

Robert Vannoy, Kings, Lecture 9

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High Places – Asa, Jeroboam – Golden Calves

High Places – Asa

We were going to talk about high places. It says that Asa did not remove the high places. That's in 1 Kings 15, verse 14. He did not remove the high places. In discussing the high places, let me refer (some of you maybe don't have the NIV Study Bible) to 1 Kings 3:2: it says of Solomon, "The people were still sacrificing at the high places because a temple had not yet been built for the name of the Lord." Now, since that's the first occurrence of the word here in Kings, I wrote a note at that point that says this: "Upon entering Canaan, the Israelites often followed the Canaanite custom of locating their altars on high hills, probably on the old Baal sites, although not always--not necessarily so. The question of the legitimacy of Israelite worship at these high places has long been a matter of debate. It is clear that the Israelites were forbidden to take over pagan altars and high places and use them for the worship of the Lord." That's one thing that's very clear. When Israel came into Canaan they were not to take over pagan altars and simply convert them into places where they would worship the Lord.

If you look at Numbers 33:52, you read there that the Lord says, "Drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places." "Demolish their high places," so it's clear that Israel was not simply to take over heathen high places. You have similar statements in Deuteronomy 7:5 and Deuteronomy 12:3; that is, to destroy the high places of the Canaanites. So that's one thing that's clear.

Another thing that's clear is that altars were to be built only at divinely sanctioned sites. Look at Exodus 20:24. Exodus 20:24 is sometimes called the "law of the altar." You have a description there of what the Israelites were to do when they wanted to make an altar. It says, "Make an altar of earth for me and

sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. Do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.” So you have various regulations about how an altar was to be built. The law of the altar seems quite clear to envision the possibility of a multiplicity of altars, but when you build an altar you’re to follow these regulations.

But in the middle of that section, Exodus 20:24-26, it says, “Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you.” It seems that the point of that is altars were only to be built in places where in some way God had manifested himself, God had caused his name to be honored there. In other words, you weren’t arbitrarily just to build an altar anywhere you decided you wanted to build an altar. So it seems there are those two restrictions at least: you don’t take over heathen altars, and you only build an altar at a divinely sanctioned site. Those things, I think, are clear.

But then we get back to this note at 1 Kings 3:2. It is not so clear whether a multiplicity of altars was totally forbidden provided the above conditions were met. Opinions of scholars are divided on that. Some say that after the temple was built, there was no legitimate worship or sacrifice at any place but the temple. That comes from a particular way of reading Deuteronomy chapter 12. And some feel that Deuteronomy chapter 12 says that when you come into the land, you’re ultimately going to build a temple, and the altar there is the only legitimate altar. I don’t think that’s the proper way to understand what’s being said in Deuteronomy chapter 12. It seems to me that the issue on Deuteronomy is not one of exclusive rights to the temple, but a primacy of the altar at the temple. Not that it’s the only legitimate place, but that it’s the primary place where sacrifices are made and certainly the place that the annual festivals were to be held. The males were to go up to Jerusalem three times a year to a major feast, and they were to be held in

Jerusalem. So there was one primary sanctuary where the ark was and where the temple was, but I don't think that necessarily means the exclusion of other altars elsewhere. But as I said, there's some disagreement on that. It's not so clear whether a multiplicity of altars was forbidden provided the above conditions were met.

It seems, however, that these conditions were not followed; that is, the destroying of the heathen altars and the building of altars only at divinely sanctioned sites. It seems that these conditions were not followed, even in the time of Solomon. The pagan high places were being used for the worship of the Lord. This would eventually lead to religious syncretism, which was strongly condemned.

So it seems that a high place is not necessarily *per se* something wrong, but that they were so often used in a wrong way that they became a source of the entrance of false worship into Israel: asyncretistic type of worship, sort of combining the worship of Baal with the worship of the Lord. You get these comments about many of the kings that they didn't tear down the high places. But I don't think you're to conclude from that necessarily that all the high places were wrong. I think it depends on what kind of worship was being carried on there and whether the site was a divinely sanctioned site; considerations of that sort.

Student Question: You had mentioned, too, that the Israelites had also failed to eliminate the Canaanites, so it seemed that they were probably living in the areas where those particular sites weren't destroyed.

Vannoy's response: It's possible. Another question, I want to go a bit further with Asa particularly, but go ahead.

Student Question: When Elijah challenged Baal...He finds broken down altars...

Vannoy's response: I wasn't going to go into it, but I acknowledge your point I think there's something to it. That seems to be a good illustration of the fact that there were altars of the Lord outside of Jerusalem. He rebuilt that altar.

But then it seems to me that the Lord, by answering by fire, really puts his divine sanction on an altar outside of Jerusalem as a legitimate place of worship. In addition, when Elijah flees after that confrontation with Jezebel he eventually gets to Horeb. If you look at 1 Kings 19 when the Lord appears to him, look at verse 10; Elijah replies, when the Lord says, “What are you doing here Elijah?” He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.” Now the way he says that it seems quite clear that he views that these altars had been broken down as bad. This in turn seems to suggest that there was nothing wrong with altars outside of Jerusalem provided they weren’t on sites of heathen altars and they were in divinely sanctioned places. But you see the situation was that the people had sort of turned away from the Lord; they weren’t even using the altars, the altars had been broken down. This is something that Elijah laments, which can suggest that altars outside of Jerusalem were not *per se* wrong; they may be wrong but not wrong *per se*.

Now, to get back to Asa, 1 Kings 15:14. You read, “He did not remove the high places.” Now I have a note there in the NIV Study Bible in which I say, “The reference here and in 2 Chronicles 15:17 is to those high places where the Lord was worshiped. There were high places where the Lord was worshiped. In 2 Chronicles 15:17 they’re again talking about Asa, and you read there, “Although he did not remove the high places from Israel, Asa’s heart was fully committed to the Lord.” This shows they did have high places where the Lord was worshiped. That, I think is clear in 2 Chronicles 33:17. It doesn’t have to do with Asa, but just notice the phraseology there.

In 2 Chronicles 33:17 you read, “The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the Lord their God.” So I think it’s clear that sometimes worship at high places was worship to the Lord. Now that worship to the Lord may have been legitimate or it may not have been legitimate, depending on whether the altar was at a divinely sanctioned site or not. It still

could have been worship to the Lord, but at an unsanctioned site. So there's still confusion there. But I think you must say there is an indication that people worshiped the Lord sometimes at the high places. The reason I bring this up here is 2 Chronicles 15:17 says, as Kings does, that Asa did not remove the high places. But then look at 2 Chronicles 14:3. 2 Chronicles 14:3, start at 2: "Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord, he removed the foreign altars and high places."

It seems like 2 Chron 14:3 says he removed the foreign altar high places" whereas the other reference in Chronicles, as well as the one in Kings, says he didn't remove the high places, And then you wonder, what do you have? Is that a contradiction? It seems to me that you take the 14:3 verse when it says, "Asa removed the high places," as a reference to high places that were centers of pagan-Canaanite worship. In other words, there's that distinction. Some of these high places were for pagan Canaanite worship, some of these places were for the worship of the Lord. And the distinction is not always clear when you just have a reference to high places. So when you come to those statements that "so and so did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, but he didn't remove the high places," I think generally the connotation of high place is bad because the worship was abused so often. It often was apparently on the sites of heathen worship or heathen altars, and it was a source of the entry into Israel of heathenisms in Israel's worship. But having said that, I don't think that all worship at high places was wrong.

What's a Levite going to do if he's going to officiate for a family that wants to bring a sacrifice? What does he have to do: go all the way to Jerusalem every time? If you're living up in Dan in the north, that could be a week's journey or more. The practicality of it is such that if you're going to say the only legitimate worship was at Jerusalem, then you're in essence saying that the people really didn't have the means to carry out the required rituals that were given in the Pentateuch. The Levites might as well just have stayed in Jerusalem if they had to

go back and forth all the time. Why go back and forth all the time? Why not just stay there. The whole thing seems to make more sense that way. There is no sense in going back and forth.

It may have been worship of the Lord, but on unsanctioned sites. In other words, a high place that somebody just built somewhere because they just arbitrarily built an altar. And even though it was worship to the Lord but they did it on an unsanctioned site, then they didn't do it in correlation with the rules in the Pentateuch. It's a hard question, but that's a possibility.

Student: You mention this sanctioning of a high place. Can you tell us how an altar would be sanctioned?

Vannoy's response: For example, at Bethel. Jacob went there; he had a dream about the ladder. He built an altar there, and the Lord appeared to him. It probably was some sort of theophany. That would be what is in view there in Exodus when it says he would cause his name to dwell: that the Lord would manifest himself in some way at this site. That then would be a legitimate site for worship.

It seems here that these high places were not legitimate high places. That's what it seems like even though if you look at all the data, it seems that there could be high places that were legitimate.

It seems to be that there's a distinction. Of course those things may have been closely connected for when you get these lists you get the idols and the high places and the altars all mentioned together.

Asa Continued – 1 Kings 15 – Victory over Zerah the Cushite

Well, let's go on. We're talking about Asa, so back to 1 Kings 15. As I had mentioned, he's described as a good king. 2 Chronicles tells us of a victory Asa had over Zerah the Cushite. That's something not mentioned in Kings. Exactly who was Zerah the Cushite is disputed, but he came with a large army and 300 chariots. In 2 Chronicles 14:9 you read of that Zerah the Cushite marched against

them with a vast army, 300 chariots, Asa went out to meet him, and Asa called to the Lord his God. You read in verse 12, “The Lord struck down the Cushites before Asa. The Cushites fled. Asa and his army pursued them and carried off a great deal of plunder, and they returned to Jerusalem.” And what follows in 2 Chronicles, chapter 15, you have a covenant renewal festival sponsored by Asa. Particularly in verse 12 of 2 Chronicles 15 you read, “They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their heart and soul. All who would not seek the Lord, the God of Israel, were to be put to death. Whether small or great, man or woman, they took an oath to the Lord with loud affirmation shouting with trumpets and horns. All of Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them. So the Lord gave them rest on every side.”

Asa’s Alliance with Ben-Hadad – 1 Kings 15:18ff

So there was this reformation during the time of Asa. Yet, in spite of that, you read back in 1 Kings 15, verse 18ff, that Asa made an alliance with the heathen king Ben-Hadad of Damascus. The context for that was that Baasha of the Northern Kingdom attacked Judah and fortified Ramah, which was a site on the border. This was in verse 17 of 1 Kings 15. Ramah was a site on the border between the north and the south, and the purpose of fortifying Ramah was to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the territory of Asa king of Judah. It’s that same situation that was Jeroboam’s concern. He didn’t want people going down to Jerusalem to worship, so he fortified that town. He taxed Judah.

What does Asa do? He takes the silver and the gold of the treasuries of the Lord’s temple and sent his officials to Ben-Hadad son of Tabrimmon, son of Hezion, king of Aram that was ruling in Damascus. “Let there be a treaty between me and you,” he said, “as there was between my father and your father. See, I am sending you a gift of silver and gold; now break your treaty with Baasha, king of Israel so he will withdrawal from me.”

Now of course, you look at a map and you realize that what he was doing was going behind the back, you might say, of the Northern Kingdom of Baasha. Syria was to the northeast of the Northern Kingdom. He concludes this treaty and pays his silver to Ben-Hadad and asks him to break the alliance that Ben-Hadad had with the north. And Ben-Hadad does that. Verse 20: “He agreed with King Asa,” and then he attacks the Northern Kingdom. Ben-Hadad conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel Maacah, and all Kinnereth here as far as the sea of Galilee. When Baasha heard this he stopped building Ramah and went to Tirzah, which was then the capital of the Northern Kingdom.

Now, something that’s not recorded in Kings is that Asa was rebuked for doing that; that is, making an alliance with Ben-Hadad. By Hanani the seer, 2 Chronicles 16, verse 7, which talks prior to that about the agreement Asa had with Ben-Hadad, you read in verse 7, “At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa the king of Judah and said to him ‘Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the King of Aram has escaped from your hand. Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great arms and chariots and horsemen, yet when you relied on the Lord he delivered them into your hands. For the eyes of the Lord ranged about the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You’ve done a foolish thing; from now on you will be at war.’”

Notice what Asa does: Asa is angry with the seer because of this; so enraged he puts Hanani in prison. And you read that because of that he was afflicted (verse 12) with a disease in his feet, and even in his illness he didn’t seek help from the Lord but only from the physicians. That disease is mentioned in Kings (1 Kings 15:23): “As for all the other events of Asa’s reign, all his achievements, all he did and the cities he built, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? In his old age, however, his feet became diseased.” And it says he died and rested with his fathers. Now he’s judged for that, he’s condemned by Hanani the seer for this alliance with Ben-Hadad.

But I think what you see happening here is something significant. This really is the beginning of a long struggle between Syria and not only the Northern Kingdom, but the Southern Kingdom, too. (Between Syria or Aram, which is the same word) and the Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

Asa does something here that really sets an example, which is followed later by Ahaz, for which Isaiah condemns Ahaz. When Ahaz was threatened by the Northern Kingdom and Syria, or Aram, together, what's he do? He really does the same thing, except now he goes further. He makes an alliance with Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria, to seek release from the pressure of Aram and the Northern Kingdom, and Isaiah condemns Ahaz for that. The same thing is going on here as far as Asa is concerned. Now, Ben-Hadad is also known to us from an inscription that has been found in Syria, bearing the name of the King of Damascus. This is another volume that is translations of ancient texts. It's called *Documents from Ancient Times*. On page 239 there's a picture of that; you can pass this around. Okay let's go a bit further here.

C. The First Two Dynasties of Israel

1. The Dynasty of Jeroboam – 1 Kings 11:26-14:20

a. Jeroboam Become King – 1 Kings 12:1-20

“C” is: “The First Two Dynasties of Israel.” We’ve been going through the first three kings of Judah. Now we go back and pick up the first two dynasties of Israel. The first is the dynasty of Jeroboam. 1 Kings 11:26-14:20. That’s five sub-points there. First is: “Jeroboam Becomes King,” chapter 12:1-20. We’ve already looked at chapter 12 in connection with Rehoboam and the refusal of the northern tribes to submit to Rehoboam, and you read there in verse 20; “When all the Israelites heard that Jeroboam had returned, they sent and called him to the assembly and made him the king over all Israel. Only the tribe of Judah remained loyal to the house of David.” So that same assembly at Shechem that we looked at in connection with Rehoboam and the request that was made of him to lighten the

burden and his refusal, then turns to Jeroboam and makes him king. So he becomes king there in 1 Kings chapter 12.

b. Jeroboam Establishes or Originates Illegal Worship – 1 Kings 12:25-33

“b” is: “Jeroboam Establishes or Originates Illegal Worship, 12:25-33.” In the latter part of the chapter you read in verse 25, “Jeroboam fortified Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there,” but then he becomes concerned that the people of the north will continue to go to the temple to offer sacrifices. And so he decides he will set up places of worship at Bethel and at Dan. Now Bethel is down toward the border between the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms in the southern part of Ephraim. Dan, of course, is far to the north. So he set up worship at both those sites.

It seems like the violation of the Mosaic commandments that is involved here is more the second commandment than the first, that is, “Thou shall not make for yourself a graven image...” Probably that more than the first commandment “thou shall not have any other gods before me.” You read, you see in verse 28, he said to the people, “It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; here are your gods, O Israel, that brought you out of Egypt.” One is set up in Bethel and the other in Dan.

That is exactly the same thing that was said in Exodus chapter 32 at the time that the golden calf was set up by Aaron in the wilderness while Israel was still at Sinai. Let me see if I can find the reference. Actually there’s Exodus 32, verse 4. They said, “These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you up out of Egypt” when they shaped that original golden calf. Now it seems like what was going on with making these calves. There have been inscriptions found of calves or bulls with images of deities standing on the back of the calf, so the calf is sort of a pedestal for the deity. And many feel that what was done both in Exodus 32, as well as here, was that Jeroboam was to make the calf but not to put the image of the deity on it. So that it was assumed like in Exodus 32, you find later in the

chapter, like in verse 8, it says “These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you up out of Egypt.” He says it’s a feast to Yahweh, that’s in verse 5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and he announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to Yahweh.” So it seems that Yahweh was being worshipped in connection with this golden calf.

So whether the calf was viewed as a pedestal on which the invisible form of Yahweh was supposed to reside but they didn’t build an actual image of Yahweh, or whether the calf was supposed to be some kind of representation, symbolic form of the power of Yahweh, (this could be somewhat disputed), but it does seem that the attempt here was to worship Yahweh, but in an illegitimate way. So the violation would be more of the second commandment than the first. But in any case, that’s a sin for which Jeroboam was judged and for which every king in the north that continued that worship is judged because they cause Israel to walk in the way of the sin of Jeroboam son of Nebat.

Now I think that to go a bit further with this, what you find Jeroboam doing is subordinating worship to politics. He was concerned for the security of his kingdom and the loyalty of his people. So he violates clearly that second command, perhaps the first command as well, but clearly the second and puts up these illegitimate places of worship.

Student Question: Did he make up a new set of laws or did he want to continue the legal structure that Israel had?

Vannoy’s Response: Seems that some of both, probably. I think he probably did some of both because you read that in verse 32, “He instilled the festival in the 15th day of the 8th month,” like the festival held in Judah, but it’s at a different time. You see in verse 33, “In the 15th day of the 8th month, a month of his own choosing, he offered sacrifices on the altar.” So, it seems like he sort of picked and chose between things he would adhere to in the Mosaic law and his own revisions of it.

c. The Prophet from Judah – 1 Kings 13

Alright, “c.” is: “The Prophet from Judah, 1 Kings 13.” It is a very interesting chapter. There’s this unnamed prophet: he’s called “a man of God out of Judah.” He goes to Bethel. Jeroboam’s standing there sacrificing, and he condemns Jeroboam for building that altar. In the process of doing that, he says that a child named Josiah of the house of David will one day burn the bones of these illegitimate priests that Jeroboam had secured to sacrifice on that altar in Bethel. Now, that’s a remarkable prophecy because Josiah is not a ruler for about 300 years after this time. We’re in 931; Josiah was 620’s, so you’re about 300 years before the time of Josiah. You had the statement that “Josiah will come and destroy that altar and burn the priest’s bones on it.” You find if you look in the time of Josiah that happened in his reign. So you have a remarkable prophecy.

It’s interesting, just as sort of an aside, that prophecy assumes the continuation of the Levitic dynasty for that long period of time, whereas in the Northern Kingdom you have four, unconnected dynasties plus several individual kings who didn’t establish dynasties. You didn’t have a consistent line in the North. This prophecy implies there will be, of course, in the south a line that’s consistent with the promise of David anyway.

But in connection with that prophecy, which is long-term, he gives us a short-term prophecy. And in verse 3 you read, “The same day the man of God gave a sign. This is the sign the Lord has declared: The altar will be split apart and ashes on it will be poured out.” And you read in verse 5 the altar was split apart as ashes poured out according to the sign given by the man of God by the word of the Lord. So you have a long range prophecy that is confirmed, or authenticated, by a short-term prophecy that was fulfilled right on the very day as these people watched.

In the meantime, Jeroboam stretches out his hand--this is verse 4--and says “Seize this prophet.” While he stretches his hand out, it shrivels and he can’t pull it back. And so he says in verse 6: “Intercede with the Lord your God; pray for me

that my hand may be restored. The prophet interceded with the Lord, and his hand was restored as good as it was before. So there you again have another authentication of the fact that the Lord was working in this people and through this man of God out of Judah.

Then, Jeroboam invites this prophet to go home and eat with him, but the prophet says he can't do it. Verse 9 says, "I was commanded by the word of the Lord, 'You must not eat bread or drink water, or return by the way you came.'" And so he starts home a different way, and there you read later in the chapter that he meets an old prophet who he tells him, "I'm also a prophet. And an angel said to me, 'Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.'" That's verse 18. But he lied to him, but the man of God went with him, drank in his house, and then while they're sitting at the table, the word of Lord comes to that old prophet, and the word of the Lord was a message of judgment for his disobedience. Verse 21: this is what the Lord says, "You have defied the word of the Lord, you have not kept the command of the Lord your God, but you came back and ate bread, drank water in a place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore, your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers." In other words, he's going to come to some kind of unusual death, not a normal death.

As he proceeds further on his journey, he's met by a lion and killed, and the interesting thing is that the lion stands there by the body with the donkey and doesn't attack the donkey, and he doesn't mutilate the body. It's a clear indication that miraculous things are going on here. But it's a sad story because here was this prophet who came and proclaimed the word of the Lord against that altar and gave this marvelous prophecy, and yet he was not completely obedient; and even though the Lord had told him not to do something, he did do it, and then the Lord judged him. Now, I think a lot of that was for the benefit of Jeroboam. He was to see the power of the word of the Lord at work.

But you read in the end of the chapter, verse 33, even after this, Jeroboam

did not change his evil ways. Once more he appointed priests from all sorts of people for the high places. Anyone who wanted to become a priest he consecrated for the high places.

I think this story shows you have to make a distinction between a good man and a bad prophet. Balaam was evil, but he prophesied nevertheless. In this case, this old prophet, he lied, but when the word of the Lord came, he spoke it. I think at this point, whatever his personal interest was, it caused him to do something very wrong.

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