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Introduction

Ben-hadad, king of Syria, and thirty-two kings, besiege Samaria, 1 Kings 20:1. He sends an insulting message to Ahab; and insists on pillaging the whole city, 1 Kings 20:2-7. The elders of Israel counsel the king not to submit to such shameful conditions, 1 Kings 20:8. He sends a refusal to Ben-hadad; who, being enraged, vows revenge, 1 Kings 20:9-12. A prophet comes to Ahab, and promises him victory, and gives him directions how he should order the battle, 1 Kings 20:13-19. The Syrians are discomfited, and Ben-hadad scarcely escapes, 1 Kings 20:20, 1 Kings 20:21. The prophet warns Ahab to be on his guard, for the Syrians would return next year, 1 Kings 20:22. The counsellors of the king of Syria instruct him how he may successfully invade Israel, 1 Kings 20:23-25. He leads an immense army to Aphek, to fight with Ahab, 1 Kings 20:26, 1 Kings 20:27. A man of God encourages Ahab, who attacks the Syrians, and kills one hundred thousand of them, 1 Kings 20:28, 1 Kings 20:29. They retreat to Aphek, where twenty-seven thousand of them are slain by a casualty, 1 Kings 20:30. Ben-hadad and his courtiers, being closely besieged in Aphek, and unable to escape, surrender themselves with sackcloth on their loins, and halters on their heads; the king of Israel receives them in a friendly manner, and makes a covenant with Ben-hadad, 1 Kings 20:31-34. A prophet, by a symbolical action, shows him the impolicy of his conduct in permitting Ben-hadad to escape, and predicts his death and the slaughter of Israel, 1 Kings 20:35-43.

Verse 1

Ben-hadad - Several MSS., and some early printed editions, have Ben-hadar, or the son of Hadar, as the Septuagint. He is supposed to be the same whom Asa stirred up against the king of Israel, 1 Kings 15:18; or, as others, his son or grandson.

Thirty and two kings - Tributary chieftains of Syria and the adjacent countries. In former times every town and city had its independent chieftain. Both the Septuagint and Josephus place this war after the history of Naboth.

Verse 4

I am thine, and all that I have - He probably hoped by this humiliation to soften this barbarous king, and perhaps to get better conditions.

Verse 6

Whatsoever is pleasant in thine eyes - It is not easy to discern in what this second requisition differed from the first; for surely his silver, gold, wives, and children, were among his most pleasant or desirable things. Jarchi supposes that it was the book of the law of the Lord which Ben-hadad meant, and of which he intended to deprive Israel. It is however evident that Ben-hadad meant to sack the whole city, and after having taken the royal treasures and the wives and children of the king, to deliver up the whole to be pillaged by his soldiers.

Verse 8

Hearken not unto him - The elders had every thing at stake, and they chose rather to make a desperate defense than tamely to yield to such degrading and ruinous conditions.

Verse 10

If the dust of Samaria shall suffice - This is variously understood. Jonathan translates thus: "œlf the dust of Shomeron shall be sufficient for the soles of the feet of the people that shall accompany me; i.e., I shall bring such an army that there will scarcely be room for them to stand in Samaria and its vicinity.

Verse 11

Let not him that girdeth on - This was no doubt a proverbial mode of expression. Jonathan translates, "œTell him, Let not him who girds himself and goes down to the battle, boast as he who has conquered and returned from it.

Verse 12

In the pavilions - This word comes from papilio, a butterfly, because tents, when pitched or spread out, resembled such animals; partly because of the mode of their expansion, and partly because of the manner in which they were painted.

Set yourselves in array - The original word, *šimū* (simu), which we translate by this long periphrasis, is probably a military term for Begin the attack, Invest the city, Every man to his post, or some such like expression.

Verse 13

There came a prophet - Who this was we cannot tell; Jarchi says it was Micaiah, son of Imlah. It is strange that on such an occasion we hear nothing of Elijah or Elisha. Is it not possible that this was one of them disguised?

Verse 14

By the young men of the princes of the provinces - These were probably some chosen persons out of the militia of different districts, raised by the princes of the provinces; the same as we would call lord-lieutenants of counties.

Verse 15

Two hundred and thirty-two - These were probably the king's life or body guards; not all the militia, but two hundred and thirty of them who constituted the royal guard in Samaria. They were therefore the king's own regiment, and he is commanded by the prophet to put himself at their head.

Seven thousand - How low must the state of Israel have been at this time! These Jarchi thinks were the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

Verse 18

Take them alive - He was confident of victory. Do not slay them; bring them to me, they may give us some useful information.

Verse 20

The Syrians fled - They were doubtless panic-struck.

Verse 23

Their gods are gods of the hills - It is very likely that the small Israelitish army availed itself of the heights and uneven ground, that they might fight with greater advantage against the Syrian cavalry, for Ben-hadad came up against Samaria with horses and chariots, 1 Kings 20:1. These therefore must be soon thrown into confusion when charging in such circumstances; indeed, the chariots must be nearly useless.

Let us fight against them in the plain - There our horses and chariots will all be able to bear on the enemy, and there their gods, whose influence is confined to the hills, will not be able to help them. It was a general belief in the heathen world that each district had its tutelary and protecting deity, who could do nothing out of his own sphere.

Verse 24

Take the kings away - These were not acquainted with military affairs, or they had not competent skill. Put experienced captains in their place, and fight not but on the plains, and you will be sure of victory.

Verse 26

Ben-hadad numbered the Syrians, and went up to Aphek - There were several towns of this name; see the notes on Joshua 12:18. It is supposed that the town mentioned here was situated in Libanus, upon the river Adonis, between Heliopolis and Biblos.

Verse 28

Because the Syrians have said - God resents their blasphemy, and is determined to punish it. They shall now be discomfited in such a way as to show that God's power is every where, and that the multitude of a host is nothing against him.

Verse 29

Slew a hundred thousand footmen in one day - This number is enormous; but the MSS. and versions give no various reading.

Verse 30

A wall fell upon twenty and seven thousand - From the first view of this text it would appear that when the Syrians fled to Aphek, and shut themselves within the walls, the Israelites immediately brought all hands, and sapped the walls, in consequence of which a large portion fell, and buried twenty-seven thousand men. But perhaps the hand of God was more immediately in this disaster; probably a burning wind is meant. See at the end of the chapter, 1 Kings 20:43 (note).

Keep this man - The drift of this is at once seen; but Ahab, not knowing it, was led to pass sentence on himself.

Verse 41

Took the ashes away - He took the bandage from off his eyes: see on 1 Kings 20:38 (note). It was no doubt of thin cloth, through which he could see, while it served for a sufficient disguise.

Verse 42

Thy life shall go for his life - This was fulfilled at the battle of Ramoth-gilead, where he was slain by the Syrians; see 1 Kings 22:34, 1 Kings 22:35.

Verse 43

Heavy and displeased - Heavy or afflicted, because of these dreadful tidings; and displeased with the prophet for having announced them. Had he been displeased with himself, and humbled his soul before God, even those judgments, so circumstantially foretold, might have been averted.

1. We have already seen, in 1 Kings 20:30, that according to our text, twenty-seven thousand men were slain by the falling of a wall. Serious doubts are entertained concerning the legitimacy of this rendering. I have, in the note, given the conjecture concerning sapping the foundation of the wall, and thus overthrowing them that were upon it. If instead of **x—x*xžx** (chomah), a wall, we read **x—x*xžx** confusion or disorder, then the destruction of the twenty-seven thousand men may appear to have been occasioned by the disorganized state into which they fell; of which their enemies taking advantage, they might destroy the whole with ease.

But **x—x*xžx** (chomah), a wall, becomes, as Dr. Kennicott has observed, a very different word when written without the **x** (vau), **x—xžx** which signifies heat; sometimes the sun, vehement heat, or the heat of the noon-day sun; and also the name of a wind, from its suffocating, parching quality.

The same noun, from **x™x—x** (yacham), Dr. Castel explains by exandescencia, furor, venenum; burning, rage, poison. These renderings, says Dr. Kennicott, all concur to establish the sense of a burning wind, eminently blasting and destructive. I shall give a few instances from the Scripture: - We read in Job 27:21: The east wind carrieth him away; where the word **xšx“x™x** (kadim) is **יָרֵחַ...יָרֵחַ** ½, burning, in the Septuagint; and in the Vulgate, ventus urens, a burning wind. In Ezekiel 19:12: She was plucked up **x‘x—xžx** she was cast down to the ground, and the east wind dried up her fruit; her strong rods were withered, and the fire consumed them. Hosea (Hosea 13:15) mentions the desolation brought by an east wind, the wind of the Lord. What in Amos 4:9 is, I have smitten you with blasting, in the Vulgate is, in vento vehemente, **â€œ**with a vehement wind;**â€•** and in the Syriac, with a hot wind.

Let us apply these to the history: when Ben-hadad, king of Syria, was besieging Samaria the second time, the Israelites slew of the Syrians one hundred thousand footmen in one day; and it follows, that when the rest of the army fled to Aphek, twenty-seven thousand of the men that were left were suddenly destroyed by **x”x—x*xžx** (hachomah), or **x”x—xžx** (hachamah), a burning wind. That such is the true interpretation, will appear more clearly if we compare the destruction of Ben-hadad’s army with that of Sennacherib, whose sentence is that God would send upon him a Blast, **x`x*x—** (ruach), a wind; doubtless such a wind as would be suddenly destructive. The event is said to be that in the night one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians were smitten by the angel of the Lord, 2 Kings 19:7, 2 Kings 19:35. The connection of this sentence with the execution of it is given by the psalmist, who says, Psalm 104:4: God maketh his angels **x`x—x*xª** (ruchoth), winds; or, maketh the winds his angels, i.e., messengers for the performance of his will. In a note on Psalm 11:6, Professor Michaelis has these words: Ventus Zilgaphoth, pestilens eurus est, orientalibus notissimus, qui obvia quaevis necat; **â€œ**The wind Zilgaphoth is a pestilent east wind, well known to the Asiatics, which suddenly kills those who are exposed to it.**â€•** Thevenot mentions such a wind in 1658, that in one night suffocated twenty thousand men. And the Samiel he mentions as having, in 1665, suffocated four thousand persons. **â€œ**Upon the whole, I conclude,**â€•** says the doctor, **â€•**that as Thevenot has mentioned two great multitudes destroyed by this burning wind, so has holy Scripture recorded the destruction of two much greater multitudes by a similar cause; and therefore we should translate the words thus: But the rest fled to Aphek, into the city; and The Burning Wind fell upon the twenty and seven thousand of the men that were left.**â€•**

2. On the case of Ben-hadad and his servants coming out to Ahab with sackcloth on their loins and ropes about their necks, 1 Kings 20:31, I have referred to that of the six citizens of Calais, in the time of Edward III. I shall give this affecting account from Sir John Froissart, who lived in that time, and relates the story circumstantially, and with that simplicity and detail that give it every appearance of truth. He is the only writer, of all his contemporaries, who gives the relation; and as it is not only illustrative of the text in question, but also very curious and affecting, I will give it in his own words; only observing that, King Edward having closely invested the city in 1346, and the king of France having made many useless attempts to raise the siege, at last withdrew his army, and left it to its fate. **â€œ**Then,**â€•** says Froissart, chap. cxliv., **â€œ**after the departure of the king of

France with his army, the Calesians saw clearly that all hopes of succor were at an end; which occasioned them so much sorrow and distress that the hardiest could scarcely support it. They entreated therefore, most earnestly, the lord Johns de Vienne, their governor, to mount upon the battlements, and make a sign that he wished to hold a parley.

“The king of England, upon hearing this, sent to him Sir Walter Manny and Lord Basset. When they were come near, the lord de Vienne said to them: “Dear gentlemen, you, who are very valiant knights, know that the king of France, whose subjects we are, has sent us hither to defend this town and castle from all harm and damage. This we have done to the best of our abilities; all hopes of help have now left us, so that we are most exceedingly straitened; and if the gallant king, your lord, have not pity upon us, we must perish with hunger. I therefore entreat that you would beg of him to have compassion upon us, and to have the goodness to allow us to depart in the state we are in; and that he will be satisfied with having possession of the town and castle, with all that is within them, as he will find therein riches enough to content him.” To this Sir Walter Manny replied: “John, we are not ignorant of what the king our lord’s intentions are, for he has told them to us; know then, that it is not his pleasure that you should get off so, for he is resolved that you surrender yourselves wholly to his will, to allow those whom he pleases their ransom, or to be put to death; for the Calesians have done him so much mischief, and have, by their obstinate defense, cost him so many lives, and so much money, that he is mightily enraged.”

“The lord de Vienne answered: “These conditions are too hard for us; we are but a small number of knights and squires, who have loyally served our lord and master, as you would have done, and have suffered much ill and disquiet: but we will endure more than any men ever did in a similar situation, before we consent that the smallest boy in the town should fare worse than the best. I therefore once more entreat you, out of compassion, to return to the king of England, and beg of him to have pity on us; he will, I trust, grant you this favor; for I have such an opinion of his gallantry as to hope that, through God’s mercy, he will alter his mind.”

“The two lords returned to the king and related what had passed. The king said: “He had no intention of complying with the request, but should insist that they surrendered themselves unconditionally to his will.” Sir Walter replied: “My lord, ye may be to blame in this, as you will set us a very bad example; for if you order us to go to any of your castles, we shall not obey you so cheerfully if you put these people to death, for they will retaliate upon us in a similar case.”

“Many barons who were present supported this opinion; upon which the king replied: “Gentlemen, I am not so obstinate as to hold my opinion alone against you all. Sir Walter, you will inform the governor of Calais, that the only grace he is to expect from me is, that six of the principal citizens of Calais march out of the town with bare heads and feet, with ropes round their necks, and the keys of the town and castle in their hands. These six persons shall be at my absolute disposal, and the remainder of the inhabitants pardoned.”

“Sir Walter returned to the lord de Vienne, who was waiting for him on the battlements, and told him all that he had been able to gain from the king. “I beg of you,” replied the governor, “that you would be so good as to remain here a little, whilst I go and relate all that has passed to the townsmen; for, as they have desired me to undertake this it is but proper that they should know the result of it.”

“He went to the market place, and caused the bell to be rung; upon which all the inhabitants, men and women, assembled in the town-hall. He then related to them what he had said, and the answers he had received, and that he could not obtain any conditions more favorable; to which they must give a short and immediate answer.

“This information caused the greatest lamentations and despair, so that the hardest heart would have had compassion on them; even the lord de Vienne wept bitterly.

“After a short time the most wealthy citizen of the town, by name Eustace de St. Pierre, rose up and said: “Gentlemen, both high and low, it would be a very great pity to suffer so many people to die through famine, if any means could be found to prevent it; and it would be highly meritorious in the eyes of our Savior, if such misery could be averted. I have such faith and trust in finding grace before God, if I die to save my townsmen, that I name myself as first of the six.”

“When Eustace had done speaking, they all rose up and almost worshipped him: many cast themselves at his feet with tears and groans. Another citizen, very rich and respected, rose up and said, “He would be the second to his companion Eustace;” his name was John Daire. After him James Wisant, who was very rich in merchandise and lands, offered himself as companion to his two cousins, as did Peter Wisant, his brother. Two others then named themselves, which completed the number demanded by the king of England. The lord John de Vienne then mounted a small hackney, for it was with difficulty he could walk, (he had been wounded in the siege), and conducted them to the gate. There was the greatest sorrow and lamentation over all the town; and in such manner were they attended to the gate, which the governor ordered to be opened and then shut upon him and the six citizens, whom he led to the barriers, and said to Sir Walter Manny, who was there waiting for him, “I deliver up to you, as governor of Calais, with the consent of the inhabitants, these six citizens; and I swear to you that they were, and are at this day, the most wealthy and respectable inhabitants of Calais. I beg of you,

gentle sir, that you would have the goodness to beseech the king that they may not be put to death.â€” â€”I cannot answer for what the king will do with them,â€” replied Sir Walter; â€”but you may depend that I will do all in my power to save them.â€”

â€”The barriers were opened, when these six citizens advanced towards the pavilion of the king, and the lord de Vienne re-entered the town.

â€”When Sir Walter Manny had presented these six citizens to the king, they fell upon their knees, and with uplifted hands said: â€”Most gallant king, see before you six citizens of Calais, who have been capital merchants, and who bring you the keys of the castle and of the town. We surrender ourselves to your absolute will and pleasure, in order to save the remainder of the inhabitants of Calais, who have suffered much distress and misery. Condescend, therefore, out of your nobleness of mind, to have mercy and compassion upon us.â€” All the barons knights, and squires, that were assembled there in great numbers, wept at this sight.

â€”The king eyed them with angry looks, (for he hated much the people of Calais, for the great losses he had formerly suffered from them at sea), and ordered their heads to be stricken off. All present entreated the king that he would be more merciful to them, but he would not listen to them. Then Sir Walter Manny said: â€”Ah, gentle king, let me beseech you to restrain your anger; you have the reputation of great nobleness of soul, do not therefore tarnish it by such an act as this, nor allow any one to speak in a disgraceful manner of you. In this instance all the world will say you have acted cruelly, if you put to death six such respectable persons, who of their own free will have surrendered themselves to your mercy, in order to save their fellow citizens.â€” Upon this the king gave a wink, saying, Be it so, and ordered the headsman to be sent for; for that the Calesians had done him so much damage, it was proper they should suffer for it.

â€”The queen of England, who was at that time very big with child, fell on her knees, and with tears said: â€”Ah, gentle sir, since I have crossed the sea with great danger to see you, I have never asked you one favor; now I most humbly ask as a gift, for the sake of the Son of the blessed Mary, and for your love to me, that you will be merciful to these six men.â€” The king looked at her for some time in silence, and then said: â€”Ah, lady, I wish you had been any where else than here; you have entreated in such a manner that I cannot refuse you; I therefore give them to you, to do as you please with them.â€”

â€”The queen conducted the six citizens to her apartments, and had the halters taken from round their necks, new clothed, and served them with a plentiful dinner; she then presented each with nobles, and had them escorted out of the camp in safety.â€” This is the whole of this affecting account, which is mentioned by no other writer, and has been thought a proper subject for the pen of the poet, the pencil of the painter, and the burin of the engraver; and which has seldom been fairly represented in the accounts we have of it from our historians.â€”

The translation I have borrowed from the accurate edition of Froissart, by Mr. Johns, of Hafod; and to his work, vol. i., p. 367, I must refer for objections to the authenticity of some of the facts stated by the French historian. We see in Eustace de St. Pierre and his five companions the portrait of genuine patriotism. - a principle, almost as rare in the world as the Egyptian phoenix, which leads its possessors to devote their property and consecrate their lives to the public weal; widely different from that spurious birth which is deep in the cry of My country! while it has nothing in view but its places, pensions, and profits. Away with it!