

## Judah During the Divided Kingdom (2 Chronicles 10:1 – 28:7)

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### The Reign of Asa, part 3: Asa Under Divine Judgment; Closure of Asa's Reign (2 Chronicles 16:1-14)

#### *Asa Under Divine Judgment (16:1-12)*

Having dealt with the earlier years of Asa's reign under divine blessing, the Chronicler turned to the time of divine judgment against the king. His depiction of this portion of Asa's life stands in sharp contrast to the preceding material.

#### *Comparison of 16:1-12 with 1 Kgs 15:16-24*

Chronicles depends on 1 Kgs 15:16-24 for much of this material (see figure 32). In several portions slight differences appear due to changes in style and corruptions through textual transmission. Yet, a number of variations are due to the Chronicler's unique outlook on these events.

First, several times the Chronicler varied from Kings to display his chronological division of Asa's reign. 1) 1 Kgs 15:16 generalizes that war took place between Asa and Baasha of northern Israel "throughout their reigns." The Chronicler, however, had already specified that there was peace during Asa's early years (14:6). For this reason he replaced the reference in Kings with a note of war taking place **in the thirty-sixth year** (16:1). 2) 1 Kgs 15:23 reads, "in his old age," but the Chronicler shifted to **in the thirty-ninth year of his reign** (16:12). 3) He also added the information that Asa died **in the forty-first year of his reign** to the parallel material in 1 Kgs 15:24. Each of these shifts were designed to shape the record of Asa into well-defined temporal units that supported his division of the king's reign into a time of blessing and judgment.

Second, the largest addition which was made to this part of Asa's reign appears in 16:7-10. This story of Hanani the prophet was added to contrast and balance with the previous story of the prophet Azariah (see 15:1-7).

Third, the Chronicler expanded the reference to sources from the book "of the kings of Judah" (1 Kgs 15:23) to the book of **the kings of Judah and Israel** (16:11).

Fourth, the simple notice that "his feet became diseased" (1 Kgs 15:23) is expanded to indicate that the king responded inappropriately to his illness by failing to seek God (16:12). The purpose of this expansion was to contrast Asa's behavior in this circumstance with the actions of his earlier years (see 15:8-18).

### *Structure of 16:1-12*

The Chronicler's record divides into two main sections (see figure 33). The first portion describes Asa's failure in battle and the subsequent prophetic rebuke and royal reaction (16:1-10). This material is followed by a description of Asa's resulting disease (16:11-12).

### *Asa's Failure, Prophetic Disapproval and Disobedience (16:1-10)*

The first half of Asa's reign involved fidelity, victory, prophetic approval and obedience. This portion contrasts with infidelity, failure, prophetic rebuke, and disobedience (see figure 33). At this point the Chronicler followed a scenario he presented on a number of occasions. A time of blessing was followed by a time of infidelity. (For the Chronicler's warning against permitting blessings to lead to infidelity see comments on 1 Chr 5:24.) The contrasts between these two periods could hardly be more striking.

### *Structure of 16:1-10*

This material divides into two segments (see figure 33). It begins with a narrative describing the king's failure in battle (16:1-6) which is followed by a prophetic encounter and the king's reaction (16:7-10).

### *Asa's Failure in Conflict (16:1-6)*

To contrast Asa's remarkable victory over Zerah (14:12), the Chronicler followed the book of Kings (// 1 Kgs 15:16-22) and recorded one of Asa's encounters with Baasha, king of northern Israel. This battle was not a total defeat for Asa. In fact, in purely political terms it was only a slight setback. Yet, from the Chronicler's point of view it represented a serious violation of Asa's loyalty to God and it brought God's judgment against the king.

### *Structure of 16:1-6*

The account of this battle divides into four symmetrical steps (see figure 33). It begins with an economic threat against Judah (16:1) and ends with its removal (16:5-6). In this regard, Asa appears to be blessed once again. The key to understanding this event, however, is the manner by which Asa resolved his problem. As the middle portions of the story indicate, Asa appealed to Syria for help (16:2-3) and the Syrians fought against northern Israel in alliance with Asa (16:4). Asa's alliance with Syria curtailed his dominance over the region.

### *Asa Threatened (16:1)*

This episode begins with the information that **Baasha king of Israel** began aggression against Judah. He **fortified Ramah**, a site six miles north of Jerusalem, to cut off a major trade route from the east toward Jerusalem. This aggression was one in a long series of skirmishes and conflicts between Asa and Baasha (see 1 Kgs 15:16).

The opening chronological reference to **the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign** is problematic (16:1). Similarly, the mention of the **thirty-fifth year** in 15:19 raises difficulties in harmonizing Kings and Chronicles. 1 Kgs 15:33 and 16:8 indicate that Elah succeeded Baasha in the twenty-sixth year of Asa's reign, but Chronicles speaks of Baasha making war in the **thirty-sixth year** (16:1). Two resolutions have been proposed. On the one hand, some interpreters hold that 15:19 and 16:1 date these events from the time of the schism of the North and South. If this were so, it would bring Kings and Chronicles into harmony. Nevertheless, this would be the only time the Chronicler oriented his dating in this direction. On the other hand, it is possible that the numbers "thirty" and "twenty" were confused at some point in the history of transmission (see *Introduction: Translation and Transmission*). This confusion would not be impossible in Hebrew script of some periods. The latter proposal seems more likely than the former. Yet, further research may point toward a better solution in the future.

### *Asa Appeals to Syria for Help (16:2-3)*

Contrary to his appeal for divine help in his battle with Zerah (see 14:11), Asa turned to human power to remove the threat of Baasha's fortification. He appealed to **Ben-Haddad king of Aram** (16:2). Asa sought an alliance with Israel's Syrian neighbor.

The text clearly indicates that Asa's move was inappropriate in the way it describes his appeal. Not only did the king send treasures from **his own palace**, he also **took the silver and gold out of the treasuries of the Lord's temple ... and sent it to Ben-Hadad** (16:2). Near the end of his account of Asa's positive years, the Chronicler praised Asa because he **brought ... silver and gold** to the temple (15:18). At this point, Asa did just the opposite. He

took from God in order to establish an alliance with a foreign power. The text emphasizes this contrast by repeating a reference to **silver and gold** in Asa's speech to Ben-Hadad (16:3). As we will see, this pursuit of foreign alliance was Asa's serious error (see 16:7-9).

Asa appealed to Ben-Hadad to establish **a treaty** with him (16:3). This arrangement was a parity treaty. Ben-Hadad and Asa functioned as peers, but Asa had to buy Ben-Hadad's loyalty because the latter would have to break his treaty with northern Israel (16:3). The terms of the treaty were simple. Syria would attack northern Israel so that Baasha would have to withdraw from Judah (16:3).

Although the Chronicler said nothing explicit at this point about the religious dimensions of Asa's plan, he later exposed this treaty as rebellion against God. Treaties and cooperation with foreign powers were not entirely forbidden to Israel (see Dt 20:10-15). Yet, when these treaties were established in lieu of dependence on God for military security, they were strongly condemned. The Chronicler condemned another such alliance in the days of Ahaz (see 28:16-21). Such events were important to him because his post-exilic readers were tempted to find their security in similar ways, rather than rely on God for protection (see *Introduction: 3) International Relations*).

Beyond this, it is important to note that in this situation Asa not only allied himself with a foreign power, but he did so against northern Israel. This fact may also have inspired the Chronicler's condemnation. Although the northern tribes were in apostasy (see 13:4-12) and aggressive against Judah, conspiring with foreign nations against them was outrageous. The northern tribes troubled the early post-exilic community (see Ezr 4:1-5), but here the Chronicler instructed his readers not to make war against them, especially by means of an alliance with foreign powers (see *Introduction: 2) Northern Israel*).

#### *Syria Attacks Israel (16:4)*

In balance with the treaty established between Asa and Syria (see 16:2-3), this portion of the story reports that Ben-Hadad attacked **the towns of Israel** (16:4). The towns listed - **Ijon, Dan, Abel Maim, Naphtali** - were in the northern regions of Israel's territories (16:4).

#### *Asa No Longer Threatened (16:5-6)*

Just as Asa had hoped, **Baasha stopped building Ramah and abandoned his work** (16:5). The threat to Judah's security was halted. Moreover, Baasha was so distracted by troubles with Syria that **Asa and all Judah** went to Ramah, took Baasha's **stones and timber** and used them to fortify **Geba and Mizpah** (16:6). The Chronicler reported these events to convey the enormous success of Asa's strategy.

To the unsuspecting reader, this whole series of events looks like a great victory for Asa. His plan worked out splendidly. Only subtle hints of religious failure appear up to this point. The Chronicler used this quality of the record of Kings to prepare his readers for a surprise. Although this event seemed to honor Asa for his diplomatic and military skills, it will soon be seen for what it really was, an act of rebellion against God.

### *Asa's Prophetic Rebuke and Response (16:7-10)*

Asa's second battle was in need of evaluation. The Chronicler immediately offered an explicit judgment of what the king had done.

### *Structure of 16:7-10*

This material divides into two reports (see figure 33). The first consists of a prophetic rebuke (16:7-9). The second confirms this evaluation by noting the king's response to the prophet (16:10). This material balances with the previous announcement by Azariah and the king's positive response at that time (see 15:1-19).

### *Prophetic Rebuke (16:7-9)*

The Chronicler added a second prophetic word from **Hanani the seer** (16:7) to balance with the previous announcement from Azariah the prophet (see 15:1). The earlier prophetic word was entirely positive, encouraging Asa to go further in his reforms. This prophetic speech, however, condemned Asa's actions.

### *Structure of 16:7-9*

Hanani's speech divides into three parts (see figure 33). This prophetic speech follows a pattern of a judgment oracle (accusation and sentencing) that occurs frequently in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. It begins with an accusation (16:7), a reminder of past blessings (16:8-9a) and an accusation and sentencing (16:9b).

### *Accusation and Result (16:7)*

In his usual fashion the Chronicler reported that God's prophet warned of judgment to come (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*). He surprised his readers, however, with the opening

words of the prophet. Instead of congratulating the king for his clever diplomacy, the prophet accused him of sin. Asa was accused of having **relied on the king of Aram** (16:7). In the Chronicler's theological vocabulary, the only one upon whom Israel should "rely" was God himself (see 13:18; 16:7,8). In his struggle with Zerah, Asa specifically affirmed that he **relied** on God (14:11). The Chronicler consistently condemned reliance on anyone but God, especially foreign nations (see *Introduction: 3) International Relations*).

The prophet continued his accusation by pointing to the results of Asa's reliance on foreign power. He announced, "**Aram has escaped from your hand**" (16:7). Some ancient texts emend this clause to read "Israel has escaped..." This emendation is probably a later attempt to clarify the prophet's message (see *Introduction: Translation and Transmission*). The meaning of the traditional Hebrew text, however, is that Asa lost not only victory over Israel (Baasha), but also over Syria (Ben-Hadad) because of his failure to rely on God (see *Introduction: 23) Victory and Defeat*).

#### *Contrast with Earlier Conflict (16:8-9a)*

To highlight the folly of Asa's actions, the prophet continued to contrast this situation with the previous conflict in Asa's reign. The **Cushites and Libyans** attacked **with great numbers**, but Asa defeated them because he **relied on the Lord** (16:8 see 14:8-15).

To support his claim, the prophet appealed to a doctrinal belief. He asserted that **the eyes of the Lord** were watching (16:9). The Chronicler referred several times to the eyes of God as his ability to know all things (see 2 Chr 6:20,40; 7:15,16). Here God looks inside human motivations to see whose **hearts are fully committed to him** (16:9). Once again, the Chronicler drew attention to the need for sincere heart devotion to God (see *Introduction: 16) Motivations*). Moreover, the prophet explained that God intervenes **to strengthen** (16:9) those who have hearts devoted to him. In the first part of Asa's reign, it was the whole-hearted commitment of the king and the people of Judah that won the Chronicler's praise. Now that the king had turned from such loyalty, the **eyes of the Lord** became a cause of fear (16:9).

#### *Accusation and Sentencing (16:9b)*

The prophet closed his speech by returning to accusation. Asa had done **a foolish thing** (16:9b). As a result, Asa would suffer severely for his sin. The prophet sentenced him to **war ... from now on** (16:9b). In sharp contrast with the blessing of peace during the earlier period in Asa's reign (see 15:15,19), Asa's kingdom would be troubled with warfare.

The Chronicler dramatically condemned the actions of Asa by drawing these deliberate contrasts with earlier times in the king's life. The message to the Chronicler's

audience is not difficult to discern. They longed to avoid war with their neighbors. Only reliance on God would bring them such rest from conflict.

#### *Asa's Response of Disobedience (16:10)*

The Chronicler's addition to Kings continues with Asa's reaction to the prophetic word. This portion parallels the king's response to the earlier word from Azariah, but it sharply contrasts with that event (see 15:8). In the early years of his reign, Asa responded with obedience to the prophet's encouragement. At this point, he reacted negatively to the second prophet's accusation.

Asa reacted in two ways. First, he **was angry with the seer** (16:10), instead of repenting of the infidelity exposed by the prophet. Moreover, he put the prophet Azariah **in prison** (16:10), much as Zedekiah imprisoned Jeremiah at a later time (see Jer 32:3). When prophets rebuked the people and predicted negative consequences, they often suffered severe punishment. Once again, the Chronicler's keen concern with the prophetic office is evident (see *Introduction: 15) Prophets*).

Second, Asa not only imprisoned the prophet, but also **brutally oppressed some of the people** (16:10). These people apparently sympathized with the prophet Hanani. The gravity of this action becomes clear when we remember how the Chronicler argued strongly that the Davidic line was ordained for the benefit of the people of Judah and Israel (see *Introduction: 4-9) King and Temple*). Asa's later years of rebellion against God led to a violation of one of his fundamental purposes as king.

#### *Asa's Final Years of Judgment (16:11-12)*

The Chronicler returned to the record of Kings (// 1 Kgs 15:23) to close off Asa's reign. He first followed Kings closely and noted other sources (16:11a // 1 Kgs 15:23a). Yet, the note that "his feet became diseased" (1 Kgs 15:23b) caused him to pause and add other new information.

First, the Chronicler added a chronological note that the foot disease took place **in the thirty-ninth year of his reign** (16:11). The text gives no clues as to the precise nature of the disease, but it is evident that the Chronicler considered it a curse.

Second, he added a theological explanation. Asa's disease was severe, but **he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians** (16:12). The theme of "seeking" God is repeated time and again in the Chronicler's version of Asa's reign (see 14:4; 15:2,12,13; 16:12; see also *Introduction: 19) Seeking*). In addition, Asa forgot that effective **help** only comes from God. The Chronicler repeatedly illustrated that God intervened to help

his people in their struggles (see *Introduction: 10) Divine Activity*). The Chronicler pointed out here that Asa did just the opposite of what he did in the earlier years of his reign. It should be noted that the Chronicler did not forbid Asa from receiving help from **the physicians** (16:12). The Old Testament shows no hesitation about taking advantage of medical care (see 2 Kgs 20:5-8; Jer 8:22; 46:11; 51:8). Yet, using ordinary means was never to be divorced from seeking divine assistance. Asa's sin here was similar to his sin in conflict with Baasha (16:1). He relied on human power rather than divine help. As a result, Asa found no relief from his disease.

#### *Closure of Asa's Reign (16:13-14)*

With one more additional chronological note (**the forty-first year of his reign** [16:13].), the Chronicler moved to Asa's death and burial. The Chronicler expanded the record of his burial in a way that brought honor to the king (compare 16:14 and 1 Kgs 15:24). He mentioned details of the burial ceremony which included **spices and various perfumes** (16:14). Moreover, the Judahites **made a huge fire in his honor** (16:14; see Jer 34:5). Asa's burial contrasts with that of Jehoram whose disgraceful burial had no honorary fire (see 21:19). The Chronicler included this information on Asa's burial to express his belief that Asa was on the whole a good king. Despite his failures, Asa was to be honored by the post-exilic community as the Judahites of Asa's day honored the king (see *Introduction: 28) Healing and Long Life/Sickness and Death*).