

Dr. August Konkell, Chronicles, Session 21, Demise of the Temple

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This is Dr. August Konkell in his teaching on the books of Chronicles. This is session 21, Demise of the Temple.

We ended with the story of two kings whose reign was very compromised because of their unfaithfulness to God and their determination to run their own kingdom as if they were on their own throne instead of being on God's throne as the chronicler views it.

What follows now is the reign of Uzziah. To put this into historical and political perspective, we are at the beginning of the 8th century. Uzziah had a very, very long reign throughout the first half of the 8th century.

It is a time that is very prosperous politically and economically. So, if we go back to the book of Kings, what we find is that Jeroboam II is king in the north and that the north, Israel, at this point in time, gains political influence and power like it really hadn't ever had since the time of Solomon. The boundaries of Israel that are described in Kings under Jeroboam II extend up into the area of Aram-zobah and all the way down to the Red Sea as they had been previously.

So, these were in the north, in Israel especially, very decadent times, and here's where we have the judgments of the prophet Amos, especially pointing out the corruption of the leaders and the way that they were crushing the heads of the poor into the dust and so forth.

Now, Uzziah, who reigned at the same time, was really a beneficiary of these political fortunes, which came about largely because the Assyrians were still in a period of demise. The Arameans had been pushed back under the power of Jeroboam, who had rebuilt the military after the time of Jehu and his terrible purges.

And so, Uzziah was somewhat the beneficiary of that. However, the end of the reign of Uzziah is really characterized by the demise of the temple. So as much as this time period begins in a very prosperous manner, it ends in a very disastrous way as far as the temple is concerned.

We begin then with the king known as Uzziah, who elsewhere is also known as Azariah. The reign of Uzziah is divided into two very distinct periods. There's the period of great military and economic achievements, expansion in the Philistine territory, development of the fortifications, and agricultural developments.

Uzziah was very much a proponent of all of these things. And this, of course, is seen in accordance with what was also happening with his most important neighbor, Jeroboam II, to the north. So, Uzziah really had a lot of freedom to pursue all of these achievements.

However, the reign of Uzziah does not end very well. And the Chronicle tells us about an incident with Uzziah, which we know about only from him, in which he attempts to usurp the authority of the priest. Now, in the temple and for Judah, this is not a minor thing.

Going all the way back to the Torah, there is a separation between the king and the priest. This is something that is explained in detail in the book of Hebrews. How does Jesus come to be both king and priest when, according to the Torah, the two roles of king and priest are always separate? Well, the writer of the Hebrews does his own exegesis of Genesis to explain how, in the person of Jesus, these two offices are brought together so that Jesus is both the king and the priest.

What is so distinct about this in the time of Judah and in the time of the temple is the way in which it is a contrast to all other nations. In all other nations around, the king is the priest and the king is the one who controls all the activities of the temple. But in Israel, that was not to be the case.

As Deuteronomy explains clearly, in Israel, the king was to have a copy of this Torah. He was to have a copy of this instruction at his side. He was to follow this instruction and he was to lead his people in following this instruction.

The king was not a king in his own right. He was a king under the revelation of the king of kings. He was a king under the authority of God and therefore, he was subject to the covenant and subject to God's divine requirements, the same as all of the other people.

That was his role and that was his function. The priest was a completely different function in carrying out this covenant in relation to God. And so, the priests are given their own role in Deuteronomy very distinctly.

And, of course, in Numbers and Leviticus, we see this clearly as the priests being descendants of Aaron, whereas the king never is a descendant of Aaron. So, this separation in the nation of Israel was a way of always making clear that they were subordinate to Yahweh, the one who had given them the covenant and the one who designated his covenant to be carried out by the king in one capacity, but the representation of Yahweh as king, the representation through the temple and all of its rituals and everything else, was to be carried out by the priest. The roles of the priest were not to be violated by anyone else because they were the ones who, in that sense, were holy.

That is, they derived a special designation from God as a status to enable them to enter the holy place in the temple. And once a year to sprinkle the blood on the kaphodot, the ark in the most holy place which represents God. This is their designation, and that is why they are called holy in a way that the king and the people aren't holy.

Now, there's another way of looking at it as we come to the covenant in the book of Exodus. All of the people in Exodus 20 are set apart from God and are holy, and all of the nations of Israel represent God. So, there is that respect in which every Israelite is holy.

But in the function of the liturgy, there are further distinctions, and it is only the Levites, and it is only the priests as part of the Levites who have this distinction of being qualified to carry out the rituals in the temple, which represent the holiness in the presence of God. So, it might not seem like such a big deal that Uzziah, the king, should attempt to offer incense on the altar that stood immediately in front of the most holy place. But it was a complete violation of the covenant and a complete violation of the structures that were to represent the covenant and, in particular, the structures that were supposed to represent the temple and its function.

And so, this, therefore, was a very serious sin that was committed by Uzziah. The result was that he became leprous. Now, those of us living in the days of COVID can understand a little bit about this whole business of isolation.

There's nothing that most of us dread more than being told we have to isolate for 14 days and we can't socially interact with anyone else for 14 days. That's our world here in Canada at least right now. And so, we always operate with this threat of isolation which doesn't quite mean that we're in prison.

We're free in a certain sense, but we're free in a very confined sense in that we can't have certain kinds of contact, and we've got limitations on anywhere that we can go and those sorts of things. Well, that was what was true for a leper in ancient times, except if a leper was not healed of leprosy, which was a skin disease of some kind. It was not Hansen's disease, but lepers were in that same category of what we today call in COVID times isolation.

So, Uzziah could no longer carry out his royal duties as king because his punishment for violating the rights of a priest had made him a leper. That is the sad story of the end of Uzziah. Uzziah is succeeded by his son Jotham.

Now, if we look at the reign of Jotham from a historical perspective, the days of Jotham are the second half of the 8th century. Uzziah dies in about the year 840. Uzziah makes quite a big deal about this.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord high and lifted up. Now, that was a very significant revelation for Uzziah because really, when Uzziah died, the degeneration that was already beginning to take place in the north where, after the reign of Jeroboam II, there were repeated assassinations and the competing rules between the final kings of Pekah and Rezin and Pekah and the others. The political times were very uncertain and, in part, the political times were very uncertain because Tiglath-Pileser, the Assyrian emperor, was now displacing not only the Arameans or Syria to the north, but he was coming closer and closer toward Israel, and this was creating great pressure upon Israel and upon its kings.

So, when Uzziah died in the year 740, Isaiah had to be reminded who the king was, the Lord who was high and lifted up. Well, it is shortly after this time that Jotham comes to reign. Jotham, if we work this out chronologically, would have had quite a lengthy overlap of reign with his father, Uzziah.

Now, that makes a whole lot of sense because if Uzziah was a leper and essentially he was in isolation, someone else had to reign in his stead. So, he was still the king, but someone else was reigning in his stead, and that was his son Jotham. Now, Jotham, as he's reported here in the Chronicler, is really given quite a positive assessment.

He is as his father Uzziah had been. See, at the start of his reign, Uzziah had been the one who had made Judah prosperous and who had made the temple of the place of worship and a priority. But, they were very turbulent times, and politically, Jotham was still able to have a certain amount of control in the Transjordan, which is what the Chronicler talks about.

So, Jotham, as the successor of Uzziah, really, for the Chronicler, has a positive assessment, which is the converse of his successor Ahaz. Ahaz is the king who will rule Judah when the end of Israel comes into effect. After Tiglath-Pileser was Shalmaneser V, and then was Sargon II, and essentially, as described in Isaiah chapters 8 and 9, or 7 through 9, Israel was turned into Assyrian provinces, into the area of the sea, into Galilee, and into the territory of the nations.

So, Israel was no longer independent. Of course, in 722, came the defeat of Samaria, the end of all rule, the end of Hosea's rule, and the deportation. All of that happens in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Kings 17.

The Chronicler doesn't make reference to what is happening in Israel in the north, though his account makes pretty clear that Ahaz, who is the successor of Jotham, is highly influenced by all of these events. So, the fall of Israel and the domination of the Assyrians has resulted in the Baal cult being revived. And Ahaz is marked as being one of those kings who made his children pass through the fire.

This has sometimes been depicted as a child sacrifice in the interests of being a benefit to the king. And it's not that that might not have happened, as we read about the king of Moab, for example, but a closer investigation of all of these references to passing a child through the fire is something of a burial ceremony for an infant that has died in a ritual referred to in Hebrew as a tophet. So, this is a dedication to the other gods in which this child's body is burned in a tophet.

It's not exactly child sacrifice as such, but it is a dedication ceremony in which the dedication is to other gods who are supposed to help. So, Ahaz has really been involved in syncretism in a very serious fashion. But most prominently, as we know from the book of Isaiah, Ahaz was in conflict with his two neighbors to the north.

First of all, Pekah is in Israel, and then Rezin is in Syria. And, of course, as we see it in the book of Isaiah, Pekah and Rezin were both trying to resist the increasing encroachments of the Assyrian armies. And so, they were trying to form an alliance to resist these Assyrian armies, and Ahaz did not want to join this alliance.

Of course, what Ahaz did instead of joining the alliance of Rezin and Pekah is seek the aid of the Assyrians to maintain his own independence. That might not seem like a very smart move, and it really wasn't a very smart move because the Assyrians had no intention of stopping taking over Syria and Israel. It was clearly Judah who was next on their list, as we shall find out in the story of Hezekiah, who is the successor to Ahaz.

But in any case, this was Ahaz's rather tragic and terrible tactic, for which he receives in Chronicles a strong rebuke from Oded the prophet. This prophecy of Oded is a recognition of the fact that Israel is now falling to the Assyrian power and that they need to be recognized as brothers. Just because they've fallen to the Assyrians doesn't mean that, somehow or another, they cease to be part of Israel.

So, this is the message of Oded. And of course, we've already mentioned that Ahaz's attempt to ally with the Assyrians failed entirely and was a disaster. So, we are now at the point in time where there's a whole new era for the temple, and a whole new beginning.

We're going to see that in the book of Chronicles, Hezekiah now becomes the second Solomon, because he has a whole new opportunity to really be the one who represents all Israel. It may be that the Israelites have gone into captivity, have been taken over by the Assyrians, and some of them have been deported. But that doesn't stop them from being part of all Israel.

This becomes the whole focus of the Chronicler in describing Hezekiah's mission. The temple reached a low point under Ahaz's rule, but with the disappearance of the

North as a nation and as a power, there was another opportunity in terms of worshiping and rallying around the temple.

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