

Thursday March 4th: Omri: [1 Kings 16: 15-28](#): 'But Omri did evil'



Fortress ruins, Herodion

Today's passage briefly describes, in not much more than a footnote, the historically pretty spectacular reign of King Omri. He became king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel a little less than 50 years after the split with the Southern Kingdom (which continued to be ruled by descendants of David) and reigned for about 12 years. In terms of the wider history of the time he was an

extremely significant figure who was militarily successful and established a powerful dynasty. He also founded Samaria, the capital city of his kingdom (1 Kings 16 v 24). The "Moabite stone", discovered in 1868 at Dibon in Jordan by German missionary Frederick Augustus Klein (who became an Anglican priest and worked for what is now the Church Mission Society), contains these references to King Omri from a later Moabite leader, King Mesha:

'Omri was king of Israel, and oppressed Moab during many days, and Chemosh [the Moabite deity] was angry with his aggressions. His son succeeded him, and he also said, I will oppress Moab.'

Other Assyrian inscriptions reveal that the northern kingdom of Israel was referred to as the 'Land of Omri' and the royal dynasty as the 'House of Omri' for over a century after his death. Yet the reign of this towering historical figure is given just 14 verses in 1 Kings 16, nearly half of which recount how he came to power. The reason for this is that the history writers of the Old Testament aren't all that impressed by his successes (you could find out about them elsewhere if you were interested - see v 27). Their assessment of the kings of Israel is based entirely on their faithfulness, or lack of it, to God and it's clear that from their point of view the most significant thing about Omri is that he repeated the mistakes of Jeroboam, first king of the Northern Kingdom, in deliberately turning aside from his vocation to lead a people loyal to God by fostering the worship of idols.

If we check out the only other reference to him in the Old Testament it's clear that his name remained a byword for the evils of idolatry for many years after his reign. Micah, prophesying to the Southern Kingdom of Judah about 150 years later, does not mince his words and foresees ruinous consequences as he accuses the people of following the 'statutes of Omri' (Micah 6 v 16), clearly in context a reference to the worship of false idols. In a twist of irony, ruin did eventually overtake the Northern Kingdom during Micah's lifetime as it was conquered by the Assyrians who deported many of its people and brought its history to a close.

The story of Omri reminds us of the perennial relevance of Lord Acton's aphorism that, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. Omri seems to have been a leader who was extremely capable but morally and spiritually bankrupt. We live at a time when populist and autocratic leaders have come to power in many countries with their divisive messages often carried via social media. Some of these leaders have cemented their power effectively for life; Presidents Putin of Russia and Xi of China being two examples. I have never understood the obsession with power but it seems to work like a drug, once you have had a fix you just can't get enough of it. But it doesn't need to be so. Nelson Mandela showed us that it is possible to lead a country whilst retaining your humanity and maintaining an attitude of public service.

Jesus never really bothered much with those in power (until he had to) preferring to spend much of his time with the 'ptochos', the poorest of the poor, made up of those were excluded from the rest of society, often reduced to begging. It was here that he nurtured the good seed of the coming kingdom. In an age where it seems that certain people have an entitlement to a lifestyle beyond the dreams of the vast majority, we need to shift our gaze away from the trappings of power and address, in whatever way we are able, however small that might be, the appalling injustices that scar this beautiful world in which all were meant to be able to live without want.

Part of the problem relates very specifically to Omri; the tendency of humanity to worship idols rather than the Lord of heaven and earth. In Omri's time it was the gods of the surrounding nations that subverted the vocation of his people to worship and serve God. As we see in the writings of the prophets this wasn't just an end in itself as in; 'serve me and not them or else'. Turning away from the one who had liberated the people and created a covenant with them had disastrous consequences for the moral and spiritual life of the nation. Micah, referred to earlier, addresses a community which has lost its moral compass because it has lost touch with its foundational calling to be the people of God, 'Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a bribe, and her prophets tell fortunes for money' (Micah 3 v 11). Money is talking so loudly it is drowning out the voice of God.

The idols of money, sex and power, which all figure prominently in the Old Testament narrative, are still extremely voluble today demanding our attention and claiming our allegiance. As human beings we have a God given need to worship but we too often look in the wrong place which means that, whether we mean to or not, we set up idols that sometimes hide in plain sight. We live in a culture in which rock stars, sports stars, soap stars, film stars and reality stars are placed on idolatrous pedestals meaning that even the most intimate details of their lives are dissected in the kind of gossip magazines people glance through while waiting for a haircut. These are lent a significance that enables their worshippers to get vicarious thrills (the lives

of many celebrities are rarely their own) before returning to the seemingly mundane and unimportant matters that make up their own daily lives back at ground level. We have become worshippers with an increasing addiction to and reliance on such things as social media which too often mean we spend much of our lives with our attention focused on stuff that either doesn't matter or is even positively harmful, such as the conspiracy theories of QAnon that are engaging certain mindsets in the United States (including some evangelical Christian communities) in very worrying ways.

What Christians are being called to do; what you and I are being called to do is to worship the Lord our God. This means that we put him first and define ourselves as those whose lives are focused on prayer, engagement with scripture, worship and service. This does not mean that we have to throw our phones and tablets away (although it might mean that we use them less) but it does mean that we make space in our lives and in our hearts to hear the voice of God addressing our distracted hearts and minds with a gentle whisper and a call to serve.

Questions: What does it mean to worship God every day of our lives? What are the marks of a life focused on serving Christ?

Prayer: Lord, we live in a society distracted by so many things that do not matter. Help us to shape our lives around our relationship with you. Amen.