

2 Kings 16 — The Copied Altar — Ahaz Gives His Son to the Fire, Buys an Empire with the Temple's Treasure, Orders the Pattern of Damascus from a Compliant Priest, and Refuses the Sign of Immanuel

2 Kings 16: Ahaz the son of Jotham reigns sixteen years in Jerusalem, c. 735–715 BC (secular chronologies run close, roughly 732–716 BC); besieged by Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel, he makes his son pass through the fire, strips the silver and gold of the house of the LORD to hire Tiglath-pileser of Assyria, copies an altar he admires at Damascus into the temple court through Urijah the priest, and dismantles the sanctuary's furnishings for the king of Assyria — while, in the scene Isaiah 7 preserves, he refuses the sign of Immanuel that the Lord gives anyway.

For fifteen chapters of 2 Kings the northern kingdom has been sliding toward the cliff — six kings in the last chapter alone, four of them murdered by their successors — while Judah, under Uzziah and then Jotham, has stayed comparatively steady. That steadiness ends here. Chapter 16 turns the camera south and gives us Judah's own catastrophe: not a coup, not an invasion, but a king. Ahaz inherits the throne of David at twenty, and in sixteen years he manages to burn his own child, empty the temple's treasury into a foreign king's hand, and replace the altar of the LORD with a souvenir from Damascus. Nobody conquers Jerusalem in this chapter. Its king gives it away piece by piece, voluntarily, and calls each surrender a policy.

Hebrew Word Studies

abar (H5674) (אָבַר / אָבַר) — **to pass over, pass through, cross v. 3.** The verb tagged at "through" in verse 3 is one of the most ordinary words in the Hebrew Bible — abar, to cross, to pass over — and that ordinariness is what makes its appearance here so cold. This is the verb of Israel's covenant crossings: Abram "passed through the land" to receive the promise (Gen. 12:6), and Israel "passed over" Jordan on dry ground behind the ark (Josh. 3:17). To make a child "pass through" the fire borrows the covenant's own traveling verb and aims it into the flames: a crossing with no far bank. The law had fenced this exact phrase — "thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Molech" (Lev. 18:21; cf. Deut. 18:10; 2 Kgs. 23:10) — and Jeremiah records God's shudder at it: a thing "which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart" (Jer. 7:31). There is a grim symmetry waiting in Isaiah's oracle from these same years: because Judah refused the softly flowing waters of Shiloah, the Assyrian river would come — "he shall overflow and go over" (Isa. 8:7–8; 2 Ne. 18:7–8), and the Hebrew behind "go over" is this same abar. The king who made his son pass through the fire would have the empire he hired pass through his land. What we send through the fire has a way of coming back through the gates.

yasha (H3467) / shochad (H7810) (יָשָׁא / שׂוֹחָד) — **to save, deliver / a present, a bribe vv. 7–8.** Two words carry the theology of the whole transaction. Yasha, "save," is Israel's most freighted verb — the word of the Red Sea ("the LORD saved Israel that day," Ex. 14:30), the root of the names Joshua, Hosea, Isaiah (Yeshayahu, "Jehovah saves"), and finally Yeshua himself: "thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The LORD stakes an exclusive claim on it: "I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour" (Isa. 43:11; cf. Hos. 13:4). So when Ahaz sends Tiglath-pileser the words "save me," he is not making a policy request; he is relocating the throne of grace to Nineveh — while a prophet whose very name preaches "Jehovah saves" stands ignored in his own capital. The narrator's second word prices the transfer: the silver and gold went as a shochad — not the neutral term for tribute but the legal term for a bribe, the gift that "blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous" (Ex. 23:8; Deut. 16:19). Isaiah used the same word to indict that generation's princes: "every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards" (Isa. 1:23). The pairing is the sermon: salvation cannot be purchased, so anything you try to purchase it with becomes a bribe — and it blinds the buyer. Matthew's first chapter quietly reunites everything Ahaz split apart: "Achaz begat Ezekias" stands in the genealogy (Matt. 1:9), and within a dozen verses both names Ahaz refused — Jesus, "he shall save," and Emmanuel, "God with us" — are announced over one child (Matt. 1:21–23). The offer Ahaz declined kept traveling down his own family line until Someone accepted it on behalf of us all.

demuth (H1823) / tabnith (H8403) (דְּמוּת / תַּבְנִית) — **likeness, resemblance / pattern, model, figure v. 10.** The two nouns Ahaz sends home from Damascus are both heavyweights of revelation vocabulary, and both are here running in reverse. Demuth — "the fashion of the altar" — is the word of Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Man is supposed to be the demuth of God. Ahaz commissions a demuth of a pagan altar — and becomes, in the process, a likeness of the nations instead. Tabnith — "the pattern of it" — is more pointed still. This is the technical term of

the revealed sanctuary: "According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle... even so shall ye make it" (Ex. 25:9), "after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount" (Ex. 25:40; cf. Heb. 8:5). David handed Solomon the temple's own tabnith, insisting "the LORD made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern" (1 Chr. 28:12, 19). Every tabnith in Judah's worship had come down — from the mount, by the Spirit, in writing from the hand of God. Ahaz's tabnith comes across — from Damascus, by courier, from the hand of a king impressed by his conquerors' decor. That is the whole anatomy of apostasy in two prepositions. The Lord's house is a house of revealed pattern or it is nothing: "mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God, and not a house of confusion" (D&C 132:8). The moment the pattern's source moves from revelation to admiration — from what God showed to what Damascus displays — the building may still be standing on Moriah, but the tabernacle has already left it.

mizbeach (H4196) (מִזְבֵּחַ) — altar, place of sacrifice vv. 10–15. Mizbeach occurs ten times in six verses here — the narrator all but pounds the word on the table — and it is built on zabach, "to slaughter for sacrifice": an altar, in Hebrew, is not a monument but a killing place, the appointed meeting of death and mercy. Its biography is the Bible's spine: Noah built one on a washed world (Gen. 8:20); Abraham built the altar on Moriah and laid his son upon it, and heaven stayed his hand and provided a ram (Gen. 22:9–13) — on the very mountain range where Solomon's temple later rose (2 Chr. 3:1). Hold those two fathers side by side across this chapter, because the contrast is the doctrine: Abraham laid his son on the LORD's altar in obedient faith, and God returned him alive with an oath of blessing; Ahaz put his son through the fire on Canaan's terms, and got Assyria. From Adam onward the true altar carried one meaning — the sacrifice was "a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:7); "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him" (2 Ne. 11:4). Every lamb on the brasen altar was a syllable in a single sentence about Christ, "every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice... the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:14). That is what Ahaz shoved to the north side: not bronze, but the type of the Atonement — the standing testimony that salvation would come by the offering of the Beloved Son, not the burning of our own. The copied altar still smoked, still received blood, still gathered the daily crowd. It just no longer meant anyone was coming to redeem them.

From the Chapter's Architecture

The frame around the panels does the moral bookkeeping. The chapter opens by measuring Ahaz against "David his father" (v. 2) and closes by handing the throne to "Hezekiah his son" (v. 20) — the king he refused to imitate behind him, the king who would undo him ahead of him, and Ahaz suspended between. And over the whole chapter hangs a silence the narrator surely intends: in 2 Kings 16 the LORD never speaks and never acts — no prophet enters, no judgment falls, nothing interrupts. Every scheme succeeds. It is the most frightening narrative texture in Kings: heaven gone quiet, not because heaven had nothing to say, but because what heaven was saying is recorded in another book. To hear God's voice during this chapter you must open Isaiah 7 — where it is pleading, on a road by the upper pool, with a king inspecting his water supply: Take heed, and be quiet; fear not. The chapter's silence is not God's absence. It is what a life sounds like from inside after the sign has been refused.