

Article of the Month – October 2009

Power Encounters as Missionary Method – III – Samuel & Kings

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Alternating with our series of twelve missionary themes in Genesis we look into biblical examples of power encounters in areas of spiritual frontline battles. Earlier we looked at such encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, and at Israel's later opponents: Amalek and Balaam. When we take the next episode of Israel's national history into account, we see in the books of Joshua and Judges that there are several occasions where God's 'hero of the day' fights a righteous battle and in doing so is helped miraculously by God. In a way one might classify these battles also as power encounters, but then the list would become endless; it is better to classify these battles as types of the usual spiritual battles that believers and their leaders have to fight. Therefore, in this series about power encounters we concentrate rather on the very obvious encounters between God and a hostile king or god.

Our first observation concerns a story in Samuel¹: the Ark of the Lord has been captured by the Philistines and is put into the temple of Dagon. Of course, no idol can stand in the presence of the God of Israel: the statue fell down twice and the population suffered heavily from tumors. It is one of the most direct power-encounter in the Bible, where there is a confrontation between God and an idol, without human interference, but where nevertheless people learn their lesson well: only God is God and their gods are inferior to Him. The main purpose of world missions has always been, to show people that there is only one true God!

Another story, that of David and Goliath², can clearly be classified as a power-encounter – in spite of its physical expression – : the giant made the mistake to not only challenge the people of Israel and its king³ but also the God of Israel.⁴ That cost him his life and the missionary purpose was the same: 'and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel'(v. 46b). Even this act of faith classified David as a full-fledged missionary – a trait that we meet in his Psalms over and over as well.⁵

Then, in Kings, we read about how, after the split of the Kingdom of Israel, gross idolatry is seen in the northern parts, the Ten Tribes of Israel. When a man of God is being sent to prophesy against the altar of the idols, he is opposed by king Jerobeam I, but as soon as the king orders the arrest of the prophet his hand withers and, humiliated, he begs the prophet to pray for healing.⁶ In this spiritual power-encounter God showed Himself superior to the calf-

¹ 1 Sam. 4-6

² 1 Sam. 17

³ 1 Sam. 17:8-10

⁴ 1 Sam. 17:26,36,43-47

⁵ I will devote an article to the theme of Missions in the Psalms next year

⁶ 1 Kings 13:1-6

gods of the northern kingdom. It is a good example of how one single missionary can stand in front of a national ruler and confront him with God's power.

A bigger power-encounter, and more visible on a national level, took place when Elijah confronted king Ahab and his 950 Baal- and Ashera-priests with the question who the true God really is. As we know, the priests and their gods failed miserably and God showed Himself superior to all of them, by consuming the watered altar and its contents by fire.⁷ The desired missiological outcome among the apostate Israelites was the same: once again they confessed the God of Israel as the one true God.

Later in Kings we find two smaller power-encounters.⁸ King Ahab was being attacked by king Ben-Hadad of Aram. It was an opportunity God wished to use to judge the latter, but Ahab did not recognize this purpose – which could only be seen with the eyes of faith. Although king Ahab played his part involuntarily, he was liberated the first time⁹ but jeopardized God's planned judgment of Ben-Hadad after the second time¹⁰ – which eventually cost him his own life.¹¹ In both cases the purpose and the message were the same: 'then you will know that I am the Lord'.¹²

Years later an Aramean army officer, Naaman, came to the same conclusion after his healing: 'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel'.¹³

One of the most impressive stories from the era of the Kings is the narrative of how Jerusalem was besieged by the Assyrian king Sennacherib at the time of Hezekiah's reign.¹⁴ This gentile ruler had the audacity to challenge the people, the king and the God of Israel, by stating that he had shown himself more powerful than the gods of the nations he had conquered and that in similar fashion he would subdue Israel. He claimed that God was unable to save Israel, which he spoke twice and wrote once.¹⁵ The outcome was terrible: his army of 185.000 people was slain by the Lord in one night. Sennacherib returned to his country in disgrace and then the whole people of Assyria knew that the God of Israel is more powerful than any of their own gods. Sennacherib himself died a short time later at the hands of his own sons while worshiping in the temple of his god – who apparently was unable to protect his worshiper.

In all cases the godly participants in these power-encounters were courageous enough to put their trust completely in the Lord, especially when it was a matter of life and death. In the article of January we will look at other missionaries who dared to do so: Daniel and his friends. The coming two months however, we continue the series of twelve missionary themes in Genesis.

⁷ 1 Kings 18:16-39

⁸ 1 Kings 20

⁹ 1 Kings 20:1-21

¹⁰ 1 Kings 20:22-34

¹¹ 1 Kings 20:42 & 22:37

¹² 1 Kings 20:13b,28b

¹³ 2 Kings 5:15

¹⁴ 2 Kings 18:17 – 19:37; Is. 36 & 37 in 701 BC

¹⁵ 2 Chron. 32:14-19

