THE ALTAR OF AHAZ AND MONARCHICAL POLYTHEISM

BENJAMIN SCOLNIC

The altar of King Ahaz (reigned 743-727 BCE) in the Jerusalem Temple is the subject of differing Biblical descriptions and a great deal of controversy in modern scholarship. In the more famous, negative view, the act of constructing an altar according to the model of one Ahaz sees in Damascus should be read in the context of the king's other clearly non-acceptable acts in II Kings 16 and should be read along with the severe condemnations of Ahaz in Isaiah, II Chronicles 28 and Josephus. In the positive view, the traditional sacrifices that are offered on and the blood that is sprinkled to sanctify the new altar, the preservation and continued use of the older, bronze altar, the ready compliance of the priest Uriah, the absence of the condemnation of cultic sins in Isaiah 7 or of explicit Deuteronomic condemnation of the new altar, all may be seen as indications that the altar was not pagan. What has been interpreted as a syncretistic and even idolatrous act may have been a non-controversial, positive act of devotion to the LORD. Ahaz may have a mixed record, as do some other kings, by Deuteronomic standards, leading us to argue against those who doubt the Biblical record as being polemical and one-sided.

AHAZ AND THE SYRO-EPHRAIMITE WAR

In the Syro-Ephaimite War, King Ahaz of Judah, threatened by the united armies of Rezin of Aram and Pekah of Israel, calls on the mighty Assyrian empire to defend him. He sends a delegation to Tiglath-Pileser III, the powerful king of Assyria (745–727), with presents of gold and silver taken from the treasures of the Temple. The extra-Biblical record confirms this tribute from the Assyrian side in 734 BCE: "In all the countries which… [I received] the tribute of… Jehoahaz[1] of Judah . . . (consisting of) gold, silver, tin, iron, antimony, linen garments with multicolored trimmings…."[2]

This confirms the Biblical record. Since it suits Tiglath-Pileser's strategic goals to subdue these two states and gain an outlet to the sea, he marches on Damascus, forcing Rezin to abandon the siege of Jerusalem. He captures and kills Rezin and incorporates Aram and part of the land of Israel.

Ahaz travels to Damascus in 732 BCE to show gratitude and obeisance to his Assyrian patron. Ahaz is inspired by an altar which he sees in Damascus and orders a copy of it made for the Jerusalem temple: *When King Ahaz went to Damascus to greet King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, he saw the altar in Damascus. King Ahab sent the priest Uriah a sketch of the altar and a detailed plan of its construction* (II Kings 16:10). The priest Uriah has the altar constructed before the king returns: *The priest Uriah did just as King*

Benjamin Edidin Scolnic is the spiritual leader at Temple Beth Sholom in Hamden, Connecticut and teaches at Southern Connecticut State University. He is the author of eleven books.

Ahaz had instructed him from Damascus; the priest Uriah built the altar before King Ahaz returned from Damascus (II Kings 16:10).

The question here is: Shall we view this altar as pagan or Israelite?

THE NEGATIVE VIEW

A negative perspective, which can be found in both ancient texts and some modern interpretations, sees the construction and use of the new altar as one example of polytheistic cultic acts by King Ahaz. The Biblical record begins with a general condemnation of this king in II Kings 16:2-4, *Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God. 3 He followed the ways of the kings of Israel*. It then lists his specific cultic sins: *and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.*

II Chron. 28 has been very influential in creating a negative view of Ahaz's actions because the altar is seen as an act of blatant syncretism and apostasy. Chronicles states that Ahaz sacrificed to Syrian gods, closes the Temple, and erects pagan altars all over Jerusalem. Ahaz is guilty of *... sacrificing to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, for he thought, "The gods of the kings of Aram help them; I shall sacrifice to them and they will help me"; but they were his ruin and that of all Israel. Ahaz collected the utensils of the House of God, and cut the utensils of the House of God to pieces. He shut the doors of the House of the LORD and made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem* (II Chron. 28:23-24). For the Chronicler, Ahaz is even worse than the evil King Manasseh who, in that book, repents of his sins (II Chron. 33:12-16). We will reserve questions about why the Chronicler makes Ahaz's sins worse. For now, the point is that the condemnation in II Chronicles may have influenced the understanding of Ahaz's altar in II Kings 16. Following this stream of tradition, Josephus (Ant. 9.243-257) combines II Kings 16 and II Chronicles 28 and states that Ahaz worshipped Syrian gods during the war, then switched to Assyrian gods after a second defeat: "Now this king was so sottish and thoughtless of what was for his own good, that he would not leave off worshipping the Syrian gods when he was beaten by them, but he went on in worshipping them, as though they would procure him the victory; and when he was beaten again, he began to honor the gods of the Assyrians; and he seemed more desirous to honor any other gods than his own paternal and true God, whose anger was the cause of his defeat; nay, he proceeded to such a degree of despite and contempt [of God's worship], that he shut up the temple entirely, and forbade them to bring in the appointed sacrifices, and took away the gifts that had been given to it. And when he had offered these indignities to God, he died …"

Some modern historians and scholars conclude that Ahaz's altar introduces the worship of Assyrian gods into Jerusalem.[3] Historians have seen the new altar as Aramaean, Assyrian, or Phoenician.[4] Bright says that the new altar is a way to "pay homage to the Assyrian gods" and states: "The reign of Ahaz was remembered by later generations as one of the worst periods of apostasy that Judah had ever known."[5]

THE POSITIVE VIEW[6]

The argument to see Ahaz's new altar in a more positive light can be structured as follows: 1. The text of I Kings 16 is filled with details of traditional Israelite rituals; 2. The priest Uriah, about whom nothing negative is ever said, readily complies with the king's instructions; 3. The prophet Isaiah, who rebukes Ahaz for other matters, does not condemn him for cultic sins; 4. Even II Chron. 28, which as we have seen views Ahaz in a terrible light, does not criticize the new altar and omits any mention of Uriah at all.

We can begin to sketch a view of Ahaz's altar as monotheistic by returning to the text of 1 Kings 16 itself. The details of the dedication, provision and utilization of this altar are described in the most traditional terms (vv. 10-16): *When the king returned from Damascus, and when the king saw the altar, the king drew near the altar, ascended it, and offered his burnt offering and meal offering; he poured his libation, and he dashed the blood of his offering of well-being against the altar.* Ahaz offers the standard range of sacrifices (see Lev. 6-7):[7] the *olah* or whole burnt offering as in Lev. 1, the meal offering as in Lev. 2, the libation offering as in Num. 15:5 and the peace offering as in Lev. 3. The splashing of blood implies a dedication ceremony (Ex. 29:36-37; Lev. 8:15). These are traditional Israelite sacrifices. *And King Ahaz commanded the priest Uriah: On the great altar you shall offer the morning burnt offering and the evening meal offering and the king's burnt offering and his meal offering, with the burnt offerings of all the people of the land, their meal offering and their libations. And against it you shall dash the blood of all the burnt offerings and all the blood of the sacrifices* (II Kings 16:15). Ahaz's new altar was "great" (v. 15) and thus bigger than the bronze one to which it is contrasted. *As for the bronze altar which had been before the Lord, he moved it from its place in front of the Temple—between the [new] altar and the House of the LORD—and placed it on the north side of the [new] altar* (II Kings 16:14). This bronze altar is connected to the altar in Solomon's temple dedication; the phrase *before the Lord* (II Kings 16:14) is used in I Kings 8:64 (cf. the same altar is in I Kings 9:25). Ahaz moves Solomon's bronze altar from its former central location to the north side of the Temple courtyard. Ahaz does not destroy the bronze altar but still uses it for oracular inquiry. One uses an altar for obtaining an oracle when one offers m a sacrifice to God to receive this oracle, as in I Kings 22 before the battle of Ramot-Gilead. *King Ahaz cut off the inserts–the laver stands – and removed the lavers from them. He also removed the tank from the bronze oxen that supported it and set it on a stone pavement – on account of the king of Assyria* (II Kings

16:17). The removal of the bronze frameworks for the basin of the Temple as in I Kings 7:27-39 and the twelve bulls that supported the molten sea as in I Kings 7:23-26 seem to be the metal given to the Assyrian king. These renovations are made to provide tribute and are not meant to de-Judaize the Temple. *He also extended to the House of the LORD – the Sabbath passage that had been built on the palace and the king's outer entrance* (II Kings 16:18). We do not know what the Sabbath passage was; the wording is quite ambiguous. Extending the passage may be a positive act making a more accessible path from the palace to the Temple. Is this remodeling to gain more materials for the tribute? It is interesting to notice what NJV does here; it moves "on account of the king of Assyria" up to the end of v. 17, so that now v. 18 concerning the Sabbath passageway is not part of what was done for the king of Assyria. The Hebrew, however, indicates that whatever is done to the Sabbath passageway is done for the foreign king, which again makes it seem to be a renovation to get material for tribute. This is an interesting example of how a translator can take liberties that change the meaning of the text.

The new altar is dedicated to God. It is the exact copy of an altar the king saw in Damascus which may have had nothing to do with Assyrian worship. Levin thinks that the altar was Aramean and that the text does not indicate that the worship was to any god but that of the Israelites.[8] Wazana goes even further and makes a case for altars to Yahweh in Aram, citing the case of Naaman in II Kings 5.[9]

Ahaz's actions are based on his own motivations. The Assyrians did not impose their gods on their subjects in other lands.[10] Cogan shows that the worship of Assyrian gods was expected and enforced in Assyrian provinces but **not** in vassal states like Judah.[11] What the King of Assyria wanted was not sacrifices or altars or worship of his gods; he simply wanted tribute.

The Kings account need not and should not be read through the perspective of the Chronicler.[12] One need not read the Kings account in the context of Ahaz's cultic sins, because other kings allowed or did some of them, too.

Also, we may differentiate between cultic sins inside and outside the Temple. The description of Ahaz's actions is so traditional, so specific with detail conforming with priestly legislation and ritual, that one begins to think that this passage is based on a priestly record with three reservations: The king offers sacrifices himself (not through the priest), he changes the altar from the Solomonic one, and even more, he takes Temple materials and parts and gives them away to a foreign king. Nelson may go too far in the other direction when he says, "Over against this sorry history of apostasy, the author of Kings sets Ahaz's praiseworthy and thoroughly orthodox act of providing a bigger and better altar of sacrifice."[13] Still, the fact that a scholar can make this case illustrates that the altar does not need to be seen in a negative light.

ISAIAH DOES NOT CONDEMN AHAZ'S ALTAR

The next set of biblical texts that offers an assessment of King Ahaz is found in Isaiah, who has an intense relationship with the king. Certainly, passages in Isaiah are negative about Ahaz. Indeed, some of the most famous Messianic passage are longing for a Davidic king, clearly differentiating such kings from the Davidide Ahaz (Is. 7:10-25). While Ahaz appeals for help to the Assyrians, Isaiah considers this as treating "God as powerless"; the prophet, to the contrary, wants to depend on God and His promise to the House of David. Isaiah states that while Aram and Israel have their armies and their plots, Judah has God (Is. 7:7-8a, 9a plus 8:8b-10). While Assyria will vanquish Aram and Israel (8:1-4), it will just chastise Judah for its social sins (8:5-8a). Isaiah seems to have thought at first that Assyria would obey God and only destroy those whom God wants to punish, but then realizes that Assyria conquers and transplants any people or nation it chooses. Isaiah will follow this belief consistently, claiming that the "long arm of the Lord" will destroy the armies of Assyria in 14:24-27 and Egypt and Judah in 31:3. The prophet predicts a supernatural solution to international problems as well as to socio-economic and moral problems in the society. If people in Israel and then Judah are guilty of crimes involving weights and standards, God will punish them accordingly.[14]

Isaiah and Ahaz have very different foreign policy perspectives in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. Ahaz's policy increases Judean dependence on and subjection to Assyrian control. Yet in fairness to Ahaz, his country is being attacked from many sides; he cannot be blamed for not having Isaiah's remarkable belief and confidence in God's salvation, or as Ginsberg puts it, supernaturalism in the face of immediate catastrophic crisis.

Certainly, passages in Isaiah are negative about Ahaz. Yet what is striking is that Isaiah does not condemn Ahaz for cultic sins. In the midst of these rebukes to the king, would Isaiah not have even referred to a major cultic sin such as a pagan altar in the Temple?

THE COMPLIANCE OF THE PRIEST URIAH

We see Uriah as a priest during the reign of Ahaz whom Isaiah appoints as one of two witnesses to his prophecy concerning his son: *Then the LORD said to me, "Get yourself a large sheet and write on it in common script: For Maher-shalal-hash-baz and call reliable witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah, to witness for me* (Isa. 8:1-2). Perhaps the scroll is to be deposited in the Temple for which he would need the priest's access. If this is so, the prophet summons him as a witness based on his official position. The incident occurs at the beginning of the reign of Ahaz, so perhaps Uriah's divergence from Temple norms may not have occurred yet. Still, we never see Isaiah denounce Uriah. Uriah is considered the most trustworthy witnesses. If Uriah had soon ruined his reputation as a reliable devotee of God, the story might have been told very differently.

Uriah was preceded by Azariah, the priest/high-priest in the reign of Uzziah and was succeeded by an Azariah, who was high-priest in the reign of Hezekiah. As I have indicated in my *Chronology and Papponymy*,[15] the priestly dynasty used the practice of naming a son for a grandfather, so Uriah may have descended from that Azariah who must have been high priest in the reign of Asa.[16] The point is that Uriah remained a respected and remembered high priest for whom descendants were named. Zwickel points out that before this reference to Uriah, we have not had any information about priests for a hundred years of history.[17] One must think that it is exceptional that he should be mentioned at all. This may show that this is based on a priestly source, but it also may show the priest's credentials as a traditionalist. Uriah's compliance can be seen not as a priest's obsequious agreement with paganism but as an indication that the new altar would be used for legitimate traditional worship. He did not object because there was not much to object to.

When one reads the account of Ahaz in Chronicles, we notice that there is no mention at all of Uriah. Japhet, who has written the best modern commentary on Chronicles, does not say a word about the omission of Uriah in II Chron. 28.[18] Neither do Williamson, Myers, or Dillard.[19] Levin states: "Since Isaiah 8.2 refers to Uriah the priest as a "reliable witness, it is unlikely that he would have been involved in idolatry."[20] This may indicate that Ahaz's altar was not pagan. Indeed, while II Chron. 28 condemns Ahaz in the strongest terms, it never mentions the new altar at all.

The traditional sacrifices that are offered on, and the sprinkling of the blood to sanctify, the new altar, the preservation and continued use of the bronze altar, the absence of explicit Deuteronomic condemnation of the new altar as pagan, the absence of condemnation of cultic sins in Isaiah, the ready compliance of the priest Uriah, all may serve as evidence that Ahaz's altar was not polytheistic.

MONARCHICAL POLYTHEISM

There is important evidence that points to Ahaz as an "idolator". He worships Baal and condones and supports all manner of pagan practices. He refuses to listen to the Word of God transmitted through Isaiah. He puts his faith in the king of Assyria over the King of the world. He put his own kingship over everything. So it is difficult to think of his new altar as devoted to the LORD.

Modern monotheists think in terms of monotheism vs. polytheism/idolatry. But we should be careful (and this is very difficult for us) not to superimpose our concept of monotheism (which, very simply, means that there is one God, and no other gods exist), or even henotheism (in which the LORD is the highest god but not the only one), onto ancient Israelite beliefs. As strange as this may seem to us, Israelites like Ahaz could use idols in rituals dedicated to other gods and still practice traditional worship of YHWH.

Polytheism could include worship of and belief in the Israelite God. Ahaz could make molten idols to Baal, even sacrifice his sons in the fire, and still consider himself an adherent of the LORD. He knew that his monarchy, as a scion of the Davidic dynasty, was based on a covenant with God and that the Solomonic Temple was central to traditional worship.

If we need to give a name to Ahaz's flexible, ad hoc religious stances, we might call him a henotheist who is devoted to a primary god while accepting the existence of other gods.[22] A henotheist may worship any god within his pantheon, depending on the circumstances. I prefer to call Ahaz a 'monarchical polytheist', a polytheist whose practices were determined by political reasons, namely his power and the security of his kingdom that depended on his subservience to a foreign king.

Copying an altar of a pagan god and setting aside the traditional altar are certainly significant acts, but these are not necessarily rejections of the traditional Temple service. The reader may connect this new altar with the sin of adopting alien ways, but Ahaz could have seen it as enhancing the worship of the Israelite God.

Ahaz refuses to "test" God in Is. 7:10-11, because he clearly does not want to hear that he should not depend on and become more subservient to Assyria. Even this refusal, however, shows that Ahaz "believed" in and was afraid of God.

Why does Isaiah not berate Ahaz for any of these acts, including some which had to be heinous in his eyes? Perhaps in his "Messianic prophecies" about the destruction of the Davidic family tree but the rise of a shoot from the stump of that same tree (Isaiah 10: 32-11), Isaiah denounces Ahaz for the general framework of all his sins, the least of which is a foreign-looking altar based on one from Damascus. Isaiah condemns the monarchical polytheism that includes worship of the LORD, but which in that worship misses the whole point, that the LORD is King and that placing his own monarchy, or the power of any human being will bring down the punishment of the One who truly controls history and the world. He bent his knee to a human superpower, forgetting that the true Superpower was the LORD.

I suggest that there was a Judean king named Ahaz who engaged in pagan acts and condoned unacceptable cultic practices. Yet when it came to the Temple itself, while he gave away precious and sacred parts of the building, he preserved the old altar, made a new one and conducted sacrifices in the traditional manner. The Biblical record on Ahaz is mixed, but this is what makes me believe that all of this is true. Many doubt the Bible and think of it as one-sided, polemical, and skewed. What we have in II Kings 16, however, seems to be two-sided and complete. Consistency in religious behavior should never be assumed in any religion in any generation, and not even in an individual, especially an individual with complex roles. And to be a political leader adds levels of complication. Ahaz saved the kingdom of Judah, which would survive for another century and a half. He can be condemned for some of his practices and praised for others, but on balance,

should be seen as a leader who thought he was doing the best he could in a violent world that threatened the very existence of his people.

NOTES

1. This is Ahaz with a theophoric prefix. All Biblical translations are from NJV.
2. ANET, 282; Nadav Naʾaman. "Royal Inscriptions and the Histories of Joash and Ahaz, Kings of Judah," *Vetus Testamentum*, 48 (1998), 333–49; Hayim Tadmor and Mordechai Cogan, "Ahaz and Tiglath-Pileser in the Book of Kings: Historiographic Considerations," *Biblica* 60 (1979), 491–508.
3. This view prevails among the standard histories such as Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1960), 266, Henk Jagersma, *History of Israel in the Old Testament Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 159; J. A, Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel from the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, A.D. 135* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 228.
4. Aramaic: Norman H. Snaith, *The First and Second Books of Kings* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 275; Assyrian: A. T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 198; idem. *History of Palestine and Syria to the Macedonian Conquest* (London: Scribner's, 1931), 452; Phoenician: H. W. F. Saggs, *Assyriology and the Study of the Old Testament* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1969), 19-22.
5. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Phil.: Westminster, 1981), 276-277.
6. P. R. Ackroyd, "The Biblical Interpretation of the Reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah," 247-59 in *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Institutions in Honor of G. W. Ahlstrom,* ed. W. B. Barrick and J. R. Spencer (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984); Klaas Smelik, "The New Altar of King Ahaz (2 Kings 16). Deuteronomistic re-interpretation of a cult reform," 263–278 in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature* (Festschrift C.H.W. Brekelmans) ed. by J. Lust and M. Vervenne (Leuven: Peeters, 1997).
7. J. Milgrom, "Sacrifices and Offerings, OT," *IDB Sup* 763-71.
8. See also J. McKay, *Religion in Judah under the Assyrians* (SBT: Naperville Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1973), 5-12.
9. Nili Wazana, "Ahaz and the Altar from Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–16): Literary, Theological, and Historical-Political Considerations" 379-399 in: O. Sergi, M. Oeming, I.J. de-Hulster, (eds.), *In Search for Aram and Israel: Politics, Culture and Identity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).
10. Richard D. Nelson and Mordechai Cogan, "The Ahaz Altar: On the Problem of Assyrian Cults in Judah," 119-124 in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 1973.
11. Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh* Centuries (SBL Monograph Series 19, 1974), 72.
12. Klaas A.D. Smelik, "The Representation of King Ahaz in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28.""
13. Richard Nelson, "The Altar of Ahaz: A Revisionist View," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986), 274.
14. H. L. Ginsberg, "The Supernatural in the Prophets with Special Reference to Isaiah," *The Goldenson Lecture 1978* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press).
15. Benjamin E. Scolnic, *Chronology and Papponymy: A List of the Judean High Priests of the Persian Period* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999).
16. In the priestly genealogy of I Chron. 6:4-15, there is a long gap between Amariah in v. 11, and Shallum, the father of Hilkiah, in v. 13.
17. Josephus, however, says that he was the son of Jothan and the father of Neriah (*Ant.* 10:8, 6).
18. Wolfgang Zwickel, "Priesthood and the Development of Cult," in *The Books of Kings* ed. Andre Lemaire and Baruch Halpern (SBL; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 423.
19. Sara Japhet, *I and II Chronicles* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster, 1993), 894-909.
20. Jacob M. Myers, *II Chronicles* (AB 13; Garden City: Doubleday; 1965); H.G.M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (NCB; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982); Raymond B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WBC; Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1986).
21. Yigal Levin, *The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah: 2 Chronicles 10-36* (London: T and T Clark, 2017), 283.
22. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion: As Illustrated by the Religions of India* (London: Longmans, Green, 1878); Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods. Emergent Monotheism in Israel* (JSOT

Supp. 241; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997), 132–133 with f. 6; Ilai Alon, Ithamar Gruenwald, Itamar Singer, *Concepts of the Other in Near Eastern Religions* (IOS 14; Brill, 1994), 370–371.