

# KING AHAZ COPIES A PAGAN ALTAR

A king who had a chance to learn to trust God chose instead to worship the gods of his defeated enemies! It makes as much sense as some things people do today.

by Becky Bennett

Every time I read a particular story in the Bible, I wonder, Why did the king do that? It might seem silly if it wasn't so sad.

It's the story of King Ahaz of Judah, found in 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 28 and Isaiah 7.

King Ahaz hadn't been taught to worship the true God. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all either neglected or completely refused to serve and obey God.

Ahaz followed in their footsteps. According to 2 Chronicles 28:1-4, he made idols and sacrificed and burned incense "on the high places, on the hills and under every green tree," and worshipped the false god Baal. He even "burned his children in the fire."

What exactly does that mean? It's talking about child sacrifice, something that God hates passionately (Deuteronomy 12:31)! This horrible practice was one of the reasons God had removed the Canaanite people from the land and given it instead to Israel (which was later split into the two nations of Israel and Judah)!

## A WORRISOME TIME

The nation of Judah had been led by evil kings for many years. As a result, it was not a strong nation even before King Ahaz. But under his rule, "the LORD brought Judah low because of Ahaz, ... for he had encouraged moral decline in Judah and had been continually unfaithful to the LORD" (2 Chronicles 28:19).

So when Syria and Israel threatened the nation of Judah and its capital Jerusalem, King Ahaz was very worried. "His heart and the heart of his people were moved as the trees of the woods are moved with the wind" (Isaiah 7:2).

King Ahaz was a very wicked king, but still God was willing to give him a chance to repent and learn to trust and serve Him. So God sent His prophet Isaiah to talk to Ahaz: "Take heed, and be quiet; do not fear or be fainthearted for these two stubs of smoking firebrands" (verse 4).

Through Isaiah, God told Ahaz that he didn't need to fear these two kings. They were like two smoking sticks that had been pulled out of a fire. They might have

### QUIZ TIME

What false god did Ahaz worship?

### QUIZ TIME

Who did God send to King Ahaz to tell him to repent?

thought they were something, but God knew they were going to lose.

They were plotting against Judah, Jerusalem and King Ahaz, in particular, but God said their plan “shall not stand, nor shall it come to pass” (verse 7). In fact, God said, Israel would not even be a nation in another 65 years (verse 8)!

## “ASK A SIGN”

“If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established,” Isaiah told King Ahaz—and all of the people of Judah (verse 9). Perhaps Isaiah could have said it another way: “If you believe what God says, you will surely be established!”

And then God made Ahaz an incredible offer: “Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; ask it either in the depth or in the height above” (verse 10-11).

How amazing! Other people in the Bible have asked God for a sign. Many of us would like to have a sign from God to tell us what to do or to give us understanding of the future. But here God offered a sign to this king!

However, instead of leaping at the opportunity to prove God and develop faith, this wicked king responded proudly (as if he were a really good king): “I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!” (verse 12).

Isaiah went on to give a sign for King Ahaz anyway—and what a special sign it is for all people! Isaiah 7:14-16 gives a prophecy that includes the birth of the Messiah, the Savior of mankind—[Jesus Christ!](#)

## AHAZ SEEKS OTHER PROTECTION

But Ahaz refused to believe God. And so God delivered the nation into the hands of Syria and Israel. A number of people were killed—2 Chronicles 28:6 says that 120,000 were killed in one day “because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers.” The Syrians took many people captive, and so did the Israelites. But God was not pleased with this, and He sent a prophet to tell the Israelites to let these captives go back to their homes (verses 9-11).

Ahaz took silver and gold out of God’s temple and sent it to another king—Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria—to try to get him to help Judah. It just so happened that Ahaz’s request came at the same time Tiglath-Pileser was planning to conquer areas to his west. So he took the gold and silver and said that King Ahaz and the nation of Judah would have to regularly give money and food to Assyria. Tiglath-Pileser conquered Syria and its capital city Damascus. And he replaced the king of Israel with a new king.

The prophet Isaiah had been right. Israel’s and Syria’s forces were snuffed out, just like that! King Ahaz didn’t need to worry about them—but now he needed to worry about staying on the good side of the really scary Assyrians and Tiglath-Pileser!

Tiglath-Pileser wasted no time in calling Ahaz to meet with him in Damascus, the Syrian city he had just conquered. And it’s there that Ahaz did the really senseless, illogical thing!

### QUIZ TIME

What was the offer God made to Ahaz?

## AHAZ WORSHIPS A DEFEATED PEOPLE'S GODS

While Ahaz was in Damascus, he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus. The Bible quotes him as saying, “Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me” (2 Chronicles 28:23).

Now wait a second! Damascus was a conquered city! It was now owned by Tiglath-Pileser and the Assyrians! Had the Syrian gods been able to help them against the Assyrians? Obviously not! Does this make any sense?

Not at all! But this was the way Ahaz thought. In fact, he was quite impressed by the altar used in serving these false gods. What he liked about it, we don't know. Maybe it was more colorful. Maybe it had an interesting design. Maybe it was just different.

In any case, Ahaz liked it so much that he sent “the design of the altar and its pattern, according to all its workmanship” to the priest back in the temple of God in Jerusalem and told him to make one just like it (2 Kings 16:10-11).

The priest was not very faithful to the true God, and he did what Ahaz told him to do. He had the copy of the pagan altar ready to go when the king returned. Ahaz was pleased with it and immediately made offerings on it. He liked it so much that he decided that this new altar should replace the altar to the true God!

As time went on, Ahaz continued to take creative license in God's temple, making all sorts of changes to the furnishings and decor (verses 17-18). But eventually he grew tired of it completely. He “shut up the doors of the house of the LORD, and made for himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem” (2 Chronicles 28:24, see also 2 Kings 16:17-18).

## A PUZZLE

Yes, it's a puzzle why King Ahaz would reject a direct invitation from God to prove that He was real and trustworthy—and instead worship false gods, gods that were not real, that had not been able to take care of those who worshipped them.

But it didn't surprise God. Long before the time of Ahaz, He recognized this illogical tendency to adopt the worship practices of other peoples—and He warned against it! Let's read it in Deuteronomy 12:29-32:

“When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

Is this just something that happened thousands of years ago? No, people today try to do what God warned against here. Christian churches even started doing things that pagan religions did so the pagans would be willing to call themselves Christians!

### QUIZ TIME

What warning did God give to the Israelites?

## QUIZ TIME

What examples of pagan practices exist in Christianity today?

When we study the history of Christmas, Easter and Halloween, we find examples of people adopting the customs of pagan peoples. You can find more details by reading our articles:

- [Christmas: Should Christians Celebrate It?](#)
- [Origin of Easter](#)
- [Halloween: Should Christians Celebrate It?](#)

If we really think about it, Christmas trees, Easter bunnies and Halloween costumes make about as much sense as Ahaz copying the Syrian altar! As shocking as it may be, the Bible does not tell us to celebrate these popular holidays, but actually warns against such pagan customs.

God does not want us to try to enhance or improve upon the way He has instructed us to worship Him. He doesn't want us to go around borrowing pagan customs to honor Him.

Instead He wants us to obey Him carefully and faithfully. If we believe God and obey Him, He will bless and protect us.

For more stories of the Bible, see the articles in this section: "[Bible Stories: The Purpose Behind the Stories.](#)"



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Neither religion nor science has satisfactorily addressed these issues, so people today are of divided opinions, confused or, worst of all, don't care anymore. The ancient words of the prophet Isaiah ring so true today: "Truth is fallen in the street." Why? Is it because God was right when He warned that humans are inclined to reject Him and usually choose not to know Him?

We are here for people who are searching for answers, who are ready to prove all things or who are hungry for more than what they've been taught most of their lives about God, the Bible, the meaning of life and how to live. We want to help you truly understand the good news of the gospel and fulfill Jesus Christ's admonition to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

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