

Victory as Defeat: Narrative Subversion of Omride Strength in 1 Kings 20.

Abstract

This paper argues that 1 Kings 20 is a literary composition that creates an idealised picture of kingship and military victory wherein the king combines with the elders, prophets and deity to reject the impositions of vassalage and defeat their enemy. Yet, the story then subverts the image and the king is raised up only to be brought down. The result is a didactic reflection on the futility of strong kingship and military victory without appropriate Yahwistic acknowledgement. As such, 1 Kgs. 20 appropriately heralds the beginning of the end of the Omride dynasty and undermines any positive associations of military strength they may have had.

Introduction

According to 1 Kgs. 20, the Aramean king Ben-Hadad besieged Samaria and demanded tribute of gold, silver, women and children to withdraw his forces (20:1-6). Faced with this threat, the king of Israel consulted the elders of the land, who counselled him to resist (20:7-9). He did so and was rewarded with two resounding victories over the Arameans (20:13-19; 20:26-30), supported and guided by prophets and by YHWH. Having made an advantageous treaty with the defeated Ben-Hadad, the king of Israel showed him mercy (20:31-34) but was later condemned for doing so by an anonymous prophet (20:35-43). This victorious, merciful king of Israel who consulted elders and acted with prophetic and Yahwistic support was apparently king Ahab, a portrayal which comes as a surprise given the material in 1 Kgs. 17-19 and 21-22.¹ Consequently, some have viewed 1 Kgs. 20 as composite, arguing that it was created from two originally separate battle accounts and the climactic prophetic interpolation in 20:35-43.² If the battle accounts were originally separate, however, the passage ultimately

¹ The king of Israel is only identified as Ahab in 20:2, 13, 14, which has led to suggestions that the passage originally referred to another king and Ahab's name was added as a gloss; e.g., Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC 12; Waco, Tx.: Word Books, 1985), p. 247; Brad Kelle, "What's in a Name? Neo-Assyrian Designations for the Northern Kingdom and their Implications for Israelite History and Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002), pp. 639-66, p. 644. Some commentators observe that the title 'king of Israel' rather than the name of the king is characteristic of the Elisha material; e.g., Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 238; Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings, Volume II* (NCBC; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), pp. 337-8. As will be discussed in section one below, however, there are reasons to think that the identification with Ahab is central to the narrative.

² Thus, for example, Würthwein viewed the passage as composed of two originally self-standing battle accounts where Israel was victorious over the Arameans, tied together with motifs of holy-war traditions and supplemented by a post-Dtr prophetic addition (20:35-43);

functions as a literary unity, with each battle and prophetic word building climactically toward the final judgement.³ In addition, not only is 1 Kgs. 20 a sophisticated and complex literary composition by itself, it also bears numerous similarities to 1 Kgs. 22.⁴ The latter is also a complex literary narrative featuring a king of Israel – likewise identified somewhat suspiciously as Ahab – dealing with prophets and a battle against the Arameans.⁵ Many of the same questions surrounding historicity, literary composition, and narrative function are found in the literature on both texts, yet the question of the overall function of 1 Kgs. 20 has been comparatively overlooked.⁶ This may be a consequence of its historical problems, its unnamed prophets, or perhaps its canonical location somewhat burying it amidst more

Ernst Würthwein, *Die Bücher der Könige. 1 Kön. 17–2 Kön. 25* (ATD 11/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 236, 243–4. Stipp, meanwhile, identifies five redactional levels in the chapter; H.-J. Stipp, *Elischa–Propheten–Gottesmänner: Die Kompositionsgeschichte des Elischazyklus und verwandter Texte, rekonstruiert auf der Basis von Text- und Literarkritik zu 1 Kön. 20.22 und 2 Kön. 2–7* (ATSTS 24; St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1987), pp. 259–67. Differently, DeVries argues for a collection of three narratives from the “Omride war accounts” (20:1–21, 22–29b, 30–43) and gives an outline of the smaller details in *1 Kings*, pp. 245–7. Long also offers a detailed structural outline of the chapter in Burke O. Long, *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature* (FOTL IX; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 209–13.

³ Hens-Piazza notes that the narrative shift in the final section 20:35–43 creates an ‘overarching assessment of Ahab and his reign’; Gina Hens-Piazza, *1–2 Kings* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 196, while Burke O. Long, “Historical Narrative and the Fictionalizing Imagination,” *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 405–16 notes that although 1 Kgs. 20 has a schema for reporting military conflict behind the dialogue, the author has developed ‘dramatic possibilities in the re-telling’ (pp. 412–16) and states that only the prophetic material is seriously considered as redactional insertions (p. 405 n.3). Writing from a linguistic perspective, Revell argues that 1 Kgs. 20 is ‘the composition of an individual with a particular purpose,’ which he identifies as using Ahab to demonstrate the power of God; E.J. Revell, “Language and Interpretation in 1 Kings 20,” in Barry Walfish (ed.), *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume I* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1993), pp. 103–14, here p. 114. In Shuichi Hasegawa, “Looking for Aphek in 1 Kings 20,” *VT* 62 (2012), pp. 501–14, Hasegawa agrees that the two battle accounts ‘form a sophisticated literary unit that was composed by an author’ (pp. 507–8). The view taken herein is particularly close to that of Revell and Hasegawa, though I aim to say more about the purpose of the chapter as a whole.

⁴ As John Gray succinctly puts it: ‘In style, subject matter, and general scope and viewpoint ch. 22 forms a unity with ch. 20’; John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (3rd rev. edn.; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 414. Walsh also notes the complex composition history of the two chapters, observing that each chapter ‘has a symmetrically structured story of Ahab’; Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 293.

⁵ On 1 Kgs 22 in particular, see Herbert C. Brichto, *Toward a Grammar of Hebrew Poetics: Tales of the Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 184; Cat Quine, “Reading Micaiah’s Heavenly Vision (1Kgs 22:19–23) and 1 Kings 22 as Interpretive Keys,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130 (2018), pp. 204–16.

⁶ We will return to questions about the relationship of 1 Kgs. 20 and 22 in section three below.

dramatic narratives. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer the question: ‘what is 1 Kgs. 20 doing?’

In so doing, what follows builds on earlier literary-critical studies, especially those concerning satire, to argue that 1 Kgs. 20 is a literary composition designed to raise Ahab up as an exemplar of a strong, Yahwistic king with the aim of subversively undermining him and the Omride dynasty he represents. The first part of the paper focuses on questions of historicity and literature. The second turns to expectations of kingship and subversion and the third considers the implications of the chapter as a whole, its relation to 1 Kgs. 22, and the variation between the MT and LXX versions. Ultimately, I contend that the depiction of Ahab consulting the elders, resisting foreign subjugation and following the prophetic word are all ironic, while his victories over the Arameans are intended to acknowledge the military strength of the Omride kings but present it as ultimately futile. In this sense, 1 Kgs. 20 is similar to 1 Kgs. 22 insofar as both chapters use literary compositions to offer didactic reflections on the downfall of the Omrides. While 1 Kgs. 22 explains how YHWH was involved in the death of an Omride king, 1 Kgs. 20 explains why Aram would dominate Israel and why military victories did not necessarily equate to good kingship.

I. History and Literature in 1 Kings 20

As noted above, 1 Kgs. 20 has been argued to reflect events from the reign of a Jehuite king later than Ahab. Jehoahaz and his son Jehoash are the usual suspects for identification with 1 Kgs. 20’s ‘king of Israel’ as, on the one hand, 2 Kgs. 13:3-5 narrates that Jehoahaz was oppressed by the Arameans but ‘the Lord gave Israel a saviour, so that they escaped from the hand of the Arameans’ (13:5).⁷ On the other hand, Jehoash was granted three victories over the Arameans in 2 Kgs. 13:14-19, 24-25. Arguments in favour of Jehoash also find support in the notice that Jehoash ‘recovered the towns of Israel’ (2 Kgs. 13:25) which may parallel 1 Kgs. 20:34’s note that Ben-Hadad restored to Ahab the ‘towns that my father took from your father’ as part of the treaty negotiating his release.⁸ The issue of identification of the monarch is not just confined to the Israelite king, however, but extends to his Aramean counterpart as Assyrian inscriptions record the Aramean king contemporary with Ahab as Hadadezer (written as Adad-idri), rather than Ben-Hadad.⁹ If we take Ben-Hadad to be a throne name for

⁷ See, in particular, J.M. Miller, “The Elisha Cycle and the Accounts of the Omride Wars,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966), pp. 441–54; J.M. Miller, “The Rest of the Acts of Jehoahaz (I Kings 20; 22:1-38),” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 80 (1968), pp. 337–42. Alternatively, DeVries proposes Joram on the grounds that 1 Kgs. 20:35-43 predicts disasters for Israel rather than the successes of Jehoash, and Joram was active against Aram in 2 Kgs. 8:28-29; DeVries, *1 Kings*, p. 248.

⁸ For Jehoash, see, for example, C.F. Whitely, “The Deuteronomistic Presentation of the House of Omri,” *Vetus Testamentum* 2 (1952), pp. 137–52, esp. pp. 145–7; Alfred Jepsen, “Israel und Damaskus,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 14 (1941), pp. 153–72, p. 160.

⁹ This is slightly complicated by the fact that Kings records two other Ben-Hadads, one in the time of king Asa (1 Kgs. 15) and one as the successor of Hazael (2 Kgs. 13:3). See discussion in, for example, Benjamin Mazar, “The Aramean Empire and its Relations with Israel,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962), pp. 97–120; Gray, *I & II Kings*, 415–20; Mordechai Cogan,

Hadadezer then some of the chronological issues may be avoided, though whether such conflict could have existed between Aram and Israel shortly before the alliance of Qarqar in 853 BCE remains open to question.¹⁰ Similar historical questions often underlie discussions about the locations of the battles in 1 Kgs. 20, such as whether Ben-Hadad and his men were drinking (and therefore stationed) in booths or at Succoth in 20:16, and which Aphek is referred to in the second battle (20:26-30).¹¹ Hasegawa, however, draws attention to the appearance of Aphek in Samuel where Israel is twice defeated by the Philistines, which may draw a connection between Ahab and Saul. If so, then Aphek in 1 Kgs. 20 may be more literary than historical, especially if the mention in 2 Kgs. 13:7 is a gloss.¹² As Hasegawa demonstrates, if the accounts at hand are ahistorical then searches for historical identifications are useless.¹³

Hasegawa's observations accord with a number of scholars who have argued that 1 Kgs. 20 is a literary or fictive composition.¹⁴ Literary elements are suggested by the concentricity in the first two battle accounts and the interrelation of themes and motifs in 1 Kgs. 20 with surrounding chapters in 1-2 Kings.¹⁵ Thus, for example, Paynter observes a large number of satirical and comedic elements flowing all the way through Kings'

I Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AYB 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 462.

¹⁰ One possibility would be to date the conflict of 1 Kgs. 20 early in Ahab's reign, thereby pushing it closer to Ben-Hadad I's reign and further from the alliance of Qarqar. However, Thiel argues that, historically, an early Ahab-era date for the conflicts is unlikely and it appears more realistic to date it later; Winfried Thiel, "Erwägungen zur aramäisch-israelitischen Geschichte im 9. Jh. V. Chr.," in M. Niemann, M. Augustin and W.H. Schmidt (eds.), *Nachdenken über Israel, Bibel und Theologie: Festschrift für Klaus-Dietrich Schunk zu seinem 65 Geburtstag* (Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums 37; Berlin: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 117–32, pp. 123–5.

¹¹ Yadin argues that they are at Succoth – a location of strategic importance in David's time – which would explain how Ahab could consult the elders of the land (20:7) while apparently under siege; Yigael Yadin, "Some Aspects of the Strategy of Ahab and David (I Kings 20; II Sam 11)," *Biblica* 36 (1955), pp. 332–51. Though note Homan's response arguing that 'booth' is the correct translation; Michael Homan, "Booths or Succoth? A Response to Yigael Yadin," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999), pp. 691–7. Some scholars identify Aphek with Al-Fiq (e.g., Gray, *I & II Kings*, pp. 427–8) or near the Golan in Transjordan (e.g., Cogan, *I Kings*, p. 466).

¹² Hasegawa, "Looking for Aphek," pp. 512–13.

¹³ Hasegawa, "Looking for Aphek," pp. 512–13.

¹⁴ Fritz terms it a 'fictive composition'; Volkmar Fritz, *I & 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary* (trans. Anselm Hagedorn; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 205; Revell argues it is a literary composition in "Language and Interpretation," and Robker questions whether a historical approach misses the point of the narrative; Jonathan M. Robker, "Satire and the King of Aram," *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011), pp. 646–56.

¹⁵ Walsh notes the concentricity of 20:1-21; Walsh, *I Kings*, p. 294, and Long sees a chiasmic structure in the two battles; Long, *I Kings*, p. 213.

presentation of the conflicts between Israel and Aram.¹⁶ We can also see literary features in the ‘thirty-two’ kings Ben-Hadad commands (20:1 cf. 22:31) and the drunken portrayal of Ben-Hadad, which Robker argues is a satire against the Aramean king.¹⁷ In addition, the disguised prophet (20:35–43) is noted by Coggins to be a motif always denoting a negative outcome for the king, and the tradition of the wall at Aphek tumbling down and killing the Aramean army (20:30) is reminiscent of Jericho.¹⁸ Furthermore, there may be connections drawn between Ahab and Saul who both are condemned for releasing a king subject to חרם.¹⁹ The comparison of the Israelite army to the size of something covered by goats while the Arameans filled the land (20:27), also introduces the motif of the underdog that YHWH protects.²⁰ Linguistically, the chapter is eye-catching, containing a number of rare and unique words and the Israelite military strategy in 20:14–19 – to send out ‘the young men who served the district governors’ – uses the Aramaic loanword מְדִינָה (‘district/province’) found otherwise only in Esther, Qohelet, and once each in Lamentations, Nehemiah and Daniel.²¹ Ziegler also draws attention to narrative potential in the violation of the oath ‘so shall God do to me’ (spoken by Ben-Hadad in 20:10).²² Finally, and more broadly, one of the central themes of the chapter is ironic reversals: the Aramean overlord becomes an Israelite vassal; notorious Ahab becomes victorious Ahab; and the Israelites are victorious but the reader is told their people are doomed.

¹⁶ Helen Paynter, *Reduced Laughter – Seriocomic Features and their Functions in the Book of Kings* (BibInt 142; Leiden: Brill, 2016), esp. pp. 158–82 and note her useful diagram of these themes and motifs on p. 181.

¹⁷ Robker, “Satire and the King of Aram.” A few commentators note that ‘thirty-two kings’ are mentioned on a stela from Zinjirli, though the inscription is broken and the context is thus uncertain (e.g., De Vries, *I Kings*, p. 339; Cogan, *I Kings*, p. 462). Montgomery also notes that inscriptions from Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal mention ‘twenty-two kings’ of the Levantine area (James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986], p. 320), which might suggest that these are round numbers used to refer to coalitions.

¹⁸ Richard Coggins, “On Kings and Disguises,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1991), pp. 55–62; DeVries, *I Kings*, 250–51.

¹⁹ For comments on Ahab and Saul see especially Daewook Kim, “Ahab and Saul (1 Kgs. 22:1–38),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (2019), pp. 525–38, esp. pp. 528–33.

²⁰ Following Baruchi-Unna’s translation of כִּשְׁנֵי חֲשָׁפֵי עֵצִים as ‘something that had been exposed by goats’ (i.e., a piece of land); Amitai Baruchi-Unna, “Two Clearings of Goats (1 Kings 20:27): An Interpretation Supported by Akkadian Parallel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014), pp. 247–9.

²¹ Est. 1:1, 3, 16; 3:13; 4:11; 8:5, 9, 12; 9:2, 3, 12, 16, 20, 30; Qoh. 2:8; 5:7; Lam. 1:1; Neh. 1:3; Dan. 6:2. We might also note the Aramaic term פָּחוּת (‘lord of a province’) in 1 Kgs 20:24, חֲשָׁפִי in 20:28 and the unique term בִּאפֶּר (seemingly ‘bandage’) in 20:38; Jones, *I and 2 Kings*, pp. 345–46, 348; Cogan, *I Kings*, p. 466; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 428. The verb וַיַּחְלֹט in 20:33 is also a *hapax* for which the Arabic etymology gives ‘to seek a decision/seek to fix an omen’; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 430.

²² Yael Ziegler, “‘So Shall God Do...’: Variations of an Oath Formula and Its Literary Meaning,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007), pp. 59–81.

Although we could look for identifiable historical data in 1 Kgs. 20, therefore, the question is, are we supposed to? The number of literary features and the connections with other parts of the biblical texts seem to suggest a negative response – 1 Kgs. 20 is a narrative talking about history, rather than objectively reporting history itself.²³ As Nelson observes, modern scholars continually tend to try to read Kings as history rather than as narrative.²⁴ If we let the narrative side speak more prominently, however, we may reach a deeper understanding of the text. For, as Walsh states, the fact that the battle accounts do not fit historically with the reign of Ahab makes their characterizations of him all the more significant.²⁵

II. Ahab's Kingship and Subverted Expectations

Given his negative portrayal elsewhere, for the reader of Kings the military victories in 1 Kgs. 20 are an unexpected high point in Ahab's reign. Previously, the reader has been introduced to Ahab marrying Jezebel, worshipping Baal, making an Asherah (1 Kgs. 16:31-33) and his kingdom suffering with drought (1 Kgs. 17:1-7; 18:1-7, 41-46). In addition, 1 Kgs. 19:16 refers to Jehu being anointed king over Israel, 1 Kgs. 21 contains the famous narrative of Naboth's vineyard, and Ahab ignores Micaiah ben Imlah's warning and apparently dies in battle in 1 Kgs. 22. Given these negative portrayals of Ahab's reign and his provocative relationship with Elijah, the presentation of him as a victorious king, heeding the prophets and being supported by YHWH in 1 Kgs. 20 comes as a surprise. To these three elements we can add two more: faced with military threat, Ahab consults the elders of the land, receiving their support along with that of 'all the people' and he successfully resists a demand of vassalship that other (more righteous) kings bow to.²⁶

Ahab's consultation of the elders deserves more attention – or perhaps, cynicism – than it usually receives.²⁷ Numerous commentators accept this portrayal as normative, suggesting that a king faced with military threats would want to ensure he had the support of his people, represented via their heads – the elders.²⁸ Slightly differently, McKenzie proposes that, due to

²³ Long characterizes 20:1-31 as 'historical story'; Long, *1 Kings*, p. 217.

²⁴ Richard D. Nelson, "The Anatomy of the Book of Kings," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 13 (1988), pp. 39–48.

²⁵ Walsh, *1 Kings*, p. 293.

²⁶ In particular, we could note the irony of Ahab (a sinful Omride) successfully resisting a foreign demand of vassalship here, while Jehu (the righteous replacement of the Omrides) lost territory to the Arameans and became a vassal to Assyria, the latter of which the biblical texts neglect to mention.

²⁷ For useful studies on elders see especially J.L. McKenzie, "The Elders in the Old Testament," *Biblica* 40 (1959), pp. 522–40; Hanoch Reviv, *The Elders in Ancient Israel: A Study of a Biblical Institution* (trans. Lucy Plitmann; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1989), pp. 120–36; Timothy M. Willis, *The Elders of the City: A Study of the Elders-Laws in Deuteronomy* (SBLMS 55; Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 2001), esp. pp. 8–14.

²⁸ E.g., Cogan, *1 Kings*, p. 463; Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 423; Walsh, *1 Kings*, p. 296; Hens-Piazza, *1-2 Kings*, p. 197. Mettinger argues that the participation of the elders at royal investitures and public events was 'more or less constitutionally fixed feature of life in ancient

the association of elders with officials (שָׂרִים), the elders may have held high rank in society and thus the king would naturally have sought their opinion in such matters.²⁹ That elders had some connection with the land, people, and judgement is not in doubt; numerous biblical texts render this clear even if we do not exactly understand the dynamics between elders and the state administration.³⁰ However, the role(s) of elders in 1-2 Kings is far from clear. The elders only appear in a few chapters, namely 1 Kgs. 8:1; 12:6, 8, 13; 20:7-8; 21:8; 2 Kgs. 10:1; 19:2[?]; and 23:1.³¹ Three of these references are connected with Ahab or his sons (1 Kgs. 20:7-8; 21:8; 2 Kgs. 10:1), three with Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 12:6, 8, 13) and the other three with the Jerusalem temple or cultic concerns.³² The association of elders and kingship does not, therefore, seem especially close in 1-2 Kings. Furthermore, Ahab's consultation in 1 Kgs. 20:7-8 is the only clear example in 1-2 Kings where a king consults the elders in the face of military conflict, which is significant when we consider the large amount of conflicts narrated in the book.³³ In the other two references that mention Ahab and the elders, the first

Israel and Judah'; Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *King and Messiah: The Civil and Sacral Legitimation of the Israelite Kings* (CB/OTS 8; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1976), pp. 109, 129.

²⁹ As McKenzie observes, the other group most commonly associated with the elders is the officials (שָׂרִים). He also argues that, although elders are not officials, the 'council of elders' mentioned with reference to Absalom, Rehoboam and Ahab must have included the שָׂרִים of the king and thus the two overlap to some extent; McKenzie, "The Elders," p. 528.

³⁰ Thus, for example, Cook argues that the state-based administration and the older village system of elders 'co-existed in dynamic tension' throughout Israel's monarchic years; Stephen L. Cook, *The Social Roots of Biblical Yahwism* (Studies in Biblical Literature; Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 2004), p. 170 and more broadly pp. 170-81. Indeed, this connection continued into second temple Judaism and early Christianity; see comments in Alistair R. Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. 21-8.

³¹ 2 Kings 19:2 might be considered slightly suspect as it refers to the 'elders of the priests' (זִקְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים) which is usually translated 'senior priests.'

³² Rehoboam's rejection of the counsel of the elders in favour of a younger group finds a parallel in Gilgamesh and Agga, where the king rejects the counsel of the elders and turns to the larger assembly to find the favour he seeks; Geoffrey Evans, "Ancient Mesopotamian Assemblies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 78 (1958), pp. 1-11; Abraham Malamat, "Kingship and Council in Ancient Israel and Sumer," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 22 (1963), pp. 247-53.

³³ The only other references that could also potentially be considered an example are 2 Kgs. 19:2 and 1 Kgs. 12, though I do not find either overly persuasive. If 2 Kgs. 19:2 is to be included as an elder reference (see n.19 above), it should be noted that, rather than consulting them directly, Hezekiah sends the 'elders of the priests' in a delegation with other officials to seek the word of Isaiah. These men thus function as messengers rather than strategists, consultants, or exemplars of popular opinion as they do in 1 Kgs. 20:7-8. In addition, I do not include 1 Kgs. 12 in this reference to 'military conflicts' because although the elders are consulted by Rehoboam at a time of *social* conflict (12:6, 8, 13), they disappear from the narrative when *military* conflict actually comes on the horizon (12:18-24). The elder consultation in 1 Kgs. 12 has more to do with land, people, and identity than with military conflict, whereas all four of these things are bound up together in 1 Kgs. 20. If, however, one wishes to consider 1 Kgs. 12 an example of royal consultation of elders in light of a threat

concerns Jezebel who writes to the elders in Jezreel, instructing them to kill Naboth (1 Kgs. 21:8-16). The second concerns Jehu, who also writes to the elders and incites them to kill Ahab's sons (2 Kgs. 10:1-11). These two references seem narratively connected to each other and noticeably differ from 1 Kgs. 20. In 1 Kgs. 21 and 2 Kgs. 10, Jezebel and Jehu both use written communication to instruct the elders to kill someone to achieve their own aims. These aims also stand opposed to each other: Jezebel had Naboth killed to further the desires of the house of Omri and take Naboth's land, while Jehu had Ahab's sons killed to wipe out the house of Omri and claim ownership of the land of Israel for himself. Moreover, in both of these examples the elders bow to the demands of the ruler, which contrasts with Ahab's consultation of them in 1 Kgs. 20 where the elders instruct him what to do.³⁴ I propose then, that Ahab's consultation of the elders may be designed to raise him up in the reader's esteem. Rather than consulting with his generals or state officials, Ahab consults the wishes of the people via the elders, showing a concern for his people's welfare in the face of military action. This is notable because such concern for the views of the people is not found elsewhere in 1-2 Kings when the kings engage in significant military conflict. The elders do not seem to have been consulted in the face of the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, for example, nor prior to the battle between Israel and Judah at Beth-Shemesh (2 Kgs. 14).

We should also consider in more detail the fact that Ahab successfully resists a demand of vassalship when the reality of vassalship was one of the dominant experiences in the Israelite and Judahite monarchies. Consequently, it is interesting that Ahab is said to successfully reject Ben-Hadad's demands when later kings' acquiescence to foreign overlords is either unmentioned in Kings (e.g., Jehu, 2 Kgs. 9-10), is a point of condemnation (e.g., Ahaz, 2 Kgs. 16), or was spectacularly unsuccessful (e.g., 2 Kgs. 17, 18-19, 24, 25). In his successful defence of Israel's land, people, and the power of YHWH's name, Ahab succeeds where supposedly more righteous kings did not. Even significantly more righteous Judahite kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah could not resist the demands of Assyria and Egypt, which renders Ahab's victories the most successful resistance of vassalship in Kings.³⁵

It thus seems that Ahab fulfils a rather idealised portrayal of kingship in 1 Kgs. 20:1-34. He consults the elders, listens to the prophets, resists a vassal demand from a foreign leader and carries out military action that permits YHWH's strength to be made known. There is not a hint of Baalism nor Jezebel in the passage. Yet, the final prophetic section

(broadly construed), then notably Ahab and Rehoboam take opposing action. Rehoboam foolishly ignores the elders' counsel and loses territory, while Ahab listens to the elders and wins a victory. Once more, Ahab's interaction with the elders sets him apart from other kings.

³⁴ Though elders do stand against Rehoboam's wishes in 1 Kgs. 12.

³⁵ It is possible this presentation is influenced by the historical memory of the battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE, where Ahab and a coalition of Syro-Levantine kings managed to repel the Assyrian forces of Shalmaneser III. Nadav Na'aman has argued that a memory of Qarqar may underlie the battle in 1 Kgs. 22 but I would argue that 1 Kgs. 20 is a much better candidate if, indeed, any underlying memory were to exist. See Nadav Na'aman, "Was Ahab Killed by an Assyrian Arrow in the Battle of Qarqar?" *Ugarit Forschungen* 37 (2005), pp. 461-74.

(20:35-43) undermines his efforts, for there it becomes clear that by letting Ben-Hadad go, Ahab forfeited the chance to truly dominate Aram and seemingly prioritized economic gains over capitalizing on the victory YHWH gave him.³⁶ By raising Ahab up as a seemingly ‘good king,’ in 20:1-34, the chapter brings him crashing down in 20:35-43. Consequently, any good that Ahab may have achieved through military victories is undermined. This also seems to be an argument against viewing 20:35-43 purely as a late addition to the chapter, tacked on to the end to critique Ahab. Rather, 20:35-43 is integral to the narrative aim of the chapter; without it, Ahab is raised up as one of the best kings in Kings – certainly one of the best in the northern kingdom – which does not fit with the negative portrayals of him elsewhere. Thus, it seems that this final critique is central: Ahab is raised up *so that* he can be undermined to greater effect. In addition, whilst the chapter ultimately conspires to undermine Ahab’s actions, it simultaneously creates a model of ideal kingship, wherein regardless of the small size of his army, if the king trusted the elders and prophets to counsel him and YHWH to grant him victory in battle, he would be successful.³⁷

III. Ahab, the Omrides, and the 20/22 Relationship

The preceding has argued that 1 Kgs. 20 functions as a literary unity that raises Ahab up as an ideal king in order to undermine him, but now I would like to turn to the broader issue of how this chapter fits with the material around it. As noted previously, 1 Kgs. 20 and 22 bear similarities to each other that are not found in the other chapters concerning Ahab.³⁸ Literary studies highlight similar motifs and styles in both, including extended dialogue around the battle accounts, an omniscient narrator’s view of the internal workings of the Aramean camp and ironic plot twists in both stories. Linguistic connections are also evident, such as the references to ‘giving into a hand’ (20:6, 13; 22:6, 15), the presence of the ‘inner chamber’ (חדר בחדר, 20:30; 22:25) and the ‘thirty two’ kings/captains (20:1; 22:31). The central roles of unknown or little-known prophets rather than Elijah or Elisha also mark these chapters out as different to the surrounding material.³⁹ Thus, Stipp identifies 1 Kgs. 20 and 22 as one of

³⁶ Paynter notes that the critique of Aram – as foolish – is mirrored in the critique of Israel here and elsewhere in the narratives concerning Israel and Aram; Paynter, *Reduced Laughter*, pp. 158–67. Whereas the reader is inclined to laugh at Aram’s boasts and drunken foolishness in 20:1-25, in 20:35-43 the reader realises the king of Israel is not immune to similar foolishness. I am also in agreement with Paynter’s critique of Robker’s “Satire and the King of Aram,” wherein he rightly notes the satirical elements pertaining to Ben-Hadad, but neglects the fact that the chapter is also a satire against the king of Israel; see Paynter, *Reduced Laughter*, pp. 161–4.

³⁷ Thus, the picture of kingship in 1 Kgs. 20 is simultaneously subversive and propagandistic and Mason notes that this is a characteristic of the Deuteronomistic texts; Rex Mason, *Propaganda and Subversion in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 83–90.

³⁸ E.g., Kim, “Ahab and Saul,” pp. 530–33 and see n.4 above.

³⁹ See n. 4, 5 above and, for example, Aarnoud van der Deijl, *Protest or Propaganda: War in the Old Testament Books of Kings and in Contemporaneous Ancient Near Eastern Texts I* (SSN 51; Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 157–9; Nelson, “The Anatomy,” pp. 40–42.

the earliest stages of post-deuteronomistic growth of the Elisha cycle.⁴⁰ Lehnart also places 20 and 22 outside the core Elijah narratives and Campbell highlights their tenuous bond to their context.⁴¹ In addition, the LXX orders the Ahab chapters differently to MT, placing 20 and 22 next to each other in the sequence 19-21-20-22 (cf. MT 19-20-21-22). It is not clear which order was the older, though as Gooding notes, the LXX's order seems more logical, moving from sin-repentance-stay of execution to sin-non-repentance-execution.⁴² Otto concurs, arguing that the order of the LXX creates three frames between 1 Kgs 21–2 Kgs 9-10.⁴³ The outer frame is characterized by the key words 'repentance' and 'killer' (1 Kgs. 21:19, 27; 2 Kgs 6:30, 32), emphasizing the similarity of Ahab and Jehoram.⁴⁴ The middle frame contains the stories about Ben-Hadad besieging Samaria (1 Kgs. 20; 2 Kgs 6:24-7:20) and the inner frame concerns the material about the righteous king of Judah, Jehoshaphat and the king of Israel (1 Kgs. 22; 2 Kgs 3).⁴⁵

Otto's observations are persuasive but as she notes, there are differences between the Elijah-Elisha cycles and the Omride war narratives that are not explained by these narrative frames. In particular, the Elijah-Elisha material is concerned with the actions of these named prophets, while the Omride war material is more interested in the actions of the king and his attitude toward prophets.⁴⁶ This is clear in the comparison between the sieges of Samaria in 1 Kgs. 20 and 2 Kgs. 6:24-7:20: the former is concerned with Ahab's actions and the latter with Elisha's. The same is true of 1 Kgs. 22 and 2 Kgs. 3. Thus, whilst 1 Kgs. 20 and 22 evidently play a role in the broader construction of Kings, these two chapters are interconnected on a level different from the other Omride war narratives.⁴⁷

Elsewhere it has been suggested that Ahab functions as a stereotype of the Omride kings in 1 Kgs. 22 which explains the changes between the name 'Ahab' and the title 'king of

⁴⁰ Stipp, *Elischa*.

⁴¹ Bernhard Lehnart, *Prophet und König im Nordreich Israel: Studien zur sogenannten vorklassischen Prophetie im Nordreich Israel anhand der Samuel-, Elia- und Elischa-Überlieferungen* (VTS 96; Leiden: Brill, 2003); Anthony F. Campbell, *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth Century Document (1 Samuel–2 Kings 10)* (CBQMS 17; Washington, DC.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1986), p. 65.

⁴² Montgomery argues that MT reversed LXX's order (Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, p. 319), though Gooding agrees with Burney that MT reversed LXX in order to bring the prophecy of Ahab's death in ch. 21 closer to the event in ch. 22; D.W. Gooding, "Ahab According to the Septuagint," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76 (1964), pp. 269–80, here p. 270. DeVries argues that a Jehuite redactor placed the material in 1 Kgs. 20 together with 1 Kgs. 22; De Vries, *1 Kings*, p. 247.

⁴³ Susanne Otto, "The Composition of the Elijah-Elisha Stories and the Deuteronomistic History," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (2003), pp. 487–508 and see further Susanne Otto, *Jehu, Elia und Elisa: Die Erzählung von der Jehu-Revolution und die Komposition der Elia-Elisa-Erzählungen* (BWANT 152; Berlin: Kohlhammer, 2001).

⁴⁴ Otto, "Composition," pp. 501–02.

⁴⁵ Otto, "Composition," pp. 501–02.

⁴⁶ Otto, "Composition," p. 500; Miller, "Elisha Cycle," pp. 445–6.

⁴⁷ So Walter Dietrich, *Prophetie und Geschichte: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 120–22.

Israel,' as well as the connections between 1 Kgs. 22 and other material in 1 Kgs. 16-21; 2 Kgs. 8.⁴⁸ The use of Ahab as a stereotype or caricature of the Omride kings in the narrative allows 1 Kgs 22 to (fore)tell the story of the downfall of the Omride kings and reassure the reader of YHWH's involvement in it.⁴⁹ I contend that 1 Kgs. 20 is doing something similar. Here too, Ahab's identification with the 'king of Israel' is slippery and the report of the battles with Ben-Hadad bear much similarity to 2 Kgs. 6-7, 13, just as the battle of Ramoth-gilead in 1 Kgs. 22 bears much similarity to events in 2 Kgs. 8:28-30; 9:14-28. In addition, in 1 Kgs. 20, Ben-Hadad seems as generic a character as 1 Kgs. 22's 'king of Aram.' Both texts thus seem to use historical figures as fictive characters in the narratives they create and notably, for all their narrative complexity, neither 1 Kgs. 20 nor 22 appears all that interested in the battles they report. Rather, the author's interpretation of the outcome of the battles is what matters. I thus propose that Ahab/the king of Israel in 1 Kgs. 20 functions as a literary stereotype of the Omride kings, famed for their military strength and their defence of Israel.⁵⁰ Read this way, this chapter offers a didactic reflection on kingship, teaching that strong kings, military victories, and perhaps even resistance of vassalship are futile if the king did not recognize YHWH appropriately.⁵¹ Thus, 1 Kgs. 20 acknowledges the military strength of the Omride kings whilst conspiring to present it as ultimately flawed and a non-reliable indicator of good kingship.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the portrayal of Ahab in 1 Kgs. 20 raises him up in the reader's estimation as a good king – one who consulted the elders, resisted foreign demands of vassalship, listened to prophets and won military victories in YHWH's name. This positive portrayal only serves to undermine him however, as the final prophetic scene makes clear: although Ahab may appear to be a good king, his efforts were fruitless as he prioritised economic and diplomatic concerns over disposal of YHWH's enemies. The high number of literary features and the historical issues noted by scholars suggest that this passage is not intended to be read historically, but as a didactic narrative. I thus propose that, in a similar manner to 1 Kgs. 22, in 1 Kgs. 20, Ahab functions as a stereotype or representative of the Omride kings who were known for their military victories. The battles in 1 Kgs. 20 are likely drawn from other texts, including the battles against the Arameans in 2 Kgs. 6, 13 and perhaps Saul's victory and rejection in 1 Sam. 15. By ascribing these victories over Aram to

⁴⁸ Quine, "Micaiah's Heavenly Vision."

⁴⁹ Quine, "Micaiah's Heavenly Vision," pp. 212–14.

⁵⁰ This might also account for the somewhat surprising absence of Jezebel in the chapter, given she played a major role in 1 Kgs. 19 and 21. She is also noticeably absent from 1 Kgs. 22 and although with chapter 22 one could claim that as Ahab went on a campaign she would not have featured anyway, in 1 Kgs. 20 the first battle takes place at Samaria and it is otherwise surprising that amongst the elders and prophets, Jezebel has no voice.

⁵¹ Hasegawa also argues that the battle accounts in 1 Kgs. 20 were composed 'for conveying didactic messages rather than portraying historical events as they happened'; Hasegawa, "Looking for Aphek," p. 510. Cogan too states that the 'didactic form of the narrative means it does not have to be taken as a historical report'; Cogan, *I Kings*, p. 474.

Ahab/the 'king of Israel,' the narrative acknowledges Omride military strength but presents it as ultimately futile due to a lack of correct acknowledgement of YHWH. The lesson of 1 Kgs. 20 thus goes beyond Ahab specifically, demonstrating to the reader that military victories did not necessarily guarantee righteousness or YHWH's favour. Such a portrayal may have been necessary in light of repeated defeats suffered by later kings whom the biblical authors wished to claim were more righteous than the Omrides.