had been compelled by the extremity of his distress, brought a severe judgment from God upon Israel. The Pesiegers, that is to say, felt the wrath of God, which they had brought Upon themselves by occasioning human sacrifice, which is strictly forbidden in the law (Lev. xviii. 21, xx. 3).¹⁰

But Bahr exposes some real problems in this viewpoint:

In this case, however, there is not a word to the effect that Israel had incurred guilt. That which had been brought about by the allied army, had taken place as the prophet had foretold (ver. 18sq.), and he had represented it as an especially great assistance of God. When, then, the king of Moab did something of his Own accord which the Law strenuously forbade, that was his guilt and not Israel's.¹¹

Furthermore, we do well to recognize the conclusion which Dilling made following a detailed study of human sacrifice in the Bible, that such sacrifice is amoral in nature.¹² In Leviticus, for instance, all human sacrifice is not banned, but only the wrong use of it to appease heathen deities. The only sin and guilt in this passage is that of Mesha, and so why Jehovah should have suddenly turned against Israel must remain a mystery.

This mystery is better explained by viewing this indignation as a subjective, and not an objective experience; as a human, and not a divine, emotion. Although the impression is given by some that this phrase always refers to divine wrath, Bahr cites several passages in which it means human anger (dissatisfaction, resentment, bitterness).¹³ Even if these cross references did not exist, the preponderance of references to divine wrath could not rule out this interpretation, but merely make it more unlikely.

Thus Bahr takes the phrase to mean that the Israeli army lost heart, as does Rawlinson along with others.¹⁴ One notable variation was Josephus who understood this emotion, not as universal horror or fear, but as commiseration for the Moabites.¹⁵ Such a view has little to support it, but it does seem most satisfying to understand this emotion as the subjective experience of the Jews, and not as the anger of Jehovah directed against them.

Why Did Israel Return to Their Own Land?

Having determined the meaning of the "great indignation," we may fix its implications for our understanding of why Israel left the battlefield. It was probably not out of commiseration for the Moabites, because mercy was hardly a part of the code of battle ethics at that time, as witness what had already been wrought upon their heads (cf. v. 24, 25)! Neither was the retreat due to a sense of guilt and responsibility for causing Mesha to sin which brought a fear of the wrath of Jehovah into their hearts.

The most likely reason seems to be that Israel feared the retribution of Chemosh, and so they fled! Most of the commentators who take a critical approach to the Scriptures take this option (cf. Dentan, Gray, and Roland de Vaux), but this fact alone does not render the position invalid. Rawlinson and Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown are among the more conservative scholars who hold that this was the cause of the sudden retreat. Let us not forget that these people shared many of the superstitions of the people around them (cf. Judges 11 :24), and furthermore, that many of the Israelites were unbelievers! They had been taught the importance of sacrifices, and now seeing such a sacrifice, fear gripped their superstitious hearts and they ceased the advance. This brings us to our final question.

Was the Victory Incomplete?

Through this sudden retreat did Israel then lose the battle? Of course not! We have already witnessed the full fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy, and so let us not get so caught up in this turn of events that we leave with the impression of defeat. Rather, because the prophecy had already been fulfilled and there remained only the malicious and greedy aggression for the spoil and annihilation of the enemy, it was that much easier to retreat when the malice turned to fear. From the standpoint of what could have happened, it was incomplete, but from the standpoint of the prophecy, it was complete.

CONCLUSION

By the grace of God, out of respect for Jehoshaphat, Israel was completely overwhelming the Moabites in fulfillment of Elisha's prophecy. Once that prophecy had been fulfilled, however, God did not allow the

Moabites to be totally annihilated. He allowed even the sacrifice of his own son by a pagan king in desperation and religious zeal to a false god as the means of striking fear into the hearts of this wayward and superstitious people; and this fear caused them to stop the attack and return home. God fulfilled His word through His prophet in honor of Jehoshaphat, but he also humbled the people at the close of the victory lest they be lifted up with pride.

DOCUMENTATION

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3. Amos 2:1.
4. Karl Chr. W. F. Bahr, "The Books of the Kings", *A Commentary Holy Scripture*, ed. John Peter Lange (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1915), p. 33 (Book II).
5. D. Winton Thomas, *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1958), p. 196.
6. Bahr, p. 33.
7. G. Rawlinson, "II Kings", *The Pulpit Commentary*, H. D. M. Spence, ed., (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company) n.d. p. 63.
8. Bahr cites the following passages which are most frequently used to substantiate this claim: Numbers 1:53; 18:5 (cf. Lev. 17:11); Joshua 9:20; 22:20; II Chronicles 19:10; 24:18.
9. F. W. Farrar, "The Second Book of Kings", *The Expositor's Bible*, W.R. Nicoll, ed., (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900), p. 364.
10. C. F. Keil, "The Books of the Kings," *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark) n. d. p. 307.
11. Bahr, p. 33.
12. David Dilling, "The Final Test of Abraham's Faith", *Unpublished Critical Monograph* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Grace Theological Seminary, 1963), p. iv.
13. Bahr, p. 33. As a noun: Ecc 5:17; Esther 1:18. Gen. 40:2; 41:10; Ex. 16:20; Lev. 10:16; and Num. 21:14
14. Rawlinson, p. 63.
15. James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Books of Kings*, Henry S. Gehman ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 364.

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