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Q&A#106 Human Sacrifice and Divine Wrath in 2 Kings 3

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Today's question: "I was reading 2 Kings 3 which discusses the war with Moab, and I was struck by how the story ends - Elisha seems to prophesy success, at least he counsels engagement, Israel does succeed, but at the end King Mesha sacrifices his son and "great wrath" comes against Israel, driving them back. Two questions arose from this ending. What do you think is going on in this story, as it ends abruptly and unexpectedly? And how do you make sense of the victory that seems directly linked to child sacrifice? The ESV study Bible comment claims that this great wrath must have been the wrath of the Moabites, but that interpretation doesn't sit well with me given the way the text invoked a kind of "divine passive" of sorts. Do you think there is some sort of real demonic response here? How might that affect the way we view the competing gods of the Old Testament and the competing spiritual practices of the present day?"

Within this video, I recommend Peter Leithart's commentary on 1 and 2 Kings: <https://amzn.to/2EdBffe>. I have also written a book on Echoes of Exodus: <https://amzn.to/2liA3eF>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I was reading 2 Kings 3, which discusses the war with Moab, and I was struck by how the story ends. Elisha seems to prophesy success.

At least he counsels engagement. Israel does succeed, but at the end, King Mesha sacrifices his son, and great wrath comes against Israel, driving them back. Two questions arose from this ending.

What do you think is going on in this story, as it ends abruptly and unexpectedly? And how do you make sense of the victory that seems directly linked to child sacrifice? The ESV study bible comment claims that this great wrath must have been the wrath of the Moabites, but that interpretation doesn't sit well with me, given the way that the text invoked a kind of divine passive of sorts. Do you think that there is some sort of real demonic response here? How might that affect the way that we view the competing gods of the Old Testament, and the competing spiritual practices of the present day? Really good question on a very tough passage. The book I found very helpful on 1 and 2 Kings, and particularly dealing with themes like this, tough questions of this kind, is Peter Lighthouse's 1 and 2 Kings commentary in the Brazos Theological series.

Highly recommended. It gets into some of the underlying themes of the text, and also recognizes some of the typology that's taking place, and the way that this typology can open up texts. In this particular case, and unsurprisingly, there are echoes of Exodus, and the Exodus echoes help us to open up the passage and help us to understand a bit of what's taking place, or at least relieve some of the questions that we might have.

There are many other things going on in this passage, and it's not an easy one to understand, but here are a few thoughts. First of all, as we look through the passage, we'll see that there is a very much a twist in the tale at the end. It's 27 verses long.

If it lasted 26 verses, it would seem to be a very straightforward story about a victory given to Israel against the Moabites, but there is that twist at the very end, and that twist changes the story significantly in our reading of it. As you look through the story, you'll see, first of all, that it begins with the replacement of Ahab, his son Jehoram, who's continuing the Amorite dynasty, and he is a wicked king like his father, except not as wicked, but he is still a wicked king. Ahab is a pharaoh type figure in the story of first kings.

We see him, for instance, persecuting Elijah, who's like Moses. He's also someone who is involved in taking over Naboth's vineyard, for instance, wanting to change the vineyard into a vegetable garden, and that's significant. The vegetable garden is something that's associated with Egypt elsewhere in scripture, and the vineyard with Israel.

He wants to change Israel, this vineyard, into a vegetable garden, and we see a number of other themes like that taking place within those chapters that help us to see Ahab and his dynasty, perhaps, as pharaonic. As we get to this passage, a few details to pay

attention to. First of all, we have a wicked king of Israel who takes as an ally the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, who is not wicked in the same way, and also the king of Edom, and they war against the king of Moab.

Moab is a vassal state or a client state that has rebelled, and Moab's leader, King Mesha, has a name that is reminiscent of a few things. It might remind us of Moses's name and Joshua's name, sort of bringing together of those two names, perhaps. Other things to notice about him, he is a sheep breeder.

It's a significant thing to be doing. He gives an immense tribute to Israel every while. So he gives 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams.

That's a huge tribute, and that's something that he gives on a fairly regular basis. Now, after Ahab's death, he rebels against the king of Israel, and there is this struggle then between the client state and the state that has placed it under tribute. And so Israel gets the support of the king of Edom and the king of Judah, and then Jehoshaphat wants to inquire of the prophet of the Lord.

Now, this would seem to be playing out a similar story than the one we've seen in 1 Kings 22. In 1 Kings 22, you have Ahab in battle, and Jehoshaphat joins with him, and then there is a request by Jehoshaphat to inquire of the prophet of the Lord. At that point, you have Micaiah coming along, and Micaiah says that the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all of Ahab's prophets, and so they lead Ahab to his destruction.

Ahab is killed at that point in that battle. And so this is an inauspicious background to consider, that this has already happened, something similar to this. What is going to take place here? That the Lord, in that case, did answer.

There was prophetic response, but the prophetic response was a lying response, something that led Israel to its doom. Now, if we look at other details of this story, we'll see some further parallels with the Exodus. They take the route of the wilderness of Edom, the route by which they entered into the land of Israel originally.

They run out of water in the wilderness, and the question is, have they been brought to perish, that they should perish at the hand of the Moabites, or in the wilderness, and Jehoshaphat wonders about this. Now, what is going to take place? There seems to be a struggle in the wilderness. They're lacking water.

They don't have water for the army or for their animals, and so there's a problem. And then they inquire of Elisha. Elisha, who follows on from Elijah, and inquires, inquiring of Elisha, Elisha says, or the Lord says through Elisha, you shall not see wind, nor shall you see rain, yet that valley shall be filled with water, so that you, your cattle, and your animals may drink.

And this is but a trivial thing in the sight of the Lord. He will also deliver the Moabites

into your hand. Also, you shall attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall cut down every good tree, and stop up every spring of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones.

And there are a number of things to notice here. First of all, that description concerning stopping up the land with stones and cutting down the trees is arresting, in part because it seems to go directly against the commands of God concerning the manner of warfare within the land. In verses 19 and 20 of Deuteronomy chapter 20, we read, when you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them, if you can eat of them.

Do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food. Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siege works against the city that makes war with you until it is subdued. And so they're engaging, they seem to be instructed here by Elisha to engage in a mode of warfare that they've been explicitly told not to engage in, engage in, in the book of Deuteronomy.

Another thing to pay attention to in the book of Deuteronomy again is that God had spoken to Israel concerning Moab, and in chapter 2 verse 9 we read, then the Lord said to me, do not harass Moab, nor contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession, because I have given our to the descendants of Lot as a possession. And so here we have a king of Israel placing the descendants of Lot, Moab, under a considerable tribute and treating it as a vassal kingdom. This would seem to go against the commandment of Deuteronomy chapter 2. And so there's something off, there's something off about the situation that Israel is fighting against Moab in the first place, and there's something off about the manner of warfare that Elisha seems to instruct them to engage in.

Later on we see that water comes by way of Edom and the whole land is filled with water, and then they rise early in the morning, the Moabites, and they see the sun shining on the water, and the Moabites see the water on the other side as red as blood. Now again significant themes here, water rushing in, water that is associated with the sun rising, these are all things that we see in Exodus chapter 14, and then the water being turned to blood, again that's an Exodus theme, that's the theme of the first plague. And so the Moabites respond to this, they think that the kings have fought against each other and this proves to be a trap.

They're drawn into the trap, they've come near and to the camp of Israel, and then Israel rises and attacks them, and they destroy the cities and they start to destroy the land as well. At this point it seems like Israel has won a great victory, and then there is that twist in the tale. Then the king of Moab took his eldest son who would have reigned in his place and offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall, and there was great indignation against Israel, so they departed from him and returned to their own land.

What has happened here? Again there's an Exodus theme, the death of the firstborn son, and so we have these two Exodus stories alongside each other. We have the Exodus story, Israel playing out, where Israel comes up by the way of Edom, and the wilderness of Edom, and then they have this provision of water in the wilderness, water turned to blood to defeat their enemies, and then they have this inrushing of water as well, and so they have a song also in the case of Elisha, but there are a lot of other things going on which would suggest Exodus themes. But on the other hand there are themes of Exodus associated with Moab.

Moab is released from captivity, Moab is a sheep breeder, he's a shepherd, and he's someone who has a name that's associated with Joshua and Moses, and then there's the death of the firstborn. But on both sides of this story there's this twist, this ugly shape to this, it's a misshapen Exodus. In both cases there's something off, and what I think we're seeing within this story more generally is the Lord being crude with the crooked, that here we have crooked kingdoms on both sides, we have a wicked King Jehoram in the Amorite dynasty, and we have Jehoshaphat who's involved, but Elisha's prophecy, what might seem to be a command, is not actually a command, it's a prophecy of what they will in fact do.

It's not an instructional command about what they should do, and it's something that leads them. They are deceived into engaging in action that is explicitly against the Word of God. They've rejected the Word of God already in subduing Moab to the King of Israel, and now they explicitly go against the commands of war concerning warfare.

And they should know this, this is not something that they shouldn't already know, and in the case of 1st Kings 22 we've seen that the Lord is shrewd with people like Ahab, and in that case Micaiah shows that the Lord put a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets to lead Ahab to his doom. And here I think we see something similar, that there is a trap that the Lord leads them into, and then wrath breaks out against them, and that wrath is the wrath of the Lord. But there is a wrath that is, this is not directly, this is not a result of the death of the first born son of Moab in a way that he's invoking his God and Chemosh has his wrath.

I don't think that's what's taking place here. Rather I think the wrath is the wrath of God that's against his people, and against everyone in that situation in some way, that the King of Moab loses his first born son, like Pharaoh loses his first born son. So he's delivered from captivity to the people of Israel, but yet at the same time he suffers the same fate as the Egyptians.

He loses his first born. And so I think we have this misshapen exodus on both sides, and the Lord is involved in a way that shows that he is not a safeguard. He's not a God that can be trifled with, a God that can be presumed upon, a God that can be used for the sake of our purposes.

He's a God that must be obeyed, that must be revered, that must be respected and honoured. And if you're going to treat his commandments in a way that is lightened, will easily dispense with them, then you're attempting your own fate. And in this case I think we see a judgment that falls upon both parties.

There is this destruction of, Moab suffers a heavy loss, it is delivered, but the king loses his first born. There's a fate similar to that of Egypt that he suffers. And on the other hand we see Israel has all these signs that seem to suggest a great exodus victory.

And then at the end we see that God has led them into a trap, and that God will bring judgment upon both of the parties. I hope this gives some helpful material for thought. If you have any further questions on this and any other passages, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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